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The material foundations of opportunism

# 1993: The nature of social-democratic reformism

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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### INTRODUCTION

**Ernest Mandel wrote this article for the October 1993 issues of *Inprecor* and *International Viewpoint*, where it was intended to be an introduction to a series of articles devoted to social democracy. Given the length of the article - too long for what was then the content of our journals - it could not be published. This study is therefore dated. However it seems to us that in spite of the nearly twelve years that have passed since it was written, this article sheds light on the crisis of social democracy.**

This crisis has continued to worsen (as is shown by the splits that are now taking place in Germany and the divisions within the PS in France...), hand in hand with an ever-widening gap between the social-democratic party machines and the popular layers (witness the results of the referendums on the European Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands).

The tendencies towards the social transformation of the social-democratic party apparatuses - prudently analysed by the author - have accentuated. Deeply attached to the analysis of reality and always on the lookout for the most up-to-date information that would enable him to confirm or invalidate his analyses, Ernest Mandel would certainly not have been satisfied with the publication of this article today, without being able to thoroughly update it.

Furthermore, for reasons of space and because some of the information included, especially in the final part of the article, which was then immediately relevant, is now outdated, some cuts have been made, indicated by: (...). Finally, we have kept the author's notes and have completed them by some editorial notes, put in square brackets - [ ]. The full text of this article will be made available on the [Ernest Mandel web site](#).

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**Since the October Revolution, the workers' movement has been confronted with the choice between two political practices. This is also a choice between two strategies.**

**This choice does not concern the "advisability" of the struggle for immediate objectives, both economic and political. It does not deal with an option for or against taking part in elections and participation in elected assemblies, not only for propaganda ends but to get laws adopted that favour workers and other exploited and oppressed sections of society [1].**

Marx fought systematically for the legal reduction of the working day (week). He resolutely combated the super-exploitation of women workers and fought against child labour. Engels sought to extend to all countries the struggle for the 8-hour day and for universal suffrage, simple and equal for all citizens [2].

In the particular conditions of Tsarist Russia, Lenin followed a similar line, even more emphatically.

[[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/allende\\_coup.jpg](https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/allende_coup.jpg)]

Santiago September 11 1973. Right-wing coup fells Allende government

These combats were based on the conviction that a working class that was in a wretched state, incapable of fighting for its physical and moral integrity, would also be incapable of fighting for a breakthrough towards a classless society. History has confirmed this diagnosis. Nowhere have bread riots led to a systematic anti-capitalist struggle, to a struggle for a better world. The path traced by Marx and the Marxists has on the other hand led to millions of the

exploited becoming conscious of the necessity for such a struggle.

What however opposes revolutionary Marxism to social-democratic reformism is the attitude taken towards the economic and political class power of Capital. It is by the same token a fundamentally different attitude towards the bourgeois state.

Reformism is the illusion that a gradual dismantling of the power of Capital is possible. First of all you nationalise 20 per cent, then 30 per cent, then 50 per cent, then 60 per cent of capitalist property. In this way the economic power of Capital is dissolved little by little. You take from the bourgeoisie first of all a big city, then two municipalities, then the majority in Parliament, then the power to dictate teaching programmes, then the majority of the circulation of newspapers, then the control of the municipal police, then the power to choose the majority of top civil servants, magistrates and officers: the political power of Capital will just fade away.

Reformism is therefore essentially gradualist. Consequently, the real theoretician of reformism was Eduard Bernstein, with his celebrated formula: "the movement is everything, the end is nothing" [3]. Today German social democracy goes one better: drop by drop, we will dissolve the rock. We go from human history to the history of geological formations. How many thousand years does it take for a rock to dissolve?

Revolutionary Marxism is the rejection of gradualist illusions. Experience confirms that nowhere, in any country, has the bourgeoisie lost its economic and political power by the gradualist path. Reforms can weaken this power. They cannot abolish it. (...)

Society, like nature, has a horror of a vacuum. That corresponds to the strong centralising tendency that is inherent in the degree of development of the forces of production. Every town, not to mention every factory, cannot have its own currency, its own Customs, its own pricing policy, its own telecommunications centre, or even its own hospital. There can be a period of dual power between the rule of Capital and the rule of the working class. But history confirms that this period can only last a short time.

If the working class does not succeed in building its own centralised power, the bourgeois state will maintain itself or be rebuilt. That is the principal lesson of all the revolutions of the 20th century. That is the positive balance sheet of the October Revolution. It is the negative balance sheet of the German Revolution and the Spanish Revolution, the two main defeats of the proletariat.

## Strategy and violence

Social-democratic strategy does not differ from revolutionary Marxist strategy by a more radical rejection of violence. Revolutionaries can even send the ball back into the court of social democracy on this question. Inasmuch as the working class and the other exploited and oppressed social layers make up the majority, indeed the overwhelming majority of the adult population, the use of violence is for it marginal, indeed counter-productive for the creation of working-class power. What is essential, for the triumph of the proletarian revolution under these conditions, is the conquest of a new legitimacy. This model of the conquest of power is the October Revolution in Petrograd. It has been correctly pointed out that it cost fewer deaths than occur through traffic accidents in a weekend in any large country. (...)

We are convinced that with a bold, resolute and coherent orientation by the majority of the workers' movement at moments of impetuous, generalised mass action, the same process could have been repeated in May 1968 in

France and during the hot autumn in 1969 in Italy. A big majority of soldiers would have refused to fire on their brothers, their sisters, their fathers, their mothers, their workmates. De Gaulle, who was not lacking in tactical intelligence, shared this judgment. That is why he did not send troops to fire on strikers, he shut them up in their barracks, for fear that they would go over to the side of the people.

On the other hand, important sectors at least of the bourgeoisie cling desperately to power, even in the face of the immense majority of citizens. Like "Madam Veto" [nickname of Marie-Antoinette in 1791], they are ready to massacre all of Paris, all of Barcelona and Madrid, all of Berlin, all of Milan and Turin, all of Vienna, all of Shanghai, all of Djakarta, all of Santiago de Chile...in order to preserve their class power. If we leave them the means to do so, they will make rivers of blood flow [4].

The social democratic Right, which is opposed to the revolutionary seizure of power, does not in fact really reduce the incidence of violence. On the contrary, it encourages it, at least objectively, if not deliberately.

The gradual counter-revolution begun by Noske, Ebert and Scheideman in December 1918-January 1919, with the help of the Freikorps, ancestor of the future SA and SS, did not only pass over the bodies of Rosa Luxemburg, of Karl Liebknecht, of Leo Jogiches, of Hugo Haase. It passed over the bodies of the thousands of workers assassinated between 1919 and 1921, of the hundreds of workers killed between 1930 and 1933. It led to the hecatombs that the Nazi dictatorship caused. (...)

Furthermore, let us remember that the social-democratic Right fully accepted the violence of the First World War in the belligerent countries. This violence resulted in between 10 and 20 million dead, while to the bourgeoisie, the war appeared "normal", "natural", unavoidable. The violence of the struggle for power, on the other hand, is considered as "abnormal", "avoidable", indeed illegitimate.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Bernstein.jpg>]  
Eduard Bernstein

In this sense, August 4th, 1914, the acceptance of the imperialist war by the social-democratic Right, also marks a turning point in the history of the 20th century. The inhuman and massive violence of the war was accepted without ongoing resistance or revolt. Only small minorities came out of it honourably. Passivity, resignation and cynicism spread in the face of massacres, and even of torture [5]. In this respect too, the historic responsibility of the social-democratic Right is overwhelming.

## Social-democratic reformism and the future of capitalism

If it is necessary to act rapidly in order to carry through the revolutionary seizure of power, it is also necessary for a deeper reason. The power of Capital, including the repressive apparatuses that protect it, are characterised by a high degree of internal cohesion. Trotsky made in this respect a remarkable analysis of the particular nature of the officer corps, in conformity with its role, which reflects this cohesion [6].

