

# Understanding Left Reformism

John Molyneux



Alexis Tsipras of SYRIZA

There is something of a vogue for left reformism on the left at the moment. I stress ‘on the left’ because it couldn’t yet be described as a societal phenomenon, except with Syriza in Greece. It doesn’t generally proclaim itself as left reformism preferring to sail under such flags as ‘fresh thinking’, ‘rethinking the left’ and ‘left unity’. Nevertheless the trend is real and perceptible both in Ireland and internationally.

In Ireland the TDs, Clare Daly and Joan Collins, are trying to create a new political formation called United Left and there have just recently been two forums of the left in Dublin devoted to this sort of project: the first, organised by Daly and Collins, featured former Socialist Party member Roger Silverman who argued (a familiar theme this) against the way ‘Leninist/Trotskyist vanguards’ work in favour of a broad anti-capitalist coalition on the model of Marx’s First International; the second, organised by Look Left, was addressed by the American sociolo-

gist, Erik Olin Wright, who analysed the left historically, in terms of three tendencies - ‘ruptural’ (revolutionary), ‘interstitial’ (anarchist/utopian) and ‘symbiotic’ (reformist) - and called for them all to work together, although he was fairly dismissive of the revolutionary tendency.

In Britain, in recent months, Owen Jones (author, broadcaster and Left Labour Member), Nick Wrack (former Socialist Party, Socialist Alliance, and SWP member)<sup>1</sup> and Ken Loach (socialist film director, former Respect, etc.) have all issued calls for a new movement/party of the left. Here is Owen Jones:

Britain urgently needs a movement uniting all those desperate for a coherent alternative to the tragedy of austerity, inflicted on this country without any proper mandate.

What is missing in British politics is a broad network that unites progressive opponents of the Coalition. That means those in Labour who want a proper alternative to Tory austerity, Greens, independent lefties, but also those who would not otherwise identify as political, but who are furious and frustrated.<sup>2</sup>

And Ken Loach:

If the unions said we’re going to do what we did a century ago, we’re going to found

<sup>1</sup>For Nick Wrack’s version see <http://wigangreensocialists.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/lets-get-the-party-started/>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/british-politics-urgently-needs-a-new-force--a-movement-on-the-left-to-counter-capitalisms-crisis-8459099.html>

a party to represent the interests of labour, and we will only support candidates who will support policies of the left then we could start again. But we need a new movement and a new party. And it needs all the people on the left of the Labour party who've spent their life complaining about it to get out and start a new one, with the unions. It needs the unions because they have resources. If Unite, Unison, GMB, you know, said we've had enough... But they're like dogs, the more you kick them the more they creep back to master. And they actually need to wake up and say this is not going to happen, we're not going to reclaim the Labour party... The unions have got to cut the ties, start again, with everyone on the left, with all the campaigns, the NHS campaign, the housing campaign, the community services campaigns - everybody. And let's begin again, and then we could really move.<sup>3</sup>

And Ed Rooksby in *Why it's time to realign the left* has attempted a theoretical/strategic articulation of Loach's call. He writes:

The major difficulty in the traditional revolutionary approach, then, is in its rejection of the very idea of taking power within the political structures of capitalism. So neither the traditional reformist approach

nor the traditional revolutionary strategy seems adequate. We need, instead, a strategy that seeks to combine elements of both. In his book *The Dialectic of Change* the Russian theorist Boris Kagarlitsky seeks to elaborate just such an approach. Revolutionary transformation, he argues, can only emerge organically and dialectically from a process of radical reform set in motion by a socialist government. He calls this approach "revolutionary reformism". ... It is hard to see how the left in Europe can avoid the problem of taking power in a left government if it is serious about changing society.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere in Europe, there are a number of broadly similar political formations - Melenchon's Front de Gauche in France, the Danish Red-Green Alliance, the Left Bloc in Portugal, the United Left in Spain, Die Linke in Germany and, above all of course, Syriza in Greece.

In a sense, the reason for the emergence of this trend is very straightforward. We have had five years of deep capitalist crisis, the painful effects of which are being felt by working class people more or less everywhere. During this crisis, right wing and mainstream reformism has either openly collaborated with the ruling class in making working people pay (as with the Labour Party in Ireland and PASOK in Greece) or has been completely ineffectual in terms of mounting any resistance (Labour in Britain, the centre-left in Italy etc). At the same time the revolutionary

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<sup>3</sup><http://socialistresistance.org/4860/the-british-left-needs-to-start-againwe-need-a-new-party-ken-loach>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=12302>

left has nowhere succeeded in making a sufficient breakthrough to pose a credible alternative to more than a small minority of workers. In these circumstances a certain turn to left reformism is anything but surprising.

