

The Problem of Reformism

by Robert Brenner

I WAS ASKED to talk about the historical lessons of revolution in the twentieth century. But since we are primarily interested in historical lessons that are likely to be relevant to the twenty-first century, I think it would be more to the point to consider the experience of reform and reformism.

Reformism is always with us, but it rarely announces its presence and usually introduces itself by another name and in a friendly fashion. Still, it is our main political competitor and we had better understand it.

To begin with, it should be clear that reformism does *not* distinguish itself by a concern for reforms. Both revolutionaries and reformists try to win reforms. Indeed, as socialists, we see the fight for reforms as our main business.

But reformists are also interested in winning reforms. In fact, to a very large extent, reformists share our program, at least in words. They are for higher wages, full employment, a better welfare state, stronger trade unions, even a third party.

The inescapable fact is that, if we want to attract people to a revolutionary-socialist banner and away from reformism, it will not generally be through outbidding reformists in terms of program. It will be through our theory—our understanding of the world—and, most important, through our method, our practice.

What distinguishes reformism on a day-to-day basis is its political method and its theory, not its program. Schematically speaking, reformists argue that although, left on its own, the capitalist economy tends to crisis, state intervention can enable capitalism to achieve long-term stability and growth. They argue, at the same time, that the state is an instrument that can be used by any group, including the working class, in its own interests.

Reformism's basic political method or strategy follows directly from these premises. Working people and the oppressed can and should devote themselves primarily to winning elections so as to gain control of the state and thereby secure legislation to regulate capitalism and, on that basis, to improve their working con-

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ditions and living standards.

The Paradox of Reformism

Marxists have, of course, always counterposed their own theories and strategies to those of reformists. But, probably of equal importance in combating reformism, revolutionaries have argued that both reformist theory and reformist practice are best understood in terms of the distinctive social forces on which reformism has historically based itself—in particular, as rationalizations of the needs and interests of trade union officials and parliamentary politicians, as well as middle-class leaders of the movements of the oppressed.

Reformism's distinctive social basis is not simply of sociological interest. It is the key to the central paradox that has defined, and dogged, reformism since its origins as a self-defined movement within the social democratic parties (evolutionary socialism) around 1900. That is, the social forces at the heart of reformism and their organizations are committed to political methods (as well as theories to justify them) that end up preventing them from securing their own reform goals—especially the electoral-legislative road and state-regulated labor relations.

As a result, the achievement of major reforms throughout the twentieth century has generally required not only breaking with, but systematically struggling against, organized reformism, its chief leaders and their organizations. This is because the winning of such reforms has, in virtually every instance, required strategies and tactics of which organized reformism did not approve because these threatened their social position and interests—high levels of militant mass action, large-scale defiance of the law, and the forging of increasingly class-wide ties of active solidarity—between unionized and ununionized, employed and unemployed, and the like.

The Reformist View

The core proposition of the reformist world view is that, though prone to crisis, the capitalist economy is, in the end subject to state regulation.

Reformists have argued—in various ways—that what makes for crisis is *unregulated class struggle*. They have thus often contended that capitalist crisis can arise from the “too great” exploitation of workers by capitalists in the interests of increased profitability. This causes problems for the system as a whole because it leads to inadequate purchasing power on

the part of working people, who cannot buy back enough of what they produce. Insufficient demand makes for a “crisis of underconsumption”—for example (according to reformist theorists), the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Reformists have also argued that capitalist crisis can arise, on the other hand, from “too strong” resistance by workers to capitalist oppression on the shop floor. By blocking the introduction of innovative technology or refusing to work harder, workers reduce productivity growth (output/worker). This, in turn means a slower growing pie, reduced profitability, reduced investment, and ultimately a “supply-side crisis”—for example (according to reformist theorists), the current economic downturn beginning at the end of the 1960s.

It follows from this approach that, because crises are the unintended result of unregulated class struggle, the state can secure economic stability and growth precisely by intervening to regulate both the distribution of income and capital-labor relations on the shop floor. The implication is that class struggle is not really necessary, for it is in the long term interest of neither the capitalist class nor the working class, if they can be made to coordinate their actions.

