

Class politics and the “new anti-capitalism”

The success of the demonstration in Seattle against the World Trade Organisation in November-December 1999 in shutting down the World Trade Organisation Conference has inspired many thousands across the world. It has provided a focus and model for the beginnings of a new generation of radicals, disgusted by the arrogance of exultant big capital and free of the depression soaked into many of their elders by the defeats of the 1980s and the triumph of private-profit economics in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

Seattle and its sequels have helped galvanise some trade-union action, too. In Sydney, last month, unions responded to plans by the New South Wales state Labor government to cut workers' compensation for injuries on the job by organising a picket of Parliament to stop Labor MPs going in to vote for the plans. Blockades by anti-capitalist demonstrators outside the World Economic Forum in Melbourne last September, and outside stock exchanges this May, must have helped inspire this action.

Sober facts

But a realistic grasp of where we are, and how far we have yet to go, is a necessary part of orienting ourselves politically. It is not an excuse for dawdling or for sectarian abstention, but a precondition for making action solid effective.

A series of demonstrations, even good ones, to “shut down” the IMF, the World Bank, the G8, and so on, do not amount to a strategy, or a solid basis for an ongoing movement. And they certainly do not amount to a “new mood” right across the working class. The statistics for strikes, for

trade-union membership, and from the general election, are sober proof of that.

“Comrades, the revolution has begun!” So George Monbiot told the “Globalise Resistance” fringe meeting at the National Union of Students conference this spring, and the SWP there applauded him enthusiastically.

Even taking Monbiot's claim as a flourish, not to be interpreted too literally, it just is not true. To cheer for “revolution” in the hope of bringing it closer is not a Marxist approach, either.

Revolution?

If there is no revolution under way — and there isn't — then to pretend helps no-one. In fact it works against doing what can and must be done, in the same way that Engels meant when he criticised a socialist group in 1890 because it “looks down on everything that is not directly revolutionary (which means here in England as in your country [USA]: all who do not limit themselves to making phrases and otherwise doing nothing)...”

If revolution of some sort really were brewing, then the job of Marxists would be not to cheer for it but to fight for clarity on what sort of revolution, made by whom. In Portugal in 1974-5, when there really was revolutionary ferment, every windbag and opportunist was for “revolution”. The Socialist Party — the

main political prop of bourgeois power, as it turned out — called itself “revolutionary socialist”. The leader of the main liberal bourgeois party called himself a “Leninist”. The job of Marxists was to cut through the bluster and focus on the substance — independent working-class politics.

However important, inspiring and valuable the demonstrations, socialist revolution cannot emerge just from more and more demonstrations to “end this” and “shut down that”. Working-class revolutions are distinguished from all previous revolutions — where the people come out on the streets, and fight heroically, but have no means of systematically planning and collectively controlling the results — by mass organisation, preparation, and consciousness. The Marxist concept of socialist revolution is distinguished from anarchist and populist (all-the-people-together) concepts by its understanding of the centrality of independent working-

Can the unions rebuild working-class politics?

- Disaffiliation?
- “Shopping round”?
- Workers' representation

Discussion on how to go forward from the votes in FBU and UNISON, with activists from different unions

5.30pm, Sunday 8 July

Friends' International House, Byng Place, next to ULU.

● Meeting organised by Action for Solidarity. Room booked for “Welfare State Network”.

Workers' Liberty

Bulletin for the discussion at “Marxism 2001”, no.1.

class organisation, preparation and consciousness.

Setting the frame?

In International Socialism 90, John Rees writes: "Anti-capitalist movements are giving a particular coloration to every other movement of resistance against the system... Trade unionists are now being thrust into a politicised world..." But the sober fact is that the "new anti-capitalist" moods and mobilisations are nowhere near definite enough, and big enough, to define the "world" for trade unionists. They are in fact moods and mobilisations — encompassing a vast variety of groups, from the social-democratic/liberal petitioner across to the wildest direct-actionist, with many socialists or potential socialists as well — rather than a single movement with a cohesion sufficient to set the frame for trade unionists.