It is practically impossible to shake this cohesion in normal times. It is only at exceptional moments that we see soldiers refusing to obey, or mass mutinies. That is one of the reasons why real revolutionary crises are relatively rare. In general they do not happen every year, or even every decade in each country. If we do not seize these relatively rare occasions, the bourgeoisie will remain in power for quite some time yet, with all that that implies.

These privileged moments for mass revolutionary action are in the last analysis the result of the exacerbation of the intense contradictions of bourgeois society. They lead to situations that Lenin summed up in a classical formula: Those on high can no longer govern as before, those below are no longer willing to be governed as before.

The debate between reformists and revolutionary Marxists is therefore finally based on their different opinions concerning the future of capitalism. Bernstein claimed that the contradictions inherent in bourgeois society were steadily decreasing. There would be fewer and fewer wars, fewer and fewer repressive practices on the part of the state, fewer and fewer explosive social conflicts. Kautsky added, in his book *Terrorism and Communism*, that the bourgeoisie had become more and more benevolent, nice, peace-loving, taking as his model the US President Wilson.

Rosa Luxemburg counter-posed to Bernstein's diagnosis one that was diametrically opposed. There would be more and more wars, more and more social explosions, in comparison with the period 1871-1900.

The history of the 20th century has confirmed Rosa Luxemburg's diagnosis and not Bernstein's. Similarly, reformist politics, gradualist politics, have hardly been credible during the phases of acute crises that have marked our century, in particular between 1914 and 1923, during the 1930s and the 1940s and from before May 1968 until the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-75.

They have also been less credible since the beginning of the "long depressive wave" that we are in at present, and of the general offensive of Capital against Wage Labour and the peoples of the Third World that is accompanying it.

But the aggravation of the internal contradictions of capitalism is not linear and constant. It is interrupted by phases of temporary relative stabilisation: the main ones were 1924-1929 and 1949-1968. The period of prolonged economic recovery after the recession of 1980-82 produced some analogous symptoms.

During these phases, social-democratic reformism can regain a certain credibility in a series of countries, profiting moreover from particular situations, such as in the Scandinavian countries. This credibility is expressed by an easier acceptance by the broad masses of everyday reformist political practice.

Now, the alternation in time of revolutionary situations, of situations of relative stability, of counter-revolutionary dynamics, means that the victorious struggle for the seizure of power requires, over and above a vanguard party that is oriented towards that end, a working class that has been strengthened by sufficient experience of self-activity and self-organisation, within which this party can become hegemonic. This experience can only be acquired during non-revolutionary periods.

The practice of the workers' movement that is advocated by revolutionary Marxists does of course combine strikes for immediate gains, the strengthening to this end of trade unions and other mass organisations, participation in elections, the utilisation of elected assemblies, the fight for social legislation.

## Priority to mass struggle

But the priority is accorded to mass extra-parliamentary action, to the mass strike, to the mass political strike, to the development of forms of self-organisation and direct rank-and-file democracy: elected strike committees; democratic mass meetings of strikers; neighbourhood and "housewives'" committees; initiatives of workers' and popular control, etc. It was Rosa Luxemburg who most systematically defended this strategy before 1914 [7].

The reformists radically refused these priorities. The leaders of the German trade unions before 1914 proclaimed: "Generalstreik ist Generalunsinn" - the general strike is generalised nonsense (stupidity). On this point too, historical experience has shown that Rosa Luxemburg was right and the reformists were wrong. There have been very many mass strikes, indeed general strikes, from 1905 onwards, in many countries.

But history has not shown that Rosa Luxemburg and the revolutionary Marxists were entirely right about the real practice of the broad working masses. There are a series of countries, and not the least important ones, where mass strikes have never led to a general strike on a national scale. We only have to think of the United States and of Germany after 1923.

Countries that have experienced general strikes on a national scale have more often than not subsequently gone through long periods where extra-parliamentary mass actions were much more limited: for example in France since May 1968. There have only been a few countries where mass strikes, indeed general strikes, have taken place more systematically: above all in Argentina, Belgium, Australia, to some extent Italy and Spain, and more recently Brazil.

During more or less prolonged intervals, reformist practice has dominated the activity and determined the conscience of the masses, as it did in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s. During these periods, the revolutionary strategy and project undoubtedly lost their credibility.

We also have to recognize that even when the working class and the trade union movement systematically engage in a mass strike, or even a general strike, that does not automatically lead to a rise in the political consciousness of workers. The case of Australia is a good illustration of that. The case of Argentina confirms that this practice can even coincide with the total absence of elementary class political independence of the broad masses. (...)

The general conclusion that emerges from historical experience is that the development and the credibility of the social-democratic project are very closely linked to the relative stability of bourgeois society. This stability is in the long term unrealisable during our century of the historic decline of capitalism. It is utopian to base oneself on it. But that is not the case during specific periods of shorter duration.

A necessary, but not sufficient condition of these phases of relative stabilisation is economic growth that makes possible a parallel increase in real wages and in surplus value [8]. But even in periods of economic growth the working class can unleash impetuous mass actions that shake the stability of bourgeois society. That was especially the case of June 1936 in France, of the revolutionary explosion of July-August 1936 in Spain, of the Belgian general strike of December 1960-January 1961, of May 1968 in France, of the Portuguese Revolution, of the beginning of the rise of mass struggles in Brazil and in South Africa. The motives can be extremely varied: defence or conquest of democratic liberties; riposte to fascist threats; fear of future worsening of the situation as regards employment and wages; international class solidarity [9].

But the general formula remains: the credibility and the influence of the reformist social-democratic project are in direct proportion to the degree of relative stability of bourgeois society. The former cannot increase when the latter declines.

## Social-democratic reformism and the bourgeois state

Social-democratic gradualism and the refusal to fight for the establishment of a workers' state in no way imply that

the reformists do not really attach importance to the question of power. On the contrary, they are obsessed by it.

It is true that before 1914, there was only one country where social democracy had governed: Australia. But social democracy had begun to conquer the administration of municipalities. And from 1914 onwards governments in which social democracy strongly participated, and even entirely social-democratic governments, were seen in a series of countries.

Since the reformists rejected the taking of power by the working class, they had practically no choice: they were condemned to administer the bourgeois state. In this domain the rule that there is no third option is universally valid. No partly bourgeois and partly working-class state is conceivable. [10] There never will be one.

This *salto mortale* was best illustrated by Emile Vandervelde, boss of Belgian social democracy and president of the Second International. Before 1914, he had written an interesting book entitled: *Socialism Against the State*. In 1914, he became a minister. He proclaimed that it was necessary to defend at all costs every scrap of power that was obtained. The majority of social-democratic parties followed the same reasoning.

Kautsky codified this in middle of the 1920s, commenting on the new social-democratic programme adopted after the reunification of the SPD and the USPD: "Between the government of the bourgeoisie and the government of the proletariat there stretches a period of transition, generally characterised by the coalition of the one with the other" [Karl Kautsky, *Die proletarische Revolution und ihr programme*, J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger - Buchhandlung Vorwärts, Stuttgart - Berlin 1922, p. 106].

The formula has to be interpreted from the point of view of its substance and not in a formal way. A government of coalition with the bourgeoisie is a government of institutionalised class collaboration. It is a government that accepts a permanent consensus with Capital: not to touch the essential structures of its power.

This class collaboration and this consensus are independent of the presence of bourgeois ministers in the government. As a matter of fact, the government which undoubtedly played the most nefarious role in the history of social democracy, the German Council of People's Commissars (*Rat der Volksbeauftragte*) of 1918-1919, after the departure of the USPD commissars, was an entirely social-democratic government without a single bourgeois minister. It suppressed the proletarian revolution, isolated Soviet Russia, concluded a pact with the Reichswehr, covered with its authority the murder of thousands of workers. It institutionalised long-term class collaboration between the employers and the trade union bureaucracy. All that in order to conquer and keep "scraps of power" in the framework of the bourgeois state.