## Reformism and Left Reformism

To understand this phenomenon further, it is necessary to begin with a few remarks about reformism in general. Most of the time under capitalism, the consciousness of most working class people is reformist: they object to many of the effects of capitalism - this cut, this tax, this policy, this government etc - without rejecting the system as a whole. Alternatively, they dislike the system as a whole but do not believe they, i.e. the mass of working people, have the ability to change it. In either case, they look to someone else to do the job for them.

Corresponding to this reformist consciousness, there are reformist politicians, parties and organisations who step forward with the message that they are the ones who will deliver the desired change or changes on behalf of the masses. A distinction must, of course, be made between workers with reformist consciousness and leaders or organisations engaged in a reformist political project. With the former their 'reformism' tends to be relatively unformed and fluid; it can easily be a bridge to action (a campaign, trade union struggle, etc.) which in turn can lead to the development of revolutionary consciousness. With the latter, it is usually more coherent, more set against revolution, and cru-

cially is attached to various institutional and personal privileges (political career, parliamentary seat, trade union office etc.) which give its bearers a certain vested interest in the existing system.

Historically, the main political expression of reformism has been the Labour, social democratic and socialist parties originally associated with the Second (or Socialist) International, founded in 1889 and dominated by German Social Democracy (SPD), and usually closely linked to their respective national trade union bureaucracies.<sup>5</sup> The British Labour Party, the Irish Labour Party, the French Socialist Party, the Swedish Social Democratic Party, the Portuguese Socialist Party, and the Spanish Socialist Workers Party are all examples of this kind of party.

However, these are by no means the only political expressions of reformism<sup>6</sup>. Next in importance historically are the Communist Parties which started moving towards reformism in the Popular Front period of the mid-1930s and completed the journey in the post-war period and especially with what became known as Eurocommunism. But there are many other forms ranging from various reform campaigns and NGOs, to Green Parties, to some left nationalist parties. Sinn Fein in Ireland and the Scottish National Party both present themselves to the electorate as parties of reform and rest to some extent on reformist consciousness in the working class.

Reformism also, by its nature, covers a wide political spectrum from right to left. On its right flank (and usually confined to its top leaders) there is a wing of

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent analysis of the reformist role of the trade union bureaucracy see John Molyneux, 'Marxism and trade unionism', *Irish Marxist Review* 1. <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/5/>

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted in passing that the idea, sometimes canvassed on the left, that reformism has ceased or is ceasing to be a problem either because capitalism can no longer grant reforms or because the Social Democratic Parties have become pro-capitalist parties, is thoroughly mistaken. Reformism will be with us as long as we have capitalism.

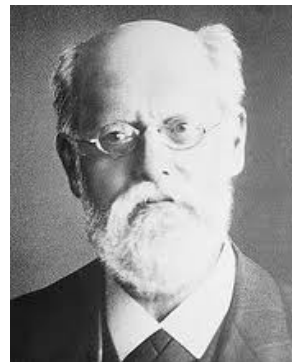
reformism which is closely linked to the ruling class and often accepted by it as a recognised ally. These leaders usually take some care to maintain a certain verbal distance between themselves and the main right wing capitalist parties (Tories, Christian Democrats etc) but it is a very thin line and, mostly, just for public consumption. Tony Blair is probably the outstanding recent example of this type but Eamon Gilmore and Pat Rabbitte also belong to this category. On the left flank of reformism there are both leaders and supporters who border on the revolutionary left and are willing, on particular issues and campaigns, to work with revolutionaries. For various historical reasons - primarily the role of republicanism and the Workers Party - the Irish Labour Party barely has a left-wing but in Britain Tony Benn, John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn are obvious examples.

There is seldom a clear boundary between right and left reformism with many intermediate stopping points and the journey from left (at the beginning of a political career) to right (as a position in government gets closer or is achieved) is a very familiar one: Eamon Gilmore, Harold Wilson, Lionel Jospin are examples. However, at the risk of being schematic, the distinction between right/moderate reformism and left reformism can be formulated as follows: right/moderate reformism more or less openly accepts and supports the continuation of capitalism, while presenting itself to working people as being able to improve it, and run it better - more in working class interests - than the party or parties of the rich; left reformism is anti-capitalist but suggests that capitalism can be changed or moved in a socialist direc-

tion by means of a series of 'strategic' reforms. Hence the key role in left reformist thinking of a 'Left Government' - to which I shall return.