The State as Neutral Apparatus

The reformist theory of the state fits very well with its political economy. In this view, the state is an autonomous apparatus of power, in principle neutral, capable of being used by anyone. It follows that workers and the oppressed should try to gain control of it for the purpose of regulating the economy so as to secure economic stability and growth and, on that basis, win reforms in their own material interests.

Reformism's political strategy flows logically from its view of the economy and the state. Workers and the oppressed should concentrate on electing reformist politicians to office. Because state intervention by a reformist government can secure long-term stability and growth in the interests of capital, as well as labor, there is no reason to believe that employers will stubbornly oppose a reformist government.

Such a government can prevent crises of underconsumption by implementing redistributive tax policies and prevent supply-side crises by establishing state regulated worker-management commissions in the interest of raising productivity. On the basis of a grow-

ing, increasingly productive economy, the state can continually raise spending on state services, while regulating collective bargaining so as to insure fairness to all parties.

Reformists would maintain that workers need to remain organized and vigilant—especially in their unions—and prepared to move against rogue capitalists who won't be disciplined in the common interest: ready to take strike action against employers who refuse to accept mediation at the level of the firm or, in the worst case, to rise *en masse* against groups of reactionary capitalists who can't abide giving over governmental power to the great majority and seek to subvert the democratic order.

But presumably such battles would remain subordinate to the main electoral-legislative struggle and become progressively less common since reformist state policy would proceed in the interest not only of workers and the oppressed, but of the employers, even if the latter did not at first realize it.

Responding to Reformism

Revolutionaries have classically rejected the reformists' political method of relying on the electoral/legislative process and state-regulated collective bargaining for the simple reason that it can't work.

So long as capitalist property relations continue to prevail, the state cannot be autonomous. This is not because the state is always directly controlled by capitalists (social democratic and labor party governments, for example, often are not). It is because *whoever controls the state is brutally limited in what they can do by the needs of capitalist profitability ... and because, over any extended period, the needs of capitalist profitability are very difficult to reconcile with reforms in the interest of working people.*

In a capitalist society, you can't get economic growth unless you can get investment, and you can't get capitalists to invest unless they can make what they judge to be an adequate rate of profit. Since high levels of employment and increasing state services in the interest of the working class (dependent upon taxation) are predicated upon economic growth, even governments that want to further the interests of the exploited and the oppressed—for example social democratic or labor party governments—must make capitalist profitability in the interest of economic growth their first priority.

The old saying that "What's good for General Motors is good for everyone," unfortunately contains an important grain of truth, *so long as capitalist property relations continue in force.*

This is not of course to deny that capitalist governments will ever make reforms. Especially in periods of boom, when profitability is high, capital and the state are often quite willing to grant improvements to working people and the oppressed in the interests of uninterrupted production and social order.

But in periods of downturn, when profitability is reduced and competition intensifies, the cost of paying (via taxation) for such reforms can endanger the very survival of firms and they are rarely granted without very major struggles in the workplaces and in the streets. Equally to the point, in such periods, governments of every sort—whether representative of capital or labor—so long as they are committed to capitalist property relationships, will end up attempting to restore profitability by seeing to it that wages and social spending are cut, that capitalists receive tax breaks, and so forth.

The Centrality of Crisis Theory

It should be evident why, for revolutionaries, so much is riding on their contention that *extended periods of crisis are built into capitalism.* From this standpoint, crises arise from capitalism's inherently anarchic nature, which makes for a path of capital accumulation that is eventually self-contradictory or self-undermining. Because by nature a capitalist economy operates in an unplanned way, governments cannot prevent crises.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of debates over crisis theory. But one can at least point out that capitalist history has vindicated an anti-reformist viewpoint. Since the later nineteenth century, if not before, whatever type of governments have been in power, long periods of capitalist boom (1850s-1870s, 1890s-1913, late 1940s-c.1970) have always been succeeded by long periods of capitalist depression (1870s-1890s, 1919-1939, c.1970 to the present). One of Ernest Mandel's fundamental contributions in recent years has been to emphasize this pattern of capitalist development through long waves of boom and downturn.

During the first two decades of the postwar period, it seemed that reformism had finally vindicated its political world view. There was unprecedented boom, accompanied by—and seemingly caused by—the application of Keynesian measures to subsidize demand, as well as the growing government expenditures associated with the welfare state. Every advanced capitalist economy experienced not only fast-rising wages, but a significant expansion of social services in the interest of the working class and the oppressed.

