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BOOK REVIEW

‘SOCIAL DEMOCRACY. THE ENEMY WITHIN’

Harpal Brar 1995; ISBN 1-874613-04-4

INTRODUCTION

This book is a valuable contribution to the critique of social democracy and its counter-revolutionary role. The first half of the text is concerned with an examination of the origins of the Labour Party (the main party of social democracy in this country) and its record both in government and opposition. Time and again the views of the Labour Party are shown to have coincided with those of the British ruling class on every important issue affecting British imperial policy at home and abroad.

The stance of various revisionist and Trotskyite organisations which, one way or another, take a pro-Labour standpoint are examined in detail. In so doing, Harpal Brar directs effective and withering fire upon those who whilst styling themselves as ‘revolutionaries’, insist on misrepresenting the Labour Party not only as a party which objectively serves the interests of the British working class, but also as being capable of bringing about the socialist transformation of society.

The author amply demonstrates the truth that the Labour Party is in reality both an imperialist party, and a ‘*bourgeois labour party*’, as characterised by Friedrich Engels, to whom this work is dedicated on the 100th anniversary of his death.

The second half of the book is comprised of articles from ‘*Lalkar*’, the paper of the Indian Workers’ Association, which comment upon the coal strike of 1984-5, various other economic struggles over the past fifteen years, and the relationship between social democracy and imperialist war. These illuminate the reactionary role played by the Labour Party in recent battles fought by the working class.

THE LABOUR PARTY SERVES THE INTERESTS OF MONOPOLY CAPITAL

Founded to give the working class a 'voice' in Parliament, the Labour Party has never been a true party of the working class, for such a party has to be revolutionary socialist in ideology. Anti-Marxist from its inception, the Labour Party preached the reformist theory that the state was a neutral apparatus which the working class could control in its own interests by obtaining a majority in Parliament. This denial of Marxian teaching on the nature of the state as an instrument of class rule also lies at the heart of those revisionist and trotskyite organisations which offer support to the Labour Party - for example through such electoral slogans as "... *kick out the Tories and elect a Labour government committed to Left policies*".

The Fabian ideology of Labour governments has always led them to operate along lines calculated to make capitalism work profitably during the (infinitely long) period of gradual, piecemeal, social reform. This illusory promise of reform has gained credence through real gains made by the working class. These have been due primarily to the rise in the value of labour power and the fact that the adjustment of wage levels to approach the higher level of the value of labour power have, by and large, been carried out through the reformist negotiating machinery.

The material basis for these gains over the past hundred and forty years have been (indirectly) the exploitation of the working people of the colonial-type countries by the British capitalist class. From the mid-nineteenth century some of the vast super-profits flowing in from colonial-type lands were used to pay an upper stratum of skilled craftsmen above the value of their labour power. This produced unions which rejected class struggle and socialist aims and confined their activities to bargaining on questions of wages, hours etc. However, despite the rise in real wages of the British working class over this period, the rate of exploitation of the workers has significantly increased. Had it not been for the 'unofficial' militant class struggle outside the reformist negotiating machinery, the rate of exploitation would have increased still more.

It should be emphasised that at no time has the mass of the British working class shared directly in colonial super profits. 'Bribery' of this kind has never affected more than a small upper stratum of the working class, and today this 'labour aristocracy' consists principally of the bureaucracy of the labour movement.

Despite the fact that its members are drawn mainly from the working class, and trade unions are affiliated to it, Harpal Brar clearly demonstrates that the Labour Party objectively serves the interests of monopoly capital. The abolition of 'Clause 4', the self-description of the party no longer as 'left of centre' but as 'centre', and the repudiation of all 'make the rich pay' programmatic points clearly show that the party's appeal is directed now to all sections of the people who want a change in government, particularly to sections of the capitalist class who have suffered from the Tory policy of serving financial branches of finance capital, and not the industrial branches. It provides at present the principal reserve party of monopoly capital, which can safely be permitted to form a government at times when the Conservative Party has lost its electoral support.

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE?

There remains the question of what a worker with a socialist consciousness should do when it comes to bourgeois elections, and here we differ from Harpal Brar who is opposed to participation in elections.