## Marxism and Left Reformism

Historically, the main current of left reformism grew up alongside and to some extent within the Marxist movement. The parties of the Second International in the period 1889- 1914 were broad workers' parties which contained, nationally and internationally, a right wing, a left wing, and a centre. The right, such as Eduard Bernstein in Germany, Turati in Italy and the Fabians in Britain, were reformists. The left, Lenin and the Bolsheviks and Trotsky in Russia, Luxemburg and Liebknecht in Germany etc, were revolutionary socialists. Between these two poles was a large centre, led and epitomised by Kautsky in Germany, that often used the language of orthodox Marxism, but in practice always conciliated the right and focused on the gradual organisational and parliamentary accumulation of forces.<sup>7</sup>



Karl Kautsky

At first this was not well understood by almost any of the participants. Marx

<sup>7</sup>Because Kautsky and his followers stood in the centre of the SPD they, and the phenomenon they represented, became known in the Leninist-Trotskyist tradition as centrists. Centristism refers to political tendencies that vacillate between revolution and reformism but in practice most of the Kautskyites were left reformists.

and Engels themselves had barely written anything about organized reformism because, by and large, the phenomenon and its effects only started to emerge at the end of their lives and took clear shape only after their deaths (though Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in 1875, and his and Engels' 'Circular Letter' in 1879 show that they were picking up danger signals). Lenin and Luxemburg (and Plekhanov, Trotsky and others) came out clearly against Bernstein's open revisionism but, while Luxemburg sensed Kautsky's (and Bebel's) conservatism, none of the Marxist revolutionaries broke with him or with the rest of the left reformist Social Democrats, until 1914 and their support for the imperialist war.

When Lenin did break from Kautsky after August 1914 he carried out a root and branch critique of the Marxism of the Second International including its philosophy (in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, Vol .38 of his *Collected Works*), its economics, especially in *Imperialism - the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, and its politics in *The State and Revolution*.<sup>8</sup> In this last book, Lenin identified and emphasized that the key theoretical and practical distinction between left reformists and revolutionary Marxists on the question of the state was that the former aimed to take over and transform the existing state machine, hoping to use it for socialist or working class purposes whereas the latter, following Marx on the Paris Commune, held that the working class would not be able to use the existing capitalist state but would have to 'smash' it and replace it with its own, new workers' state. On the basis of the experience of

the Russian Revolution Lenin argued that this would be a state of workers' councils or 'soviets' (the Russian word for council).

...only workers' Soviets, and not parliament, can be the instrument whereby the aims of the proletariat will be achieved. And, of course, those who have failed to understand this up to now are inveterate reactionaries, even if they are the most highly educated people, most experienced politicians, most sincere Socialists, most erudite Marxists, and most honest citizens and family men.<sup>9</sup>

This point is of huge theoretical importance because it makes concrete in relation to the process of revolution the fundamental Marxist principle of working class self emancipation.<sup>10</sup> Strategies for the taking over of the existing state are, by their nature, ones in which the pre-eminent active role is played by parliamentary leaders, and other notables, who assume control of government ministries, the police, the armed forces etc., while the role of the masses is to provide support for this process at the top. Strategies for the smashing of the existing state are ones in which the workers themselves actually confront and defeat the state, city by city, town hall by town hall, police station by police station, and themselves create the new state workers' council by workers council.

Another theoretical implication is for the understanding of nationalisation and state ownership - always emphasised by

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<sup>8</sup> *The State and Revolution* was written in 1917 in the midst of the revolution but it is worth noting that its key ideas were already present in his notebooks of 1916. See V.I.Lenin, *Marxism on the State*, Moscow 1976.

<sup>9</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, Peking 1965, p.80. It should be noted that this is written in a book in which Lenin is arguing in favour of revolutionary participation in parliament.

<sup>10</sup> See James O'Toole, 'The principle of self emancipation', *Irish Marxist Review 2*, [www.irishmarxistreview.net](http://www.irishmarxistreview.net)

left reformists. Nationalisation by the capitalist state is not socialism but state capitalism. As Engels said in *Anti-Duhring*:

The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage-workers - proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with. It is rather brought to a head.<sup>11</sup>

But whether the goal is to take over or smash the capitalist state also has huge practical implications for socialists in the day-to-day struggle long before we arrive at a revolutionary situation. For example, it shapes our attitude to the police, the courts, and the armed forces. Our attitude to the police is not based on an assessment of the character of all, or most, individual cops, but on an understanding that this is a capitalist institution which our class will need to defeat and dismantle. Consequently, we do not call for the strengthening of the police or the state generally to deal, for example, with crime or anti-social behaviour.

