

Socialists and the

MASS ORGANISATIONS

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Preface

This text deals with the question of how socialists should relate to the mass organisations of working people, especially the social democratic parties and parties to the left of social democracy. It should be seen as a living document that will change over time to reflect new input from discussions around the world. If you would like to comment on this document or to write to us about anything else please send us an email to: coordinatingcommittee@socialistnetwork.org or visit our Facebook page at facebook.com/TheSocialistNetwork.

In this time of a general capitalist crisis with horrendous implications for the majority of humanity we see it as of utmost importance that the Left regains theoretical strength in order to be able to move forward. The last quarter of the 20th Century saw the collapse of both Stalinism and Reformism. Since then the Great Economic Recession of 2008 has caused a deep crisis in capitalism. One would expect that all these developments would have greatly boosted the socialist movement. Yet the opposite has happened – it has continued to weaken and divide.

In *The Socialist Network* we believe that the main reason for this is that they have not undertaken what should be a central task for socialists today: To uncover the potential of a new society that has already been built up within capitalism today, explain the barriers that are preventing it from being realised, and outline how that can be done. We are now working on this in a democratic, collaborative and open manner. And we are striving to express ourselves in terms that can appeal to the overwhelming majority of society. We invite you to join with us in this work.

About The Socialist Network

The Socialist Network was founded in 2012 and consists of *Föreningen Socialisten* in Sweden, *Socialist Expression* in Cyprus and *Revolutionary Struggle* in Pakistan, as well as individual members in a range of other countries. We are organised as a network so that every individual member and group who participates retains their autonomy. Our purpose is not to be a substitute to the labour movement. On the contrary, we strive to unify, learn from, and contribute to it. An individual or a group can either join a group that is a part of *The Socialist Network* or join the Network directly.

Don't hesitate to visit us at www.socialistnetwork.org.

Introduction

Since the dawn of capitalism, working people have always needed mass organisations to defend and advance their interests. By mass organisations we mean movements and bodies that seek to improve the lives of the vast majority and are open to a wide range of people to join and support. In most countries it was a long and difficult struggle to establish the basic democratic rights of assembly, speech, media and so on in order to allow these mass organisations to develop and operate. And there are still many countries languishing under dictatorships where such organisations are still suppressed.

Traditional Organisations

The traditional organisations of the working class, the trade unions and the mass social democratic parties, were originally founded on the basis of replacing capitalism with a socialist society, on international solidarity and so on. However, after many decades of political and organisational decline the traditional organisations of the working class in most countries have forgotten their historical mission and as a result have lost their direction. These organisations, especially the social democratic and labour parties, are now led by people who have embraced the myth that there is no alternative to capitalism, that there is no possibility of creating a different form of society based on common ownership and real democracy. Thus they see no other way than to make the current capitalist system work better despite its inherent greed, exploitation, inequality, chaotic economic life, unemployment, war and environmental degradation. That is why such leaders have gone along with the reactionary policies of neo-liberalism and are willing to see the living standards of working people and their gains in welfare drastically cut back. All in the vain hope of restoring capitalism to its more healthy days. This general toleration of capitalism, warts and all, is not just represented in the leadership of the movement but is also reflected among large layers of the population. Other alternatives to capitalism that once existed are now widely seen as failures. For example, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc has convinced many people that there is no viable alternative to capitalism. Similarly, the reformist alternative of gradual nationalisation and social welfare offered by social democracy in the West has lost credibility and been rolled back not just by right-wing capitalist parties but by the social democrats themselves.

Meanwhile, the insistent propaganda of the capitalist media has reinforced illusions in the existing system. Even when such illusions are deeply shaken such as we saw in the Great Recession of 2008-9 and the continuing international economic crisis, the absence of a credible alternative from the socialist movement has left the vast majority confused and even willing to accept cuts in their living standards and welfare services in the desperate hope of a return to better times.

Having abandoned any idea of replacing capitalism, the social democratic party leaderships compete with the liberal and conservative parties for who can run the capitalist system more efficiently with more or less humanity at the margins. For many of the social democratic leaders politics has become more of a rewarding career than an opportunity to improve people's lives. The desire for the receipt of the fruits of government office has too often led these leaders to willingly participate in the cutting back of the living standards and welfare services of the majority of the population. The founders of social democracy would be turning in their graves to see this flagrant abandonment of the original principles of the movement.

Now that capitalism has moved into an era of economic crisis and global competition is driving us in a relentless race to the bottom, social democratic governments have shown themselves willing to preside over a drastic decline in living standards for the majority while the rich grow richer by the day. This has been accompanied by social democratic leaders increasingly accepting the need to privatise the public sector and to 'restructure' the employment market so that workers rights are abandoned and cheap flexible labour becomes the norm. All in the name of supposedly increasing efficiency and national competitive advantage. Thus, ideology and principle has been largely removed from mainstream politics which more and more resemble a game of musical chairs, with politicians competing with each other for who can win elections on the most effective mix of promises and popular slogans pre-tested in focus groups. Increasing the public's cynicism about social democracy is the image of so many social democratic ministers socialising with the wealthy and wooing the barons of big business. Not that such a degeneration has gone by without resistance from many ordinary members of the social democratic movement. But hand in hand with the embracing of capitalism has gone a suppression of what party democracy used to exist. In its place we see an increasing centralization of power in the hands of the social democratic leaders and away from the Party's ranks. This is reinforced by the leadership's monopoly of internal Party communication and their use of the capitalist media to undermine and marginalise those who argue for a socialist alternative.