In a moment of lucidity, the leader of the British social-democratic Left, Aneurin Bevan, nevertheless stated: "The goal cannot be to exercise power (at any price, E.M.). The goal must be to exercise power in order to carry out our programme". Even more precisely, the American socialist leader Eugene V. Debs proclaimed: "It's better to vote for what you want, knowing that you have little chance of getting it (rapidly, E.M.) than to vote for what you don't want, knowing that you are sure to get it". Most social-democratic leaders have not exactly respected these wise pieces of advice.

Léon Blum had the undeniable gift of elegantly formulating half-truths, in other words sophisms. He invented the famous distinction between the exercise of power and the conquest of power (furthermore, he did not hesitate to identify the latter with the dictatorship of the proletariat). But he conjured away the fact that the exercise of power would necessarily take place in the framework of the bourgeois state. He did not at all point out that this same exercise of power would consequently imply a permanent consensus with the bourgeoisie, with all that flows from that.

The leader of the Italian social-democratic Right, Filippo Turati, once sighed, disillusioned: "How beautiful socialism would be without the socialists!" The formula is worth what it is worth; let's accept it as such. He had hardly finished pronouncing it than he made an offer to King Victor Emmanuel III to participate in a government, or even to head it, 'in order to block the road to fascism".

But one could not participate in such a government without sharing the command of the bourgeois army, without participating in the defence of public order by repressive methods (no doubt less violent than the fascists' methods, but repressive all the same), without participating in the administration of the Italian colonies, where terror reigned.

Because the willingness to "exercise power" has been manifested by social democracy, with few exceptions, in the framework of imperialist bourgeois states. These states all had exploitative relations with the countries of the Third World. In addition, some of them were at the head of colonial empires that subjected the peoples of the Third World to cruel regimes of economic super-exploitation and political oppression.

It was impossible to maintain the consensus with the imperialist bourgeoisie, to govern or co-govern on that basis, without simultaneously sharing the responsibility of administering these colonial empires, with all that flowed from it.

Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the Independent Labour Party in Britain, subsequently leader of the Labour Party, dotted the 'i's' and crossed the 't's before 1914. In a book that created a sensation and whose German edition carried a favourable introduction by Bernstein [11], he defended theses that were revolting from a socialist point of view. According to him, it was certainly necessary to "democratise" the British Empire, but it was also necessary to maintain it.

And the "democratisation" did not include according democratic rights of self-government to the "inferior races". These races were supposedly incapable of governing themselves. MacDonald even defended the pre-apartheid regime in South Africa. He went so far as to justify racial segregation in the South of the United States and the absence of political rights for Black people.

Political practice was in conformity with ideology. When MacDonald twice became Prime Minister of Britain in the 1920s, he maintained and defended the Empire, while implementing some minor reforms. When the colonised peoples began to rebel in order to conquer national independence, Labour governments continued the bloody repression begun under bourgeois governments, sometimes unleashing it themselves.

After 1945, the Attlee government prudently disengaged from India and Palestine, while causing the ravages of partition. But at the same time, it sought to crush by military means the revolution in Indochina and the anti-colonialist revolts in Malaysia and Kenya.

The Popular Front government in France similarly maintained the French Empire and the repression that that implied. From 1944 onwards, French governments in which social democracy participated or which it headed unleashed large-scale colonial wars in Indochina, North Africa and Madagascar. The social-democratic leaders in the Netherlands acted in the same way in Indonesia.

Léon Blum tried to sum up social-democratic politics and strategy, in opposition to those of the communist parties, both before the advent of Stalinism and after its rise to dominance, in the title of a book published in 1945: *On a Human Scale* [Léon Blum, *A l'échelle humaine*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945]. On a human scale, the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by the colonial wars and the continuing dire poverty in the "Third World"?



To be sure, all these horrors did not take place without meeting any opposition within international social democracy. There was reticence, there were protests and revolts. The French PS suffered a split in reaction to the bloody repression and the tortures in Algeria, co-organised by the "socialist" Lacoste and backed up by the "socialist" leader Guy Mollet. The Labour Left in Britain opposed Attlee's colonial wars, the Left of the Italian PS energetically opposed colonial wars. Swedish social democracy gave discreet support to the revolts of the oppressed. But these were very much minority reactions. The historic responsibility of social democracy as a whole is on this point too, a terrible one (...)

## From "municipal socialism" to the "socialism" of nationalisations

The American socialist Daniel De Leon, much admired by Lenin, called the reformist bureaucrats the "labour lieutenants of Capital". The formula is correct if we respect each of its terms.

The reformist bureaucrats are not part of the bourgeois class. They come from the working class and the organisations of the workers' movement. They defend their own interests when they institutionalise class collaboration. These interests coincide historically with the defence of the bourgeois order. They do not necessarily coincide at every moment with the defence of the immediate interests of the majority, or even the whole of the big bourgeoisie.

The reformist bureaucrats want to increase their "share of the cake". This increase implies some sacrifices on the part of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois class certainly appreciates the fact that the reformist leaders contribute to the relative stability of the bourgeois order. But to what extent is the price that has to be paid justified in its eyes? The bourgeoisie is often hesitant and divided on this subject. That is why, in the inter-war period, social-democratic participation in government was only intermittent, except in Sweden and Denmark.

## Red Vienna

On the other hand, municipalities administered by social democracy became more and more widespread. "Red Vienna" was the model for them. It is undeniable that they brought an improvement in the condition of the working class.

A new stage in the administration of the bourgeois state by social democracy began at the end of the Second World War. It saw the nationalisation of important sections of industry in Britain, France, Italy and Austria, and of the financial sector in the same countries (except in Britain). In Belgium, a bank of public origin, the Caisse d'Epargne, became the country's principal holder of bank deposits. Social democracy was jointly responsible for this evolution, and was even the main initiator of it in Britain and Austria.

There were also much longer periods of ministerial participation, and even of entirely social-democratic governments, than before 1940. At the same time as the extension of nationalisations, there was the generalisation of social security laws in almost all the countries where social democracy participated in government. This legislation in its turn contributed to improving the condition of the working class, to a much larger extent than "municipal socialism".

Why was the bourgeoisie ready this time to pay the price? Some of the transformations corresponded to its own material interests. This was in particular the case of the nationalisation of the sectors of raw materials and energy,

which were at the end of the day a form of subsidies to manufacturing and export industries. Other nationalisations corresponded to the principle of the "nationalisation of losses".

# Radical reforms

But fundamentally, it was a question of reforms that tended to absorb the risks of social explosions that existed in these countries at the end of the Second World War. The war had exacerbated social contradictions and radicalised the popular masses. The bourgeoisie and its power structures emerged discredited by the whole of their conduct during the war.

Radical reforms were the minimum price to pay to avoid revolution. Social democracy saved capitalism as it had done at the end of the First World War. This time the Stalinist parties were jointly responsible, and in France, Italy and Greece they bore the main responsibility. But now the bourgeoisie was forced to pay a much higher price for services rendered than in 1918-1919. The period of economic expansion after 1949 facilitated the operation.

To all these reasons which explain the advance of reforms from 1944 onwards, must be added the influence of the Cold War. The bourgeoisie was obliged to create a socio-political situation in capitalist Europe that would reduce any attraction exercised by the Stalinist Soviet "model" and its export to Eastern Europe.

With the exception of some countries in Southern Europe, it had the material and political means to do so, with the help of the reformist leaders. These leaders had an apparently valid excuse for hitching their wagon to the locomotive of the imperialist bourgeoisie engaged in the Cold War. The Soviet bureaucracy had suppressed democratic freedoms in Eastern Europe. Was it not threatening to do the same in Western Europe?

Now, social democracy obtained its scraps of power and its privileges on the basis of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. So it is really attached to this democracy and to the democratic freedoms that go with it, even though it is ready to stretch them a bit, if maintaining the consensus with the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois order requires it. On their side, the working masses are deeply attached to democratic freedoms, and this attachment became even stronger after the Second World War, following the terrible experience of fascism.

