

# Dual Power and Vanguard Parties

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The year 1995 saw the publication of *Beyond Capital* by Istvan Meszaros. This book of nearly one thousand pages undoubtedly contains much interesting and useful information and ideas. One of its positive aspects is that it shows that capitalism has entered into what Meszaros terms a 'structural crisis'. This implies that capitalism has entered a phase in which, economically, it has no room for manoeuvre. We are left with chronic unemployment, immense armaments budgets and severe damage to the environment. Further, in capitalism's 'structural crisis' the only way out for the working class is to turn defensive struggles into offensive ones in order to overthrow the world capitalist system.

Istvan Meszaros is not a Trotskyist (he himself can of course hardly be blamed for this). This finds its reflection in several ways. For example, he fails to comment on Trotsky's attempt to build the Fourth International. He clearly does not agree with the basic Trotskyist thesis that the crisis of humanity is reduced to a crisis of proletarian leadership. He does not understand the significance of the dual power situations which have been and are inherent in twentieth century capitalism.

Cde C.Slaughter has written a review of *Beyond Capital* in *Workers International Press* (June 1997). This is mainly centred on the important Chapter 18, 'The Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive'. It is in the context of cde Slaughter's review that this article has been written.

In relation to revolution the position of Meszaros is clear. He maintains that a socialist revolution can take place only if a state of 'mass communist consciousness' is reached in society. Thus cde Slaughter writes: 'How ... is it possible ... to combine effective resistance [to attacks made on the working class] with that of "mass communist consciousness" (Meszaros p.695, quoting Marx) which is necessary if the bankrupt system of capital's rule is to be ended?' (WIP June 1997 p.9. Slaughter's note on Meszaros and Marx). Further: 'Meszaros shows that Marx's project of fighting for the necessary socialist (communist) consciousness takes the only feasible form of self-developing common action' (p.9). It is clear from the context that the phrase 'self-developing common action' does not refer to the revolutionary seizure of power. It is important to realise that Marx's term 'mass communist consciousness' is used by Marx in a sense completely different to that of Meszaros. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels wrote that a revolution was necessary if the working class were to become fit to rule. Thus:

Both for the production on a mass scale of ... commu-

nist consciousness; and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; the 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 (MECW, Vol 5, pp52-3).

This makes it quite clear that, for Marx and Engels, only by going through a revolution could the working class rid itself of 'all the muck of ages' and thus bring about a 'mass communist consciousness'. In this day and age, of course, such a revolution must of necessity be a world revolution.

The contrast is striking. For Marx and Engels, mass communist consciousness arises as a result of revolution. For Meszaros mass communist consciousness is a pre-condition for revolution. Meszaros is therefore quite mistaken in asserting that he has taken over and is using a basic idea of Marx and Engels.

It is necessary to spell out one of the basic lessons learned by world Trotskyism and embodied in its theoretical arsenal. This is that, in the period of capitalism's death agony, the working class, time after time and in country after country, has risen up and has created dual power situations. This of course happened in 1917, when the dual power situation was resolved in favour of the working class by the leadership given by the vanguard party led by Lenin. However, on all other occasions the working class has been unable to take state power due to the absence of such a party.

It would be appropriate to consider some examples of past dual power situations. The most recent example is that afforded by the massive general strike in South Korea in 1997. Perhaps the best-known was that of France in 1968, when the greatest general strike in history, involving ten million workers, took place. In the absence of a vanguard party the Stalinists were able to stifle the revolution on behalf of the ruling class. In Iran in 1979, for a four-month period preceding the overthrow of the Shah, four and a half million workers not only went on strike but occupied and ran the factories. However, there was no vanguard party capable of rallying the workers against the takeover by the clergy. In 1985 there was a general strike in Denmark. No less than one million workers were involved. This was out of a total population of five million. In other

words one in five of the whole population was involved. Here again the threat to capitalist rule fizzled out due to the lack of a revolutionary vanguard. The final example given here is that of Bolivia in early 1996. In *Workers Press* (20/7/96) it was reported that a general strike and uprising took place, with students in one city disbanding the police and setting up a new, revolutionary police. But instead of mobilising the working class and its allies to take power the leaders of the COB (the Bolivian TUC) ordered two hundred leading trade unionists to go on hunger strike. Here once again a vanguard party was lacking.