In the late '60s or early '70s, it thus appeared to many that the way to insure continually improved conditions for working people was to pursue "class struggle inside the state"—the electoral/legislative victories of social democratic and labor parties (the Democratic Party in the United States).

But the next two decades entirely falsified this perspective. Declining profitability brought a longterm crisis of growth and investment. Under these conditions, one after another reformist government in power—the Labour Party in the late '70s, the French and Spanish Socialist Parties in the '80s, and the Swedish Social Democratic Party in the '80s—found itself unable to restore prosperity through the usual methods of subsidizing demand and concluded that it had little choice but to increase profitability as the only way to increase investment and restore growth.

As a result, virtually without exception, the reformist parties in power not only failed to defend workers' wages or living standards against employers' attack, but unleashed powerful austerity drives designed to raise the rate of profit by cutting the welfare state and reducing the power of the unions. There could be no more definitive disproof of reformist economic theories and the notion of the autonomy of the state. Precisely because the state could not prevent capitalist crisis, it could not but reveal itself as supinely dependent upon capital.

Why Reformism Doesn't Reform

It remains to be asked why the reformist parties in power continued to respect capitalist property rights and sought to restore capitalist profits. Why didn't they instead seek to defend working class living and working standards, if necessary by class struggle? In the event that that approach led capitalists to abstain from investing or to capital flight, why could they not then have nationalized industries and moved toward socialism? We are back to the paradox of reformism.

The key is to be found in the peculiar social forces that dominate reformist politics, above all the trade union officialdom and the social democratic party politicians. What distinguishes these forces is that, while they are dependent for their very existence on organizations built out of the working class, they are not themselves part of the working class.

Above all, they are off the shop floor. They find their material base, their livelihood, in the trade union or party organization itself. It's not just that they get their salaries from the trade union or political party, although this is very im-

portant. The trade union or party defines their whole way of life—what they do, whom they meet—as well as their career trajectory.

As a result, the key to their survival, to the fluctuations in their material and social position, is their place within the trade union or party organization itself. So long as the organization is viable, they can have a viable form of life and a reasonable career.

The gulf between the form of life of the rank and file worker and even the low level paid official is thus enormous. The economic position—wages, benefits, working conditions—of ordinary workers depends directly on the course of the class struggle at the workplace and within the industry. Successful class struggle is the only way for them to defend their living standards.

The trade union official, in contrast, can generally do quite well even if one defeat follows another in the class struggle, so long as the trade union organization survives. It is true that in the very long run the very survival of the trade union organization is dependent upon the class struggle, but this is rarely a relevant factor. More to the point is the fact that, in the short run, especially in periods of profitability crisis, class struggle is probably the main threat to the viability of the organization.

Since militant resistance to capital can provoke a response from capital and the state that threaten the financial condition or the very existence of the organization, the trade union officials generally seek studiously to avoid it. The trade unions and reformist parties have thus, historically, sought to ward off capital by coming to terms with it.

They have assured capital that they accept the capitalist property system and the priority of profitability in the operation of the firm. They have at the same time sought to make sure that workers, inside or outside their organizations, do not adopt militant, illegal, and classwide forms of action that might appear too threatening to capital and call forth a violent response.

Above all, with implacable class struggle ruled out as a means to win reforms, trade union officials and parliamentary politicians have seen the electoral/legislative road as the fundamental political strategy left to them. Through the passive mobilization of an election campaign, these forces thus hope to create the conditions for winning reforms, while avoiding too much offending capital in the process.

This is not to adopt the absurd view that workers are generally chomping at the bit to struggle and are only being held

back by their misleaders. In fact, workers often are as conservative as their leaders, or more so. The point is that, unlike the trade union or party officials, rank and file workers cannot, over time, defend their interests without class struggle.

Moreover, at those moments when workers do decide to take matters into their own hands and attack the employers, the trade union officials can be expected to constitute a barrier to their struggle, to seek to detour or derail it.

Of course, trade union leaders and party officials are not in every case averse to class struggle, and sometimes they even initiate it. The point is simply that, because of their social position, they cannot be counted on to resist. Therefore, no matter how radical the leaders' rhetoric, no strategy should be based on the assumption that they will resist.