But there was a way open for the social-democratic leaders to refuse to take on joint responsibility for the Cold War in Europe, while avoiding the Stalinist model: to opt for a workers' state based on the widest pluralist socialist democracy, maintaining and extending democratic political freedoms. They deliberately rejected this choice. They accordingly bear the responsibility, except in the neutral countries, of having supported the imperialist Cold War.

# Managing the system

This responsibility was not a minor misdemeanour. It meant in particular the establishment of anti-worker and anti-strike repressive bodies, such as the CRS in France. It meant attempts to break strikes when the reformists were in power. It meant the responsibility of splitting trade unions, above all in France and Italy, under the direction of the sinister Irving Brown, financed by the CIA, splits for which the Stalinist communist parties and the Kremlin also bear their share of responsibility.

It meant participation in the Korean War, which cost several thousand dead and which took humanity to the brink of

nuclear war. It meant the responsibility of the Labour Right in the fabrication of nuclear weapons in Britain.

But having said all that, it is nonetheless true that the period 1945-1970 led in the majority of the countries of capitalist Europe to the biggest rise in history of the standard of living of the working class. The conviction that it was useful and possible to fight for reforms, including radical reforms, spread among large sections of the working class and throughout practically the entire organised workers' movement.

The communist parties largely adapted to this situation. But in spite of the impact of Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU and the crushing by military means of the Hungarian Revolution, this neo-social-democratic evolution did not prevent these parties from maintaining on the whole their own identity and remaining hegemonic in the workers' movement in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece.

These two and a half decades therefore represent the apogee of the conquest of reforms and of the struggle for even more radical reforms. We only have to think of the programme of anti-capitalist structural reforms of the Renardist Left [\[12\]](#) and of the Socialist Left in Belgium. But that did not lead to an acceptance by the masses of Welfare State capitalism as the only model that was possible and desirable. Even less did it lead to the permanent disappearance of large-scale explosive mass actions, or even to growing passivity of the working class.

Those who reasoned in this way, in spite of the warning shots of the Belgian General Strike of December 1960-January 1961, made a big mistake, on the level both of analysis and of prognosis. They were spectacularly disavowed by May 1968 in France and by the hot autumn of 1969 in Italy.

The reality is that the working class did not feel that the improvement in its living and working conditions was the result of the goodwill or the wisdom of the bosses. It considered it rather as the result of its own increased weight, in particular in the workplaces: you only have to think of the increased power of trade union organisation at plant level, which included elementary forms of workers' control. It often saw it as the result of its own struggles. It instinctively understood that the long post-war boom, by creating a situation of virtually full employment, had created a relationship of forces between Capital and Labour that was more favourable than during the two previous decades.

## After 1968

And above all: economic growth itself, the real development of the forces of production, whatever might have been its negative effects, in particular from the ecological point of view, produced new needs for the mass of the working class, needs that the system was incapable of satisfying. Material needs, certainly, but also new needs for a quality of work and of life superior to those of Welfare State capitalism.

Ecological and feminist demands, demands for self-management and direct democracy, for solidarity with the struggles of the peoples of the Third World, emerged massively between 1968 and 1975. These were well and truly demands for a model of society that would be superior to Welfare State capitalism. The organised workers' movement, in its two main branches, the social-democratic branch and the branch of the post-Stalinist communist parties, proved to be incapable of giving expression to this historic aspiration during the seven years in question. That is what made possible the growth, although it was still modest, of political forces on their left.

## Advent and dynamic of "management socialism"

"Municipal socialism" and the "socialism of nationalisations" profoundly modified the social composition of the reformist bureaucracies. In the beginning they were recruited essentially from the mass organisations of the workers' movement, with which they broadly identified, although it was according to the logic: we are the organisation.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/psoe.gif>]

But the conquest of red municipalities led to the recruitment of professional administrators of public or mixed companies: electricity, gas, water; public transport companies; companies for building and managing housing, etc. In some countries, there were also administrators of hospitals and municipally-run educational institutions, as well as of public assistance bodies, or even administrators of unemployment funds, over which the trade union bureaucracy sought to establish its control.

To this vast para-state bureaucracy was subsequently added a part of the bureaucracy of the nationalised enterprises. The totality of this bureaucracy became a growing part of the social-democratic machine. It gradually became a majority in relation to the bureaucrats who came from the organisations of the workers' movement. This transformation led to important consequences concerning the priority objectives pursued by social democracy.

## Public sector bureaucrats

The bureaucrats of the public sector had the mentality of functionaries. They tended to identify with the function and not with the organisation (which however enabled them to exercise it). What they sought above all was job security and advancement. Their material privileges depended on it. The justification that was invoked for this new motivation of social-democratic apparatchiks was professional competence. It had to be demonstrated that social democracy was capable of running things better than the bourgeois parties. It was an argument that weighed heavily with the social-democratic leaders who presided over municipalities or ministries that were responsible for nationalised enterprises. It progressively asserted itself. It gave birth to "management socialism".

This evolution in priorities led progressively to transformations in several domains. The maintenance of positions of political power which made it possible to prolong the exercise of administrative functions became more and more an end in itself. It detached itself from the goal of strengthening the organisation from which, however, it flowed.

"Good management" was increasingly judged according to "technical" criteria, independently of its effects on the living conditions of the working class. But since the maintenance of "red municipalities" and of ministerial posts depends on the results of elections, winning elections at practically any price became in its turn an end in itself. In order to characterise this new type of behaviour, we could paraphrase Bernstein's formula: the elections are everything, the movement is no longer anything. These transformations only asserted themselves gradually. Social democracy's electoral clientele still remained essentially the working class. It was difficult to win votes from it without promising or offering something in exchange.

It is true that electoralism, and above all prolonged participation in government, also creates a phenomenon of clientelism, of electors who are assisted, who depend on subsidies and allowances from the state and are therefore predisposed to vote for those who distribute them. Nevertheless, the objectives of reforms did not quickly disappear from social-democratic preoccupations.

Even though within the social-democratic apparatus the functionaries of the public sector became the majority, within the socialist parties the traditional members still dominated for a long time. The defence of the organisation as such continued to predominate in the leaderships of the parties. Management objectives must not come into conflict with that objective.

## Gonzalez, Kinnock, John Smith

But nevertheless, gradually, this conflict took shape. This was especially the case following the prolonged presence of social democrats in power, which followed the end of the rise of revolutionary contestation from 1968-75. From then on, guaranteeing the permanency of power even at the price of a weakening of the party became an acceptable option, at least in a series of countries. This turn was expressed in a new conception of the party, made most explicit by Felipe Gonzalez in Spain, but also by Neil Kinnock and John Smith in Britain.

The socialist party was supposed to represent its electors and not its members. If its preoccupations and decisions came into conflict with what the leaders considered - often wrongly - to be the priority preoccupations of the electorate, these preoccupations had to be imposed, if necessary against those of the members, or even against what were obviously their interests.

The members were not taken in, especially when their immediate interests were at stake. They massively left the parties concerned. These parties became shadows of their former selves.

## De-politicisation

The obsession with winning elections at any price did not in the first instance lead to substituting more right-wing policies for more traditional reformist policies. It resulted rather in a transformation of political life, which was, besides, wished for and pursued by the bourgeoisie. The political struggle was "de-ideologised", in other words depoliticised. The confrontation of programmes, ideas, projects of society, was replaced by the confrontation between leaders. Advertising agencies "launched" candidates as one launches a brand of detergent, and increasingly came to dominate the election campaigns. This has been described as the emergence of a "democracy of the opinion polls". These polls were supposed to determine the preferences of the electorate. So the personalities who were more or less charismatic, most apt to represent these preferences, emerged, so to speak, automatically.

The reality was quite different. The electorate remained divided according to its opposing interests, in other words along class lines. If only because of their ultra-simplified and arbitrary character, the polls hardly expressed the real preoccupations of the different classes. The high number of abstentions indicated that the electorate did not really identify with this new way of conceiving politics. And above all: the candidates chosen were not the most charismatic or the most photogenic, not to mention the most competent. Their selection was the outcome of quarrels among different clans and of conflicts of interest, complex and not very transparent, within the parties.

