

## Chapter 9

### Reforms and Revolution

The birth and development of the modern labour movement within capitalist society offers us an example of the reciprocal effect between *the social milieu* in which people find themselves, independent of their wishes, and the *more or less conscious action* they develop to transform it.

#### 1 Evolution and revolution in history

The modifications of the social system that have occurred through the ages have always been the result of sudden and violent change following wars, revolutions or a combination of the two. There is no state in existence today which is not the product of such revolutionary upheavals. The American state was born out of the 1776 revolution and the civil war of 1861-65; the British state out of the 1649 and 1688 revolutions; the French state out of the 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1870 revolutions; the Belgian state out of the 1830 revolution; the Dutch state out of the revolt of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth Century; the German state out of the 1870-71, 1914-18, 1939-45 wars, and the revolutions of 1848 and 1918, etc.

But it would be wrong to suppose that the use of violence is sufficient to change the social structure in the way desired by the combatants. For a *revolution* really to transform society and the conditions of existence of the working classes, it must necessarily be *preceded by an evolution* that creates, within the old society, the *material* (economic, technical, etc.) and *human bases* (social classes possessing certain specific characteristics) of the new society. When these bases are lacking, even the most violent revolutions end by more or less reproducing the conditions which they aimed to abolish.

A classical example of this point are the victorious peasant uprisings throughout Chinese history. Each uprising represents popular reaction against the insupportable exactions and taxes imposed on the peasants by successive declining dynasties in the 'Celestial Empire'. They lead to the overthrow of one dynasty and the coming to power of a new dynasty, often, as in the case of the Han dynasty, drawn from the leaders of the peasant insurrection themselves.

The new dynasty at first establishes better conditions for the peasantry. But the more it consolidates its power, and the more the administration entrenches itself, the more state spending increases and brings with it the obligation to raise taxes. The mandarin-functionaries, at first paid by the state treasury, begin to abuse their power and appropriate property on peasant lands, extracting a land rent over and above taxation.

Thus the growth of peasant misery reappears after a few decades of better conditions. The absence of a 'leap forward' in the productive forces and the development of modern industry founded on mechanisation explains this cyclical character of the social revolutions in classical China, and the impossibility for the peasants of achieving any lasting emancipation.

#### 2 Evolution and revolution in contemporary capitalism

Contemporary capitalism is itself born of social and political revolutions: the great bourgeois revolutions of the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries which gave birth to the nation states. These revolutions were made possible by a preceding evolution — the growth of the productive forces within feudal society, which then became incompatible with the maintenance of serfdom, the corporations, and the restrictions imposed on the free production and circulation of commodities.

This evolution also brought about the birth of a new social class, the modern bourgeoisie, which served its apprenticeship in political struggle in the medieval communes and through skirmishes with the absolute monarchy before advancing to the conquest of political power.

From a certain stage in its development, bourgeois society

too is characterised by an evolution which inexorably prepares a new social revolution.

*On the material level*, the productive forces develop to the point where they become more and more incompatible with the private ownership of the means of production and with capitalist relations of production. The development of large industry, the concentration of capital, the creation of trusts, the growing intervention of the bourgeois state to 'regulate' the capitalist economy, prepares the ground to a greater and greater extent for the socialisation (the collective appropriation) of the means of production, and for their planned management by the producers themselves.

*On the human (social) level*, a class is developed and strengthened which increasingly takes on the qualities necessary for the achievement of this social revolution: 'capitalism produces its own gravedigger in the proletariat'. Concentrated in large industries and cut off from the hope of individual social mobility, the proletariat acquires, through daily class struggle, the essential qualities of collective solidarity, co-operation and discipline in action which will make possible a fundamental reorganisation of all economic and social life.

The sharper the inherent contradictions of capitalism become, the more the class struggle heats up, and the more the evolution of capitalism prepares the revolution through explosions in various fields (economic, social, political, military, financial, etc.) during which the proletariat can attempt to gain political power and bring about a social revolution.

### *3 The evolution of the modern labour movement*

However, the history of capitalism and that of the workers movement have not followed the clear linear trajectory anticipated by Marxists in the 1880s.

The internal economic and social contradictions of the imperialist countries did not worsen immediately. On the contrary, between the defeat of the Paris Commune and the outbreak of the First World War, Western Europe and the USA experienced a long period of growth of the productive forces, an uneven growth which concealed the internal

contradictions which were undermining the system.

These contradictions were to erupt violently in 1914. The main precursors of this were the Russian revolution of 1905 and the general strike of Austrian workers in the same year. But the immediate experience of the workers and the workers movement in these countries was not of a deepening of the contradictions of the system. On the contrary, these experiences promoted the idea of a gradual, mainly peaceful and irreversible evolution towards socialism (the situation was different in Eastern Europe; hence illusions of this kind did not carry such weight).

