

On the Current Passivity and Stoicism of Organised Labour

Sun, 12/13/2009 - 22:58 — Anonymous

By **Ian MacDonald**

This is a previously unfeatured article that was mis-placed a year ago as a comment below an article from a correspondent. Ian's article in fact uniquely expresses his philosophical approach to struggles in the workplace that is his legacy. -- *London Corresponding Committee/Hobgoblin*.

--

Capitalism is now at a qualitatively different stage from what it was in the 1970s and '80s; and the ideas of the left have to move on as well.

In the 1970s and '80s production for direct consumption rather than service or financial production was concentrated in the traditional American and European industrialised countries and organised within national/European boundaries. If you went on strike in engineering for example, as I did a number of times, then you saw the result of your strike pretty quickly, i.e. the production lines stopped and if you stayed solid you won. This had twofold implications, 1) You did not need to concretely look to a revolutionary alternative to society, you could change things yourselves, collectively. 2) You did not have to go out on strike for long to see an effect; and therefore could calculate your gains over days lost.

With the relatively recent movement of whole production lines from Europe to China, in the so-called advanced countries, the service sector and public service have taken over as the main employers. This means that, a) you need to go on strike for longer to win, b) you often go on strike with only 25%, (in the UK public sector) of the work force (and often there is no pressure to recruit more members as management are happy to negotiate with you on that basis) and c) workers will often never claw back what is lost; meaning that strikes are more about higher ideals, for future generations etc; therefore people need to believe that a better world is not just preferable but possible.

Dave Tate [in his article, *The Limits of Stoicism*, implies that pessimism and optimism are different categories, distinct from stoicism. But rather than seeing stoicism as a separate category in this respect I believe there are in fact quantitatively different forms of stoicism. Does this matter? Yes, I think it does. Dave says, "Stoicism is a way of ethically enduring hardship by the oppressed class." He then goes on to say that "stoicism is being challenged by some workers, at least in the public sector...." I don't believe this is true. Yes, there are sectors that feel they can try and win, whose efforts are resisted effectively by their own leadership, but there is still a massive gap between this optimism and seeing the need to overthrow the present system. Therefore stoicism still endures! My view is that for stoicism to give way to a higher form of collective consciousness then there has to be vision of the kind of society that needs to be formed, not just a need to overthrow the present one.

Dave Tate states that the forces of capitalism are not, “like a force of nature, which come and go like the wind...” My contention is that is precisely the problem. It is like a force of nature. It has its own dynamic through the extraction of value and resulting alienation; which means that, in essence, individual capitalists are as much alienated from it and objectively have as much interest in creating a new free society as the working class whose historic role is to destroy it.

Dave states that, “...The media seeks to isolate public sector workers arguing that if they get above inflation pay rises, this will further push up inflation” Of course workers should struggle for more; because if they are totally docile then more and more value will be extracted from them. There is dialectic here which means that workers need to fight subjectively but it is important that the objective nature and independent nature of capitalism is realised. If it is not then big theoretical mistakes will be made that have practical effects on building a free society. Logically capitalism cannot be changed by the human beings that control it, i.e. it won't work just to get rid of the baddies and replace them with the good guys. The history of reformism is littered with good guys gone bad! The creation of value is what make human beings alien to capitalism and each other, culminating in the perverse social interaction within capitalism between commodities i.e. “things”.

So what about the rest of the left and the way forward? How is it possible to move from a consciousness of stoicism to a revolutionary consciousness that aims to get rid of capitalism and put a socialist society in its place?

In my view the post-Marx Marxist Left, including crucially the Trotskyite left has theoretical positions that will lead, whether they like it or not to reformist positions, whatever the revolutionary rhetoric. The example of the Left I am going to look at is the Socialist Party. I work with many comrades in the Socialist Party and I hope they do not take this article as patronising, as it is not meant to be so. They are good militants that want to change society fundamentally; of that I have no doubt. Objectively however, the logic of the organisation they are in suggests something different. Firstly the SP and many other Left organisations are based on Trotsky's ‘Death Agony of Capitalism’ and the idea that Capitalism is decaying: “The strategic task of the next period - a prerevolutionary period of agitation, propaganda, and organization - consists in overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard...” (Trotsky 1938).

Bank collapses and crises aside, capitalism is still expanding, not decaying, with increasing value production in China and India for example (which of course does not preclude the recession we are witnessing at the moment). In other words the “objective revolutionary conditions” are no longer revolutionary conditions, and never were; and the logic of the Transitional Programme is based on a false premise i.e. that Capitalism is in imminent danger of implosion. Secondly, the SP and most of the Trotskyite left, have a position that the Soviet Union was a workers state, albeit bureaucratically degenerated (or deformed) until relatively recently. The analysis, which to do it justice, would need to take another article, is based around the idea of socialism as being formally about redistribution of wealth and state control of this wealth rather than abolition of value-production. This theoretical position leads directly to the political view today that socialism entails nationalization and smashing the state, so that working people can exert control

through their own workers state and essentially redistribution of wealth, NOT, crucially getting rid of value.

When Marx wrote his Critique of the Gotha Program it was about this fundamental point, it was about NOT seeing as the pivot, “fair distribution”, but about getting rid of value-production, immediately, as the definition of socialism/communism, on the basis of equal individual return for each worker’s production, rather than the average extraction of surplus value. Marx was also clear that a true socialist society is about, “from each according to his, (sic) ability to each according to his needs. “ This is not a bourgeoisie concept of equality but one of need related to ability, a very different thing. The point I am making here is that unless we understand a) the nature of capitalism in today’s world and b) what makes capitalism tick, i.e. value, then objectively nothing can and will be changed.

