

MIKE MACNAIRS BOOK ON STRATEGY.

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Mike Macnair of the Communist Party of Great Britain has recently written a book[3] whose avowed aim is to reformulate left strategy along Kautskian lines. One might say: surely this is a retrograde step politically. But in a sense a movement towards Kautskyism would be an advance for the official communist movement. Macnair distinguishes between the Kautskian trend in Social Democracy and right wing Social Democracy. Besides recalling how much of orthodox Leninism is actually Kautskyism at second hand, Macnair makes the very accurate observation that:

The coalitionist policy of the right wing of the Second International has been, since 1945, the policy of Second International socialists and 'official communists' alike. The substantive difference between them, before first Euro-communism and then the fall of the USSR, was that 'official communists' proposed for each country a socialist-liberal coalition that would commit to geopolitical formal neutrality combined with friendly relations with the Soviet bloc. With the Soviet sheet anchor gone, the majority of the former 'official communists' are at best disoriented, and at worst form the right wing of governing coalitions (as is the case with the ex-communists and ex-fellow-travellers within the Labour Party in Britain).

A key discriminating feature of the Kautskian tendency was its opposition to coalitions with bourgeois parties and an insistence that it would only enter into government when it had the requisite majority to rule un-aided. In this sense then, a move to Kautskyism would amount to a considerable radicalisation of the communists in Europe. So the book is significant. I will argue however, that it is marked by a failure to go beyond certain fatal limits of classical social democracy, and also by a failure to have any positive theory of socialism. This lack of a theory of socialism is first evident in a non-treatment of the history of the USSR and China, and later in a failure to spell out what sort of economy the socialist movement should be fighting for. On the first point he writes:

Under the Soviet-style bureaucratic regimes there was no objective tendency towards independent self-organisation of the working class. Rather, there were episodic explosions; but to the extent that the bureaucracy did not succeed in putting a political cap on these, they tended towards a pro-capitalist development. The strategic line of a

worker revolution against the bureaucracy - whether it was called 'political revolution' as it was by the orthodox Trotskyists, or 'social revolution' by state-capitalism and bureaucratic-collectivism theorists - lacked a material basis.

He extends the argument to apply to orthodox Stalinists who have to explain why the real Stalinists were not able to organise opposition to the restoration of capitalism. This is an interesting observation but it has two drawbacks.

- (1) Its focus is exclusively on the USSR and Eastern Europe post WWII. It ignores the experience of China during the Cultural Revolution, and if Getty[2] and others are to be believed, the experience of the Great Purges. There was working class participation there. Did this arise from an 'objective tendency'?
- (2) It could be a council of despair. Since the abolition of private capitalism is bound to remove the old class struggle between labour and capital over profits. If such trades union struggle is a precondition of class consciousness, then socialism is bound to remove that class consciousness. Whether it is bureaucratic socialism or not. What then is to be the social basis of resistance to capitalist restoration.

He argues with respect to the USSR

What happened instead was to render concrete the 1850s warnings of Marx and Engels against the premature seizure of power in Germany,¹⁶ which formed the basis of Kautsky's 'caution' in the 1890s and 1900s. By choosing to represent the peasantry and other petty proprietors (especially state bureaucrats), the workers' party disabled itself from representing the working class, but instead became a sort of collective Bonaparte. The Bolshevik leaders could see and feel it happening to themselves,¹⁷ and in 1919-1923 the Comintern flailed around with a succession of short-lived strategic concepts, each of which would - it was hoped - break the isolation of the revolution. These strategic concepts are not simply rendered obsolete by the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The fate of the other 'socialist countries' also proves them to be a strategic blind alley.

This was of course like the argument of Kautsky during the 20s. Is it valid to say that the CPs represented petty proprietors when in power?

Well there is some truth in it to the extent that so long as petty peasant production existed, it created wings within the CPs who defended its interest Bukharin, Gomulka, Deng. But these were just one wing, and in most cases they did not come out on top. In the USSR private peasant agriculture was largely eliminated by collectivisation. And during the 50s and 60s, state farms expanded at the expense even of collectives. In Poland after 56

the pro-petty proprietor wing did come out on top, but that was not generally the case. In the DDR, CSSR and Bulgaria state or collective agriculture was the rule. The crisis of the socialist system, Poland aside, was not generally precipitated by the demands of petty proprietors in agriculture. The identification of state bureaucrats with petty proprietors is an unconvincing throwaway phrase, not justified by any argument.

