

# 13 The case for a revolutionary party

Globalisation has created a vastly more unequal, intensely commercialised, ecologically damaged and altogether a more dangerous world. At the same time, the conditions for building a new democratic society based on co-operation and collective efforts are also present. *A World to Win* has attempted to demonstrate that no serious change is possible outside of a struggle for political and economic power. The strategic objective, therefore, is the ousting of the moneyed élites and their political backers as the precondition for creating a just society.

The stakes are high for the future of humanity. Increasing numbers are aware of this and want do something about it. How in practice do we achieve this transformation? It will not happen without leadership and organisation committed to this task. Social revolution is a high form of conscious practice requiring knowledge, training and skills to take and hold on to power. We are not describing a coup, nor the actions of a few dedicated people. A social revolution has to involve millions of people who want to transform society with a definite purpose in mind. There is an inescapable fact in all this – a political organisation is needed to carry it through.

## **Parties and power**

Political parties in the sense that we understand them today first came into existence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century throughout the capitalist world. They followed the extension of the franchise, which

began in Britain with the Reform Act in 1832, although the working class was excluded from the ballot box until after 1867. These political reforms marked the start of a period which has become known as parliamentary or representative democracy. This has been based on voting to send to parliament people who stand for election under the label of a political party. The Tory Party and the Liberal Party were the two major parties of that period. These developments in Britain were also associated with the consolidation of the political triumph of the manufacturing bourgeoisie and their middle class supporters over the landed aristocracy. Both the Liberals and the Tories represented different tendencies and groups within the ruling classes.

These democratic changes were accompanied by turbulent periods of mass struggle, including the rise of the great Chartist movement in the late 1830s and 1840s and, much later, the Suffragette campaign for women's votes. The right to vote, as well as the right to form a political party, were clearly an advance on the extremely restricted, corrupt, clique system that existed before modern parliamentary politics.

Today, as we have shown in other parts of the book, these historic gains are undermined in a variety of ways, a process that is intimately connected with the intensity of globalisation. A stark expression of this is the fact that the traditional parliamentary parties in Britain all stand for more or less the same thing. New Labour, meanwhile, has become the governing party in place of the Tories, because it expresses most closely the interests of corporate and financial capital. The reduction of representation to that of only the ruling classes effectively disenfranchises large sections of the population. These recent changes have contributed to a large-scale disillusionment with politics and traditional parties.

We are convinced, however, that it is not the *notion* of a political party that is wrong and outdated, but *existing* parties and state structures. Politics is part of what it means to be human. We need to debate, be represented and have a say, not simply individually but collectively too. We should set out to *extend* democracy so that it takes on new meaning for the majority, going beyond the increasingly empty shell of existing

parliamentary politics. A new type of party is needed to create the conditions for this change to take place.

The capitalist class in Britain took shape within the womb of feudal society. It began to accumulate capital through trade and finance in a way that challenged the economic and political framework of feudalism. Rival ideologies arose on the basis of the new wealth that questioned the myths, religion and hierarchies of absolute monarchy. When the two forces could no longer co-exist, a revolutionary conflict burst into the open in the form of the English Civil War. The Parliamentary side under Oliver Cromwell organised the New Model Army for the purpose of overthrowing the Crown. It was both a military machine and an arena for political debate and struggle. The power of the absolute monarchy was broken, leading to the dominance of parliamentary rule and the start of the economic freedoms capital demanded.

While the nascent capitalist class of the 17<sup>th</sup> century built economic wealth and with it a distinct ideological and philosophical outlook *within* the existing feudal system, this advantage is unavailable to those who need to make a social revolution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a result, we are obliged to construct a virtual future in the present in the shape of a revolutionary political party.

Conditions for social revolution can mature but cannot succeed without leadership, strategy and tactics. These require prior preparation and cannot grow spontaneously. An understanding of the need to take political power and actually doing it, do not and cannot arise intuitively out of people's experiences. This is primarily because of the powerful, limiting and restrictive role that capitalist ideology and its guiding philosophy plays within social consciousness.

