

Revolutionary Programmes: Necessity or Fantasy

by Roy Ratcliffe

There is a trend of thinking within the ranks of the revolutionary left which seems to start from an assumption that things can or will go wrong with the progress and development of socialism, and have gone wrong in the past, because certain people, key people or even an entire vanguard, had or have inadequate revolutionary ideas. Those who represent this trend and start from such an assumption are at considerable pains to discover the “correct” or “true” ideas and their correct sequence, so that “mistakes” won’t happen again.

Reams and reams are produced as a result of a sort of extensive “literary archeology” which attempts to trace the distinct stages of development in the varying species of socialist thought from Marx to present writers in order to demonstrate incorrect programmatic positions which have led or will lead to mistaken or unfortunate actions.

The purpose of such activity is to show where each deviation, variation and possible mutation has occurred in the evolutionary development of socialist thought, in order to discover the “true” message and embody this in the correct practical “order of events” or “sequence of procedures” known as a programme. However, much of this work, unlike real archeology, only manages to invert the real life process. In the end, more often than not, this work only arrives at idealised connections, and proposes correctives in the form of abstract programmes and formulas. Yet such programme-led analyses only serve to perpetuate the problem that has been identified and was the motive or stimulus for such study in the first place. As workers and revolutionary humanists, we should recognise that theories and ideas, whether adequate or not, do not automatically cause people to follow these ideas, although it may often appear that way to other commentators – and even to those who are advocating the ideas themselves. In real life the actual process is that people choose, select, modify, reject and even create ideas and theories that not only embody their experiences but, more importantly, suit their practical needs. Again, this is not always the case. But it happens far more often than is admitted, even when that practical need is simply to be seen as a clever and diligent intellectual.

The Stalins, Healys and others of that ilk, do not or did not act the way they did as a result of mistaken understanding of the theories of Marx. Rather, they acted the way they did for other reasons, and then developed supposedly Marxist theories to vindicate the way they acted. Such people did not and do not study real life in order to justify the relevance of their ideas;

they study ideas to find relevant ways to justify their actions. We should emphatically recognise, for example, that it was not perverted theories or brutal programmes which produced Stalinist sectarian behaviour; it was Stalinist sectarian behaviour that produced perverted theory and brutal programmes. Lenin’s actions in consolidating the soviet state against the Russian working class were not the results of following a mistaken theory or even caused by the fact that Marx did not manage to get around to articulating a comprehensive blueprint for transitional forms for him to follow. Instead, the opposite procedure happened. Lenin’s real life actions as leader of the Bolsheviks caused a modification in the ideas he had of the state. (See, for example, the ideas in the article *Better Fewer But Better*).

Lenin’s own earlier – and more accurate – theoretical contribution in *State and Revolution*, leaning heavily on Marx and Engels and written with full knowledge of the so-called “backwardness” of Russia, called for a smashing of the state. But this was not even attempted. The theoretical positions in *State and Revolution* were ignored by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in practice almost as soon as it was written. So, simply writing into programmes even abstractly “correct” perspectives, like “smashing the state”, does not for a moment guarantee that they will be carried out. Trotsky’s fetishisation of the Party, his elevation of it over the working class and his concord with Stalin over compulsory labour discipline and the national plan, were not the result of a mistaken understanding of Marx’s principle of the self-activity of the working class. Trotsky had a perfectly good theoretical grasp of this principle in 1904. His later theoretical modifications and justifications – see for example his ideas in *Terrorism and Communism* – and his silence over his 1904 theories, were reached as a result of his actions in real life, supporting, and being an active participant in, Bolshevik oppression.