We are of course dealing with a tendency and not a generalised reality. The social-democratic parties did not all embark on this road. Powerful counter-tendencies manifested themselves in many countries. But it nevertheless has to be recognised that a tendency in this direction affected social democracy as a whole, although to differing degrees.

## Social democracy manages the long depression in a climate of easy money

Social-democracy was in a certain sense the inheritor of the 1968-75 wave of revolutionary contestation. When this wave did not end in victory, a substantial sector of the masses replaced their hopes of radical changes with hopes of reforms. Social-democracy came forward to promise these. In Spain, it was able furthermore to offer the perspective of a peaceful liquidation of the dictatorship. The majority of former "leftists" approved, and adopted this choice. They

joined the social-democratic current.

The socialist parties were then able to deploy all their ambitions to appear as the best managers of the economy (which was of course capitalist) and the state (which was of course bourgeois), insofar as they remained in government for lengthy periods.

But unfortunately for them, the period after 1975 remained one of a "long depressive wave" of the international capitalist economy [13]. Imprisoned by their desire to run the economy in a purely "technical" way, the socialist leaders approached the depression without any overall economic project that was fundamentally different from the project of big capital.

Indeed for a long time, they obstinately denied the reality of the depression, or minimised its extent. This led them to endorse the austerity policies advocated by the bourgeoisie. In the countries where they were in power, they took the initiative themselves in implementing these policies. The consequences for the working masses were serious. In Spain they were disastrous. Under the government of Felipe Gonzalez, the country had the highest rate of unemployment in the whole of Europe.

Prolonged participation in government after 1975 took place for the socialist parties in an economic climate that was marked, apart from the long depression, by the persistence of hyper-liquidity. The capitalist economy continued to be characterised by a rising rate of indebtedness. The total mass of floating capital took on colossal proportions. [14]

Considerable socio-economic changes flowed from this. A get-rich-quick mentality spread among important sections of the big and middling bourgeoisie. The appearance of the layer of "yuppies" partly expresses it. Credit for the asking, cock-and-bull projects financed with other people's money, corrupt practices and generalised bribery were the result of this climate. In the socialist parties, the idea prevailed: since everyone is doing it, why don't we do it too?

## Capitalist politicians enter social democracy

A second modification of its social composition favoured this moral degradation within social democracy. Attracted by the lengthy participation in government by the socialist parties, a series of capitalists, especially middling ones, began to enter the SPs. Their way of operating was substantially different from that of the technocrats. They sometimes embarked on large-scale speculative operations, hoping to be covered by the government. The personages of Th  ret in France, friend of Mitterrand, or of Maxwell in Britain, friend of Harold Wilson, are in this respect typical.

In the beginning, the individual corruption of socialist leaders did not come from these practices. They acted essentially with a view to financing the electoral campaigns and the apparatus of the party. The dramatic drop in membership increased the pressure in this direction. But in a society where more than ever money is king, the temptation to help yourself is very great. Some leaders escaped it, many succumbed. The most typical case is that of the leader of the Italian PS and former Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi [15].

The new social-democratic cadres of the functionary type gave birth to cold and authoritarian technocratic leaders, of whom Jacques Delors and Craxi are the typical representatives. The new cadres of "yuppie" origin are characterised by a pleasure-seeking life-style and by the squandering of public money. Jacques Attali and his management of the Bank responsible for providing credit to the countries of Eastern Europe is the perfect symbol of them.

Both types are indifferent to the effects of their behaviour on the masses and on the electorate. Experience has

shown that they made a big mistake about that. It shows a contempt for the masses that is not so different from the contempt that characterised the Stalinist bureaucracy [16] The masses instinctively feel it, just as they feel deep resentment at the growing corruption that has developed within the socialist parties.

The result is dramatic: a growing contempt for the leaders of these parties in many countries; a growing contempt for "politicians" in general. In the short term, these phenomena reinforce the tendencies towards depoliticisation. They risk creating a favourable climate for the far Right.

The reactions of the masses, faced with the corruption that has developed in many socialist parties, are fully justified. But it must always be remembered that the bourgeois parties, not to mention fascist and military dictatorships, are even more corrupt. It must especially be kept in mind that big capital is a source of corruption and that the corruptors are more guilty than the corrupted.

But the reactions of the masses are above all determined by the effects of social-democratic policies on their conditions of existence. Their main preoccupation is unemployment, as well as the fear of unemployment. The main priority in these conditions is to wage an effective struggle for a reduction of working hours without a reduction of the weekly wage: the 35-hour or even 32-hour week. The refusal of the social democrats to take this road is doubtless the fundamental cause of their political bankruptcy, the fundamental cause of their decline in Europe [17]

## The collapse of working-class counter-culture

The effects of the depoliticisation that is encouraged by social democracy have been greatly reinforced by the collapse of working-class counter-culture over the last few decades. The abrupt disappearance, a century almost to the day after its foundation, of the daily paper of the Austrian PS, Arbeiterzeitung, which was for a long time one of the best socialist dailies in Europe, is the symbolic expression of this.

[[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/workers\\_theatre.jpg](https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/workers_theatre.jpg)]

Working class counter-culture: radical theatre, in post-1918 Germany.

One of the principal achievements of the mass workers' movement, first of all traditional social democracy and then the mass communist parties, was to organise a network of institutions that immunised an important section of the working class against the influence of bourgeois ideology, which is inevitably predominant in bourgeois society.

The press and socialist (later on, socialist and communist) books and pamphlets played the main role in this respect. But to the role played by the press has to be added the role of cultural institutions such as theatre groups, choirs, adult and youth brass bands, sports groups, etc. They developed among the working masses needs that bourgeois society had stifled. In her book Introduction to Political Economy (Einführung in die Nationalökonomie), Rosa Luxemburg had rightly insisted on this real civilising role of the organised workers' movement.

The dykes that were thus built against the ocean of bourgeois ideology were undoubtedly fragile. The ideas that were spread by the socialist press and publications consisted most often of elementary vulgarisation. The understanding of Marxism was limited.

Social-democratic ideology contained quite a lot of petty-bourgeois influence and prejudices (one only has to think of the prejudices concerning women and of the ideas about sexual questions...). Later on, the Stalinist and post-Stalinist press, publications and institutions did the same. Nevertheless, the overall effect was to considerably

limit the direct ideological influence of the bourgeoisie within the working class. The development of class consciousness, of class political independence, of working-class solidarity, was powerfully stimulated.

In the same way, the progressive disintegration of these networks of working-class counter-culture greatly contributed to weakening the politicisation of the working class and to reducing the surface of collective class reactions. Its interaction with the new consequences of social-democratic practices is obvious. This regression has an objective basis: the re-privatisation of the leisure pursuits of the masses played a preponderant role. As a result the networks of collective existence loosened. Less collective existence led to less collective consciousness. Less collective consciousness led to less resistance to bourgeois ideology.

## Ideological regression

This regression should not be generalised in an abusive way. Important centres of collective life remain, especially in workplaces and in the unions. The pressure of people's immediate interests is at the end of the day stronger than ideological mystifications. The breadth of mass reactions is witness to it.

Besides, it is possible to reconstitute the networks of counter-culture. Locally-based Christian groups have succeeded remarkably in doing so in a series of countries: in Europe this is especially centred on solidarity with the Third World, in the countries of the Third World themselves, especially around the immediate needs of the poor. The questions of ecology, feminism, anti-racism, anti-fascism and the fight against social marginalisation provide a favourable terrain for such reconstitution in a series of countries in Europe.

But it remains true that the social-democratic parties are no longer the organising centres of this possible and necessary renaissance of working-class and popular counter-culture. It is taking place essentially outside them.

## Identity crisis

A prisoner of its technocratic turn, corroded by its successive doctrinal revisions and renunciations, dumbfounded by its electoral defeats, severely hit by its loss of a popular audience, a prey to deep internal divisions, social democracy is experiencing a profound crisis of identity. Its ideological disarray is painful to behold.