The ruling classes are not complacent about political power. They know that running and controlling the system requires conscious leadership and they take nothing for granted. They have long experience of doing this and are aware that a rapidly changing world requires frequent adjustments, including the generation of new ideologies. Thus they work at political leadership and invest a lot of effort in it. The leadership qualities

displayed by Thatcher and Blair in forcing through change in often difficult conditions are examples of this. Anything that even implicitly threatens the capitalist is treated very seriously. A factory take-over, a major industrial action such as the miners' strike, or a series of mass demonstrations provoke a variety of responses, including provocations, arrests, racism, nationalism and force. Under these conditions, the actions of individuals or even large groups of individuals cannot by themselves lead to the change we seek.

### **What a revolutionary party is**

A revolutionary party is an organisation created out of the historic need to bring about the transition from capitalism to a society formed on the basis of common ownership and democratic control. Its aim is to organise and lead this change. The revolutionary party is a membership organisation that people freely join and has a structure and a constitution. It is the place where the theory, strategy, training and practice of social revolution are generated.

### **The role of the party**

A revolutionary party has a series of roles to carry out in the areas of training, democratic discussion, political intervention as well as to act as a rallying point and focus for the struggle for power itself. Its tasks include to:

#### **Training and development**

- ▶ encourage and help all members to become leaders
- ▶ train members in the philosophy of contradiction and change, materialist dialectics
- ▶ facilitate and support self-development of members
- ▶ bring out the different capacities, talents, abilities and potential of members.

#### **Democratic discussion**

- ▶ provide a space where all revolutionary currents and tendencies can participate
- ▶ be an arena for members to debate and discuss policies,

practice and strategies in a democratic way

- ▶ reflect in discussions the diversity of interests of workers
- ▶ organise maximum participation in democratic decision-making processes.

### **Political intervention**

- ▶ establish a relationship of trust and confidence between the party and those in struggle against capitalist policies
- ▶ support and encourage spontaneous actions while bringing out the essential political issues they contain
- ▶ decide on tactics such as whether to contest parliamentary elections as a platform
- ▶ advocate political action for the practical transformation of capital-labour relations
- ▶ learn from history and from day-to-day struggles while assessing the party's interventions.

### **A rallying point**

- ▶ be a symbolic entity
- ▶ show and lead by example.

### **Struggle for power**

- ▶ give the mass of the people a sense and understanding of their own potential power
- ▶ ensure that the issue of political power is at the heart of its work
- ▶ organise the struggle for power.

### **How a party functions**

A revolutionary organisation, by its very nature, is concerned with leading change, both within and outside the organisation. Therefore it has constantly to learn from what is happening around it and involve the entire membership in making the changes that are needed. This requires self-motivation and self-organisation based on the commitment and enthusiasm which can only come from a shared aim.

Strong connections, interconnections and democratic involvement at all levels are necessary. The areas for involvement

**Blasting through inertia**

Only leadership can blast through the many sources of corporate inertia. Only leadership can motivate the actions needed to alter behaviour in any significant way. Only leadership can get change to stick by anchoring it in the very culture of an organisation.”

“Real leaders take action because they have confidence that the forces unleashed can be directed to achieve important ends.”

“In an organisation with 100 employees, at least two dozen must go far beyond the call of duty to produce a significant change. In a firm with 100,000 employees, the same might be required of 15,000 or more.”

“New decision-making processes are needed because no one individual has the information needed to make all major decisions or the time or credibility needed to convince lots of people to implement the decisions.

*Leading Change*, John P. Kotter

include training, education, research, developing policies, communications, monitoring progress and holding the leadership to account.

A revolutionary party has to be designed to:

- ▶ ensure accountability of leaders and members
- ▶ make transparent the internal decision-making process
- ▶ facilitate continuous development and training of leaders and members
- ▶ avoid bureaucratic inertia and complacency
- ▶ involve members in developing policy
- ▶ ensure that minority interests and differences of view have an equal voice
- ▶ study and learn from failures and mistakes
- ▶ combat subjectivism and egoism
- ▶ intervene in struggles external to itself
- ▶ learn from and build alliances with movements in other countries.

A dialectical systems thinking approach emphasises

interrelationships and processes. Things are seen in movement, in relation to a whole, the big picture. So, for example, party structures should function horizontally and vertically within a given process. Reciprocal relationships between the elected leadership, departments, units of membership and members will be the norm.