So thinking and writing correct ideas doesn’t always mean they will be followed, even by the person who writes them. Gerry Healy and his supporters in the SLL/WRP did not conduct themselves in dehumanised, arrogant and sectarian ways because they were carrying out dehumanised and arrogant theories espoused by Marx and Engels. Quite the reverse. In the process of carrying out the practical struggles to build a “vanguard”, they adopted brutal, dehumanised and arrogant methods. Then they sought justification for these methods, not in the writings of Marx, for they could not be found there, but in the writings of Lenin and Trotsky. The reasons they leaned so heavily on some – and actually not all – of the ideas of Lenin and

Trotsky, was because they could find in Lenin and Trotsky ideas which justified their practice. These, and many other sectarian group members, were intelligent and dedicated human beings who studied "theory" and were quite capable of discerning alternative and more humane readings in Marx but they consciously filtered and selected only those ideas which fitted their chosen methods. Incidentally, those who still retain a programmatic allegiance to Lenin and building the "vanguard" need to say whether the following sentiments will appear in their post revolutionary programme as they did in Lenin's writings:

"The dictatorship of the proletariat.....can be exercised only by a vanguard." (Lenin Collected Works, Vol 32, p 21).

"The dictatorship of the proletariat does not fear to resort to compulsion and the most severe, decisive and ruthless forms of coercion by the state." (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol 31 p 497).

"...half a dozen workers who shirk their work (in the manner of rowdies, the manner in which many compositors in Petrograd, particularly the Party print shops, shirk their work) will be put in prison. In another they will be put to cleaning latrines. In a third place they will be provided with yellow tickets after they have served their time ... In a fourth place one out of every ten idlers will be shot on the spot." (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol 26, p 414).

So guess where Stalin got at least some of his inspiration! I suggest also that working people of today and the future would be interested to know whether the present-day followers of Trotsky would include in their post-revolutionary programme ideas such as these:

"The very principle of compulsory labour service is for the communist quite unquestionable." (Terrorism and Communism, p. 146).

"The labour state considers itself empowered to send every worker to the place where his work is necessary. And not one serious socialist will begin to deny to the labour state the right to lay its hand upon the worker who refuses to execute his labour duty." (ibid p. 153).

It is perhaps not too difficult after reading the above to guess why many rank and file workers and party members in Russia could see very little difference between the programmes of Stalin and Trotsky when the arguments developed after the death of Lenin. Those who are still wedded to the ultimate idea of becoming a Leninist or Trotskyist "vanguard", complete with a worked-out revolutionary programme, guided by the writings of Lenin or Trotsky, will have some difficulty convincing working people to accept such possibilities – particularly if they put them up front instead of keeping them hidden. They will also need to convince some of us who still consider Marx as

extremely relevant why such ideas were not considered essential by Marx and yet were carried out in the name of Marx or Marxism as they called it. In fact I suggest that the desperate search in some socialist quarters to discover contradictions between the "young" Marx and "mature" Marx has been more to do with making it easier to justify inhuman or dehumanised practices by consigning or relegating Marx's humanist principles to some immature stage in his development, so they could then be safely ignored.

Uncovering theoretical deviations articulated by the various exponents of "Marxism" may be interesting and occasionally necessary but they are not as important as studying the real-life practice of the actual participants, as they spoke about it or wrote about it in their day to day activity. Perhaps I should supplement the points made above by stating that in my view revolutionary humanists do not study Marx in order to discover or establish the "correct" theory or programme so that we can then follow it or implement it. Revolutionary humanists study Marx to explore and understand how he studied the world so that we can do this ourselves with more accuracy and confidence. So, instead of having to lean on Marx all the time, we learn to stand on our own two feet. Instead of turning to Marx constantly to find a similar or identical situation to the one we are in, we can begin to analyse and respond to the situations ourselves. Accordingly the revolutionary humanist purpose of such study would not be to use Marx's volumes as weapons with which to beat each other around the head. Nor should we be using his words as bullets (or even the softer form of intellectual paint balls) to shoot people down in a ritual macho competition to be "top gun" or top group on the left, whilst hiding behind the camouflage of pursuing and articulating "correct" ideas.