Left Reformist Parties

The embracing of capitalist ideology by the social democratic parties has created a large political space on the left of the political spectrum. Hundreds of millions feel their lives inexorably deteriorating in an increasingly brutal capitalist world and are left wondering who to turn to, and who to support. In some countries, sizeable parties to the left of Social Democracy have emerged, usually with some past connection to the mass communist movement. Such left reformist parties include *Die Linke* in Germany, the *Vänsterpartiet* in Sweden, the *Izquierda Unida* in Spain, the *Socialistische Partij* in Holland and so on. Such parties have been able to achieve a significant presence in their parliaments. In some cases, like the Workers Party of Brazil and the ANC in South Africa, they have been able to win elections and form

governments, promising radical change in favour of working people. However, where such left reformist parties have won elections we see the same tendency to bow to the pressures of the existing system and embrace capitalism as the only show in town, implementing pro-capitalist policies with all their unequal and insecure consequences. In Brazil and South Africa massive street protests and strikes have recently broken out against this tendency.

Even in those Left Parties who have not entered government we see an incredible level of timidity, a reluctance to advance a programme for the transformation of society. Instead, these parties have generally limited their activity to defensive campaigns and in their programmes to calls for the implementation of a list of modest demands, which worthy as they undoubtedly are, offer no obvious answer to the deep crisis we are facing. Moreover, these Left Parties face serious problems of internal party democracy; plus the dilemma of how to relate to their larger social democratic rivals.

The Revolutionary Left

One possible alternative to the mass parties of social democracy and the left reformist parties are the many revolutionary socialist organisations, members of which are usually found on demonstrations or in city centres organising petitions and selling socialist papers. However, such organisations are usually small in numbers and limited in influence. They tend to be fundamentalist and dogmatic in their thinking, looking backward to their marxist forebears and squabbling over their writings like religious texts. As a result the language that many of these groups use and the shrill way in which they address the public usually alienates the majority of people.

Another major limitation of many of the revolutionary socialist organisations is the sectarian way that they relate to the broader mass movement, denouncing their leaders and seeking to feed off and dominate the movements they are involved with. Each group tends to see itself as the vanguard of the working class, the kernel of the mass revolutionary party which will lead the people in the overthrow of capitalism. From that perspective all other socialist groups or currents in the movement are seen as obstructions and rivals to be overcome. Internally, such groups tend to be highly centralised and bureaucratic, unwilling to tolerate dissent and splintering over and over again. No wonder that the revolutionary left is so marginalised.

Single Issue Campaigns & Protest Movements

The inevitable result of all this is that there now exists a massive political vacuum. The majority of people in the world are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with capitalism but can't see any alternative to it nor any political movement capable of solving their problems. While we see millions willing to come out on

street protests and general strikes to give expression to their discontent, such a desire for change is not translated into the growth of traditional left-wing parties. Instead, into this huge political vacuum has come a multiplicity of single issue campaigns along with a non-party protest movement. Thus we see organisations like Greenpeace and Amnesty International on one side, and sit-down protests such as the Occupy movement on the other. Indeed, many people, the youth in particular, have adopted an openly 'anti-party' attitude. So disillusioned are they in the existing political institutions and the corrupt and remote hierarchies that they see in them, they are wary of joining any permanent political organisations, preferring to participate in spontaneous campaigns without any party label. With this anti-organisational mood today many people who want to be active and to change society say that they don't need an organisation. Instead they think that we can just have a social movement. We can just participate in this and that activity, have this or that meeting, in the street or in the square. The development of social media like Facebook and Twitter have encouraged and facilitated this trend, giving people an individual voice and allowing them to join non-party political networks of all kinds. And to shift allegiances between them as they wish.

This anarchistic-style reaction to the the corruption and unprincipled nature of the mainstream parties is also reflected in an aversion to electoral politics and even the idea of agreeing on a programme for change. On the other side, there is a rejection of the sectarian behaviour of the revolutionary left-wing groups and their attempts to come in and dominate popular campaigns. For these reasons, both the social democrats and the organised revolutionary left were not welcome in the Occupy movement. This was taken to the extreme in the Occupy movement where the rigid application of 'rule through consensus' (where *everyone* has to agree for a decision to be taken) sadly prevented the movement from coming out with a meaningful programme. A programme that could convert the massive popularity of the Occupy movement into effective action in the mainstream of society, including the battle in the media and the electoral process.