This is expressed in the first place by an inability to recognize the main aspects of reality such as it is and the challenges that it poses to social democracy, and indeed to all the tendencies of the Left. Faced with each of these problems, social democracy adopts positions that are deeply influenced by those of the bourgeoisie, suffering in addition from the incoherence of these positions, and losing a large part of their credibility as a result of the flagrant contradiction between words and actions [18].

What is the nature of the economic, or socio-economic, system in which we live? Many social-democratic leaders and ideologues deny that it is capitalist, capitalism being according to them a thing of the past. [19]

Is this simply a semantic quarrel? Absolutely not. In considering that the Golden Calf is still on its feet, we affirm at the same time that the laws of development of the capitalist mode of production still determine the main tendencies of economic evolution. That implies in particular that periodic crises of over-production are inevitable. Have we been mistaken about this, or has social democracy been at odds with reality?



Paradoxically, at the very moment when social democracy no longer knows how to define the society of which it is part, the capitalists, and not the least important of them, call a spade a spade and capitalism, capitalism [20].

# Austerity

The policy of austerity, jointly advocated by the bourgeois parties and the socialist parties, does not correspond to an unavoidable technical imperative. The priority given to the fight against inflation at the cost of social regression is not the only possible way to stop inflation. It is the only one that corresponds to the interests of Capital: attain a new rise in the rate of profit, encourage the accumulation of capital.

The necessary “opening up to the world”, in other words the rejection of autarchy, does not in fact imply respecting the norms imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. There are other possible forms of international cooperation than those that favour the big banks and the multinationals. These alternative solutions correspond to the interests of the working masses. There is nothing scientific about affirming that they are “unworkable”. At best that is dogmatic prejudice, at worst a capitulation to the interests of the bourgeoisie.

The incoherence involved here is sharply illustrated when we examine more closely the real functioning of the international economy. Far from being run according to the ‘laws of the market’, it is run according to the laws of “monopolistic competition”, where all sorts of revenues are ensured by systematically erecting obstacles to the hallowed “free competition”.

The claim, many times repeated by socialist ministers, that “there is no money” to effectively combat unemployment, given the extent of the budget deficit, has no scientific foundation. It is exactly the opposite that is true. Given the scale of public spending, it is possible to radically redistribute this spending in order to favour the re-establishment of full employment, without increasing the budget deficit, in fact even better, while reducing it.

It is true that that would imply a Draconian reduction of the internal debt, for example by bringing down to one per cent the interest on the bonds of this debt, except for small investors. A Draconian reduction of the military budget and of the money spent on the repressive apparatus would serve the same objective. It is not the money that is lacking. What is lacking is the will to reorganise public spending in the interest of the working masses, as against the interests of Capital.

It is self-evidently spending on health and education that is in the long term the most productive, even from a strictly economic point of view, not to mention a social point of view. But the governments in which socialists participate are in the process of reducing this spending. The government of the Netherlands has just made a radical turn in this direction [21] The priority is not to reduce the budget deficit or the ‘explosion’ of spending on health. The priority is to reduce the budget deficit without putting into question the consensus with the bourgeoisie.

# Fake arguments

The social-democratic leaders sometimes retort that there is not a majority of electors that is ready for such alternative policies. Let us accept that for the sake of argument, although the assumption is no way demonstrated: unemployment and the fear of unemployment occupy a preponderant place in the electorate's preoccupations. But even if the social-democratic leaders were right, the answer flows quite logically. Given the decisive importance under present conditions of re-establishing full employment, is it not preferable to fight in opposition for the realisation

of this objective, combining extra-parliamentary actions with pre-electoral agitation, with the hope of winning a majority in the foreseeable future? For socialists to be compromised by government policies that maintain and increase unemployment - is that not to play the card of the greatest evil, not the card of the lesser evil?

Spreading structural unemployment is a cancer that is not only eating away at the well-being of the workers. It also leads to a growing threat of a new rise of fascism. Fascism feeds on the extension of the "dual society", on the development of social layers that are marginalized and de-classed. In the imperialist countries alone we can estimate the real number of unemployed today at 50 million [22]. This figure is likely to make a new leap forward during the next recession.

The social-democratic leaders are sincerely opposed to neo-fascism, which could lead to their political and even physical disappearance. Already during the 1930s Albert Einstein, a quite moderate socialist, but a socialist all the same, affirmed: you cannot effectively combat fascism without eliminating unemployment. He was not mistaken.

But caught between their anti-fascist proclamations and their obsession with not breaking at any price the consensus with the bourgeoisie, the reformist leaders opt at the end of the day in favour of the latter imperative. Is this realistic? Is it not rather suicidal?

Recently, a veritable workers' revolt took place at Crotona, in Southern Italy, against the closure of the last important factory in the region. While manoeuvring to defuse the revolt, the government, including the socialist ministers, condemned the "workers' violence". But then the Archbishop of Crotona spoke out in solidarity with the workers and their families. Of course he did it for motives that we do not share, but nevertheless the archbishop proclaimed that it was inadmissible that the welfare of the workers and the survival of an entire region should be subordinated to the imperatives of profit and profitability [23]. What a pathetic spectacle: here we have an archbishop who expresses elementary socialist principles against socialist ministers.

## Working week

The struggle for the 35-hour week and the 32-hour week, the struggle against the practice of the multinationals who exercise blackmail by threatening to re-locate jobs abroad, can only be effectively conducted on an international scale. The social democratic leaders present themselves as enthusiastic partisans of European unification. But when it is a question of countering the multinationals and their threats to re-locate centres of production, it is "sacred national egoism" that prevails. Every government in which socialists participate, encourages the multinationals to behave in this way by showering them with concessions. The result is a foregone conclusion. Just as in the past, unemployment increases everywhere. Is this realpolitik? Is it not rather a fools' policy?

## "Dual society"

The growth of unemployment, of the "dual society", of the fear of the most defavourised layers of the working class of dropping even lower down the social ladder, favours the rise of racist and xenophobic reactions. The far Right systematically exploits these reactions. The "respectful" Right just as systematically makes concession to them. But now the social democrats are going down the same road, for basely electoralist motives. They also want to limit immigration, deport immigrants, subject to a special regime people who are not "of native stock". Even though they are more moderate on this than the Right, what does that still have in common with traditional socialist values?

In the Third World, barbarism is spreading before our eyes. There are 1.2 billion poor. Hunger has taken on such dimensions that in Angola, for example, phenomena of cannibalism are spreading [24]. In Brazil, a new "race" of pygmies has been born in the Northeast, through the accumulated effects of several generations who have suffered malnutrition. [25]. According to UNICEF, another UN body, every year 60 million children in the Third world die as a result of hunger and easily curable illnesses.

# Doctrinal incoherence of social democratic left

The social democratic ministers (and prime ministers and former prime ministers, like the late Willy Brandt) denounce these horrors, more or less pertinently. But in the exercise of their functions, they follow the rule: laissez faire, let it pass. Even the minimum objective of devoting one per cent of national resources to the so-called "aid for the Third World" (in reality, nine times out of ten, aid to national export industries) has been attained practically nowhere. No question of cancelling the debt (including the interest on the debt) of the Third World towards the West. No question of reversing the evolution of the terms of exchange, which are a source of the permanent pillage of the third world. Once again: what does that have in common with elementary socialist values?

In order to rediscover a minimally coherent ideological identity, socialist leaders have reacted. We can give the examples of the Frenchman Michel Rocard, the leader of the Flemish FGVB unions Robert Voor Hamme, the Spanish ex-leftist Sole Tura, and especially Tony Benn, who is undoubtedly the most sincere among them. [26]

But doctrinal incoherence persists. They advocate a return to solidarity, but not unlimited solidarity. To want a supplement of solidarity, while maintaining a commitment to the market economy, therefore to profit, is like trying to square the circle [27]. The imperatives of austerity policies are not questioned, except by Tony Benn.