Most importantly, it has implications for how socialists should organise. If the perspective is to take over the state machine, then the most obvious way to do that is to win a parliamentary majority at a general election - indeed it is the **only** way to do it short of some kind of revolutionary *coup d'état* which has zero

chance of succeeding in an advanced capitalist country. But winning a parliamentary majority clearly requires as broad a party as possible that is also compatible with a left programme i.e. it certainly requires a party that contains both reformists (albeit left reformists) and revolutionaries like the parties of the Second International and like Syriza today. This is especially the case given that it is highly unlikely that the majority of working class people will achieve fully revolutionary consciousness other than in and through a revolution.

If, on the other hand, the goal is to smash the state then what is needed is a revolutionary combat party capable of acting in a decisive way to lead the masses in an insurrection. This cannot be done by a party that is fifty-fifty, or some other balance, of reformist and revolutionary since the reformist wing would be able to paralyse the party at the crucial moment and prevent it taking decisive action.

Lenin said, 'Political questions cannot be mechanically separated from organisational ones and anybody who accepts or rejects the Bolshevik party organisation independently of whether or not we live at a time of proletarian revolution has completely misunderstood it'<sup>12</sup>. With equal truth, we can say that the question of what form party organisation should take cannot be separated from our understanding of the nature of the capitalist state. (It is important to grasp this connection because some people on the left are currently rejecting 'Leninist' organisation as if it were simply an organisational question, without considering its relationship to the tasks of socialists in relation to the state.)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, quoted in G. Lukacs, *Lenin A Study on the Unity in his Thought*, London 1970, p.26.

## A Government of the Left?

As we have noted, the question of a 'left government' is of central importance for the left reformist project. For most left reformists it is seen the principle means of achieving their political goals and as such tends to become the overriding priority to which most day-to-day political activity and campaigning is subordinate. However, pinning down what exactly defines a 'left government' is by no means straightforward and left reformists themselves would generally prefer the matter to remain rather fuzzy. It is easier to say what a left government is not.

It is not a typical social democratic or Labour government of the kind which has become extremely familiar in Europe over the last fifty years or so; it is not a Blair- Brown British Labour government, or a Francois Hollande French socialist government, or PASOK in Greece or Gerhard Schröder SPD government or an Irish Labour government (should such a thing come to pass). It is not, in other words, a pro- free market, pro- US, pro-imperialist business-as-usual government with perhaps a slight inflection towards moderate Keynesianism and the welfare state. Nor, obviously, is it full blown workers' power with the takeover of banks and major corporations under workers' control, directly initiating the abolition of capitalism and the transition to socialism. It is somewhere in between.

At a minimum a left government is one that, while operating within a capitalist framework, would nevertheless govern against the capitalist grain; i.e. it would implement a series of reforms to which the capitalist class would be opposed and which would benefit working class people and the oppressed and it would fairly consistently try to defend working class people and attacks on their living standards em-

anating from the system. It would also be a reasonable minimum expectation of such a government that its foreign policy, if not based on militant anti-imperialism and socialist internationalism, would at least refrain from outright support for and collusion with imperialism and imperialist wars.

At the higher end of the scale, a left government would be one that does the above *and* seriously attempts to erode capitalist power by, for example, gradually bringing ever greater sections of the economy into public ownership and, crucially, initiating more democratic forms of management and beginning the process of bringing the state apparatuses (police, army etc.) under democratic control. In foreign policy, it would not only shun direct collusion with imperialism but also actively support and build alliances with anti-imperialist liberation movements and anti-war movements internationally. In this way, such a government might prepare the ground for or 'open the way' to a thorough socialist transformation of society after, say, a five or ten year period and a fresh mandate from the electorate.

The key question is, of course, is such a government possible? It is not so much whether or not it could be elected - clearly, in certain circumstances it could - Syriza could easily be elected in Greece - but whether or not it would be able to govern in an 'anti-capitalist' way in either the weaker or the stronger sense of the term?

## The historical experience

Ireland has never had a left government; however, there exists a considerable international experience on which we can draw and from which we can learn.

One of the administrations most frequently cited as an example of what can be achieved by a left government is the British Labour Government of 1945-51 un-

der Clement Attlee. Left reformists, like Tony Benn, have always pointed to the Attlee government as epitomising the 'old Labour' to which they wanted to return and recently the socialist film director, Ken Loach, has released *The Spirit of 45* - a film devoted to evoking and celebrating that moment in British history - to coincide with his call for the formation of a new left wing party to resist the current Tory Government's massive onslaught on the welfare state. What earned this government its reputation on the left was its development of the welfare state, above all the creation of the National Health Service, and its substantial programme of nationalisation.