The policy of reform through coalition governments thus entails (a) the displacement of the downswing of the business cycle onto the weaker states and their firms and populations; and (b) the displacement of the social polarisation which capitalism produces onto polarisation between nations. On the one hand, this gives the reformists' negative claims their credibility: reforms are actually achieved and social polarisation is reduced in the successful states. On the other, the reformists necessarily commit themselves to sustaining and managing an imperial military force.

This may be true of Germany, the UK or USA, but what of Sweden. It is an unsafe generalisation.

At the point of global war between the great powers, the illusory character of the policy of reform through coalition government becomes transparent. All that maintains the reformists are mass fear of the consequences of military defeat, and direct support from the state in the form of repression of their left opponents. Thus both 1914-18 and 1939-45 produced major weakening of the reform policy within the workers' movement and the growth of alternatives. In the event, after 1945 the destruction of British world hegemony enabled a new long phase of growth, and reformism was able to revive. We are now on the road to another collapse of reformist politics ... but what is lacking is a strategically plausible alternative.

The above point is sound, he then attacks the slogan of All Power to the Soviets.

But 'All power to the soviets' was also illusory in another sense. Even before they withered away into mere fronts for the Russian Communist Party, the soviets did not function like parliaments or governments - or even the Paris Commune - in continuous session. They met discontinuously, with executive committees managing their affairs. Though the Bolsheviks took power in the name of the soviets, in reality the central all-Russia coordination of the soviets was provided by the political parties - Mensheviks and SRs, and later Bolsheviks. It was Sovnarkom, the government formed by the Bolsheviks and initially including some of their allies, and its ability to reach out through the Bolshevik Party as a national organisation, which 'solved' the crisis of authority affecting Russia in 1917. The point is simply that

the problem of decision-making authority is not solved by the creation of workers' councils arising out of a mass strike movement. Hence, the problem of institutional forms which will make authority answerable to the masses needs to be addressed in some way other than fetishism of the mass strike and the workers' councils.

He says that the Kautskian center, opposed the left on the grounds that if the workers party already had a majority then a mass strike would be pointless, whereas taking power after a strike whilst in a minority would be elitist minoritarian. Against the right they argued that taking part in a coalition would saddle the workers party with responsibility for the measures taken by their middle class allies, which, like as not, would be hostile to the working class. He sums up the strategy of the center as:

When we have a majority, we will form a government and implement the whole minimum programme; if necessary, the possession of a majority will give us legitimacy to coerce the capitalist/pro-capitalist and petty bourgeois minority. Implementing the whole minimum programme will prevent the state in the future serving as an instrument of the capitalist class and allow the class struggle to progress on terrain more favourable to the working class.

He criticises the positions of the the late Engels on the state as insufficient. Engels had argued that one had to fight for a democratic republic in order for a peaceful transition to socialism by electoral means to be possible - giving the UK and USA as examples of where this might occur. Macnair argues that Engels missed the essence of the bourgeois state form which was:

The inner secret of the capitalist state form is not 'bourgeois democracy'. Rather, it has three elements: 1. the 'rule of law' - ie, the judicial power; 2. the deficit financing of the state through organised financial markets; and 3. the fact that capital rules, not through a single state, but through an international state system, of which each national state is merely a part.

This seems a little idiosyncratic, particularly point 2. True that states often do use deficit financing, and indeed one can argue that the growth in the money supply necessary for the circuit M-C-M' can often occur this way. But why is deficit finance the key?

Surely the power to tax is more important than that, and in particular, the power to levy taxes in money rather than in kind. Along with this goes the right to issue money. The acceptability of state issued money, and the ability to raise deficit finance, both in the end depend upon the power to tax. Without tax revenues, there would be no way to pay the interest on the

national debt, and without the obligation to pay taxes in domestic currency, there would be not ability to issue money that was generally acceptable.

