THE CRISIS OF THE MARXIST PARTY – RESOLUTION OF THE DSA

(1)The existing Marxist parties are small, often in crisis, and isolated from the working class. What has traditionally been the largest organisation, the SWP, has been undermined by allegations of sexual malpractice. Whist the newest organisation, Left Unity, seems to be preoccupied by the issue of conduct between members. None of these Marxist organisations seems capable of developing an imaginative strategy that could mobilise a mass movement against the austerity policy of the Coalition government.

(2)In this situation of general demoralisation the Left has often become preoccupied with consolationist schemas about the falling rate of profit.(1) Or, alternatively, has accommodated to the standpoint of anti-European populism like TUSC. Thus because of demoralisation within the party organisations it is not surprising that many activists prefer to support the apparent alternative of single issue campaigns.

(3)The question that this resolution attempts to address is how it is possible to overcome this crisis of the party, and therefore promote the development of a principled Marxist organisation. This rejuvenated party would be able to relate in an effective manner to the concerns of the working class and so promote struggle against the reactionary policy of the present government.

(4)One attempt at a resolution of the present crisis is to call for the unification of the existing groups. However this approach is presently undermined by the attitude that most of the Marxist left have towards the SWP. This organisation is effectively deemed to be too corrupt to be regarded as being part of the Marxist left. For example, Alex Callinicos was banned from speaking at the recent conference of the Historical Materialist journal. In order to resolve this situation, we should call for a public inquiry that would make recommendations about the SWP. Either we make a principled and effective call to ban the SWP from the activity of the Marxist left, or else we should allow the SWP to fully participate in the actions of the Marxist groups and Labour movement. In any eventuality the issue should not be resolved by gossip and semi-official bans. This present situation does nothing to contribute to the cause of the alleged victim of the behaviour of a leading SWP member.

(5)Let us assume that some resolution of the SWP situation is achieved we would then have to ask the question as to whether it is possible to realise a united Marxist organisation? Past experience would suggest that this outcome is unlikely. It is unlikely that the SWP and the Socialist Party will work together, and the attempt to create a new version of the Socialist Alliance is likely to be failure. The most viable alternative is that Marxists should support the most recent attempt to develop a popular socialist organisation which is Left Unity.

(6)Stuart King has outlined in the most powerful terms the reasons why we should support Left Unity. He recently argued that: “Left Unity has none of the large socialist groups stitching up deals behind the scenes and laying down the line, as we experienced in the Socialist Alliance, and it’s all the better for it. It is 2,000 plus individual socialists trying to put together a new socialist party that can challenge neoliberal capitalism. It will involve muddle and mistakes, frustration and setbacks. If it is to succeed, it will be built from below, in struggle, by branches committed to actively supporting every local struggle against austerity, cuts and insecurity; fighting against Tories, Lib-Dems and Labour to establish party workers can trust.”(2)

(7)The point that King is making is that Left Unity has the potential to become a mass party of the working class. If it becomes involved in the various struggles of workers to achieve better conditions there is no reason why it cannot grow into a popular party and so resolve the existing crisis of Marxist organisations. But Jack Conrad, of the CPGB, is more concerned. He suggests that Left Unity is influenced by people who reject the importance of the October revolution, and who want to accept the approach of reformism. The emphasis on action is at the expense of the importance of theory: “Hence in some Left Unity branches there is a deep-seated culture of ‘anti-politics politics’. Everything is subordinated to the imagined level of the so-called ‘ordinary people’ Patronising, insulting, but revealing. Always expected, like Godot, these so-called ‘ordinary people’ never arrive. However, in their name an intolerant, fearful, bullying culture has developed.”(3) It would seem from this analysis that the prospects of Left Unity are not encouraging and the limitations of the party culture and ideology will promote the ultimate demise of the organisation.