The single-issue campaigns and protest movements along with the social media networks have a very important role to play in mobilising fresh layers and raising awareness about issues. But protest and campaigning can only take the struggle so far. The healthy rejection of opportunism and careerism on the one hand, and sectarianism on the other, should not lead on to the rejection of organisation and policy altogether. If it does then nothing will come out of all the protests in the world. In fact, it will achieve entirely the opposite - protests seemingly without end and the disruption and chaos they can bring will eventually result in increasingly popular support for an authoritarian solution to bring back order and stability. This was a key element in the propaganda made by Mussolini and Hitler in their rise to power.

In other words, we can't just keep on campaigning *against* things. We have to also campaign *for* things. That is why we need to develop a programme for transforming society, and to create the right form of organisations to achieve it.

The Mass Political Movement That is Needed Today

A political movement obviously should not exist for its own sake. It has to have a purpose. So what should be the purpose of a mass political movement that is on *our* side. First of all it should set out to defend and protect the exploited and oppressed. Under capitalism this means the overwhelming majority of people whether we talk of workers and poor farmers, women and youth, small business people and the middle layers of society, ethnic and sexual minorities, and so on. The victims of the short-sighted greed of capitalism also includes the planet itself along with the rest of animal life. All are being ripped off by the super-rich, the less than 1% of society that dominates the economy, politics, the media and so on. They grow wealthier by the day while we are subject to cutbacks, loss of living standards and environmental degradation. Against this global onslaught we see numerous strikes, demonstrations and struggles of all kinds. We need a mass political movement that supports these struggles, unites them and champions their cause.

But defensive struggles in a system in terminal decline can only take us so far. They are of limited use without a plan for replacing the existing system with something radically better. For this we need a mass political movement that is committed to the democratic socialist transformation of society, a society which is democratic from top to bottom and where the majority own and control the direction of the economy, the media, public services and so on. However, having a broad goal is not enough. In the old days of social democracy it too paid lip service to the replacement of capitalism with a socialist society. But this remained a vague aim which seemed to disappear more and more into the distance. If a mass political movement is serious about abolishing capitalism in order to solve the main problems of humanity, then it has to develop a meaningful and realistic set of proposals that the majority of people can understand and support. Such a programme cannot be developed by a few intellectuals but must come out of the widest discussion and consultation with working people across the world. For each nation's problems are interlinked with those of the planet as a whole, and an effective mass political movement can't see itself as purely a national movement but must be consciously international from the start. Last but not least, developing a real programme for the transformation of society has to then be followed by serious and consistent action to achieve it.

The Need For Democracy Inside Our Movement

Just as we need the maximum of democracy inside society, we need the fullest democracy inside our own movement. The two are not just connected but must go hand in hand. From the early days of capitalism a basic form of democracy was developed within the traditional organisations of the labour movement with regular meetings at local and national level, reports and elections, delegate conferences and so on. But this has clearly proved itself to be inadequate to the task of defending working people and transforming society. Democracy above all is about providing the opportunity for people to discuss through the choices available to them and on that basis make decisions. In this regard our movement has failed to provide a healthy forum in which working people could discuss how to move forward together. A genuine forum through which we could choose the ideas and leadership we need to change society.

For Transparency and the Right to Publicly Disagree: To this end, one of most basic requirements we need in our movement is real transparency at all levels. How can working people choose the best policies and leaders if they are not provided with the information they need to make those choices? This means bringing to an end any rule that seeks to prevent disclosure and debate. Such undemocratic rules exist in all wings of the movement. In the leadership of many social democratic parties and trade unions we find practices that forbid minorities from talking about the differences that exist at the top. In some sections of the movement this is called maintaining ‘collective responsibility’. In this way disputes within the leadership are kept hidden from the membership rather than being openly expressed. How then are workers supposed to participate and reach a decision if there is not a public discussion of differences in the movement? Such rules drastically inhibit the right of the rank and file members to know what is going on in their organisations and to make the choices that would naturally flow from that information. This rule is sometimes applied at lower levels of the organisation where speaking out can lead to members being disciplined for ‘bringing the organisation into disrepute’.

On the socialist left this rule forbidding minorities to speak is often extended to include the whole membership of the organisation under the title of ‘democratic centralism’. Under this rule any member who expresses a point of view that is contrary to the policy of the organisation can be disciplined and expelled. In this way working people as a whole are denied the right to know, comment on and thereby participate in the debates of the Left. The end result is that any group of members who significantly disagrees with the majority line is thrown out. Thus we see socialist left groups splitting again and again, a feature of the revolutionary left which makes it a laughing stock in the broad population. Meanwhile, the continuous development of online communication is more and more undermining these ludicrous rules of secrecy and making them redundant and unenforceable.

For The Right of Platform: Another basic requirement of democracy is the right of people to organise for their point of view. Without such a right working people are denied the chance to hear alternatives and to make a meaningful choice over policy and leadership. Yet there exists in many sections of the movement rules against the right of groups of members to set up and campaign for different platforms of ideas. The right-wing of the labour movement often assume that only they are representative of working people and have a god-given right to the leadership of the movement. In this they are greatly assisted by the capitalist media. However, there is the unfortunate fact that they have to win elections in order to maintain their positions, elections in which they can always be defeated by candidates more representative of the interests of the membership. Past experience has shown that the commitment of the right-wing to democracy is only skin deep. All too often they will try to prevent defeat with organisational measures against their opponents. In particular, they fear open debate on an equal footing.