Why too, does he miss out the monopoly of armed force held by the state, the existence of a standing army, and salaried police?

Why does he not mention the parliamentary state as the characteristic constitutional form of civil society?

Macnair presents an interesting critique of residual nationalist traits in the writings of Marx and Engels. These are of course particularly marked in the late Engels where certain Jacobin patriotic themes exist, which at a later date could provide a cover for the SPD voting to support the World War. Macnair argues plausibly that these derive in the end from the theme of the Communist Manifesto that “the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie”.

Macnair outlines and summarises Lenin’s line on revolutionary defeatism. But he argues that it was the specific character of the Great War that made it an effective strategy. Had it been a quick German victory like 1870 it would have had no purchase, and indeed had Germany been fighting a defensive war on German soil, then Engels advocacy of a defencist policy would have been vindicated. He also argues that the defeatist policy could never have made headway or been appropriate in the conditions of the Second World War. The defeatist strategy could only work if it was applied generally in all the belligerent powers. This presupposed an international and the possibility of a generalised revolutionary crisis. Although this did not occur, Macnair believes that the defeatist strategy was right because it was based on an important truth about the state. The key point was that the power of the state rests on the coherence of the army. An unjust and terrible war offers the chance that by defeatist propaganda in the armed forces, one may disrupt the main coercive power of the state and thus overthrow the rule of the old dominant class.

Macnair argues that it was a mistake of the old 2nd International not to have taken seriously Engels advocacy of democratic republican measures like universal military training, a militia and the right to bear arms. They should also have argued that the army ranks should have freedom of political speech and the right to organise in political parties and trade unions. This would have created conditions favourable to opposition to an imperialist war, and although Macnair does not mention this, they would also have created conditions favourable to preventing military putches.

Political programme

The key is to replace the illusory idea of ‘All power to the soviets’ and the empty one of ‘All power to the Communist Party’ with the original Marxist idea of the undiluted democratic republic, or ‘extreme democracy’, as the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The present task

of communists/socialists is therefore not to fight for an alternative government. It is to fight to build an alternative opposition: one which commits itself unambiguously to self-emancipation of the working class through extreme democracy, as opposed to all the loyalist parties.

This is superficially correct, certainly in impetus it goes in the right direction. But it contains real ambiguities which only become evident when he lists his demands. When he does, then Macnair makes a complete hash of it and shows that his conceptions of political democracy have completely failed to break free from Bourgeois republicanism.

But I am going to quibble here and argue that the phrase 'democratic republic' is wrong from the start. It couples two quite different ancient models those of Athens and those of Rome, state forms which are radically distinct in terms of the degree of popular power that they permitted. The republic is Rome reborn, it is senatorial power, it is presidential power (the first magistrate), the political form of the dominant imperial state. It is no accident that the slave owning classes of the USA adopted a republican constitution which took Rome as its model. The Social Democratic movement should, in republics like the USA, Germany and France, be seeking to overthrow the republican constitution and replace it with democracy. In bourgeois monarchies like Britain, Sweden, or Holland to raise the slogan of republicanism rather than going straight for democracy, places you no further left than radical liberals.

What does Macnair give as the political measures necessary to achieve this 'extreme democracy'?

- universal military training and service, democratic political and trade union rights within the military, and the right to keep and bear arms;
- election and recallability of all public officials; public officials to be on an average skilled workers' wage;
- abolition of official secrecy laws and of private rights of copyright and confidentiality;
- self-government in the localities: ie, the removal of powers of central government control and patronage and abolition of judicial review of the decisions of elected bodies;
- abolition of constitutional guarantees of the rights of private property and freedom of trade.

What is striking about this is what it omits. How are political decisions to be reached in this 'extreme democracy'?