That kind of use for the works of Marx can be expected from sectarians but not genuine revolutionary humanists. Revolutionary humanist theory and practice, of which Marx was and remains the greatest individual exponent, was, I consider, successively distorted and contorted by "Marxists", "Leninists", "Stalinists" and "Trotskyists", until it became transformed into the dogma of a self-satisfied sectarian ruling elite. It mattered little to its "content" whether that sectarian elite controlled the state as in Russia and the eastern bloc or one of the small sects in various countries. Only the scale and extent of the sectarian distortion and brutal arrogance varied between these respective political arenas. Yet, interestingly, they all alleged that they spoke in the name of Karl Marx. Nothing less is required, I suggest, than the return of Marx's works to the revolutionary humanist tradition. The results of his life's activity have been abducted and held hostage by various shades of sectarianism for far too long.

Sadly, much of 20th century philosophical discourse, including a lot of so-called Marxist philosophy, still appears to be little more than terminological abstraction and manipulation. It is not designed to help

make sense of the world, but: (a) to elevate intellectual production into a superior social and economic position to other forms of production; (b) to competitively undermine other rival intellects; and c) to reduce the intellect of the working class to a baffled, subordinated and mute incomprehension. This is perhaps understandable within bourgeois circles, for this class is thoroughly imbued with elitism and tries to justify notions of superiority and inferiority. It has a vested interest in complicating and mystifying life and in making working people feel inadequate. However, this should not be the case for those thinkers ostensibly concerned with developing, and acting upon, the ideas of Marx.

But so-called "Marxist" intellectuals have tended to talk down to working people, assuming they have a superior revolutionary position, because they have the ability and the time to provide complex analysis, detailed programmes and definitive instructions which working people "must" follow. This is despite Marx's argument that it was the unique and key position which working people had in relationship to the means of production which made them the revolutionary class. Incidentally, even if it were true the working class may be proportionately smaller in the advanced countries than in Marx's time, this key position would not be altered. Nor does the fact that some working people in the advanced countries become chauvinistic or racist, or that some in the developing countries become nationalistic change anything – contrary to what some "new left" thinkers considered in the 1960s and 1970s. Such subjective factors may delay the outbreak of revolution, affect its development or even its outcome, but cannot re-fashion the unique revolutionary position and potential of working people.

Positively, this revolutionary potential exists because working people are the "active" element in the production both of the means of production – factories, machines, etc – and of the necessities which the rest of society depend upon today, as will any future society tomorrow. Negatively, this potential exists because of their dehumanised and exploited condition within capitalist society. The life, the very day-to-day existence of the working class is antagonistically opposed to the needs of the ruling capitalist class. Human labour is beyond question the basis of all life and all societies, and the modern working classes are the "specifically created" human agents of all society's essential labour under the domination of capital. And yet it is the capitalist class which have historically appropriated those means of production and the wealth, in the shape of accumulated surplus value.

This polar opposition to the capitalist class makes working people potentially revolutionary against the rule of capital. Their position as the operators of the means of production make them not only able and likely to rebel against capital, but also makes them the only class able to really found society anew. No other class in society can re-engage so completely and directly with the extensive means of production after a

revolutionary overthrow of capital, not simply because of the numbers required but because of their day-to-day familiarity with production under capital and also because of their socialisation in its collective and co-operative patterns of operation. Of course this familiarity, ability and numerical strength can be exploited by other classes as it is under the rule of capital and was under the political rule of Leninist and Stalinist sectarianism, and in particular it can be exploited by some intellectuals who think they know better.

But as Istvan Meszaros comments: "... under the changed circumstances intellectuals (and especially the former bourgeois intellectuals whose conditions of everyday life are quite different from those of the popular masses) know *far less* about "what is to be done" in relation to the specific problems of post-revolutionary societies and their corresponding material mediatory forms of potential solution than the working classes, whose daily bread is directly affected by the success or failure of the measures that need to be adopted." (Beyond Capital p 396).