(8)We would suggest that there is an alternative to the apparently naïve enthusiasm of King about the prospects of Left Unity and this alternative is not represented by the cynicism and pessimism of Conrad. Instead of these opposing views we would suggest that it would be naïve to expect in the present climate that Left Unity would be likely to be fully formed as a principled revolutionary party. The ideological influence of the neo-liberal offensive has shifted politics to the right and has meant that the aim of socialism has often been diluted by its adherents. Hence it was likely that Left Unity would always be a right centrist organisation that was more influenced by reformism than revolutionary politics. The initial platforms of the major groupings within Left Unity were openly committed to the mixed economy and limited nationalisation. The promising development of the Socialist Platform was undermined by its organisational dissolution. Hence the various Marxist groups of a left-wing character were reduced to their individual combinations. For example the Communist Platform is expressly the supporters of the CPGB. The Workers Power platform is also exclusively composed of the membership of these organisations. Consequently, the future task of the Marxist Left organisations within Left Unity is to meet together in order to compose a common platform.

(9)The Common platform of the most principled Marxist groups within Left Unity could consist of: (i) The perspective of International socialist revolution. This would involve the rejection of all forms of socialism in one country including opposing isolationist withdrawal from the EU.(ii)The primary aim of realising socialism which would involve economic democracy and the social ownership of the transnational and major economic concerns.(iii) Realisation of a democratic republic based on abolition of the monarchy, House of Lords, and the principle of federal republics within the UK if it was wanted by the people of Scotland and Wales.(iv)Commitment to the revolutionary transformation of society based on the formation of workers councils and armed militia.(v)An action programme of demands that would constitute opposition to austerity, cuts, and the defence of the public sector.(vi)Support for the struggle against women’s oppression, racism, and affirmation of gay and lesbian emancipation.(vi)A programme to connect the interests of ecology with that of socialism.(vii)A strategy that promotes the general strike as the method to oppose all bourgeois governments and advance the opposition to austerity within the EU.

(10)We believe that it would be possible to unite the Marxist Left within Left Unity on the above basis. If this task was successful it would be possible to transform the balance of forces within this organisation. The point is that we cannot change anything within Left Unity if we are either naively uncritical or alternatively cynical and despondent. Instead what is required is to create a united platform that would act as a fulcrum of opposition to the right-wing inclined approach of the existing leadership. But, if instead the organisations of the Marxist left remain isolated the result will be the continued domination of the right wing within Left Unity. The point is the question of the character of the Left Unity organisation is not written in stone or irreversible. It may be that its present condition is that of right centrist hegemony and the prevailing influence of opportunist organisations. However, it is entirely possible to challenge this situation if the Marxist left unites and develops a political offensive to become the leadership of Left Unity. It is not adequate to complain from the sidelines about the situation because what is called for is a political and ideological struggle that can win the non-committed majority to revolutionary politics. If this struggle is not wage then the only certainty will be that the right-wing leadership will remain in the ascendency.

(11)However the activity of politics is not exclusively defined by what occurs within Left Unity. What is most important is that the Marxist Left orientates itself to become part of the struggles that may occur against the austerity policy. In this context Ken Loach is right to suggest that the Marxist Left should become part of working class communities and therefore potentially more attentive to the concerns of the working class. Instead of panicking about the rise of UKIP we should become involved in actions that can potentially raise the morale of the working class. In this manner the present demoralised character of the working class can be challenged and instead victories, however small, can become the basis to generate support for a more generalised offensive against the system. But, at present the isolation of the Marxist Left from the working class means that socialist culture is rapidly eroded and most people have difficulty even comprehending the significance of the 1945 Labour government. Hence in this very bleak situation it would be sectarian to blame Left Unity for all of the difficulties of the Marxist Left. Instead defeats within the class struggle have encouraged an apolitical mood within the population, and this situation has become the basis for demoralisation within the Marxist groups. The alternative to this situation is not just struggle. Instead we have to re-arm Marxist theory in order to be able to answer the major viewpoints of bourgeois ideology. Precisely we have to answer the common view that the working class no longer has the capacity for collective class action.(4) Instead of answering this question the Marxist Left presently ignore it, and hope this issue will go away. This viewpoint is naïve. What is not understood is that these types of question are generated by the situation in the class struggle. Hence we would be doing socialist politics a vital service if we could provide perceptive analysis of the class struggle and so indicate why the role of the working class is not finished.

