

The death of reformism: Corbyn and the “broad left”

By Chris Marsden
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The following speech was delivered by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, for the past 20 years.

Marx repudiated the central premise of reformism when drawing the fundamental lesson of the Paris Commune of 1871. The first attempt by the working class to take power into its own hands ended in the slaughter of up to 20,000 Communards.

Marx concluded that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.” The modern state functioned as “the national power of capital over labour,” a “public force organized for social enslavement” and “an engine of class despotism.” The working class must overthrow the bourgeois state and establish its own state power, tasked with the “expropriation of the expropriators.”

The history of the revolutionary socialist movement is one of implacable hostility to the advocates of reformism, of the constant exposure of their pretensions and falsehoods to break their influence over the working class.

In 1938, Leon Trotsky gave a speech on the founding of the Fourth International, in which he declared, “Our aim is the full material and spiritual liberation of the toilers and exploited through the socialist revolution. Nobody will prepare it and nobody will guide it but ourselves.”

He contrasted the Fourth International with the “old Internationals,” which were “rotten through and through. The great events which rush upon mankind will not leave of these outlived organizations one stone upon another.”

That prediction is now being realised.

The Stalinist parties are either husks, or, in the case of China, the new organising nexus of the bourgeoisie. The Social Democratic parties of Europe, which once advocated a reformist road to socialism, are going the same way. Today, the average share of their vote in western European countries is just 22 percent.

The German SPD, supported by less than a fifth of the electorate, is in a second grand coalition, propping up the

right-wing CDU. But only another five EU states—Malta, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia—have social democrats in government.

Some parties, such as France’s Socialist Party, have suffered a collapse to single figure support, including in Greece, where the name “Pasokification” was given to this phenomenon.

The Blairite think-tank, Prospect, proclaims, “Social democracy, the most influential force in European politics for decades, is dying.”

They should know, because the party they dubbed “New Labour” was in the vanguard of the political shift to a nakedly pro-business, pro-privatisation, pro-austerity and pro-war agenda that has ended in electoral meltdown.

The working class, particularly the younger generation, has abandoned the old parties in disgust at what they have done.

Moreover, the “broad left” parties, meant to supposedly replace these despised formations, have themselves been discredited. This is epitomised by Syriza in Greece, which came to power based on a pledge to oppose austerity, only to implement cuts worse than those that led to the collapse of PASOK.

Syriza is now in head-on conflict with the working class, after having privatised 14 regional airports, the Port of Piraeus, Thessaloniki seaport, cut pensions by 40 percent, with another 20 percent cut to follow, eviscerated the health service, shed tens of thousands of jobs, brought in anti-strike laws, embraced NATO and a military alliance with Israel.

I speak to you from a country which is supposedly bucking this trend—where the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015 is meant to have signalled a rebirth of the Labour Party.

This is the narrative pushed by Britain’s pseudo-left groups—who declared Corbyn’s victory a step towards Labour’s re-founding “as a democratic, socialist, anti-austerity party.”

Events have already disproved such claims.

We have documented, as a party, every retreat made by

Corbyn to meet the dictates of the right wing of the Labour Party and of big business.

Rather than oppose austerity, Corbyn instructed Labour councils to impose the cuts demanded by the Tories, while his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell dedicates his days to courting the City of London.

Rather than mobilise workers against militarism and war, Corbyn has capitulated on every key issue—allowing free votes on war in Syria and the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme, as part of NATO’s military build-up against Russia.

In our appraisal of Corbyn and Labour, we base ourselves on the rich legacy of the Marxist movement and on the analysis made by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

“Reformism is bourgeois deception of the workers,” wrote Lenin, describing it as a “disease.”

With the line-up of the social democrats behind their own ruling classes in the First World War, he wrote of the monstrous victory of opportunism—a tendency rooted in “a section of the petty bourgeoisie and of certain strata of the working class who *have been bribed* out of imperialist super-profits and converted to *watchdogs* of capitalism and *corruptors* of the labour movement.”

Without a struggle against these parties, he said, “there can be no question of a struggle against imperialism, or of Marxism, or of a socialist labour movement.”

Trotsky said of Britain’s Labour “lefts:” “Workers must at all costs be shown these self-satisfied pedants, drivelling eclectics, sentimental careerists and liveried footmen of the bourgeoisie in their true colours. To show them up for what they are means to discredit them beyond repair.”

Groups such as the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party, et al., pass over more than a century of the history of the Labour Party and similar formations.

For decades, figures far to the left of Corbyn headed factions or led parties in which millions placed their trust, and which had implemented measures that significantly benefitted the working class—such as the founding of Britain’s National Health Service. Even then, every effort to transform them along socialist lines failed.

But those days are long-gone.

The lurch to the right by the social democrats is not the result of a few bad leaders. How does this account for the universal character of this process?

It was the necessary response of pro-capitalist parties and politicians to the profound changes associated with globalised production, the integration of finance and manufacturing and the domination of the world economy by transnational corporations.

This rendered the reformist programme of securing social

concessions, within the framework of the nation state through class collaboration, moribund.

To compete in globalised markets, the ruling class demanded of the social democrats, and the trade unions on which they rest, that they impose savage cuts and betray strikes—which they have done now for decades.

In the process, their relationship to the working class has undergone a fundamental shift, as they have become ever more directly the servants of the financial oligarchy.

The pseudo-left groups claim that this has all changed, because Labour is led by a nice man, with progressive intent. However, their support for Corbyn is not based on such stupid misconceptions, but on political calculations rooted in definite social interests.

They represent an upper middle-class stratum that views revolution as a threat to the substantial privileges they enjoy, often as advisers to the labour bureaucracy or leading functionaries within the trade union apparatus.

Close to a century and a half after Marx wrote on the Paris Commune, the perspective of the pseudo-left groups is to “lay-hold” not of the state, but of Jeremy Corbyn—and to ride his coat-tails into the machinery of government.

This is what their co-thinkers have done in Greece, with Syriza, Portugal’s Left Bloc, Die Linke in Germany and Podemos in Spain.

Should Corbyn come to power, his actions would be the same as those of Syriza—to betray the political mandate he was given, and pursue the austerity and militarism demanded by the raging crisis of British and world imperialism.

The Socialist Equality Party bases its perspective not on ephemeral illusions in figures such as Corbyn, Alexis Tsipras or Pablo Iglesias, but on the reality of existing social relations.

There is no possibility of a return to the reformist past of the Labour Party.

We live in an era of escalating class struggle, not class compromise, of blood and iron, that can only be transcended through world socialist revolution. In the bicentenary year of his birth, the future belongs to Marx, and to the great revolutionary tradition defended by Lenin and Trotsky, and embodied today in the parties of the ICFI.

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