We can add to this: it is not only bourgeois but revolutionary intellectuals, the producers of ideas, whose conditions of everyday life are quite different from those of the popular masses. And after the experience of revolutionary Russia we can also say that their combined "vanguardist" knowledge of what to do next did not lead to the end of oppression and exploitation for the working class. It led straight to a particular brutality under the rule of a long-term Bolshevik and right hand man of Lenin – Stalin! Not a good track record for the concept of a "vanguard" nor for the leadership efforts of revolutionary intellectuals. Little wonder then that anyone adopting the title of intellectual is viewed with considerable suspicion in some quarters.

However, there is a useful role and there are tasks for revolutionary humanists with intellectual ability. Marx was such a person and one of the highest possible calibre – and, interestingly, he did not produce programmes, try to set up vanguards or tell the working class what they "must" do. Incidentally, he was also quite scathing about some intellectuals himself, calling them "muddleheads from the allegedly 'learned' caste". Nevertheless we should now perhaps add a further essential task of the genuine revolutionary humanist intellectual supporters of working people during and after a revolution: that is, to assist them to overcome all elitist exploitation of their labour and to ensure it does not return under the guise of a different political or intellectual social stratum as it did in Russia. In advance of a revolution, intellectual activity, for example, can also serve to remind working people that the real engine of all necessary social wealth is the activity of the working class. It can also help explain why, in order to realise a future based on socialism, working people will need to keep collective communal control of their productive activity as well as of the means of production.

To return now to the revolutionary position of the working classes. For the material reasons previously noted, Marx concluded that the working class was the only really revolutionary class. It was from a contemplation of the system of capital and the situation of the working class that ideas for the revolutionary overthrow of capital arose. Revolutionary ideas and theories are a creation of thinking, acting human beings, best made after due reflection on areas of experience, particularly the experience of trying to change things. However, these ideas and theories are never concrete or precise but abstract and general. They are more in the nature of guidelines and hypotheses. As such they need to be constantly tested in action by experience, evaluated against that experience and, where necessary, modified, bearing in mind the orientating principles or purposes for which the ideas are intended in practice. For this result, honest description, reflection and evaluation is essential, as well as an honest and clear statement as to the purposes intended.

This level of honesty has become quite rare among the left and entirely absent among the sectarian left. Revolutionary humanist ideas and theories, as creative guidelines for further practice, should encapsulate where possible the experience of past struggles so as to provide improved guidelines. This is why Marx's work is so important. His creative thinking, often after exhaustive study and reflection, provided many such guidelines. However, much of what is published of Marx's work was never intended by him for publication. Many volumes of Marx's writings represent his own notes taken down for his own purposes. As such they are entitled to be obscure and somewhat inaccessible. For this reason special care is needed to understand their terminology and interpret them. Nonetheless for those with the time to read them and resources to obtain them they are the richest known source of creative thinking upon what general directions working people need to take in order to free themselves and the whole of humanity from the restrictive and destructive confines of capitalist economic relations.

Occasionally, we can read sentiments by socialists regretting that Marx never got round to saying more about how life would function under the future socialist society – as if he hadn't done enough for one lifetime. Here we should recognise that Marx didn't theorise much about the future form of society nor comment very much on the precise forms of transition. In his view, it was not the function of intellectual theorising to project a detailed image of an imagined future onto the screen of the present, for the education of revolutionaries and the future education of an (imagined) confused but eagerly waiting working class. For Marx, the creation of the future was to be the practical creative task of the associated workers themselves, once they had liberated themselves from the political, military and economic hold of the ruling class and their state. This was not merely because they were eminently capable of such creative tasks, but also

because this would be necessary for them in order to equip themselves to found society anew. The liberation of the working class from the oppression of capital would be by their own actions and own efforts along with those of their supporters. This liberation would be brought about just as much from the collapse and crisis of capital caused by its own internal contradictions as from the previous and later positive combative actions of the workers themselves. And both of these will be much more useful to the adoption and development of socialist ideas among working people than any intellectually led self-appointed vanguard armed with its latest detailed programme – transitional or not.