We believe this position to be both mistaken and dangerous. Despite its limitations, “parliamentary democracy” provides a more favourable terrain for preparing socialist revolution than would exist under a fascist dictatorship, or even a corporate state. It is therefore essential for the working class to defend the democratic rights associated with “parliamentary democracy” against attempts to abolish them.

The right to vote, limited though it is, is one of the democratic rights associated with “parliamentary democracy”. To advise workers not to use this democratic vote is to imply it is of no value, and so to play into the hands of the fascist elements who seek - as part of the ideological preparation for the attempt, when objective conditions require it, to abolish “parliamentary democracy” - to inculcate the view that democratic rights are worthless. Advice to workers not to vote is harmful and reactionary.

WHICH PARTY OF THE CLASS ENEMY MOST ADVANCES THE SITUATION OF THE WORKING CLASS?

Where there is a division over policy between different sections of the monopoly capitalist ruling class, a political party serving the interests of monopoly capital tends to become the vehicle of one or other of these antagonistic sections to put forward a policy which serves the interests of that section.

In 1970, for example, a majority of British monopoly capitalists had become convinced that their economic future lay in breaking the dependence upon United States imperialism, which had been the dominant feature of the international position of British imperialism since the second world war, and in joining the alliance of Western European powers which had been set up in the form of the European Economic Community. One of the reasons for the “dismissal” of the Labour government in 1970 was that it was tied to what had become a minority section of British monopoly capital which wished to continue the “special relationship” of dependence upon US imperialism.

These differences in foreign policy were overshadowed in 1974 by a more urgent difference in domestic policy brought to a head by the refusal of the miners to surrender to the government’s wage restraints. A majority of monopoly capitalists, now represented by the Labour Party, wanted to move away from the existing system of rigid wage restrictions and towards the building of a corporate state in which trade unions would be incorporated within the machinery of the capitalist state.

Even though the working class was not directly represented in the 1974 general election it was still able to achieve a tactical advantage by influencing the result. When the Heath government resigned, the unity of the miners in rejecting wage restraint, together with the refusal of the rest of the working class to blame the miners for hardship caused by the three-day working

week brought about a split in the monopoly capitalist ruling class on this issue and forced a majority of the monopoly capitalists to organise a “dismissal” of that government. The new Labour government then instructed the National Coal Board to reach a settlement with the miners which proved a considerable advance upon what the Heath government had been prepared to allow.

To argue that policy differences amongst the monopoly capitalist class not only exist but have concrete implications for the working class is to accept that it cannot be a matter of complete indifference to the working class which party is elected to government. This is so even if there are only minor disagreements such as that relating to Value Added Tax on fuel regarding which the Tory Party was in favour and the Labour Party opposed.

The increase in cost of fuel would certainly preclude a proportion of elderly people from being able to heat their homes adequately and would undoubtedly, in turn, add to the already huge number of deaths related to hypothermia in winter months. If this became an election issue, a ‘don’t vote’ stance would ignore an issue of literally life and death significance to some sections of the working class. There may only be a shade of difference between the Labour and Conservative Parties, but that ‘shade of difference’ could represent the difference between life and death for tens of thousands of people.

All genuine socialists must advise workers to use their democratic right to vote in an election in such a way as to create the best conditions of the advance of the working class to positions of class struggle and ultimately of revolutionary struggle, which alone can bring about the establishment of a socialist society.

Since the government at the next election will be either Conservative or Labour, both of which parties represent the interests of monopoly capital, both of which represent the interests of the class enemy of the working class, correct tactics require an analysis of whether the situation of the working class would be more advanced by the election of a Labour government or by the election of a Conservative government.

Should, as for example in 1974, the advice be to vote Labour, it must be associated with the categorical statement that the Labour Party is the political tool of big business and can never be anything else. This fact is amply documented in ‘Social Democracy: The Enemy Within’, and we warmly recommend the book to all those who wish to see the social emancipation of the working class.

‘Perestroika - the complete collapse of revisionism’, Trotskyism or Leninism’, and ‘Social democracy - the enemy within’ by Harpal Brar, are obtainable from E J Rule, 14 Featherstone Road, Southall, Middlesex UB2 5AA, UK. Prices (respectively): £10.00, £15.00, £10.00 including postage; for orders outside UK please add £2.50 (Europe) or £5.00 (rest of world) to cover postal costs.