To think otherwise is to have our proportions all wrong. The workplaces, the trade unions, and the working-class neighbourhoods are the big picture, and the "anti-capitalist" moods and mobilisations a valuable leaven and source of activists — not vice versa. A real "new movement" — a revitalised workers' movement — will be built through painstaking activity in the workplaces and on the doorsteps, and through thorough discussion and education, not through any amount of loud-speakering about the "spirit of

Seattle".

Slogans like "Rebel! Resist! F**k capitalism!" or "Anti-capitalism: reform or revolution?" point not in a Marxist direction but towards a more militant version of anarchist and populist concepts. To focus on "destroy the IMF" or "smash the WTO" is to miss the point. Of course the IMF and the WTO are vile capitalist institutions. What else would they be, when their job is to coordinate the capitalist world market? But if they could somehow be separated off from the body of capitalism and "smashed" separately, it would get us no further forward. Either the big capitalist governments would set up replacements, different in detail but similar in essence. Or they would not — in which case capitalism would regress into a world of trade blocs and high trade barriers.

Tobin Tax

Alex Callinicos, in his SWP position paper on "The Anti-Capitalist Movement and the Revolutionary Left" claims the Tobin Tax movement in France, ATTAC, as the prime example worldwide, of a "more or less organised political milieu where a new left is beginning to take shape". But what sort of class demand is the Tobin Tax? This proposal for a small percentage tax on foreign-exchange transactions, made by the very mainstream US economist James Tobin, is certainly more welcome than calls for cuts in public-service spending, or increased indirect taxes on working-class consumers. We do not need to hector or denounce Tobin Tax supporters. We do need to formulate an independent assessment of the issue from a working-class viewpoint, rather than just throwing in every halfway impressive-looking manifestation of "anti-capitalism" as evidence for incipient revolutionary insurgency.

The Tobin Tax it is neither a realistic interim "quick-fix" — to be effective, it would have to be implemented by every major government in the world acting simultaneously, or else foreign-exchange business would simply move to sites without the tax — nor a step towards mobilising the working class against the bosses, nor a fundamental challenge to the privileges of capital.

If the working class were strong and coordinated enough worldwide

to enforce the Tobin Tax, then it would be strong and coordinated to focus on measures much more central to class relations — and it should do so.

Class axis

Anti-corporate feeling is a start. But it can have many meanings. "Global good, local good"? "Big bad, small good"? "Multinational bad, national good"? "European Union bad, nation-state not so bad"? Without sectarianism or pedantry, it is the job of Marxists to criticise, explain and argue. The real axis for progress is workers against capital, not "ordinary people" against "the multinationals". We are not against globalisation, or European integration, or a European single currency. We are for a workers' struggle for social levelling-up and political democracy across Europe, against the bosses' social levelling-down and bureaucracy. We are for workers' globalisation against capitalist globalisation.

Transitional demands along those lines might include: opening the books of the multinationals; information and veto powers for international shop stewards' committees over multinationals' investment plans; action by international shop stewards' committees to demand 'levelling up' of wages and conditions; aid from rich countries to poor ones under the control of workers' and community organisations in those countries, and along the lines of workers' reconstruction plans worked out by those organisations; taxing the rich in countries where industry is shutting down to finance workers' reconversion and reconstruction plans there; and so on. All these, and others, flow from a general approach of working for workers' control over social wealth, rather than petitioning the World Bank, IMF, WTO or whomever to act more charitably.

"In any case", as Lenin wrote in 1917, "the slogan of the moment on the eve of the new revolution, during it, and on the morrow of it, must be proletarian organisation". There is no substitute.

The future of the Socialist Alliance

An open platform for contributions from all the tendencies and viewpoints in the Alliance.

5.30pm,
Wednesday 11
July

"The Plough", Museum
Street (a short walk down
Gower Street).

● Meeting organised by Workers' Liberty