The 1945 Government did not start the British welfare state from nothing - its origins go back to the Liberal Government of 1906-14 which brought in old age pensions, unemployment and health insurance - but the three acts it introduced in 1946 (the National Health Act, and two National Insurance Acts) and the National Assistance Act of 1948 were reforms of major importance. There is no gainsaying the fact that these measures, and especially the establishment of the NHS - free to all at the point of provision - made for a significant improvement in the lives of British working class people.

In terms of public ownership, 1946 saw the nationalisation of the mines with the formation of the National Coal Board and the nationalisation of the Bank of England. This was followed, in 1947, by the establishment of the Central Electricity Generating Board and in 1948 with the nationalisation of the railways, inland water transport, some road haulage and road passenger transport plus Thomas Cook & Son under the British Transport Commission. In 1949, the UK gas industry was national-

ized and 1,062 privately owned and municipal gas companies were merged into twelve area gas boards and, in 1951, the government nationalized the Iron and Steel industry.

To these achievements it should be added that these were years of more or less full employment (unemployment never rose above 3%) and consistently rising living standards (by about 10% per year). Moreover, between August 1945 and December 1951, over a million new homes were completed in England, Scotland, and Wales.

Clearly this is impressive but when one looks at the overall record of the government the picture is less rosy, especially when it is viewed in its wider historical context. First of all it is clear that the Attlee government in no way 'opened the road' to socialism in that it was followed by 13 years of Tory rule in which capitalism enjoyed the largest boom in its history, without any wholesale reversal of Labour's policies. This was possible because the nationalization carried out by the government was state capitalist not socialist nationalization. It was the taking over of a segment of the productive forces by the existing capitalist state with no element of workers' control or workers' power involved. As Engels put it:

The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The work-

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<sup>13</sup> F.Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>



ers remain wage-workers proletarians.<sup>13</sup>

And as far as the capitalist state was concerned, the government touched not a hair on its head. There was not a hint of abolishing or even reforming the anti-democratic House of Lords or the monarchy - no question of anything but complete 'loyalty' to 'King and Country'. However the government had no qualms about using this state against workers' taking industrial action.

Striking dockers, gas workers, miners and lorry drivers were denounced, spied upon and prosecuted. Two States of Emergency were proclaimed against them and two more were narrowly averted. Above all, the government used black-legs against these strikes... On 18 different occasions between 1945 and 1951, the government sent troops, sometimes 20,000 of them, across picket lines to take over strikers' jobs.<sup>14</sup>

Also, in terms of its foreign policy, the government was thoroughly reactionary and imperialist. It deployed troops in Greece to crush the Greek resistance, waged a brutal war of counter-insurgency in Malaysia, used British troops to help restore French colonial rule in Vietnam, reinforced British rule and the Orange supremacy in Northern Ireland, backed the formation of Zionist Israel, crushed a general strike in Kenya, and supported the South African annexation of Namibia. It also sided unequivocally with the US in the cold war, manufactured the atom bomb and joined NATO in 1949.

This unusual mixture of reforms that benefited working people with strike-breaking and support for imperialism was the product of an exceptional combination of circumstances. On the one hand the government won a landslide election victory on the basis of a wide radicalization among working people during the war, but because the war had popular support it was a relatively passive radicalization that took the form of voting Labour rather than the form of mass strikes, anti-government demonstrations, anti-war mutinies and so on. On the other hand, the government coincided with a period of full employment (established during the war) and the beginning of the post-war economic boom. This made the ruling class willing and able to make concessions (allow reforms) and to go along with a Keynesian economic policy and a degree of state capitalism (nationalization). Here it is crucial to grasp: a) that the boom and the full employment were not the result of Labour's economic policy or wisdom, rather it was international capitalist expansion created by the war and maintained after the war by the permanent arms economy; b) that this particular combination of circumstances is highly unlikely to recur, especially in Europe at the present time. There are, however, certain parallels with the Hugo Chavez government in Venezuela. The legacy of Chavez is discussed elsewhere in this journal by Peadar O'Grady so I will make only very brief comments here. Like the Atlee government that of Chavez was able to achieve a number of significant reforms. Under Chavez unemployment fell from 14.5% in 1999 to 7.8% in 2011, the percentage living in poverty fell from 62.1 to 31.9, child malnutrition fell from 4.7% to 2.9%, Social spending rose from 11.3% of GDP to 22.8%, enrollment in secondary edu-

<sup>14</sup>Geoff Ellen, 'Labour and strike-breaking, 1945-51,' *International Socialism* 24, Summer 1984, p.45

