In general, discussions in the labor movement ought to be concerned to inform rather than confront the various sectional interests of the movement. As an example it would surely be more useful to organise a round table discussion between feminists and some male trade union activists where each explained their positions than to continue the many separate discussions in pubs, clubs, conferences and seminars where each section of the movement complains of the other and attributes every possible evil motive to those who don’t agree with them. The forces arrayed against us all are enormous, we should not, therefore, dissipate our limited strength but conserve it for the real battles against those who exploit us and seek to destroy us. Without that perspective the next years, one, ten or a hundred, will continue to be determined by capital and will be rather gloomy. Marx’s legacy, and we ourselves, deserve better than that.

WAITING FOR THE REVOLUTION?

My comments concern that part of the left which, broadly speaking, is informed by a marxist theory of society while working as part of a labor government and being concerned with the work that society generates for such departments as Youth and Community Services.

The dilemmas we face today have a long history. There are fundamental contradictions in our society which are the major cause of economic misery and suffering. To overcome such contradictions requires very radical, deep social change but we have learnt through our own experiences that there are definite limits to “parliamentary socialism” which the forces of capital will not allow to be breached.

So here I am in agreement with the revolutionary left and against the Fabian conception of socialism. But then I disagree with the revolutionary left when it comes to a choice of one’s practical political activity. The choice, as old as marxism, essentially comes down to either deciding to be a pure revolutionary and work only for the end of capitalism or deciding to work within the capitalist system on the basis of a judgement that pure revolutionary activity is both futile and irrational in the current situation.

The left in the labor party makes the latter choice, estimating that revolution is so far off, it would seem, that to act as if it was near or could be realised in the near future through practical activity, is political folly.

The choice often is not clearcut. The rhetoric of one’s option is often mixed with the practice of the other. But I think a coherent position can be maintained for the left, even if, at times, the choices all seem rather distasteful.

It is realised that by working in the parliamentary system which is set within a capitalist economic system, fundamental exploitation cannot be resolved. This is the task of revolution. Nevertheless, if present-day practice cannot bring the possibility of revolution nearer just now it is important to take all available opportunities to alleviate suffering and inequality. I am arguing that as there is no current possibility for revolution then suffering has to be treated from within the political system, with all the compromise that this necessarily implies. Thus work, as in youth and community services, seeks to tackle problems of homelessness, unemployment, isolation, hunger, the lack of opportunity to care for children, the violence which poverty engenders. Now all these problems can be traced back to the inequalities created by capitalism but revolutionary activity is neither halting these missions nor enhancing the value of socialism. Our historical predicament is that only by the changes that can be achieved within capitalism can the values of socialism be furthered. Such changes are limited and do not go to the prime cause, but they do stop the worst excesses of economic degradation.

So while I do not believe that socialism will be achieved by parliamentary or social welfare means I do believe that reformist practice is the only moral choice which history allows. In other words, the desire to end capitalism has a moral motivation.

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Ann Symonds
A familiar argument against this position is that if reforms did not take place, if labor parties and trade unions did not compromise with capitalism to alleviate the wrongs of the system, then revolution would result. In other words activity for reform is seen as anti-revolutionary. This argument has an initial and obvious appeal but experience tends to deny it. When there is an economic crisis there is no consequent rise in the expectancy of revolution. If the argument was valid the revolution would be the nearer the more people would suffer. But this is not the case. The revolutions that have occurred have taken place in non-western, non-industrialised countries, amidst a complex pattern of historical circumstances. It is a failure of marxism that is cannot explain these historical facts. This is a source of the much publicised crisis of marxism.

It is a convenient but simplistic argument to claim that reforms halt the "inevitable" revolution. I would further contend that the parliamentary/trade union activity for reform maintains a revolutionary potential by preserving an element of class consciousness in times of capitalist strength. Even if it is only in a small way, the labor movement does uphold a sense of class against those forces of capitalism which seek to impose a social consciousness of the isolated individual. And some reforms do maintain the idea in the community that social change to improve and determine one's own life is possible.

The consciousness of self-determination has to be continued, even if in a limited form, as a basis for future radical change. So rather than being anti-revolutionary, the labor movement keeps up a certain consciousness on which any future revolution will depend. In our times it is not such activities which stifle some imminent revolution but without such practice the socialist tradition is in danger of being lost at any popular level.

Our historical experiences rule out the Fabian conception of achieving socialism but also deny the political practice of the pure revolutionary. With the revolution so far beyond any foreseeable future, the only rational and valid political practice is within the political system of capitalism. It is here that the values of socialism are pursued and only in this way can the prime constituents of a socialist consciousness be preserved.

As for the future, to speculate about marxism in another hundred years is a very un-marxist thing to do. Marx never went in for such futurology, at least not in detail.

But in the near future, the danger seems to me that the marxist tradition could be lost. One role of the left should be to try to maintain that tradition. It should be kept alive for the essential insights it provides to the nature of capitalism. And it should be upheld in the labor party left because, if a revolution is ever to eventuate, it will be due to a popular labor movement, not to a few academics or revolutionaries. Of course the labor left should always try to halt other forces of oppression at work in society, whether they fit into a marxist analysis or not.

In summary I believe that if the labor movement does not maintain some sort of marxist or socialist perspective then marxism, as an historical force in Australia, will die. And, conversely, without marxism, the labor movement would be hollow and would offer no effective resistance to capitalism. The resistance now offered may be small but it may be all we can do and, as I have tried to say, we should do it.