(12)The recent policy conference of Left Unity indicates welcome signs of a possible developing left-wing mood. There are calls for opposition to austerity, and for solidarity action throughout Europe in opposition to the prevailing economic policy. It is vital that the Left tendencies attempt to promote these glimpses of a revolutionary approach. The point is that the Marxist Left should express what represents principled politics for the development of the class struggle against the ruling class. The Left should be concerned to advocate a strategy that could generate the development of a mass movement against the austerity policy and which would raise the issue of the alternatives to this reactionary economic policy. But instead of this type of concern in relation to the issue of the transformation of the Left Unity into becoming a militant organ of class struggle, one of the components of the Marxist Left, the CPGB, is virtually obsessed with the diversionary issue of safe spaces in relation to internet conversations. This criticism is not meant to deny the importance of this issue but it is of a secondary nature when compared to the importance of developing a strategy for a potential mass movement against austerity. The fact that one of the possible components of the Marxist left of Left Unity is so pre-occupied with the issue of safe spaces indicates that it is residing in a realm of images and appearances rather than attempting to tackle the difficult and real issues raised by the class struggle.

(13)One of the most important discussions at the recent Left Unity policy conference concerned the issue of ‘safe spaces’. The position of the leadership was rejected but without an alternative being adopted. It was the Communist Platform that led the opposition to the official policy because of the apparent undermining of democracy and the right of free speech. The CPGB obviously considered that the issue of safe spaces was the most important of the Policy conference, and most of its newspaper articles on the event were about this question. None of these articles considered that the issue of safe spaces was an effective distraction from the more important task of developing a strategy to oppose the austerity policy of the Coalition government. Indeed the approach of the CPGB was itself a justification of elitism in regards to its conception of the relationship between the party and working class: “If Left Unity is serious about recruiting from the working class, with all its prejudices, we must confront its homophobia, its sexism and its racism. We cannot start from the position of exclusion.”(5) This view of an ideal and pure party that recruits a reactionary mass of workers is itself unrealistic. We all live in a society that continually perpetuates ideological constructs about various groups of people that reinforces prejudices which can affect anyone at any given moment in time. Hence the view that a left wing party can exist without any expression of prejudice is not credible. Indeed this point is one-sidedly recognised by Mather but she projects exclusively all of this prejudice onto the working class members of the organisation. It could be suggested that what is being defended is the prejudice of anti-workerism! In all of the debate about safe spaces what is not recognised is that the attainment of socialism cannot be realised unless the party becomes an organ of the aspirations of the working class. In this sense the party must be biased towards the recruitment of working class members and must be receptive to the articulation of the ideas and aims of this social force. This situation will not result in the justification of prejudice and instead will result in the elaboration of various discontents with capitalism. If the party is truly an expression of the interests of the working class it will welcome these ideas and attempt to incorporate them into the development of a perspective to struggle for socialism. The point is that the party does not instruct the working class not to be prejudiced instead the very practice of the party indicates that what is important is the struggle for the emancipation of humanity. Hence the most effective way in which any prejudices can be challenged is to involve all the members of the party to struggle for socialism in the most democratic manner. In other words the most effective alternative to safe spaces is not to construct alternative forms of disciplinary conduct but instead to encourage the collective struggle for socialism on the basis of the principles of solidarity. It would then be possible to limit the importance of matters of discipline to an organisational item in the rules of the party. High morale created by the joint endeavours in the struggle for socialism would soon resolve outstanding organisational questions. It is because Left Unity lacks a strategy for promoting the realisation of socialism which means it is preoccupied with the question of ‘safe spaces’. Low morale results in in-fighting and disputes between individuals within the party. This is why the organisational alternative of the Communist Platform is no more satisfactory than the safe spaces code of conduct. What is necessary is a culture of militant struggle that would end the preoccupation with discipline. However the CPGB lack a strategy that would provide this alternative and instead outlines its own obsession with safe spaces and disciplinary codes.