<sup>15</sup>Figures from *Links, International Journal of Socialist Renewal* <http://links.org.au/node/3246>

cation went from 44% to 73.3% and the number of Venezuelans with pensions rose from 500,000 to 2 million.<sup>15</sup> An impressive record. At the same, as with Labour in 1945-51, the apparatus of the capitalist state has been left intact and, after thirteen years in power, there has been no assault on the wealth or economic position of the Venezuelan capitalist class. As Owen Jones, in a pro-Chavez article, has observed, 'Venezuela's oligarchs froth at the mouth with their hatred of Chavez, but the truth is his government has barely touched them. The top rate of tax is just 34 per cent, and tax evasion is rampant.'<sup>16</sup> Nor is this about to change. President Nicolas Maduro, Chavez's successor, has recently called for 'more foreign investment and a better relationship with the business community.'<sup>17</sup> What has made possible this combination of substantial reform without an assault on the power of capitalism was the boom in the Venezuelan economy and massive oil revenues - an average growth in GDP of about 4% in the Chavez years. Here again, there is a parallel with Labour in 1945-51 and the post-war economic boom. Thus what has been achieved in Venezuela is not an 'opening of the way' to socialism but a reformed capitalism with better conditions for the workers and without a revolutionary mobilization of the working class from below those gains may well be eroded in the years to come, especially if the economic boom comes to an end.

Unfortunately the outcomes of three other left governments in the 20th century were much worse.

#### The Spanish Popular Front government

<sup>16</sup>Owen Jones, 'Hugo Chavez proves you can lead a progressive, popular government that says no to neo-liberalism' *The Independent*, Monday 8 October 2012.

<sup>17</sup><http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/8858>

<sup>18</sup>Franco launched his coup from Morocco and 80,000 Moroccan troops fought on his side. If the Republic had made Morocco independent this would have hugely weakened the fascists. See Andy Durgan, *The Spanish Civil War*, New York 2007, p.33.

took office on 16 February 1936, as a result of its general election victory. This took place on the basis of six years of intense class struggle which include the overthrow of the Spanish monarchy in 1931 and the uprising of the Asturian miners in 1934 (brutally crushed by General Franco with 5000 deaths). The Popular Front comprised two liberal (bourgeois) Republican parties, the Spanish Socialist Party (a far left Social Democratic party), the Spanish Communist Party, a section of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT and the formerly Trotskyist and avowedly revolutionary Marxist, POUM. In July 1936 the Spanish ruling class reacted by backing a Fascist coup led by Franco. The coup succeeded in about half of Spain, while in the other half it was resisted by mass workers action from below with the workers effectively taking power in Barcelona and elsewhere. The country was thus split in two and the Spanish Civil War began. The Popular Front government played a lamentable role in this titanic struggle. In such circumstances there was no possibility of a gradual programme of progressive reforms. The need to win the war - literally a matter of life or death for all on the left - dominated everything. But how to win it - that was the central question. In purely military terms, Franco's forces, massively armed and assisted by Hitler and Mussolini, inevitably had the advantage. On the side of the Republic, lay the revolutionary enthusiasm and heroism of the masses and the possibility of undermining Franco behind his own lines by revolutionary measures such as land seizures and factory occupations

and granting independence to Morocco.<sup>18</sup> In the event, the government did none of these things, indeed it positively opposed. Obviously the bourgeois republican parties would not countenance inroads on capitalist property and the capitalist state. But neither would the Communist Party; its line, and the line of CPs internationally - on orders from Moscow - was that in order to win the war the broadest possible unity was required, including unity with 'democratic' capitalist parties and even the British and French governments and that therefore the spontaneous workers' revolution that had developed in Barcelona and elsewhere had to be first restrained and then liquidated. To enforce this policy GPU agents and methods were imported into Spain with the consequent murder of POUM leader, Andreu Nin, and others<sup>19</sup>. This strategy proved disastrous. Unsurprisingly, no support was forthcoming from Britain or France, while the working class and revolutionary forces were demobilized and demoralized. As a result the fascist victory, which came in 1939, was more or less inevitable. The fascists took the most terrible revenge on their opponents with approximately 200,000 loyalists being executed and Franco maintained his dictatorship until his death in 1975.

Running parallel to the terrible events in Spain was the Popular Front government in France. If its outcome was not as immediately catastrophic it was nonetheless deeply disappointing. The French Popular Front was an alliance between the Communists, the Socialists and the mainstream Radical Party. It took office in May 1936, headed by Socialist leader, Leon Blum, in a landslide victory on the basis of a mass anti-fascist upsurge and a rising tide of strikes.