It is the fact that trade union officials and social democratic politicians cannot be counted on to fight the class struggle because they have major material interests that are endangered by confrontations with the employers that provides the central justification for our strategy of building rank and file organizations that are *independent of the officials* (although they may work with them), as well as independent working class parties.

Reformism Today and Regroupment

Understanding reformism is no mere academic exercise. It affects just about every political initiative we take. This can be seen particularly clearly with respect both to today's strategic tasks of bringing together anti-reformist forces within a common organization (regroupment) and that of creating a break from the Democratic Party.

Today, as for many years, Solidarity's best hope for regrouping with organized (however loosely) left forces comes from those individuals and groups which see themselves as opposed from the left to official reformism. The fact remains that many of these leftists, explicitly or implicitly, still identify with an approach to politics that may be roughly termed "popular frontism."

Despite the fact that it was framed entirely outside the camp of organized social democracy, popular frontism takes reformism to the level of a system.

The Communist International first promulgated the idea of the popular front in 1935 to complement the Soviet Union's foreign policy of seeking an alliance with the "liberal" capitalist powers to defend against Nazi expansionism ("collective security"). In this context, the Communists internationally put forward the idea that it was possible for the working class to forge a very broad alliance

across classes, not only with middle class liberals, but with an enlightened section of the capitalist class, in the interest of democracy, civil liberties, and reform.

The conceptual basis for this view was that an enlightened section of the capitalist class preferred a constitutional order to an authoritarian one. In addition, enlightened capitalists were willing to countenance greater government intervention and egalitarianism in order to create the conditions for liberalism, as well as to insure social stability.

Like other reformist doctrines, the popular front based itself, in economic terms, on an underconsumptionist theory of crisis. Underconsumptionism was in fact receiving a wide hearing in liberal, as well as radical-socialist, circles during the 1930s, receiving a particularly strong boost with the promulgation and popularization of Keynes' ideas.

In the United States, the implication of the popular front was to enter the Democratic Party. The Roosevelt administration, containing as it did certain relatively progressive establishment types, was seen as an archetypal representative of capitalism's enlightened wing. And the imperative of working with the Democrats was very much increased with the sudden rise of the labor movement as a power in the land.

The Communists had originally been in the lead in organizing the CIO, and had, in fact, spectacularly succeeded in auto largely by virtue of their adoption, for a very brief but decisive period (1935-early 1937), of a rank-and-file strategy much like that of Solidarity today. This strategy had, at the start, found its parallel in Communist refusal to support Roosevelt.

But by 1937, soon after the adoption of the popular front with its implied imperative not to alienate the Roosevelt administration, the CP had come to oppose labor militancy (sitdown strikes, wildcats) in the interest of the classically social democratic policy of allying with the "left" wing of the trade union officials.

The implication of this policy was to reject the notion that the labor officialdom represented a distinct social layer that could be expected to put the interests of its organizations ahead of the interests of the rank and file—a notion that had been at the core of the politics of the left-wing of pre-World War I social democracy (Luxemburg, Trotsky, etc.) and of the Third International since the days of Lenin.

Instead, trade union officials ceased to be differentiated in social terms from the rank and file and came to be distinguished (from one another) by their political line alone (left, center, right).

This approach fit very well with the Communists' strategic objective of getting the newly-emergent industrial unions to enter the Democratic Party. Of course, much of the trade union officialdom was only too happy to emphasize its political role inside the emergent reform wing of the Democratic Party, especially in comparison with its much more dangerous economic role of organizing the membership to fight the employers.

The dual policy of allying with the "left" officials inside the trade union movement and working for reform through electoral/legislative means within the Democratic Party (hopefully alongside the progressive trade union leaders) has remained to this day powerfully attractive to much of the left.

A Rank-and-File Perspective

In the trade unions during the 1970s, representatives of tendencies that eventually ended up inside Solidarity were obliged to counterpose the idea of the rank-and-file movement independent of the trade union officials to the popular front idea of many leftists of supporting the extant "progressive" leadership.

This meant, in the first place, countering the idea that the progressive trade union officials would be obliged to move to the left and oppose the employers, if only to defend their own organizations.

Revolutionaries contended that, on the contrary, precisely because of the viciousness of the employers' offensive, trade union officials would for the most part be willing to make concessions in the interest of avoiding confrontation with the employers. They would thereby allow the bit-by-bit chipping away of the labor movement virtually indefinitely.