Globalised capitalism, in the course of its development, has produced new methods and technologies which provide better conditions for revolutionary organisations. Workers in general are better educated and are familiar with communications methods such as email, the Internet, video-conferencing, mobile phones with email and visual links, personal computers and so on. These techniques allow mass involvement more quickly through transfer of complex documents, visual materials including video and music, as well as simple and urgent

**Connection and creativity**

When people connect to each other and to powerful ideas, creativity and action are ensured. Barriers to the flow of information and new ideas are lowered as people forge links with others. Work also flows more smoothly, because people learn how what they do fits into the larger whole, and how to access needed resources. When people connect to each other, they become known to each other. They stop being stereotypes, roles, functions and members of that hated 'other'. They become human beings with their own real-life issues and concerns. People who are doing their best to get the job done. People with unique talents to share."

"Meeting today's challenges cannot be done by any one person single-handedly. We need a community of people who willingly provide their talents and insights to address increasingly complex issues. Community is important because one person no longer has the answer. Answers reside in all of us. When we create community, we move beyond a group of people who may have personal connections with each other to developing a group of connected people who have both the will and willingness to work together to accomplish a goal that has meaning for them.

*Terms of Engagement*, Richard H. Axelrod

**Developing new policies – an example**

A member is in discussion with a transport campaign group and comes to the conclusion that the party's policy on the issue needs developing. She tells the group that she will start the process of renewing the party's transport policy. An internal email to the party's relevant policy section makes the preliminary case for an amended policy. This is posted on the policy bulletin board with an invitation to support the proposal. Sufficient support triggers the launch of the actual policy change process. The policy section, with the agreement of the member, suggests the areas that need updating. This is communicated to the other policy bodies of the party and to the basic membership units of the organisation for discussion. These units have the responsibility of involving the local members in the discussion. They will also talk to external bodies and individuals to deepen their understanding of the issue. A draft policy is put together by the policy section out of all the communications it has received from members and branches for further consultation. Consultation on the proposal is widened to include the campaigning transport group. When a final draft is reached, an e-conference is called to approve the new policy, which is then published on the party's website.

messages, news and information.

For example, all decisions and minutes of discussions can be communicated to the relevant bodies soon after they take place. Involving membership in this way can help to encourage openness and a shared awareness, commitment as well as shared responsibilities. Making maximum use of communications technology will help create an organisation in which challenging views through open debate and improving ways of doing things is the norm.

The advantages of collective, participatory leadership over old-style, hierarchical structures has, paradoxically, been recognised by top management gurus who advise capitalist firms. Because of the combined rapid pace of change and its global nature, corporations have been compelled to identify the training of leadership as a top priority. A key function of this leadership is to involve their workforces in decision-making processes. These

gurus have written detailed explanations of why this should happen and how it should take place. They emphasise the significance for the life and future of an organisation of having leaders who are in continuous training and retraining. What they call for is a “learning organisation”. These experts demonstrate a concept of leadership which goes far beyond the narrow group of senior managers to embrace workers at all levels of the firm. The underlying approach is that all staff are capable of changing and involving themselves at high levels. Working in this way, they have discovered, can vastly improve performance.

Naturally, this egalitarian, democratic, non-hierarchical, participatory, collective, committed, team-working approach is equally designed not to challenge the fundamental issue of ownership and control of the corporation which exists solely for the purpose of enhancing shareholder profit. This is a kind of collective working combined with private ownership. Nevertheless, these advances in organisational techniques, combined with revolutionary ICT, are important for a 21<sup>st</sup> century concept of a revolutionary party. By emphasising the group rather than the élite, a revolutionary organisation becomes a more powerful unit. Democratic structuring and functioning in turn will become the basis of the authority of elected bodies of leaders. Equally, it underlies the principle that decisions arrived at democratically are everyone’s property and carry with them an obligation to carry them out, regardless of whether you are in the minority or the majority.

If all members and leaders work in this way, their collective efforts can help to ward off the inherent tendencies in any organisation to conservatism and bureaucracy. A scientific approach enables us to identify seats of resistance to change, bring out the opposites, understand the change possibilities, identify issues and the sources of complacency and inertia. Operating in this more advanced way will allow us to tackle difficulties and problems that have dogged revolutionary movements in the past.

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## The real origins of Stalinism

*Some suggest that a revolutionary party of the type we have described, if it were to come to power, must lead to the type of dictatorship that arose in the Soviet Union.*

The real difficulty with this view is that it presumes an inevitability about history that simply does not exist. There are alternative paths that history can follow that are decided by the interplay of objective and subjective factors, by real human beings in struggle under circumstances not of their choosing. There was nothing pre-ordained about what happened in the Soviet Union.