It is worth mentioning at this point the Socialist Party-sponsored Campaign for a New Workers Party. I am not against a New Workers Party in principle, but one must ask: what will make it different from what has gone before? It was not long ago that Labour had the Clause 4 slogan:

"To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service."

The reason it was ditched was not just because some nasty right-wingers thought it should go but because objectively it did not fit in with a party wedded to capitalism. What is to stop any new party going in the same direction and therefore being a massive historic diversion if the embryonic leadership of such a party, made up of Trotskyites and “left” trade union leaders have a misunderstanding of what capitalism is based on and indeed what they are actually fighting for?

This leads back to the conclusions of Dave Tate’s article which states, “we need to consistently argue that this freedom is unobtainable in a capitalist society, be it free market or state capitalist and that it can only be achieved through the abolition of capitalism itself through an introduction of a socialist world. This can only occur when workers are self confident and conscious of their desire for freedom. “

How are workers to be self-confident and conscious? Looking at the above quote and the objective nature of capitalism there could be a tendency to see an eventual objective and therefore (fateful) eventual response from the working class. I don’t believe, that Dave means this and I certainly do believe that the working class is the subject whose role, historically, is to, a) remove capitalism and b) put a free society in its place. I agree with Dave when he poses the question about ensuring that, “socialists in their workplaces and communities have the arguments with other workers as to why support should be given to those on strike and why all workers are experiencing an increase in alienation.”

Absolutely true! But more than that I believe that socialists, and specifically Marxist-Humanists, have to pose now the question of the type of society we want to build. This is not a call for an

exact blue print, but involves a vision of a society without value-production and therefore is about human beings as free individuals being able to relate to each other as human beings as opposed to “things”. In my view to be able to start to pose this question the bullet of “intellectualism” needs to be well and truly bitten. Dave importantly bases his article on Hegel and the philosophical concept of stoicism and the development of consciousness of the working class as a whole. It is vital that theory and philosophy are combined with the activity of the working class now and in any developing working class political formations. This is not a luxury and is the opposite of elitism - often a charge from the Left against those who see the importance of philosophy and theory. The reason it is important is that, apart from the need to understand the complex nature of capitalism so it can be destroyed, it is central for there to be a convergence of intellectual and labour before the revolution; not primarily to guard against a bureaucratic elite akin to Stalinism, but so that there will be a mass consciousness that is capable of overthrowing capitalism and achieving a free society. It is very convenient for some on the Left to reduce change in consciousness to happening mainly through struggle. Struggle is a vital component, but only half the story. Unless the masses know where they are going and understand the enemy then any revolutionary change and move from a consciousness of stoicism is still-born.

It is ironical that the traditional Left groups have a leaderships that, whether they like it or not, are fundamentally on a different intellectual level from the rest of their organization; and it is this fact that means it is vital to look at other methods of organisation compared to democratic centralist model.

In the context of the above, Marxist-Humanists need to be able to relate to the real struggles of the working class, and to link them to philosophical and theoretical ideas. This will not be easy, and will involve looking at new modes of organization, inevitably around concrete issues of workers control, because that raises consciousness and confidence. However this confidence is quickly dissipated if there is not a political understanding of the nature of capitalism itself and therefore why a new society has to be fought for if there is to be real workers control. The question of workers studying Marxism has to be grappled with. Dave Tait talks about involving the community and I think that is an important point for two reasons:

a) community involvement has the potential to politicise struggle, but also to depoliticise it (witness the recent hospital campaigns where the emphasis has often been on one community competing with the other for the right to a hospital bed,

b) The line between the community and the work place is becoming more and more blurred. In the eighties the 35-hour week was a popular demand and in some engineering shops. Now the blackberry and the laptop are all powerful, often connected to workplace systems, enabling connection at the home. This makes 24 hour working a real possibility (in some areas of the financial sector it is already the norm). In the very low paid jobs like cleaning, it is often the case that workers do two or more jobs, and work round the clock.

In this context, how is it possible to grapple with Marxist ideas and theory? I think that the answer is that because work is a permanent way of life and arguably more encompassing than ever before, the politicisation of workers has to take place with reference to the work they do, for instance posing workers control in the sense of how would the job be done if workers themselves

were running the business/social services dept and how this would be transposed in a socialist society. Would, in many cases, the job still exist? Would workers do the same jobs or would they be shared? This would have to be combined with Marxist Education, which involves workers thinking for themselves and not being given the line by an entrenched elite.

How this is done should be discussed in further articles, but certainly it will not be easy. I do not however see an alternative to moving workers from stoicism and to a higher form of consciousness that would point the way forward to higher levels of struggle. At present it is very hard to argue for long strikes, because workers are not stupid and see that they will lose money and never claw it back, even if they win their demands. However if workers see a different society being possible in reality, then strikes take on a more altruistic and progressive nature, away from stoicism. The answer of the bureaucrats of course is keeping strikes short, making secret deals and going precisely nowhere.

The difference of the above approach to 'transitional demands' is that Trotsky saw transitional demands as, "a bridge between present demands and the socialist program of revolution..." But this was in the context of a set of demands written in 1938, in the context of what was believed at that point to be a pre-revolutionary situation. What is being proposed above is not a bridge but a process of convergence of intellectual ideas and the practice of workers i.e. the nature of work itself, within the global capitalist world.

13 November 2008