It is true that the colonial super-profits accumulated by the imperialists allowed them to grant reforms to the workers of the Western countries. But other factors must also be considered in order to understand this evolution.

Massive emigration to the colonies and the growth of European exports to the rest of the world brought about the long-term decline of the 'industrial reserve army'. The balance of forces between capital and labour on the 'labour market' was therefore more favourable to the workers, which in turn created the basis for the growth of a mass trade unionism going beyond the ranks of the skilled workers. The bourgeoisie was frightened by the Paris Commune, by the violent strikes in Belgium (1886, 1893), by the apparently irresistible growth of German social democracy, and deliberately sought to pacify the masses in revolt by means of social reforms.

The practical result of this evolution was a Western labour movement which in fact contented itself with the struggle for immediately realisable reforms: wage increases, more social legislation, the expansion of democratic liberties, etc. It relegated the struggle for a social revolution to the domain of literary propaganda and the education of cadres. It ceased preparing itself consciously for this socialist revolution, believing that it was enough to strengthen the mass organisations of the proletariat so that, 'when the time came', this enormous force would automatically play a revolutionary role.

#### 4 Reformist opportunism

But the role of the mass parties and trade unions of Western Europe went beyond a simple reflection of this temporary restriction of the class struggle to the terrain of reforms. They also became a political force which accentuated *the adaptation of the mass labour movement to the 'prosperous' capitalism* of the imperialist countries. Social democratic opportunism neglected to prepare the workers for the sudden imminent changes in the social, political and economic climate, and became an important factor in the survival of capitalism through the crisis years of 1914-1923.

Opportunism manifested itself *on a theoretical level* with the revision of Marxism officially proclaimed by Eduard Bernstein ('the movement is everything, our goal nothing'), who demanded that social democracy abandon all activity save that intended to reform the system. The 'Marxist centre' around Kautsky, while fighting revisionism, made numerous concessions to it, above all in justifying the daily practice of parties and unions which came closer and closer to revisionism.

Opportunism appeared *on the level of practice* with the acceptance of electoral coalitions with 'liberal' bourgeois parties, with the gradual acceptance of ministerial participation in coalition governments with the bourgeoisie, and with the lack of any determined struggle against colonialism and other manifestations of imperialism. Temporarily discredited by the consequences of the Russian revolution of 1905, this opportunism was above all displayed in Germany with the refusal to accept Rosa Luxemburg's proposal for the launching of mass strikes for political ends. It essentially reflected the particular interests of a reformist bureaucratic apparatus (social democratic officeholders, party and union officials who had acquired lavish privileges within bourgeois society).

The German example shows that the hold of reformist opportunism over the workers movement was not inevitable. It would have been possible to launch extra-parliamentary actions and broader and broader mass strikes during the years preceding the First World War. These actions would have prepared the working masses for the tasks of the

revolutionary upsurge which coincided with the end of the war.

#### 5 The need for a vanguard party

Experience therefore confirms the fundamental elements of the Leninist theory of the vanguard party. The working class can itself engage in vast class struggles around immediate objectives, and it is perfectly capable of reaching an elementary level of class consciousness. But it cannot spontaneously arrive at the superior forms of political class consciousness which are necessary in order to foresee the sharp turns in the objective situation and to elaborate the tasks of the labour movement which flow from these turns; which are necessary also in order to outwit all the manoeuvres of the bourgeoisie and to combat all the influences (however subtle) that bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology can exercise over the working masses.

On the other hand, the mass movement inevitably experiences ups and downs. The broad masses do not permanently remain at a heightened level of political activity. A mass organisation which seeks to adapt itself to the average level of activity and consciousness of the masses will therefore often hold back the expansion of revolutionary activity, which is itself only possible at certain definite times.

For all these reasons the construction of a vanguard organisation of the working class, a revolutionary party, is indispensable. In normal times it remains a minority. But it maintains the continuity of the activity of its militants and their level of class consciousness. It allows the acquired experience of struggle to be preserved and diffused throughout the class. It prepares for future revolutionary struggles, and the preparation of these struggles is its essential task. Because of this fact, it greatly assists the changes in the ideas and activity of the organised workers and broad working masses which are required by the abrupt changes in the objective situation.

Of course, such vanguard parties cannot substitute themselves for the masses, trying to bring about the social revolution for them. '*The emancipation of the workers can only be brought about by the workers themselves.*' To win

the majority of workers over to the programme, strategy and tactics of the revolutionary party — that is the necessary precondition for a vanguard party to play its full historic role.