In contrast, we need a mass movement that encourages the maximum of debate and choice. We have nothing to fear from the open and free flow of ideas and information, and everything to gain. In this way, the members will have the best chance to decide on the policies, strategies and leadership they need and society will better understand why they have made such decisions. We believe that this principle is needed in all mass organisations so that different trends of opinion have the right to form platforms and openly argue and mobilise for them. Naturally, accompanying such a right is the responsibility of such platforms to abide by democratic rules of conduct and debate in order to ensure a positive and united outcome.

For The Right to Elect and Recall Representatives and Officials: In too many cases the leaders of our movement and our public representatives act in ways that do not serve our interests and ignore our democratic processes. Such officials and public representatives are encouraged by capitalist society to look down on the rank and file members as ignorant or irrelevant, and to see themselves as a law unto themselves.

To counter this we need to ensure that the rules of our movement ensure that all full-time staff are periodically elected by and answerable to the members they serve. Similarly, we need our public representatives to be democratically selected by the membership, not parachuted into an area or onto an election list by the movement's leadership. And when an official or representative acts against the interest of working people or disgraces the movement we need to have the right to recall and replace them. Above all, we need to ensure that all those who are active in the mass movement and in direct contact with working people are directing our organisations, not the full-time staff or a privileged layer of public representatives.

For an End to Patronage: In the standard parliamentary democracy, the leaders of parties are allowed to appoint a whole layer of officials. This is made ten times worse if they succeed in becoming prime ministers or presidents with the power to appoint cabinet ministers and thousand of public officials. This power of patronage is a major force undermining democracy inside and outside parliament. It inevitably tends to create cabinet ministers who bow and scrape to the leader who appoints them. Further down it encourages members of parliament to follow the leader's line in the hope of future promotion to a ministry position. Thus we end up with what is sometimes called 'a payroll vote' in parliaments or elected chambers. Members of parliament regularly complain that they have no real power and that all the decisions are taken by the leader and the cabinet. Yet it is the members of parliament who yield their powers to the leader and thereby create an elective dictatorship. Our movement must be committed to bringing this undemocratic system of patronage to an end and replacing it with democratic election of all important positions by all those who are affected by them.

For Representatives of Working People on a Representative Salary: Social democratic politics has now become a comfortable career for people from a relatively privileged background. All too often they come straight from the right university or through family connections into politician's offices and then into leading political careers. Thus, a future in social democratic politics is no longer seen as a way to take action to solve humanity's ills but more as a comfortable career path towards power and reward. These young party apparatchiks having no real life experience and certainly no background of struggle among and for working people, are fast-tracked into parliament and then into a ministerial portfolio.

As a result working people are being less and less represented in parliaments and congresses. This is made especially worse by the payment of increasingly exorbitant salaries and expenses to publicly elected officials, a trend that is helping to attract self-servers rather than those dedicated to serving the public. As if this wasn't bad enough, we see an ever increasing tendency for our public representatives to accept payments from big business either in the form of consultancies, lobbying favours, job offers and outright bribery. This gets worse the higher an official goes and the more power they hold to influence the outcome of commercial decisions in favour of this or that company. Safeguards against corruption do exist but these are increasingly circumnavigated by means of offers of lucrative employment after leaving office so that companies can gain access to their inside information, experience and contacts. Thus we increasingly see social democratic ministers taking a circular route from ministerial office into big business when in opposition and then back again into ministerial office when their party is returned to power. Such obvious conflicts of interest represent a complete undermining of democracy and the trust of the public. In our movement we have to make a break from this cosseted world of political life separate from and divorced from the lives of working people. We want a full range of working people in

parliament on reasonable salaries not political opportunists who make a lucrative career out of public service. To this end we must create representative selection procedures for choosing our public candidates, procedures that favour the choice of working people from all walks of life. We need a movement that insists that our elected representatives only take reasonable salaries close to the incomes of the ordinary people that elect them. A movement that demands that our elected representatives refuse as a matter of principle all business consultancies and lobbying arrangements, or subsequent offers of employment.

For a Code of Conduct that Upholds Members Rights: Last but not least, we need a movement that upholds the rights of its members and protects them from abuse. We have seen too many cases of sexual exploitation and denial of justice in the social democratic and socialist movements. While no movement can be perfect it is clear that we have to do far far better in our efforts to educate members and leaders to treat each other with respect and to provide the proper procedures for members to complain when they have been abused. To this end we need a clear Code of Conduct that upholds members' rights and encourages all to behave in a positive and constructive manner. This also applies to the way that we debate with each other. Denunciation and vicious mudslinging only serves to obstruct political debate and embitter relations between members. We need to create a climate of tolerance and respect in which debate can flourish and differences encouraged rather than stifled.