To complete the tableau, we have to add the demonstration of ideological aberration given by the Right (28). Professor Sachs and other Chicago Boys consider that the application of the policy of the IMF in Peru and Chile (as well as in Poland!) is a success: inflation has been stopped. But at what a cost of unemployment and massive poverty [28].

The Pope has unleashed veritable crusade against birth control and the use of condoms. Given the spread of AIDS, this is totally irresponsible. Alexander Solzhenitsyn is unleashing a full-scale attack on the ideas of the Enlightenment. According to him, these ideas are responsible for separating ethical principles from political and social practice [29].

This is a historical falsification equivalent to that produced by Stalinism. So then, the tens of millions of dead that were caused by the Crusades, by the slave trade, by the extermination of the Indians, by the massacres of midwives (called "witches"), by the Inquisition, by the use of slave labour in plantations, by the wars of religion, (a quarter of the population of Germany wiped out), by dynastic wars - all phenomena that occurred before the century of the Enlightenment - were all the result of political and social practices dominated by ethical principles?

A series of Nobel Prize winners have gone back to mysticism and made science responsible for all the evils of our epoch [30]

Do we have to remind them that before the development of modern science, a quarter of the population died of plague in the 14th century? In an epoch when pandemics are spreading, which like cholera and tuberculosis are

directly linked to the development of poverty across the world, it really is a case of a new 'betrayal of the intellectuals'.

But the fact that there are ideological aberrations much worse than the ideological disarray of social democracy hardly compensates for this disarray. It does not enable social democracy to surmount its crisis of credibility.

## An uncertain future

After the 4th of August 1914, Rosa Luxemburg described the right-wing majority of social democracy as a "stinking corpse". She was not mistaken about the smell. It is even less pleasant in our epoch than it was in hers. But she was wrong about the survival of social democracy. It is still very much alive 80 years after this mistaken diagnosis, although it has been seriously weakened in a series of countries.

This survival can be fundamentally explained by three reasons.

First of all the isolation of Soviet Russia - a backward country - due to the partial failure [\[31\]](#) of the international revolution in 1919-23, which was, besides, largely caused by the social-democratic Right itself. To this we have to add the growing inability of the Communist International and the communist parties to really undermine the hegemony of social democracy within the workers' movement in a large number of countries from the middle of the 1920s, with important exceptions like France, Italy and Spain.

Secondly, social democracy has in the main held on to its bases in the organised workers' movement, even if they have been seriously weakened. The case of New Zealand, where the entire trade union movement has broken its links with the ultra-right-wing Labour Party, is for the moment the exception and not the rule. The suicidal attempt by John Smith to break the organic links of the British Labour Party with the unions has absolutely no guarantee of success. Although the Spanish, French, Swedish and Belgian unions are partly taking their distance from social democracy, there is nowhere, for the moment, a rupture.

The very nature of social democracy explains the permanency of these bases. In order to be able to obtain the advantages that it covets, the social-democratic apparatus, even in its present phase of degeneration, must keep a minimum of autonomy in relation to big capital. Mitterrand, Felipe Gonzalez, Mario Soares, Neil Kinnock and John Smith, Scharfing and Lafontaine, Guy Spitaels and Willy Claes, are not on a par with the Agnellis, the Schneiders, the Empains, the Wallenbergs, the Thyssens, the lords of Indosuez, the masters of the City [\[32\]](#) (...)

The third reason for the survival of social democracy is the relative pertinence in the eyes of the masses of the argument of the lesser evil. They continue to think that Kinnock and John Smith are worth a bit more than Thatcher and Major, that Mitterrand and Rocard are not exactly the same as Giscard, Chirac and Balladur, that Scharfing, Rau and Lafontaine are worth a bit more than Helmut Kohl, that Felipe Gonzalez is not the same as his adversary of the centre-right, even though the differences between all these personages and between the practical measures that they implement tend to become blurred, with all the serious consequences that flow from that.

If revolutionary Marxists reject the logic of the lesser evil, it is certainly not because they prefer the greater evil.

The reactions of the masses, which explain for a large part the survival of social democracy, are in the present situation part of the general crisis of the credibility of socialism. In the eyes of the masses, neither social-democratic reformism nor Stalinism and post-Stalinism, have succeeded in creating a society without massive exploitation,

oppression and violence. On their left there has not emerged a third component of the workers' movement, sufficiently strong to be considered as politically credible in the foreseeable future.

In these conditions, the masses react to the most pressing problems, without turning towards global social solutions, towards "another model of society". Their reactions are often on a large scale, on an even larger scale than in the past [33].

But they are defensive reactions, fragmentary and discontinuous. They are therefore more easily channelled.

On the electoral level, there is no general tendency that dominates. (...)

More important than the electoral evolution, however, is the organisational evolution. All the social-democratic parties have been very much weakened in terms of the number of their members, without even mentioning their implantation in the workplaces, including those in the public services. Two of them have experienced splits, although minor ones. The split in the British Labour Party, clearly to the right, essentially led to a fusion of the splitters with the Liberal Party. The split in the French PS has led to the creation of the "Citizens' Movement" of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, whose dynamic is still uncertain.

But especially, in two countries, Italy and the ex-GDR, there have emerged mass parties to the left of social democracy - the Party of Communist Refoundation and the PDS - with a certain echo among not insignificant layers of working-class electors. It is still too early to say what will be the future of these parties. But for the moment they represent a challenge on a mass level to social democracy (and to the post-Stalinist neo-reformists) such as has not been seen for a long time. (...)

## Dialogue and contestation

In these conditions, revolutionary Marxists must combine in relation to social democracy, to use fashionable terms, a "culture of radical contestation" and a "culture of dialogue".

"Culture of radical contestation" means on the practical level to refuse to make any concessions to the logic of the electoral and governmental "lesser evil", which would imply an even limited acceptance of austerity measures, restrictions on democratic liberties, any concessions to xenophobia and racism. That means giving priority, under all circumstances, to the defence of the immediate interests and aspirations of the masses, to the unhindered development of their initiatives, their mobilisations, their struggles, their self-organisation, without subordinating them to any "superior objective", chosen and imposed in an authoritarian and verticalist fashion.

"Culture of radical contestation" means also on the level of propaganda to present as concrete and structured a global socio-political objective as possible. That means refuting all the "theoretical innovations" of social democracy and the new reformists, "innovations" which are ninety-nine times out of a hundred regressions to pre-Marxist positions that are 150 years old, if not more.

That means vigorously defending the capital of Marxism, but of a Marxism that is open, critical and self-critical, that is ready to re-examine everything in the light of the facts, but not lightly, not in an unscientific way, not without looking at reality as a whole. Revolutionary Marxists have neither the arrogance to have an answer to everything nor the claim to have never been wrong about anything. But they are not ready to throw out the baby with the bath water. The theoretical and moral capital remains considerable. It deserves to be vigorously defended.

“Culture of dialogue” means engaging with social democracy, with every wing of it that is ready to, including parties as a whole, debates and confrontation whose aim is to facilitate common actions in the interests of the working class and the oppressed.

These operations are certainly facilitated by a modification of the relationship of forces which would render too costly a peremptory refusal by the reformists. They can facilitate differentiation within social democracy. But independently of this logic, we have to fight resolutely for the dialogue to be engaged and pursued, so that a “third component” of the organized workers movement, to the left of social democracy and the new reformist parties, is de facto recognised.

This objective is neither tactical nor conjunctural. It is strategic and long lasting. It is directly linked to a fundamental conception of the self-organization of the working class, which leads on to our conception of the taking of power (...)

To combine these two “cultures”, that is the task of revolutionary Marxists today in relation to social democracy.

21st September 1993

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[1] Social legislation makes it possible to extend to the weakest and least organised layers of the working class the conquests that the strongest sectors are able to win themselves.

[2] There is certainly a contrary tendency within the workers' movement, but with the exception of a few countries, it has remained very much a minority.

