

What sort of momentum?

IT IS TRULY ASTONISHING that the courts, having initially decided that new members of the Labour Party could vote in the leadership election, have now reversed that decision in favour of those committed to the defeat of Jeremy Corbyn. At first they ruled that there was a contract between the party and the new members who had been told they would have a vote if they joined up and paid their dues. Then the Court of Appeal, in what one must conclude was an entirely political judgement, changed tack and decided that the Labour Party bureaucracy should have the final say about who can, and who cannot vote for the party's leader.

This is an object lesson in how our courts behave when in the midst of political strife; they unaccountably find themselves veering towards political judgements rather than strictly legal ones. In this case they dismissed the implicit contract that existed between the party and its new members in favour of the National Executive Committee's decision to move the goal posts in the middle of the game.

We should, of course, expect this from a bourgeois democracy, where all state institutions exist to defend property against both criminals and communists. In any contest, which concerns implicit or explicit threats to property, the courts, the police, and the armed forces, can be expected to defend the status quo, by all means at their disposal.

Now, of course, it is said that Jeremy Corbyn because he has zero chance of winning a general election represents no threat at all. Furthermore, he is not suggesting that we should abrogate private property, the law of value, or the right of capitalists to make profits by employing their private investments as they see fit.

What then is all the fuss about?

Well, the real danger is that Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, Labour's leader and shadow chancellor, have found themselves heading up a mass movement of half a million people demanding that government should be for the many not the few, that the state's primary duty is social justice rather than the defence of private property and commercial interests.

So, from the point of view of the state, of the bourgeoisie more generally, of great swathes of the middle and working classes, the problem resides not in the electability or otherwise of Corbyn, but in the danger posed by expectations raised among a large section of the population that the capitalist system simply cannot deliver. This is why, Trotsky, long dead, has been raised like Lazarus from his tomb. Trotskyists, together with more numerous elements on the far left, believe that raising demands that, if implemented, would provoke crisis, or cannot ever be met – is the key to developing and intensifying revolutionary consciousness among the masses.

They see the failure of socialistic demands, or the crises provoked by their achievement, in the right conditions, and with a fair wind behind them, 'leading inevitably' to greater clarity concerning the real nature of capitalism, and consequently to the development of heightened levels of revolutionary consciousness, moving the public at large ever leftwards towards the communist future. The fact that no examples of the failure or success of socialistic or left reformist demands leading society towards a successful revolutionary outcome can be produced from the historical record is, it is often said, irrelevant, because the past does not determine the future, and hope springs eternal.

The truth is, of course, that the collapse of left-wing governments and policies invariably results, not in a movement to the left, but on the contrary, to decisive moves rightwards as the capitalist class and their unnervingly broad social base points to the failure of

socialists to run the capitalist system properly, and blames the left for economic incoherence, shortages, and chaos. This dismal reality continues to be true. From Athens to Caracas, and from Madrid to Brasilia, the left finds the failure of its attempts to govern on behalf of the many rather than the few, its failure to inaugurate regimes of social justice, within the belly of the beast so to speak – within capitalist society – doomed to failure.

Mass movements that provoke social crisis by the achievement of reforms or by the expectations offered by unwinnable demands, transitional, or otherwise, invariably result in failure and defeat. It is true that this might not always be so, which is why 'hope' along with unreasoning 'optimism' are key to sustaining socialist aspirations. Oscar Wilde put it nicely when he said "A map of the world without Utopia on it is not worth glancing at."

Wilde was undoubtedly right about this, as right as those who fear the naivety and utopianism of the left. This paradox lies at the heart of our history; we want a world in which exploitation, inequality, and injustice, are banished for good, yet we repeatedly find ourselves in the midst of quick sands which suck us back to the point we have been struggling to leave behind, or still worse, into ever deeper pits of oppression.

Yet, Corbyn, McDonnell, and Momentum are not threatening us with anything so grim – neither the Gulag, the headlong retreat of Alexis Tsipras, nor the bread queues of Nicolás Maduro's Venezuela are on offer, because

The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few, where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties

we owe, and where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect.

These pieties, endlessly repeated by Jeremy Corbyn, and the leaders of the Labour left, are undoubtedly in keeping with their more detailed policies. So we can rest assured that they only have our real interests at heart, and are governed entirely by the best of intentions.

The problem is that they, just like the Trotskyists of old, know that capitalism cannot deliver such a society. Yet they hope that by demanding what seems reasonable and fair to a fair minded person they can reveal the contradictions within the system and enable them to push forward for far more profound revolutionary change at some unspecified time in the future.

It's a peculiar strategy that seems to rest upon the belief that the mass of the population are as naïve as the image that Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters project – they are simple kind hearted men and women, lads and lasses that want fairness and justice for all. The truth is rather more brutal than this, the bulk of the population know only too well how this society works, and are not going to have the wool pulled over their eyes by anybody who suggests that it can be made fair and decent, without vast upheavals, whose outcome would be intrinsically alarming, and radically uncertain.

That's why they might vote for a Labour Party and a Labour leader who promises to attempt marginal reforms within the system – better schools, hospitals, wages, and conditions – rather than a mass movement that appears to be promising the earth without explicit reference to the fundamental changes in social and economic arrangements that would be required to bring this utopia about.

The conflict confronting Corbyn and Momentum is painfully apparent, are they engaged in a struggle to

bring a Labour government to power, or are they seeking to build a movement committed to a far-reaching socialist transformation of society?

A clear answer to this question is necessary because these are wholly incompatible objectives. A communist mass movement in which wider and wider circles of society became involved in fathoming out how to strengthen social solidarity by extending democracy from the sphere of politics to the realm of everyday economic relations and relationships, would be a radically different thing from a movement which seeks to form a Labour Government embarked on improving the prospects of British capitalism on behalf of working people.

Communists should, of course, run for Parliament, and seek clear demonstrations of support from the electorate for their ideas. Communists should engage at every level in the extension of democracy into the management of the workplace and the economy at large. What they should not do, however, is pretend that making limited demands for the reform of capitalism can lead to its eclipse. The great majority of working people already know this to be true – they know that Labour governments cannot reform their way out of capitalism, or permanently shift the balance of power in society in favour of those who have to work for wages.

Labour governments in the past have promised and delivered better options for working people, and they may be able to do so in the future, what they cannot do, however, is usher in a realm in which “power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few.” Doing that would require an entirely different set of economic and social arrangements.

Consequently, it is surely time to put a stop to this pantomime in which a mass socialist movement rallying around Corbynesque pieties and neo-Keynesian demands claim that they can do anything other than lead us to yet another defeat in which the

movement mills in and out of its compromises and half truths, or triumphantly forms a government in which a perfectly sensible neo-Keynesian policy is pursued in the defence of the common interests of capitalists and workers alike.

I am not posing here the old clash between “reform or revolution” or between “maximum and minimum demands”, but I am arguing that the election of a Labour Government cannot be won through the insurgency of a mass movement committed to grandly radical rhetoric whilst espousing startlingly sensible and limited demands.

Which is it to be? A left-Labour government (for which I would certainly vote), or a communist mass movement committed to the eclipse of capitalism (which I would definitely support)? They are entirely different goals and cannot credibly be merged within Momentum without wrecking the prospects of both the Labour Party and the potential of a communist movement.