(14)In a more constructive manner, the Left Unity conference opposed any suggestion of withdrawal from the EU and was committed to struggle within an all European basis. It also opposed any accommodation to imperialism in relation to the situation in the Middle East. These glimpses of principled politics were an indication that it is possible to intervene within Left Unity in order to develop support for a principled socialist programme. The problem is that Workers Power campaigns exclusively on behalf of its own faction when advocating a revolutionary standpoint and the CPGB are obsessed with the internal issues of Left Unity. Hence no alternative to the sad demise of the Socialist Platform has yet developed. It is necessary to urgently hold a meeting of all the leftwing currents within Left Unity in order to establish a broad and principled faction that can effectively struggle for revolutionary socialist politics. The formation of a faction on an accessible action programme would advance the struggle to transform Left Unity.

(15)If the above perspective is carried out the Marxist Left will still not be comprehensively united. We call for the formation of factions within the SP and SWP that can strive to transform these organisations in the direction of revolutionary politics. If this process is carried out the next task that will be created will be the unification of these rejuvenated organisations with an equally transformed Left Unity. This process will require a unification Congress in order to realise this task. However the issue will remain concerning what programme can unite these organisations? We consider that an action programme can contain a strategic perspective that can advance the struggle for socialism. Jack Conrad has recently argued that this approach is elitist: “Basically the notion is that capitalism is so corrupting, so pervasive that the majority can never be won over by the strength of our arguments. But steer them into action, put them into motion, lead them from one moderate demand to ever more bolder demands and eventually the aim of working class power will be realised. Only the revolutionary elite knows what is really going on.”(6) The idea that it is possible to mobilise workers on the basis of remote control is ludicrous. People will only enter into action when they are convinced of the necessity for militant struggle. If they are not convinced of the effectiveness of proposed action they will not participate. Hence the idea of activity without the development of consciousness is ridiculous. Marxists propose action in order to stimulate and promote the awareness of the validity of militancy and then they hope that this process will increase the popularity of the aim of socialism. The actual prospect of revolutionary transformation is not possible without the development of what Marx called communist mass consciousness, and the related recognition of the importance of mass struggle in order to achieve this aim. Hence the idea that a party can bamboozle an entire class into supporting the goal of socialism is not possible and has not been realised in history. All genuine revolutionary developments have required popular mass actions and conscious support for the transformation of society. But what is most disappointing about Conrad’s criticism of the role of some of the Marxist left is that he does not outline an alternative strategy. It seems that the CPGB have become critics of the Left and their responsibilities to advance the class struggle are of a distinctly secondary matter. This negative view seems to express their sense of demoralisation. We would argue that the CPGB should reject this sceptical attitude and instead campaign more constructively in favour of a Marxist programme and the transformation of Left Unity. Instead of this standpoint they seem to have the pessimistic view that all socialist projects will fail in the near future. The expression of concern about the condition of Left Unity is not connected with constructive proposals as to how the situation could be improved. They do not seem to recognise that they have a role in trying to bring about an improved and principled Left Unity.

(16)The DSA believes that our role is to promote the renewal of the Marxist Left. Hence despite our small size it is possible to advance the struggle for unity in a principled manner. This process cannot be advanced by the abstract proclamation of unity instead what is required is focus on a particular issue that can provide the basis for united action against capitalism. We believe that the issue which expresses these aspects is the question of austerity. The implementation of this policy by the Coalition government, and within the EU, has undermined the material standards of every sector of the working class and led to a decline in the services provided by the public sector. A dynamic and vibrant Marxist Left would have instantly recognised the importance of the necessity to oppose the austerity policy and therefore would have proposed strategies to bring about its demise. Hence a Marxist Left that was not preoccupied by insular issues would have recognised that the struggle to oppose the austerity policy could have united the working class within a mass movement. The result of this development of mass mobilisation could have been a challenge to the very hegemony of capitalism. Instead of this possibility we have the alternative scenario that the austerity policy is being implemented without opposition. It has become part of the common sense of the population that there is no alternative to austerity. Richard Seymour outlines the outstanding issues in the following manner: “Somehow, the Right has successfully transformed a crisis of capitalism, triggered in this case by the activities of the Richest, into a crisis of state overspending caused by the fiduciary incompetence and stupidity of the poorest. They did not convince everyone of every aspect of their narrative, which is too incoherent to achieve total acquiescence. But it has been sufficient to weaken and disorganise opposition. What is needed is a realistic model of how this has been accomplished, what the weak points in the consensus are, and what resources there are for a coherent left-wing alternative.”(7) Unfortunately the Marxist Left is in such a chronic crisis that it cannot recognise the increasing development of an historic defeat concerning the uncontested implementation of austerity. Instead they try to deny the importance of what is happening in terms of preoccupation with other issues. Consequently the role of a Marxist current like the DSA is to try and persuade the Marxist left of the significance of the development of struggle against the austerity policy and to promote activity in these terms. Only if the Marxist Left rises to this challenge will it be indicated in practice that it is possible to generate the development of the party needed by the working class.