[3] From Eduard Bernstein's book, *Evolutionary Socialism*, published in 1899.

[4] The counter-revolution in Indonesia in 1965 undoubtedly caused the death of a million people.

[5] The way in which the amnesty for the torturers of the Chilean and Argentinean dictatorships was organised speaks volumes about this.

[6] The unfortunate Allende, and General Prats who supported him, had confidence until the last minute in the “constitutional traditions” of the Army chiefs. They did not want to “divide” the Army. They even invited four of its representatives into the Popular Unity government. They paid for this illusion with their lives. Cf. *Carlos Prats, Il soldado di Allende*, Rome 1987.

[7] Especially in *Social Reform and Revolution* and in her writings on the mass strike. Trotsky did the same in *Results and Prospects*, and Gramsci in his writings in *Ordine Nuovo*.

[8] From a Marxist point of view redistribution of the national revenue should not be confused with “redistribution of surplus value”. By definition, each part of the national revenue which goes to direct and indirect wages is part of variable capital and not of surplus value.

[9] On this subject let us remember the exemplary action of the Swedish workers in 1905 to prevent the bourgeoisie of that country using force to make the Norwegian people renounce national independence; the strikes in solidarity with the young Soviet Russia by workers in Berlin and Vienna in January 1918, against the rapacious peace treaty imposed by German and Austrian imperialism at Brest-Litovsk; the general mobilisation of the British working class and workers' movement in 1920 to prevent a military intervention in Poland with the aim of crushing the Red Army and Soviet Russia; the broad mobilisation of the international working class, including the Soviet working class, in support of the Spanish workers in 1936; the enthusiastic mobilisation of the Cuban working class with Angola and Ethiopia against the semi-fascist bandits, a struggle which, it is true, was diverted by the Castroist leadership in the case of Ethiopia towards support to a repressive and indefensible military

dictatorship.

[10] There has never been one In his book *New Democracy* published in 1940, Mao defended the idea of a state (and therefore also of an army) part proletarian and part non-proletarian. But his practice was opposed to this theory. He maintained de facto the independence of his army, which in the end made possible the victory of the Chinese Revolution. It was only in the course of the Cultural Revolution that he finally corrected his theoretical line and admitted that the People's Republic of China had been, since its proclamation in 1949, a dictatorship of the proletariat (we would add: highly bureaucratised from the beginning). But in Indonesia, the leadership of the CP adopted the theory of New Democracy, with the full support of Mao. They considered General Suharto's army as a two-class army. They paid for this error with their lives and those of countless communists, workers, intellectuals and poor peasants... .

[11] James Ramsay Mac Donald, *Socialism and Government*, 2 vols., Independent Labour Party, London 1909 (The Socialist Library, Bd. 8); *Socialismus u. Regierung*, ed. by Eduard Bernstein, Eugen Diedrichs, Jena, 1912.

[12] From the name of the Walloon socialist trade union leader and founder of the Walloon Popular Movement, Andre Renard (1911-62).

[13] See on this subject our work *The Long Waves of Capitalist Development*

[14] It became largely uncontrolled and uncontrollable See our article, "Monetary chaos", *International Viewpoint* 248, September, 1993..

[15] Enzo Biaggi, *La disfatta - de Nenni e compagni a Craxi e compagnia*, Rizzoli, Milan 19993, deals in detail with the case of Craxi. Our comrade Hans-Jurgen Schulz has dealt with the scandal, more limited but analogous, of the West German housing cooperative controlled by SPD apparatchiks: *Die Ausplunderung der Neuen Heimat*, Frankfurt 1987, isp-Verlag (isp-pocket 28).

[16] We do not believe that the masses are never wrong. But the same remark also applies to experts, technocrats, ideologues, political leaders. That the masses are often right against all of them is well illustrated by the case of Chile. When on the day of Pinochet's coup the masses demanded arms - they had also vainly demanded them in the preceding weeks - the leaders replied: "Stay in the factories and don't let yourselves be provoked". We know what the result was..

[17] We might add in relation to this that even when social democracy finally decided to impose the 35-hour week - in the case of the government of Lionel Jospin in France after 1997 - it did it in the framework of its attachment to the consensus with big capital. Thus the "Aubry Laws" of the Jospin government knowingly combined the reduction of working hours and the modification of working conditions, in the sense of an intensification of the workers' efforts. Because of this these laws had only a slight impact in reducing unemployment. Felling that they had been tricked, the workers did not vote for Jospin, who had claimed to be their "benefactor" in the presidential election of 2002.

[18] As a good indication of the increasingly small difference between the centre-left and the centre-right the SPD chose as its new Geschäftsführer (sort of general secretary) an ex-leader of the FDP, a liberal party. In France, in a book that created a sensation, Edwy Plenel exposed the use of the secret services and the attacks on democratic liberties under Mitterrand.

[19] The Welfare State is supposedly a system of "mixed economy" The formulas of "organised capitalism", "state capitalism", "monopoly capitalism" are only paraphrases of the "mixed economy". Under cover of "Marxist" language, they all presuppose, against the opinion of Marx, that there can be a "capitalism" without the laws of development of this system remaining in force. All the leaders of social democracy peremptorily proclaim that the reign of the market is "inevitable". It is only a question of limiting its "excesses"..

[20] This is particularly the case of Agnelli, the boss of FIAT, and of Lord Lawson, ex-minister of Margaret Thatcher (*Republica*, September 4th, 1993, *The Times*, September 1st, 1993).

[21] *Le Monde*, September 13th, 1993. It clearly emerges from a report by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton University that it is an increase and not a reduction of spending on education that is urgent. This report reveals that almost half the adults in the United States are illiterate or semi-literate (*Time magazine*, September 20th, 1993)..

[22] The official unemployment figures are considerably below the reality because they do not include those who are excluded from the benefits of

unemployment insurance, often on the initiative of “socialist” ministers.

[23] *La Stampa*, September 8th, 1993 and *Il Manifesto*, September 11th, 1993.

[24] *L'Unita*, September 17th, 1993.

[25] According to UNCTAD, a UN institution, poverty is constantly spreading in Latin America. According to a recent report of the World Bank, at the end of the 1980s, the poorest 20 per cent of the population of Latin America only received 4 per cent of the national revenue and 32 per cent lived below the poverty threshold, compared with 22 per cent ten years earlier.

[26] See in particular: *Le Figaro*, July 1st, 1993 for Rocard, the article by Sole Tura in *El Pais*, reprinted in *De Morgen*, April 30th, 1993 and the article by Robert Voor Hamme in *De Morgen*, April 3rd, 1993.

[27] Rocard speaks in the vaguest and most mystifying fashion of a “vast movement, open and modern, extrovert, rich in its diversity and even encouraging it, a movement that federates all those who share the same values of solidarity, the same objective of transformation” (*Le Figaro*, July 1st, 1993). “Values of solidarity” without putting into question the laws of the market and profitability? Show us how it's done!

[28] In Chile, income per head of population has decreased by 15 per cent under the neo-liberal regime. Spending on health was reduced from \$29 a head in 1973 to \$11 in 1988. Twenty per cent of the population receive 81 per cent of national income.

[29] *Die Zeit* (weekly), September 17th, 1993.

[30] See the book *Il Ccranio de Ccrstonballo - Evoluzione della specie e spritualismo* de Giacomo Scarpelli (Bollati Boruinghieri, Turin, 1993).

[31] We speak of a partial failure, because international class struggles nevertheless powerfully contributed to the survival of Soviet Russia.

[32] According to the *Sunday Telegraph*, seven former Conservative ministers have joined the boards of management of big trusts in the City: Lords Prior, Moore, Young, Walker, Lawson, Fowler and Lamont..

[33] Among the very large mass movements let us mention the demonstrations against the Pershing missiles in the Netherlands and Belgium, certainly the biggest in the history of these countries; the impressive mass anti-austerity demonstrations in Italy, and, in a different political context, the million women who took to the streets in the United States to defend the right to abortion against a verdict of the Supreme Court.