To win over such a majority would normally only be possible at the 'high' points of pre-revolutionary or revolutionary crisis, themselves indicated by the outburst of powerful spontaneous mass movements. There is, therefore, no contradiction between the spontaneity of the masses and the necessity for the construction of a revolutionary vanguard organisation. The latter helps the former, prolongs it, completes it and permits it to triumph by concentrating all its energy at the decisive moment on the overthrow of the political and economic power of capital.

### *6 Revolutionaries and the struggle for reforms*

Ultra-leftist attitudes, rejecting any struggle for reforms, have developed among a minority of the labour movement and the working class as a reaction to reformist opportunism.

For revolutionary Marxists, reformism is in no way identified with the struggle for reforms.

Reformism is the belief that capitalism can be abolished gradually through the accumulation of reforms. But it is perfectly possible to combine participation in struggles for immediate reforms with the preparation of the workers vanguard for anti-capitalist struggles of such an intensity and size that they bring about a revolutionary crisis in society.

The radical rejection of any struggle for reforms implies the passive acceptance of a deterioration in the situation of the working class until a moment when it would suddenly become capable of overthrowing the capitalist regime with one concerted attack. Such an attitude is both utopian and reactionary.

It is utopian because it forgets that the workers, increasingly divided and demoralised by their inability to defend their standard of living, employment and elementary rights, are hardly likely to be able to overcome a social class invested with the wealth and political experience of the modern bourgeoisie. It is reactionary because objectively it serves the cause of the capitalists — who have everything to gain by

lowering wages, maintaining massive unemployment, suppressing the unions and the right to strike — if the workers passively allow themselves to be reduced to the state of defenceless slaves.

Revolutionary Marxists see the emancipation of the workers and the overthrow of capitalism as the final outcome of a period of increased organisational strength of the proletariat, of increased class cohesion and solidarity, of a growing confidence in its own strength. All these subjective transformations cannot result simply from propaganda or literary education. In the last analysis they can only result from success in the current class struggles, which are very often struggles for reforms.

Reformism is not automatically produced through such struggles and such successes. It results only if the workers vanguard abstains from educating the class in the necessity of overthrowing the system; if it abstains from the fight against the influence of petty-bourgeois and bourgeois ideology within the working class; if it abstains from engaging in practice in mass extra-parliamentary, anti-capitalist struggles which aim to go beyond the stage of reforms.

For the same reason, it is absolutely necessary for revolutionaries to work within the mass trade unions and fight for the consolidation and not the weakening of trade union organisations.

Of course, the trade unions are generally ill-equipped to prepare or to organise revolutionary struggles; that is not their function. But they are absolutely necessary for the day-to-day defence of the workers' interests against those of capital. The daily class struggle does not disappear even when capitalism is in decline. Without strong trade unions, grouping together an advanced fraction of the working class, the employers have every chance of winning the daily skirmishes. The doubts and loss of faith about their own strength which would follow on from such unfortunate experiences would be highly damaging to the development of a heightened class consciousness among the broad mass of the workers.

Moreover, in the epoch of contemporary capitalism, trade union activity no longer automatically confines itself to the

fight for better wages and a reduction of the working day. More and more, workers find that they are faced with overall economic problems which affect their standard of living: inflation, taxation, cuts in social spending, factory closures, unemployment, speed-up, attempts by the state to limit the use of the right to strike and free collective wage bargaining, etc. Sooner or later any trade union is obliged to take a position on all these questions. It therefore becomes a school for the education of the working class on all problems, including the overall problems of capitalism and socialism. It becomes an arena where tendencies in favour of permanent class collaboration, and even the integration of the trade unions into the bourgeois state, confront class struggle tendencies which refuse to subordinate the interests of the workers to the supposed 'general interest' — which is merely the barely disguised interest of capital. As revolutionaries who are integrated in these class struggle tendencies best defend the immediate interests of the broad masses against attempts to divert the trade unions from their basic function, so they have the opportunity in these conditions to obtain a growing response among more and more workers, if they work with patience and perseverance and do not allow mass work to be monopolised by every shade of bureaucrat, reformist and right-winger.

Revolutionaries try to be the best trade unionists. They work continually to get the trade unions and their members to take up the objectives and forms of organisation of struggle which most clearly serve the immediate class interests of the workers. They never neglect the defence of these immediate interests, although at the same time they continuously develop their general propaganda for the socialist revolution, without which it is certain that no workers' victory can be consolidated, and no vital problem concerning the workers can be completely resolved.

The union bureaucracy, on the other hand, which is progressively integrated into the bourgeois state, increasingly substituting class conciliation and 'social peace' for its original task of the irreconcilable defence of its members' interests, objectively weakens the trade unions. It increasingly rides roughshod over the concerns and beliefs of its

members, and tries to prevent the rank-and-file from determining union goals and strategy. The struggle for trade union democracy and for class struggle trade unionism therefore logically complement each other in our everyday struggles.