The history of the Bolshevik Party both before and after the 1917 revolution is one of constant discussion and struggle over fundamental questions. Both left and right wings of the party participated in long and often sharp disputes over political perspective which engaged the best minds of the period. The decision to lead a revolution, the terms of the treaty with Germany that took Russia out of World War I, the shift towards a market economy in 1921, increased self-management and democratic life were all forged out of intense, openly-waged inner-party debates. Even at the height of the post-revolution political crisis, seats were reserved on the leading committees for factions like the Workers Opposition.

During the most traumatic period of the early 1920s, there was an amazing flourishing of culture, science and the arts. This creative period had a profound influence throughout the world. All these events are well documented, especially since the *glasnost* period under Gorbachev where much of hidden history came to light.

After the revolution, the Bolshevik Party was extremely small and in no position to impose dictatorship. For a period it worked with other parties in the government, but this arrangement broke down and Lenin's party was left in charge of the state on its own. The circumstances in which they found themselves began to exert

intolerable pressures. These were to prove more decisive than the nature of the party itself. Russia in 1917 was an extremely backward country and the largely illiterate peasants made up 80% of the total population. There was no history of democratic life in the country and the state had always played a directing role in people's lives. From the early days, workers' self-management and democratic control proved difficult to establish. The political leadership under Lenin found itself having to encourage these processes from the top, from positions of power. This contradiction brought them into ever closer relationship with the state bureaucracy, which like all administrative bodies was inward looking and conservative.

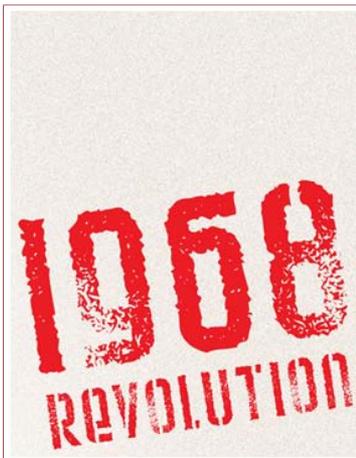
The internationalist wing of the Bolshevik Party hoped that the extension of revolution to countries like Germany would provide the resources to overcome Russia's economic and political difficulties. When the German revolution of 1923 failed, the perspective of international revolution was put to one side and, with the death of Lenin a year later, the bureaucracy began to exert a greater and greater grip on the party. Trotsky led the growing resistance to this degeneration, forming the Left Opposition which included many of the leaders of the revolution. The Opposition fought for internationalism, the planned development of industry and rejected the Stalinist policy of building "socialism in one country". But a combination of internal and external social and political conditions counted against the Opposition and they were eventually defeated.

After a bitter internal struggle that lasted for most of the 1920s, Stalin finally seized political control of the party – as the spokesman for the bureaucracy. Trotsky was expelled from the party and exiled in 1929. The political leadership eventually merged with and was swallowed up by the state apparatus and by the mid-1930s an authoritarian dictatorship exerted an iron grip over the country. The old leaders of the revolution were among the first targets of the dictatorship. So, far from creating the conditions for authoritarian rule, the party was its victim. Trotsky analysed the degeneration of the Soviet Union in his classic work, *The Revolution Betrayed*, which called for a political revolution to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy and

restore democracy. Gorbachev ended the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy and tried to introduce economic and democratic change while preserving non-capitalist, state-owned property as the basis for development. He wanted to build on the tremendous sacrifices that the Soviet people had made in constructing a modern society in spite of the crimes of Stalinism. His political revolution broke the power of the old regime but the collapse that accompanied the changes proved too difficult to control and the Soviet Union disintegrated.

This break-up is described by the media and even in school books as the “end of communism”, rather than the overthrow of Stalinism. Presenting complex events in such a simplistic fashion reinforces the message that anything but capitalism is bad for your health and is doomed to failure. But even a cursory examination of history shows that the Soviet Union never reached socialism, let alone communism.

The real issues of this history, therefore, are not solely to do with the nature of the party but the whole set of conditions that existed in Russia in 1917. Were a socialist revolution to succeed in Britain or one of the other advanced capitalist states, it would inherit much more favourable circumstances, especially the long struggle for democratic and basic rights. These are outlined elsewhere in the book and would certainly present outstanding opportunities to advance swiftly and democratically to a socialist society.



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