The latter perspective has been more than borne out, as officials have by and large sat on their hands as the concessions movement has reached gale proportions and the proportion of workers in trade unions dropped from 25-30% in the '60s to 10-15% today.

Equally to the point, revolutionaries in the trade union movement had to counter the popular front idea that the trade union leaders were "to the left of the rank and file." If you talked with many leftists in that period, sooner or later you'd get the argument that the rank and file were politically backward.

After all, many "progressive" trade union leaders opposed U.S. intervention in Central America (and elsewhere) more firmly than did the membership, stood much more clearly than did the membership for extensions of the welfare state, and, even, in a number of cases, came out for a labor party.

Our response to this argument was to

contrast what "progressive" trade union leaders are willing to do verbally, "politically," where relatively little is at stake, with what they are willing to do to fight the bosses, where virtually everything may be at risk. It cost the well-known head of the IAM William Winpisinger virtually nothing to be a member of DSA and promulgate a virtually perfect social democratic world view on such questions as the reconversion of the economy, national health care, and the like.

But when it came to class struggle, we pointed out, Winpisinger not only came out clearly against Teamsters for a Democratic Union, but sent his machinists across the picket line in the crucial PATCO (air controllers) strike.

Over the past decade or so, many leftists have broken with the Soviet Union or China and become open to reexamining their entire political world view. But this does not mean that they automatically move in our direction. For their popular front political strategy corresponds in central ways with a still (relatively) powerful and coherent political trend—i.e. social democratic reformism.

If we are to win over these comrades, we will have to demonstrate to them, systematically and in detail, that their traditional popular front strategy of working with the trade union "lefts" and penetrating the Democratic Party is in fact self-defeating.

Independent Political Action

At various points in the election campaign, important elements within the leaderships of the Black movement, the women's movement, and even the labor movement proclaimed that they would like to see a viable political alternative to the Democratic Party. Their statements of intent seemed to make the IPA project suddenly much more real. These people are indispensable, at this point, for any practical third party effort for the simple reason that the great majority of Black, women, and labor activists look to them, and no one else, for political leadership. But are they serious about IPA?

In one sense, it is obvious that all these forces *need* independent political action. The Democratic Party has long been seeking to do ever more to improve capitalist profitability and progressively less in the interest of workers, women, and oppressed minorities. It has therefore been of decreasing use to the established leaderships of the union, Black, and women's movements who, after all, work inside the party primarily so that they can win something for their constituents.

The official leaderships of the movements would thus no doubt love to have in existence a viable third party. But it is

the paradox of their social stratum and their reformist politics that they are unable to do what is necessary to create the conditions in which such a party could come into being.

It is difficult to see how these conditions could be achieved except through the revitalization of the social movements, above all the labor movement—the growth of fighting militancy and fighting unity within the union movement and beyond. Newly-dynamized mass movements could provide the material base, so to speak, for the transformation of political consciousness that could bring into being an electorally successful third party. But such movements are just what the established leaderships are afraid to create.

On the other hand, in the absence of a massive break in the activity and consciousness of the mass movements, it makes absolutely no sense to the established leaderships to break with the Democrats. These elements take the electoral road extremely seriously; for it is the main means for them to secure gains for their constituencies. And the sine qua non for gains through the electoral road is all too self-evident: it is electoral victory. Without electoral victory, nothing is possible.

The problem is that, for the foreseeable future, no third party would have a chance to win. The political consciousness is not yet there. Moreover, third parties are especially disadvantaged here by the winner take all electoral system.

In this situation, the established leaderships of the trade union, Black, and women's movement are in a double bind: they cannot break from the Democrats until the conditions are present that can promise electoral victory for a third party; but they cannot create the conditions for a third party without forsaking, probably for a substantial period, their established methods of winning gains via the electoral road.

It is, unfortunately, not at all surprising that the most serious supporters of a break toward a third party within the established leaderships of the movements—to be found within the women's movement—showed themselves much less interested in "their own" Twenty-first Century Party than with the Democratic Party candidacies of Carole Moseley Braun, Barbara Boxer, and even Dianne Feinstein.

Just as any revival of the labor movement, the social movements, and of the left will have to depend on a break from—and confrontation with—the social and political forces that underpin reformism, so will the project of building a new party to the left of the Democrats. □