Since Macnair says nothing new about this, he accepts the pretensions of parliamentary government to be democratic. But once he does that, he has sold the pass. He is accepting the basic structure of the bourgeois state designed by Hamilton and Madison in which the people do not rule, but are given at least the illusion of influence by being able to choose which of their betters will rule over them. The Federalists knew their classical

political theory and they understood that in establishing a state of this form in the USA they were not establishing a democracy, but a republic. They had read their Aristotle and understood well enough that election was an anti-democratic principle:

There is a third mode, in which something is borrowed from the oligarchical and something from the democratical principle. For example, the appointment of magistrates by lot is thought to be democratical, and *the election of them oligarchical*; democratical again when there is no property qualification, oligarchical when there is. In the aristocratical or constitutional state, one element will be taken from each— from oligarchy the principle of electing to offices, from democracy the disregard of qualification. Such are the various modes of combination. (Aristotle, *Politics* Book 4 part 9)

The Federalists aimed at this aristocratical or constitutional state, which was oligarchic in essence but had certain trappings of democracy. In practice of course the removal of the property qualification came later, but the key issue was election. Initially bourgeois states had property qualifications to vote, these could later be relaxed, but the principle of election was retained. It was quite clear from classical political theory that election was an oligarchic or aristocratic principle. It involved the deliberate selection of the 'best' people, the aristoi to high office. And who are our 'betters' but the upper classes, the more educated, the more wealthy etc. Any system of election is inherently biased against the lower classes and favours the upper classes. Elections are inherently oligarchic and elitist.

as an oligarchy is said to be a government of men of family, fortune, and education; so, on the contrary, a democracy is a government in the hands of men of no birth, indigent circumstances, and mechanical employments. (Aristotle, *Politics*, book 6, part 2)

Look at the USA, the UK or the BRD. Do they have government by those of indigent circumstance and mechanical employment?

Clearly not.

Or do they have government made up of those of family, fortune or education?

Clearly they do.

So they, like all bourgeois states are oligarchies not democracies. The re-labeling of the ancient oligarchic state form as 'democracy', was single the greatest intellectual counterfeit of the bourgeois epoch. Both Kautsky and Macnair have unquestioningly accepted the counterfeit at face value. They end up supporting oligarchy rather than democracy.

In contrast to the oligarchic form of government, Aristotle summarised the essential components of democracy :

that all the magistrates should be chosen out of all the people, and all to command each, and each in his turn all:

that all the magistrates should be chosen by lot, except to those offices only which required some particular knowledge and skill:

that no census¹, or a very small one, should be required to qualify a man for any office:

that none should be in the same employment twice², or very few, and very seldom, except in the army:

that all their appointments should be limited to a very short time, or at least as many as possible:

that the whole community should be qualified to judge in all causes whatsoever, let the object be ever so extensive, ever so interesting, or of ever so high a nature; as at Athens, where the people at large judge the magistrates when they come out of office, and decide concerning public affairs as well as private contracts:

that the supreme power should be in the public assembly; and that no magistrate should be allowed any discretionary power but in a few instances, and of no consequence to public business. (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 6 part 2)

Aristotle was by no means an advocate of democracy, but he attempted to provide a relatively objective description of the then available constitutional forms. His *Politics* provided the menu from which the classically educated founders of the US constitution placed their orders. What Aristotle was describing above is not 'extreme democracy'. No. He was listing the minimal conditions for a state to be called a democracy at all.

The key principle is that instead of being elected, public officials are chosen from the general public like a jury. Aristotle argues that in democracies the best form of magistracy or executive, is a council. If magistrates are chosen by lot, they will be untrained and lack specialist knowledge of government, but if there is a group of them, they will, collectively be wiser and more competent than any one individual. There is a wisdom in crowds[5], for the collective will contain people with many different skills and experiences.

In a modern oligarchy like France, Britain or the USA, what Aristotle called the magistracy is elected. In these elections those with education and money have a huge advantage. The election process is expensive, there are the costs of advertising and campaigning. Historically, in Europe at least, workers parties have been able to partly get round this by collecting dues from hundreds of thousands or millions of members. But when standing candidates they usually face the hostility of the privately owned mass

¹This means property qualification.

²This means public office. Nobody should hold the same public office twice.

media, which is hard to offset. They are also under pressure to present candidates who are far from being “of indigent circumstances, and mechanical employments”. Their first generation of leaders may be of that sort: Ramsay MacDonald or Lula. But later they attempt to present candidates who are educated and polished : Obamas and Blairs. In consequence the elected representatives of popular parties tend to be from higher classes than their supporters. They tend, in consequence, to be markedly cautious in implementing the full rigour of a socialist programme when in office.