With such dual power situations (and many more have occurred) in mind it is easy to see the correctness of Trotsky's statement that: 'All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet ripened for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only ripened; they have begun to get somewhat rotten ... The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership' (*Transitional Programme*).

It is now possible to say that, generally speaking, the general rule of revolution (exceptions to the rule are of course a possibility) at the present time is that the working class will, through its own self-movement, rise up and thereby create a dual power situation. But, as in 1917, the dictatorship of the proletariat can only ensue if a vanguard party is on hand to resolve the crisis of leadership and thus to lead the working class to power.

The question of dual power needs to be considered more closely. The first point to be made is that movements that develop into dual power situations are not usually started by those who intend to create such situations. Indeed, such ideas are often very far from the minds of those who start off the process. The opposite can be the case. For example, a section of workers can agree, in principle, with the operation of a government-inspired wage freeze. However, since they themselves find it difficult to live on their existing wages, they consider themselves to be exceptions to the general rule and go on strike. Their example may be followed by other sections of the class and the whole process may snowball. Eventually, independently of the intentions of the workers, a position may be reached at which a movement develops which objectively poses the question of power. Since all thought reflects material reality, such a large movement finds its reflection in the minds of workers in such a way that they feel, often for the first time, the basic strength of the working class as a class. In such a situation workers become prone to consider the policies of a vanguard Marxist party and to accept its leadership. A proletarian revolution can then follow.

It needs to be stressed that the working class, however militant its struggles may be, can never spontaneously see the necessity of smashing the capitalist state machine, replacing it with the dictatorship of the proletariat and with a workers' government pledged to Lenin's strategy of

world revolution. Such knowledge can only be supplied by a Marxist vanguard party.

To look at the matter in another way, it is a general Marxist principle that the working class acts first and then, afterwards, thinks about what it has done. In contrast to this, a vanguard Marxist party, which can consist only of a minority of workers and others, can anticipate dual power situations and prepare for them accordingly. Trotsky remarks somewhere that Marxism is a science of perspectives. A genuine Marxist party must therefore have a perspective of its intervention in objectively-developing dual power situations. Here it would be opportune to quote Trotsky's definition of scientific socialism (Marxism):

Scientific socialism is the conscious expression of the unconscious historical process; namely, the instinctive and elemental drive of the proletariat to reconstruct society on communist beginnings (*In Defence of Marxism*, New Park p.129).

The above definition is worth considering. Clearly one aspect of the class struggle which Trotsky must have had in mind when he wrote these lines was that of dual power situations. For it is 'the unconscious historical process' involving 'the instinctive and elemental drive of the proletariat' that shows its strength during dual power situations, whilst it is the 'conscious expression of unconscious processes' that forms the content of the policies of the vanguard party as it strives to resolve the crisis of leadership.

It is indeed unfortunate that the crucial question of dual power receives little attention either in the one thousand page book of Meszaros or indeed in cde Slaughter's review of it. The same is true of the latter's pamphlet, *A New Party for Socialism*.

The failure of Meszaros to emphasise the vital importance of dual power situations is further reflected in cde Slaughter's review. Thus he writes: "self-developing common action" ... will ripen and bear fruit in socialist revolution only insofar as the mass of people learn in their own experience ... that they themselves must take on the task of reconstructing society on new foundations' (WIP June 1997 p.9). Here it needs to be re-emphasised that the working class itself, however militant it may be, will never spontaneously acquire the knowledge that it is necessary to smash the capitalist state, replace it with the dictatorship of the proletariat and follow a strategy of world revolution. This is surely shown by the lessons of past dual power situations. In France in 1968 the workers who objectively posed the question of power certainly had not learned 'in their own experience ... that they themselves must take on the task of reconstructing society on new foundations'. Indeed, after they had been betrayed, a large proportion of workers still continued in their belief in a parliamentary transition to socialism and in socialism in single countries. In Denmark, the period following the dual power situation in 1985 showed no sign that the workers had learned 'in their experience' that they 'must take on the



task of reconstructing society'. The same can no doubt be said of the periods following the revolutionary situations in Bolivia in 1996 and South Korea in 1997. Also in the periods following the many other dual power situations that have arisen since 1917 and which have ended in failure.