The French working class responded to

the Popular Front election victory with a massive wave of strikes and factory occupations which produced a near revolutionary situation. In June 1936 there were nearly 9,000 occupied workplaces! The reaction of the government of the left and its supporters - the decisive role was played by the Communist Party- was to offer concessions so as to bring the strikes to an end as soon as possible. The concessions were considerable: pay rises of 7 to 15%, a 40 hour week (reduced from 48), two weeks paid holidays, and recognition of collective bargaining. However they fell far short of any structural or strategic change to the system and it is important to remember that these reforms were rung *from* the government *by* workers' action from below not pushed through by the government at the top.

Over the next couple of years the combination of serious inflation and the economic policies of the government rapidly eroded many of the workers' gains. By mid-1937, the Popular Front government had started to disintegrate, without any substantial working class fight back- both the Socialist and the Communist Parties actively opposed resistance to the 'People's' government, and in November 1938 the Popular Front experiment came to an ignominious end. Within two years the Nazis were in Paris and the French parliament had voted for Vichy and collaboration.

A third example of a Popular Front government is Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile 1970-73. Popular Unity resembled the Popular Fronts of the thirties in that its core consisted of an alliance between the CP and the Socialist Party (Allende was from the SP) with liberal Radicals. In office, Allende and Popular Unity pursued policies of limited na-

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<sup>19</sup> 'Nearly 4000 anti-fascists are known to have been imprisoned in Catalonia up until the end of the war. Most were CNT members.' Andy Durgan, as above, p. 99.

tionalization, social reform and Keynesian economic expansion. They did not, however, challenge the Chilean state apparatus or military, hoping instead to win their support or at least to neutralize them. For a year or so the government's economic strategy seemed to be working - the economy grew and working class living standards were raised - but, in 1972, Chile went into economic crisis and experienced raging inflation. The Chilean working class responded to this with mass resistance in the form of major strikes and demonstrations and the organization of cordones (industrial coordinating networks) which were embryonic workers' councils, combined with demands that the pace of change should be speeded up. At the same time, the right increased their mobilization against the movement and the government and began preparations for a coup. Allende temporized, with the Chilean CP proving to be one of the most cautious elements in the UP coalition. 1973 saw two unsuccessful coup attempts but Allende still would not break with the military, or arm the workers. On 11 September the infamous General Pinochet<sup>19</sup>, with the backing of the US, staged a successful coup which claimed the lives of Allende himself and 30,000 Chileans, establishing a brutal<sup>20</sup> military dictatorship which ruled Chile for seventeen years.

## A Balance Sheet

This by no means exhausts the list of 'left governments' (others that could be considered include Hungary in 1919, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and Evo Morales in Bolivia, and perhaps many more) but enough examples have been presented to draw up a certain balance sheet. The first point that has to be made is that in none of

these examples, nor in any other instance, did left reformism succeed in 'opening the way to socialism' or initiating any transition to a post-capitalist society. Nor indeed could any of these governments be said to have launched a serious assault, successful or otherwise, on the institutional power of the capitalist class or its state. The most that has been achieved by any of these governments is a series of social reforms which improved the living standards of working class people within capitalism and that was only possible in very favourable economic circumstances, as in post 1945 Britain, Venezuela's oil boom, and Chile 1970-1. In circumstances of economic crisis - in Europe of the 1930s and Chile in 1972-3 - even these limited reforms were unacceptable to their respective ruling classes which were able to use their economic and political power, especially their power in the state machine, to undermine and destroy the left government.

There is, however, a notable exception to this depressing historical record - the Provisional Government that ruled Russia between February and October 1917. Because of its peculiar fate it not usually thought of in retrospect as a 'left government' but it was very much thought of as that at the time. It was brought to power by a great popular revolution from below which overthrew Tsarism and comprised a coalition of Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), non-party leftists and bourgeois liberals (the Cadets). The leaders of the Provisional government did not make the revolution but they had all been long standing opponents of Tsarism and, initially, had mass popular support - including, until Lenin's return from exile in April, from the Bolsheviks. Moreover, the 'left' character of the government seemed reinforced when Alexander Kerensky, a

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<sup>20</sup>It is a bitter irony that Pinochet was promoted to Commander in Chief of the Chilean Army by Allende on 23 August, just two weeks prior to the coup.

member of the Socialist Revolutionaries, succeeded Prince Lvov as Prime Minister in July 1917.