Democratic selection by lot suffers none of these disadvantages. It guarantees that the assembly will be dominated by the working classes. It guarantees that the assembly will be balanced in terms of sex, age, ethnic origin, etc. As such it would constitute the most favourable possible grounds for achieving a majority for socialism. If Macnair really wanted to follow the logic of the working class party being the most consistent advocate of democracy what he should be demanding is:

- The replacement of all parliaments, councils, assemblies and quangos by juries drawn randomly from the population.
- The right of initiative and referendum, with taxes, and the budget to be submitted to popular vote³. Declarations of war only by popular vote.
- Full political rights, including the right to elect officers in the armed forces.
- Abolition of the judiciary and magistracy. Juries to be supreme in courts. No loss of liberty without jury trial.

One of the most interesting parts of Macnair’s book is his treatment of the history of internationalism. He is a strong advocate of the need for an international, but is very critical of the 3rd and 4th internationals. The 3rd is criticised for its bureaucratic military command structure which, he claims, would only have been justified in the event of a general revolutionary civil war across Europe in the 1920s. Failing that it suppressed local initiative and the horizontal links that real internationalism required. He devotes a perhaps excessive critical attention to the Trotskyite international, in view of the latter’s limited influence. He still sees the need for a new international but cautions:

It should be apparent that the objective political conditions do not yet exist for such a struggle. But they do exist for continental united struggles for political power, which fight for continental unification: a Communist Party of Europe, a Pan-African Communist Party, and so on. A dynamic towards the continental unification of politics is already visible in bourgeois politics, not just in Europe, and in the Latin

³It is notable that when the right of initiative was advocated by the left in the SPD in the 1890s Kautsky opposed it, see the account in [4]. Now popular votes can be easily and securely done using telephones, see [1].

American Chávista 'Bolivarians'. It is even present in an utterly deformed and reactionary manner in the islamist movement in the Middle East.

In general what is infuriating about reading Macnair, is that although his heart and impulses are in the right place, he remains dogmatically hide-bound by a particular set of historical exemplars. It is clear that his programmatic repertoire is drawn almost exclusively from the Erfurt Programme and the first programmes of the RSDLP. So although he advocates the struggle for democracy and although he says that we must oppose parliamentary constitutionalism, the only significant constitutional measure he proposes - the right of recall, is far too feeble for the task. People will not make democratic revolution if the main objective is just the right to recall MP's. If you want a democratic revolution you would have to be intransigently opposed to the underlying elitist principle on which the existing system is based.

You would have to constantly challenge the legitimacy of an elected parliament. Your victorious candidates would have to follow the example of Irish Republicans in refusing to attend and thus add legitimacy to the elected parliament. You might consider the Irish Republican policy of combining legal with illegal struggle.

You would have to organise mass civil disobedience to unjust laws as we in Scotland did to Thatchers Poll Tax.

You would have to oppose the will of parliaments to the will of the peoples by using tactics like the local referendum that we used to block the Tory attempt to privatise water in Scotland.

You would have to look to the Chartists or Covenanters organisation of monster petitions for change. But they should be Claims of Right not petitions, since the latter concede legitimacy to those from whom one is petitioning.

You should be demanding a constitutional convention drawn by lot from the population to redefine the state structure.

You should be educating party members in the goals of revolutionary democracy, so that if such bodies drawn by lot come into existence, then any party members who randomly find themselves allotted, can come to play a leading role in the citizens jury. The party members would have to be prepared to argue intransigently in a constitutional convention for the most radical and egalitarian structures.

You would have to be prepared, at time of major crisis or political scandal, for the people themselves to take the initiative in forming such a convention drawn by lot.

You would have to argue in the Trades Union movement, that only by raising labour's goals above the economic, to the political, could labour be free.

Within the labour movement you would have to be arguing for the abolition of the wages system in concrete practical terms, explaining the relatively simple steps that a democratic assembly could take to achieve these

goals. The struggle over wages and conditions is not enough, but to abolish the wages system we must first win the battle of democracy.

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