(17)Hence the general inability to establish an awareness of the importance of austerity within the Marxist Left is an indication that the crisis of the party is not specific and instead affects all organisations. We have entered a period in which the very relevance of Marxist groups has been called into question. Instead it is left-wing individuals like Richard Seymour who have understood the importance of fighting austerity for the development of class struggle. His strategic vision may be limited but at least he is trying to instil a sense of urgency about the importance of constructing a mass movement of opposition to the austerity policy. In the past Marxist organisations were able to rise to the challenge and so provide leadership in the struggle against the Poll tax. Important solidarity was also provided in the Miners strike of 1984-85. Similar sentiments can be made about the mass struggles of the 1970’s. The result of the interaction of party and class was the growth of the influence of Marxism. Significant sections of the working class were influenced by the ideas of Marxism in the 1970’s and 1980’s. But the increasing influence of the neo-liberal offensive has led to the decline in importance of the Marxist Left. Most people would have no idea about what was meant by Marxism and Trotskyism. The implementation of the austerity policy represented a possibility to alter this situation. What was left of the Marxist Left could have attempted to provide leadership in the struggle against austerity. It could have challenged the limitations of the trade union bureaucracy and instead provided strategic imagination that resulted in the mass mobilisation of millions against austerity. This type of development occurred in relation to protests against the Iraq war in 2003. But since then the SWP has entered into chronic crisis, and the SP has lacked the audacity to provide a challenge to the domination of the trade union bureaucracy. Whilst the rest of the Marxist Left has generally considered Left Unity to be a panacea that would resolve the problem of the crisis of leadership within the working class. Certainly the formation of Left Unity does represent promise about the development of a mass socialist party, but it also lacks a strategy that would enable this promise to be realised. It has not understood that the vital strategy that could create the connections between itself and the working class is expressed by the development of mass opposition to austerity. Instead the issue of austerity is a minor question in the agenda of its policy conference, and the major preoccupation concerns safe spaces. Hence preoccupation with internal affairs distracts from concentration on major issues in the class struggle. In this manner the character of the development of Left Unity is part of the problems of the Marxist Left and not their resolution. However Left Unity is still an important development when compared with the stagnation of the Marxist Left. In this context the role of Left Unity must be central to the prospects of advancing the unity of Marxism. But this process of unity will itself be diversionary unless it is connected to the issue of developing a strategy to oppose austerity. The advance of a Marxist party is connected to the development of an action programme for the class struggle.

(18)It could be argued by many commentators that the golden age of Marxism is over, and so is the era of the Marxist party. Simon Hardy and Luke Cooper have argued that the importance of the party is being replaced by broader anti-capitalist movements and Social Forums and they contend: “The crisis of the Left is still a crisis of the Sect. Sometimes referred to as the idea of a “fighting propaganda group”, the left group with a narrowly conceived strategy and tradition that acts as a “monopolist in the sphere of politics”, is a model that fundamentally disrupts the development of organic unity on the Left.”(8) They suggest that the Left has to be organisationally transformed into parties that respond to the requirements of the class struggle and this point is very relevant. But what issue is capable of bringing about this transformation? Their emphasis is on the role of new social formations with a dynamic strategy, and so the implication is that the era of the party they described in such critical terms is over. But can new forms of activism replace the role of the Marxist party? The Marxist party may have been limited by sectarian and elitist limitations in the past but the very crisis of the Marxist group is indicating that alternatives are not smoothly generated. The very dire situation of the Marxist left is not creating alternatives. Instead the situation is characterised by a working class movement that lacks any connection to a strategy of opposition to capitalism and the lack of a party that could promote this alternative. Instead of new leaderships being generated in the vacuum of the decline of Marxism we have a dire situation expressed by the chronic necessity for the renewal of Marxism in terms of the promotion of strategic imagination. Hardy and Cooper argue that the generation of strategy will be the result of the development of new anti-capitalist forces. But this has not happened. Instead the acute crisis of strategy is connected to the decline of the Marxist party.