Immediately, on foot of the February insurrection the Provisional Government proclaimed a series of important reforms such as an amnesty for all political prisoners, freedom of speech, of the press and of assembly, abolition of hereditary privileges and local government on the basis of universal suffrage. But these reforms, like the workers gains in France in 1936, were really won by the masses in the revolution, than handed down from above. Thereafter, the Provisional government achieved little, remaining locked into the disastrous World War and unable to implement even its own minimum programme of convening a Constituent Assembly or granting land to the peasants.

What distinguished the Provisional Government from other left governments was neither its achievements nor its lack of them but the fact that, in October 1917, it was overthrown from the left in a socialist revolution. Had this not happened there is little doubt that the Provisional Government would have met the fate of the Chilean or Spanish Popular Fronts. The counter revolution made an attempt at a coup under the leadership of General Kornilov in August 1917 and it was the Bolsheviks not the government itself that played the key role in defeating it. It is overwhelmingly likely that the Tsarist generals, given time to regroup, would have struck again, perhaps successfully. Trotsky used to say that without the October Revolution fascism would have carried a Russian not an Italian name. But what

made October possible was the existence of the Bolsheviks as an independent revolutionary party which had been built in the years running up to the revolution.

## Revolutionaries and left reformism

Marxists are revolutionaries not because they are impatient or prefer revolution to gradual reform but because both theory and experience demonstrate that the road of reform does not work. As Marx put it in *The German Ideology*, 'revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.'<sup>21</sup>

This does not mean, however, that we can simply adopt a negative attitude to the phenomenon of reformism in general or left reformism in particular. Rather, we have to be both for it and against it, support it and criticize it, work with it and independently of it, at the same time - with different emphases at different points in the struggle.

Marx and Engels supported the formation and development of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) but criticized the *Gotha Programme* on which it was founded<sup>22</sup> and warned against early tendencies to reformism in their 'Circular Letter' to SPD leaders.<sup>23</sup> Rosa Luxemburg worked within the SPD until 1915 but polemicized fiercely against the revisionist (reformist) Eduard Bernstein in her 1900 book *Social Reform or Revolution*<sup>24</sup>,

<sup>21</sup> K.Marx, *The German Ideology*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#d4>

<sup>22</sup>K.Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>

<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/index.htm>

opposed Karl Kautsky and the SPD union leaders over the mass strike and denounced the party as a whole as ‘a stinking corpse’ for its support for imperialist war.

The Bolsheviks worked with the Mensheviks in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) after the split of 1903 but maintained their separate faction until it developed into a fully independent party from 1912 onwards. At the beginning of the Comintern Lenin argued first for breaking from the reformist Second International and the formation of independent revolutionary communist parties and then for supporting the reformist parties against the right in elections and finally for a united front with the reformists in defence of basic working class interests. Trotsky continued this approach in the 1930s, especially in relation to the fight against fascism. In the development of the International Socialist Tendency in Britain in the 1950s and 60s the forerunners of the SWP worked inside the Labour Party to gain an initial audience but then organized separately as soon as an audience for revolutionary politics emerged to the left of Labour. They continued to support Labour (‘without illusions’) against the Tories in elections and also supported the Labour Lefts (Tony Benn etc.) against the Labour Right. When the possibility of developing a left alternative to Labour at the ballot box opened up the SWP worked with left reformists, such as George Galloway, to try to build it, but without giving up its critique of bourgeois democracy or electoralism.

Today, internationally and in Ireland,

we need to continue this dialectical approach. Whenever the radicalization of working people expresses itself in a move from the right, or from mainstream reformism, to left reformism, as with Syriza or the Front de Gauche, we welcome and encourage it. But when that left reformism is counter-posed to building revolutionary organisation we criticize it. When workers vote for candidates of the ULA rather than Labour (or Sinn Fein) we are delighted but if we are asked to dissolve our organization or hide our distinctive revolutionary politics we decline.

We work with other working people and other reformist political forces in campaigns in defence of working class interests. We support the left against the right or far left against the moderate left in the trade unions - Jimmy Kelly versus Jack O’Connor, Jerry Hicks versus Len McCluskey - but retain our understanding that the most important division in the unions is between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy.<sup>25</sup> We would support the formation of a ‘government of the left’ but we would not join it, i.e. we would vote for it or transfer to it as appropriate and our elected representatives would sustain it against the right in the Dáil. But we would not assume responsibility for it or be bound by it or vote with it if introduced cuts or other anti-working class measures. And at no point in the whole process should we abandon the Marxist critique of the left reformist perspective or the project of building a revolutionary party.

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<sup>25</sup> See John Molyneux, ‘Marxism and Trade Unionism’, as above.