The Need for Unity

Working people clearly appreciate that unity is strength, especially in the face of capitalist wealth and power. That in division lies defeat. This was the guiding principle behind the building of the trade unions and social democracy and pervades all aspects of people's struggles and organisation. Some socialists reject this desire for unity as "naive" and insist on splitting again and again over one 'principle' or another. This has done great damage to the socialist movement and encouraged a purist approach to political organisation. In contrast, working people correctly see that one united movement has a far greater chance of succeeding than one divided up into a series of competing groups. We completely agree with this and are wholly committed to campaigning for united action between all mass organisations of working people irrespective of what leadership or programme currently exists in these organisations. This includes campaigning in both social democratic and broad left parties (mass parties to the left of social democracy) for a common programme for the democratic socialist transformation of society; a united front in elections and so on.

Turning to Traditional Organisations in Times of Crisis

When events bring people into struggle they usually follow large movements rather than small groups. Similarly, they listen to those who hold positions of authority rather than unknown individuals. In the case of working people, although they have suffered many disappointments at the hands of their traditional organisations, in crisis situations they still look to them for a lead. This is normally reflected in a rise in membership, in votes, in officially endorsed demonstrations and strikes, and so on. If the enraptured membership in such situations can find leaders who are willing to give voice to their demands they can move forward very quickly. If however, all they see is an unresponsive brick wall or leaders who make promises they don't intend to carry out, they can easily lapse back into demoralisation and apathy. This is why it is so necessary to work patiently and consistently within the traditional organisations, so that when the struggle rises a genuine and effective alternative to the movement can arise. The more possible it is for socialists to achieve positions of authority in advance of a crisis the more successful the struggle will be when it breaks out.

We also recognise the need to develop additional organisations for the struggle as it develops. Where there are no trade unions we should help set them up. Where this is no mass party we should do the same. Similarly with tenants bodies, pressure groups etc. One of the great potential advantages of online communication is that it is now much easier to launch relevant campaigns and participate in those that have been formed by others. The key is to approach such initiatives in a positive spirit, not trying to dominate them but to genuinely assist their development, helping to connect them to the broader struggle and the overall need to transform society.

Renewing the Democracy of the Mass Organisations

There is a naturally democratic instinct among working people. They know that majority control is in their interests as opposed to domination by unrepresentative minorities. Unfortunately, there are strong tendencies in all organisations towards bureaucracy, especially if they become large and powerful. This is made much worse within a capitalist society, where officials and leaders of working people are too often bought off by better salaries, status and privileges. Many of these officials and leaders see their role more as 'negotiators' between working people and the system's representatives, rather than fighters for our interests. For these leaders struggles and strikes are unwelcome as they disturb the daily routine of meetings and tasks that form the basis of their 'profession'. Such leaders often become important barriers to struggle which they seek at all costs to prevent.

It is for this reason that there is a recurring battle by the rank and file, especially during times of struggle, to renew the democratic life of their organisations. Some socialists react to this bureaucratisation of the

mass organisations by writing them off and urging working people to leave them and build something new. While, in some extreme situations there may be no alternative but to help launch alternative organisations, all too often this approach only ends up by dividing and weakening the overall movement while leaving the majority of members in the old organisation under the control of the undemocratic leaders. It is usually far better to encourage and assist the members of the mass organisations to democratically transform their organisations so that they are capable of defending the interests of their members. With this in mind, we welcome the new online communication channels which for the first time are beginning to link all members together. Thus, instead of the old monopoly on information and communication held by the central offices of each organisation, it is increasingly possible for all members to talk to each other directly. This holds incredible potential for the extension of democratic participation and reducing the negative effects of bureaucracy.

Challenging the existing leadership in a positive way

We believe that it is a mistake to substitute denunciation of the existing leadership for measured and effective criticism. Thus, calling the leaders of the traditional organisations ‘enemies of the movement’, ‘traitors’, ‘betrayers’, ‘capitalist agents’ etc. may make the accuser feel better but usually has the opposite effect to that intended. Such personal attacks tend to create sympathy for the leadership and discredit the left-wing. Certainly they are no way to overcome any illusions that the rank and file may have in the leadership who they often see as on their side and trying to make the best of a difficult situation. This can only be done by solid, accurate and well-thought out criticism delivered free of personal rancour. Whether or not an individual leader is corrupt or clearly hostile to the interests of the movement, is not the key issue. Our starting point must be to find the most effective way to convince the membership of the need for a better policy and leadership.

Another common mistake is to be on the lookout for ways to confront the bureaucracy of the movement irrespective of whether the rank and file is behind such a challenge. Indeed, some socialists seem to see it as a badge of revolutionary courage to look for confrontations with the leadership, sometimes launching adventures in order to confront and provoke them. However, all this usually does is provide a useful pretext for the officials of the movement to take disciplinary action against such socialists, to which of course they respond with claims of ‘victimisation’. Instead, we should support campaigns to democratise the movement step by step, in line with the membership’s consciousness.

The Tendency for Reforms Rather than Overthrowing the Whole System

The general tendency of working people is to fight for improvements within the existing system under which they live. While in the course of personal and collective struggle significant numbers can become

conscious of the need for a new system of society, for the majority it is only when the system has demonstrated (usually many times!) that it cannot deliver reforms, cannot even retain past gains, that they will come to see the need to end the capitalist system and replace it with a democratic socialist alternative. Such, abnormal situations of crisis only come along every now and then. We should also bear in mind that people develop at different speeds, and that most will not move from having illusions in capitalism one day to adopting a socialist consciousness the next. In the 'normal' times the struggle must centre around campaigns to defend existing gains and for improvements. In such times, we believe that it is necessary for socialists to be the best fighters for reforms, while at the same time showing how such reforms can best be secured through the democratic socialist transformation of society.