Here it needs to be remarked that if the 'mass of people' can learn 'in their own experience' that a socialist revolution is necessary, and if indeed it is possible for the working class to achieve a 'mass communist consciousness' before a revolution, then the question of providing a Marxist leadership for the working class does not arise, or is at least relegated to a question of secondary importance.

The above-quoted view of Meszaros, namely that 'the mass of people [will] learn in their own experience that they themselves must take on the task of reconstructing society' clearly contradicts the decades-long Trotskyist position that the contradictions of capitalism frequently give rise to dual power situations which, due to the absence of vanguard parties, fail to lead to revolution. It is therefore both surprising and perplexing that cde Slaughter fails to subject the position of Meszaros to critical comment.

A further aspect of the position of Meszaros needs to be considered. This is his insistence that the allegedly necessary 'mass communist consciousness' can be obtained only through 'an inherently pluralist movement' (p.9). It has to be stated that the lessons of the twentieth century is that dual power situations have failed to result in working class power, not because there was a lack of 'inherently pluralist' movements but because of a lack of vanguard parties. It is hard to see, for example, how the French dual power situation of 1968 could have resulted in socialist revolution if there had been an 'inherently pluralist movement' rather than a vanguard party.

Of course it is perfectly permissible for Trotskyists to call for and work for a pluralist movement, such as the MFS in Britain. But such a movement can, by itself, be no substitute for a vanguard party. Indeed, the real importance of pluralist movements is that they can provide a recruiting ground for the vanguard party. Thus it is essential for organisations like the MFS to contain within it a Trotskyist nucleus which can develop into a vanguard party. The Trotskyist nucleus of course has to face many tasks. Not least of these is that of developing itself theoretically through a consistent fight against those other parties and groups whose policies would lead the working class to disaster. Examples of these include the SWP (Britain), the SWP (USA), the Lambertists and the French organisation Lutte Ouvriere (which received 1.6 million votes in 1965). It may be concluded that for Trotskyists the only true criterion for the establishment of pluralist movements is that of whether or not it leads to the building of a vanguard party.

Brief mention should be made of the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the effect this has on dual power

situations. The first point to be made is that the betrayals of the working class in dual power situations by Stalinists is now, to say the least, much more difficult. Indeed, it makes the task of vanguard parties easier. However, the Stalinist collapse does not in any way mean that workers in struggle will spontaneously understand the need to smash the capitalist state machine, establish a proletarian dictatorship and so on. In dual power situations all sorts of revisionist elements and trade union bureaucrats will come forward in an attempt to hold the working class back from revolution and these will have to be combatted by the vanguard party.

A brief contrast between the Meszaros approach and the Trotskyist approach is now possible. The Meszaros approach: First, the building of an 'inherently pluralist movement' then, through this, a 'mass communist consciousness'. Then this will lead to revolution. The Trotskyist approach: The building of vanguard parties. Intervention of vanguard parties in dual power situations leading to revolution.

To summarise some of the main points made above:

- 1) Contemporary history is characterised by a series of dual power situations.
- 2) In dual power situations the working class will objectively pose the question of power.
- 3) The intervention of a vanguard party is necessary to transform a dual power situation into a revolution.
- 4) Pluralist movements cannot in themselves resolve the crisis of leadership. However, they may be used as a recruiting ground for the vanguard party.
- 5) 'Mass communist consciousness' arises as a result of the working class going through a revolution. It cannot be regarded as a pre-condition for proletarian revolution.
- 6) The 'mass of people' may learn 'in their own experience' that change is needed. This will of course make them receptive to Marxist leadership. But they will never spontaneously learn what has to be done. It is the task of the vanguard party to win at least advanced sections of the working class to Trotskyist positions.
- 7) The collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy makes the building of vanguard parties easier than formerly. It also lessens the Stalinists' ability to betray. However the Stalinist collapse does not imply that, in dual power situations, the working class will spontaneously know what to do.

It is to be hoped that cde Meszaros will re-examine his position. In conclusion, it is necessary to prepare for the many dual power situations that will arise in various parts of the world in the next few years. In this preparation, it is necessary to start from the premise that the crisis of humanity is reduced to a crisis of proletarian leadership.