(19)The above argument does not amount to the advocacy of a nostalgic call for the re-formation of the Marxist parties of the past. Hardy and Cooper are right to outline the very limitations of these parties in terms of their defence of elitism and bureaucracy. Often these parties had a despotic leadership and the role of democracy was rejected. In this context new types of parties are required. But their relevant role is defined by the significance of class struggle, and this means the struggle against austerity acquires primary importance. This does not mean that the various internal issues which presently preoccupy the Marxist left are unimportant. However these issues are secondary when compared to the issue that could still reunify the working class against the capitalist system which is opposing austerity. However any further delay in the promotion of a mass movement against austerity can only bring closer the total victory of the deflationary policy. Already massive cuts to public expenditure are being planned for the 2015-2017 period, and the effective acceptance of these cuts will represent an historic defeat for the labour movement. None of the new activists recognise the necessity to promote a mass movement on these issues instead they are primarily concerned about the question of democracy. This issue is not unimportant but it is presently being distorted in a right-wing manner in order to uphold Euro-scepticism and right-wing populism. What will make democracy a real issue for the working class will be its connection to the forms of struggle against austerity. In other words the development of proletarian democracy connected to the dynamics of mass struggle can establish the strategic importance of what is presently a vague aspiration for democratic improvement within society. However none of this is possible without the revival of the Marxist party. Only this development would provide the most favourable conditions for the connection of the importance of mass opposition to the austerity policy with the strategic imagination of how to defeat this policy. The party is indispensable for providing the principles of this action programme. Historical experience has not provided an alternative to the role of the party in relation to the development of strategy for the class struggle.

(20)Some commentators would argue that what is called for is the formation of a Socialist organisation rather than an ideologically homogenous Marxist party. These supporters of the development of the former type of party have the Syriza party of Greece in mind. The problem with this standpoint is that the parliamentary ambitious of Syriza will ultimately test is principles to advance the interests of working people. Only a revolutionary organisation will reject the limitations of liberal democracy and have a perspective of the vigorous transformation of society. In this context Left Unity vacillates between reformism and revolutionary politics with a preference for the former standpoint. At some point this issue will have to be resolved. It is to be hoped that revolutionary politics will be triumphant. However the DSA, contrary to opinion, does not advocate half-way houses, or centrist combinations. We are for the development of revolutionary parties because they can be most sensitive to the requirements of the class struggle. In this context we believe that only a revolutionary party is likely to be urgently concerned to construct a strategy to oppose the austerity policy in both the UK and the EU in general. The very reticence of Left Unity to confront this issue is an indication of its centrist character. This indecision is an expression of the importance to renew the Marxist party as a requirement of the class struggle. Possibly the transformation of Left Unity will be part of this process but we cannot provide guarantees that this development will inevitably occur. Instead our primary task is to utilise all possible political channels in favour of the revival of the revolutionary party. We hope that Left Unity can become part of this process rather than an obstacle. In making this argument for the revolutionary party we do not favour one political tradition over another. Instead we would argue that there is a general crisis which affects all organisations. But what we do know is that the revival of the Marxist party is vital if the task of developing mass opposition to austerity is to be successful.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)The Workers Weekly has many of these types of articles. There are too many to individually mention.

(2)Stuart King Letters Page in Weekly Worker, November 13th 2014 No 1034 p2

(3)Ibid: Jack Conrad: Background, prospects and secret trails, p4

(4)Erik Olin Wright: Envisioning Real Utopias, Verso, London, 2010

(5)Yassamine Mather: The Tyranny of Safe Spaces, Weekly Worker November 20th 2014, No1035 p7

(6)Conrad op cit p4

(7)Richard Seymour: Against Austerity, Pluto Press, London, 2014 p113-114

(8)Simon Hardy and Luke Cooper: Beyond Capitalism, Zero books, Hants, 2012 p155-156