However, past experience has shown that the fight for reforms can all too easily become an end in itself, with the aim of the democratic socialist transformation of society relegated to celebratory speeches and pious resolutions. This tendency towards 'reformism' appears in all mass organisations to one extent or another. This is clear within the social democratic parties and trade unions, but we have also seen that the pressures of 'reformism' afflict the broad left parties and their leaderships - as they gain bigger votes and sizeable parliamentary representation they too come under heavy pressure from the capitalist media and bourgeois society to moderate their policies. Of course, just as a hermit in a cave can be separated from the temptations of the world, it is easy to avoid 'reformism' by isolating oneself from the mass movement which includes people of all persuasions, illusions of all kinds, and elected representatives who believe in the capitalist system. Far more difficult but ultimately more worthwhile is the task of combating reformism and capitalist thinking in the places where it flourishes in our movement - the social democratic parties, the trade unions and every other kind of mass organisation. To do this requires confidence in one's ideas and the ability to express them effectively. Socialists should not regard 'reformism' as some kind of contagious disease that one will catch through regular contact.

If we are really secure in our arguments why should we fear to argue and fight for them in any arena? We should not be afraid of 'reformism' in any of its varieties. On the contrary, we should challenge it on its own ground and demonstrate through consistent work and patient argument that the democratic socialist transformation of society is not only possible but absolutely necessary. In this way, socialists will remain in touch with the broader layers of the population, better understanding their needs and opinions, as well as responding to their criticism of our ideas.

Where should socialists work politically?

While there is a general consensus on the need to be active inside trade unions there is great controversy about whether socialists should join mass political parties, and if so which ones. In our view, socialists

should be active in all the mass organisations, acting with the positive aim of helping them to make gains for working people – assisting the members in building them up, bringing them under democratic control, uniting them together in action, and encouraging them to fight for a democratic socialist alternative. We see this as an unconditional commitment that should not be dependent on the particular policies or leadership of mass organisations at any particular time.

In this context we believe that socialists who join social democracy *or* the broad left parties should be equally supported and assisted in their efforts. We think that this is the only approach that is capable of advancing the long-term interests of working people.

Social Democracy

It is wholly understandable why socialists and many working people have become disillusioned with the social democratic parties. These parties have increasingly come to be seen as part of the established ‘political game’ with all its cynical manipulation, corruption and betrayal of promises. Yet, tens of millions of working people continue to vote for the social democratic parties. Principally they do so because they fear that the main alternative – the open business parties of the centre and the right – will implement far worse policies than the social democrats. And such a fear is not misplaced as we have seen in France under Sarkozy, in Britain under Cameron, and in Spain, Sweden etc.

Even where there exists a mass broad left party offering a more radical alternative to social democracy such as in Germany, Spain, Sweden, Holland, France and so on, masses of working people continue to vote for social democracy. They do so sometimes because they are not convinced by the left alternative, and sometimes because they feel that only the social democrats are capable of preventing the more reactionary parties coming to power.

In such a situation it is all too easy to look at the social democratic parties in an un-dialectical way, ignoring the wider processes in society that affect these parties. And by only looking at how these parties operate today, it becomes very difficult to imagine how these parties could change, shifting back to the left as the crisis of capitalism deepens and lengthens. Some socialists now describe the social democratic parties as ‘bourgeois’ parties, arguing that they have altered their class character and become versions of the American Democratic Party. Of course, some of the social democratic leaders have tried to take their parties in this direction but actually completing the process is easier said than done. Despite appearances on the surface, social democracy has not fundamentally changed its original nature and contradictions. And from the opposite direction, it would be making the same mistake to believe that the American Democratic Party can be transformed into a party of working people. In reality, the class struggle continues to run through social democracy just as it has done ever since it became a significant power

within capitalist society in the early decades of the last century. None of the factors that help drag most social democratic leaders away from their roots and the members are new: the seductions of government office, bribery by corporations and rich individuals, intimidation and flattery of the mass media, manipulation by intelligence agencies etc. It has just been taken much further than previously.

Ironically, all these means of incorporating the workers' leaders into the capitalist system are actually a sign of the weakness of the system and point to the objective strength of working people and their organisations. The ruling elite in the advanced societies know that if the leadership of social democracy was to go out and campaign for democratic socialism in a popular and consistent way, it would gain mass support and unleash huge social forces that could imperil the whole system. It is capitalism's Achilles Heel, a possibility that they fear and seek to prevent. It was no accident that Margaret Thatcher, the champion of the neo-liberal movement, when asked what was her greatest success, did not reply that it was in winning the Falklands War, or creating an economic boom, defeating the trade unions and so forth. Instead she said that her most important victory was in convincing the Labour Party to abandon its support for a socialist alternative. Such is the understanding of the capitalists in the potential power of social democracy to bring down the capitalist system, and the need to prevent social democracy moving in this direction.

However, the capitalists don't hold all the cards. The social democratic parties are not sealed off from the trends of society - the coming mass radicalisation of working people offers possibilities for the growth of a strong left-wing inside the ranks of these parties. Of course, right now the idea of winning a left-wing majority in the social democratic parties might sound far-fetched or impossible. However, we must look forward to a future period when through events and experience, and the potential of modern communication, people can more and more see a democratic socialist alternative as viable and necessary. Such a widespread change of consciousness will inevitably be reflected inside social democracy with new leaders arising to voice these radical moods.

Our political work now must be one of preparation, linking up with members in social democracy who want to fight back and reclaim their parties. Helping them to organise together a growing movement for a democratic socialist alternative within the social democratic parties. In this way we are making the road clearer and easier to travel down so that working people's efforts to transform society are successful.

New Mass Parties

There are many socialists who argue in favour of setting up new mass parties in order to give voice to a left which is undemocratically excluded from political life by the capitalist media and the social democratic leadership. We deeply sympathise with this desire for the freedom to offer a democratic

socialist alternative to the population, especially in a period dominated by right-wing ideas and savage attacks on the living conditions of the majority. We also completely understand the disgust felt by many at the state of the existing movement. But before taking the step of leaving social democracy in favour of building a new broad left party we urge socialists to bear in mind that the social democratic movement belongs as much to us as it does to the current leaderships, even more so. After all, the founding socialist traditions of the trade unions and social democracy are far more in tune with our views than with those who have embraced capitalism and now dominate the leadership. It is our movement and we should not allow all the generations of hard work to build it up to be lost. Moreover, if we abandon the struggle within the traditional workers parties we will leave them under the leadership of people who use the prestige and historically progressive image of such parties to advance their own interests rather than those of working people. This plays into the hands of the ruling class that uses these leaders to block the anger and discontent of the oppressed and exploited.

In setting up new left parties socialists will inevitably focus on the radical minority in society. But this risks giving up on the majority of working people who have shown again and again a willingness to return to the social democratic parties. Some on the left believe that they can make a fresh start by leaving social democratic 'reformism' behind. But there is no magic line that divides social democracy, its leaders and ideology from the rest of the population. The influence of 'reformist' thinking runs right through the middle of all the other organisations of working people including the trade unions, campaigning groups and community organisations of all kinds. Reformist social democrats and those who think like them are active in all areas of society and just creating a new left-wing movement doesn't solve this problem.

We believe that the battle for the future will be played out in all the organisations of working people. Leaving the social democratic parties is a departure from one of the most important and most significant arenas of the class struggle, an arena where the intervention of conscious socialists can make a decisive difference when the radicalisation of working people really develops.

Broad Left Parties

Notwithstanding what we have said above about the need to stay and fight in social democracy, in some countries sizeable parties to the left of social democracy are already in existence and can't be ignored or excluded. Such parties can play a very valuable role in the struggle to transform society, and we in *The Socialist Network* believe that socialists should do everything we can to assist them. There is undoubtedly a natural base in the population for the broad left parties. In very exceptional cases where social democracy has been openly discredited such as in Greece a broad left party can extend its natural base to a much higher level. But this is more the exception than the norm. For a broad left party to be taken

seriously by working people it needs to demonstrate first of all an ability to achieve significant representation in parliament and/or at local council level. Where electoral systems are heavily biased against smaller parties such as in Britain, it is extremely difficult for a party to the left of the mainstream parties to even reach first base.

A second vital condition for success is the need for unity on the left. We have already seen the disastrous results in Scotland and Ireland when a broad left party splits. Here the question of party democracy is key. In some broad left parties effective internal democracy with competing political platforms are banned. In some of the newer broad left parties such rights exist but are subverted by factions who are more interested in developing their own forces than the party as a whole, and are ready whenever they deem the time is right to split the party. In contrast, the broad left parties desperately need an effective model of democracy and a democratic culture to ensure its implementation.

Last but definitely not least, for a broad left party to succeed it cannot just be a more radical version of social democracy with a list of more militant social and economic demands. With the decisive issues now posed by the world capitalist crisis a broad left party needs to be able to develop a credible alternative to capitalism and convincingly explain how a democratic socialist society could effectively solve the problems of working people. In doing so it must bridge the gap between day-to-day campaigns and the need to change society generally. Unfortunately, the broad left parties have not yet risen to this challenge and this is a fundamental weakness in their appeal to the working and middle classes.

Broad Left Parties and Social Democracy

Even if a broad left party was to get everything right, there would still reach a point where party members and their voters came to realise that they cannot achieve majorities in national elections without linking up with social democracy. Working people are very practical and they want to see their votes delivering meaningful change and improvement in their lives. To this end, they will not just keep casting their votes for movements that they see as having no hope of success. Thus the possibility for electoral pacts and potential coalition governments between left parties and social democracy present themselves – red-red platforms/coalitions as they have been termed. This poses afresh the problem of how to relate to the social democratic parties. The left within social democracy is generally sympathetic to the idea of such red-red arrangements while the right-wing opposes them. The possibility of such coalitions then hangs on the struggle for power between the left and right within social democracy. In this way, the development of a strong left-wing movement within social democracy is as important for the broad left parties as it is for their social democratic rivals.

Similarly, in the day to day struggles to defend working people's economic and social conditions, members of broad left parties should be willing to join hands with anyone willing to fight back. If they are members of social democracy they should be welcomed as this can only increase the strength and appeal of such campaigns.

How To Work in the Mass Organisations?

It is one thing to agree in principle that we must work in the mass movements but quite another to carry it out in an effective and positive fashion. Most importantly, we have to learn from past mistakes.

Separation from the mass movement: Repeated experience has shown that the continuing approach of most socialist groups in seeking to create separate revolutionary parties has failed. In attempting to do so, socialists mistakenly believe that they are emulating the experience of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution. However, they have forgotten that it was only through striving for and winning the majority in Russian social democracy that the Bolsheviks were able to win a decisive majority of the Russian workers and lead them to victory in 1917, a victory that for a time inspired socialists throughout the world. The opposite strategy of trying to create revolutionary socialist parties in opposition to the existing mass workers parties only ends up dividing the movement and separates socialist from the majority of the oppressed.

Entrism: In line with our positive approach towards active work in the existing mass organisations, we reject the tactic of "Entrism". This tactic is used by socialist groups who wish to operate inside a mass workers party with the aim of building up their own forces and then splitting away at a later stage in order to form what they think will be a mass revolutionary party. Entrism is inherently pessimistic in that it assumes that reformism will always dominate the existing mass workers parties and that the ideas of socialism cannot become the majority in them. We don't accept this defeatist view. Moreover, Entrism is a parasitic policy towards the workers parties that obviously can't be revealed to the members of the party without causing a hostile reaction, and therefore demands secrecy and denial. While Entrism is motivated by the desire to win more people to socialist ideas, in practice it inevitably becomes a self-interested and inward-looking approach towards the mass movement, and opens up those who practice it to charges of disloyalty and dishonesty.

Instead, we believe that where existing mass movements exist, what is needed is to help build up a large and well-organised democratic socialist wing within them, a wing that seeks to win a majority for its ideas and through that to assist working people to decisively transform society. This means working not as a short-term 'tactic' but in a long-term positive way within trade unions, community organisations, pressure groups and both the social democratic and broad left parties. It means seeking to democratise and

unify these mass organisations in the struggle for a new society. And where mass organisations do not yet exist and are necessary we should help to establish them.

United Fronts Within the Movement: An important part of regenerating the mass movement is the need to transform its programme, practice and leadership. Anyone who supports this goal should be encouraged to participate in a united front to change these mass organisations. Where such united fronts already exist they need to be strengthened. Where they don't exist, socialists should help in forming and building them. This is absolutely vital in the struggle for new policies and new leadership in the mass movement.

Creating Cadres: Most socialist groups demand that their members follow a single line. This is also applied to the orientation of their work in the movement. Thus one group will see it to their advantage to opt for work inside social democracy, another within a broad left party, while another for independent work outside all existing parties. Then at a later stage the leadership of such groups may decide they can gain more by switching their orientation. This is why they call such decisions 'tactical'. We reject such an unprincipled, inconsistent and sectarian approach to the organisations of working people. Quite apart from the damage such methods do to the mass organisations, they also damage the socialists who carry them out. Rather than creating cadres - thinking and creative activists - it is a recipe for creating 'followers' who are willing to be directed like pawns in a tactical political game.

Clearly, there are many divisions between socialists over where to work in the labour movement and society generally. There should be no problem in that. People need to work in the areas that interest and inspire them. The main thing is to be willing to participate in broad work in a non sectarian manner. We believe that a socialist movement should be there to serve its members, not the other way around. We should be seeking to help individual socialists work in the mass organisations of their choice, sharing advice, passing on skills, helping to co-ordinate and so on. Thus these comrades will become local leaders in their own right and the reach of socialist ideas and tactics will be that much greater. In this way we can be like thousands of small cogs turning the larger wheels of the broader movement and society generally.

Conclusion

To conclude, we in *The Socialist Network* believe that socialists need to be active wherever working people are. That means that we should work in all their organisations, including both social democratic and broad left parties, striving to democratise and energise them, uniting them together in a positive struggle to defend our conditions and extend them. In this we are only taking forward the natural instincts of working people for unity and effective action.

We believe that all sections of the mass movement require rebuilding and renewing on the basis of unity, democracy and struggle. Central to this, the labour movement needs to revive its historic mission to end capitalism and achieve the democratic socialist transformation of society. This mission cannot be just in words, but must become an integral part of its day-to-day thinking and practice.

To this end, *The Socialist Network* is prepared to cooperate with anybody who is willing to undertake this vital task of rebuilding and renewing the movement. We urge anyone who agrees with our general approach or wishes to discuss it in more detail, to get in touch and develop further discussions with us.

January 2014

(This Statement includes changes agreed at

The Socialist Network Conference

in London November 2013)