It was enough for Marx, and should still be enough for present-day revolutionary humanists, to point out the contradictory and transitional nature of the domination of the capitalist system historically and the socialist transitional forms which had/have already sprung up within the capitalist system – co-operatives, cartels, Paris Commune, pre-Bolshevised soviets – and to point out the many pitfalls waiting for workers in struggle. For the rest, it is sufficient to support and when possible facilitate the coming together of workers and revolutionary humanists in and out of their struggles. The question of the role of revolutionary humanists during the heat of a revolutionary political crisis is a separate question, but even here I suggest their activity should supplement and complement the efforts of revolutionary workers, not frustrate them as in post-1917 Russia. We should acknowledge that no amount of peering at the horizon of the future will produce anything but hazy images, or abstract detail, and even the serious possibility of self-induced mirages. No amount of microscopic analysis of the texts of Marx will produce an exact or foolproof blueprint for the future success of socialism. As noted earlier such study has a different purpose. We should also recognise that sadly the legacy we have actually inherited, after all the volumes of theorising of Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Zinoviev, Lukacs, Marcuse, Gramsci, Gerry Healy, Tony Cliff, Ted Grant, James Cannon, Burnham and the rest, is a chronic, almost fatal dose of dogma and sectarianism. But for the excellent guidelines left by Marx we would have very little else. We also have lots of practical errors and bad practices to seriously evaluate – very little of this has been done to date – so as to avoid them in the future. For this, minimum, maximum or transitional programmes are of absolutely no use. Devising detailed programmes and debating them seems to me to be similar to using a rocking chair: we may be comforted and even fooled by the actual movement, but in reality we are going nowhere except backwards and forwards.

The whole project of socialism is both revolutionary and developmental. It is revolutionary in the comprehensive sense of both the form and content of social and political life; and developmental in the sense of a series of approximations and changes of tack – but not of principle. Revolution involves rapid and sudden changes which are themselves

unpredictable and are the result of unpredictable and often unforeseen causes. The day to day pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary work of working people and revolutionary humanists will be developmental in the sense that much of it hasn't been done before, and many new things will occur which themselves will cause constant reappraisal and modification. So no detailed theory or polished programme – no matter what genius produces it – will guide us much further than next month or at the most next year. By that time many things will have changed. This will be particularly the case when the accelerated tempo of a revolutionary situation begins and throws many, if not all, of the assumptions on which detailed programmes are based out through the window. Trying to follow a previously worked out programme in such dynamic situations is perhaps one of the few instances in which well intentioned revolutionaries can be led into quite reactionary behaviour.

As an instance of sincere revolutionaries following a detailed schematic programme, the line of “defeat social fascism first” in pre-fascist Germany springs to mind here as one of the most catastrophic examples. Sincere rank-and-file Bolsheviks and revolutionary workers forcing through the Bolshevik programme against the Russian working class and peasants is another. Closer to home the thousands of sincere revolutionaries fulfilling the detailed programmes of the sectarian Socialist Labour League/Workers Revolutionary Party, Socialist Workers Party, Communist Party etc – and in doing so boycotting many unity actions – is another. Recognising the extremely limited uses of even well-thought-out programmes does not mean that revolutionary humanists are left to start with a blank sheet, or stumbling about in a darkened room. We have inherited sufficient materialist guidelines to begin to act as revolutionary humanists with a conscious awareness of what is needed in general, even if much of the detail will need to be left closer to the events as they begin to unfold. In some cases, workers and their supporters will be faced with having to think on our feet.

Here are some of the general points that I think we can safely say we know. We know from experience and the guidelines produced by Marx in *Capital* that the capitalist form of production is crisis-ridden and contradictory. We know from the experience of capitalist production and from the *Grundrisse* that the combination of working people and modern industry can produce enough necessary products to assure all the world's citizens of a basic humane standard of economic and social welfare, once production is organised according to socialist methods. We also know from modern society that such is the productivity of the combination of labour and industry that sufficient surplus products can be made available to release sufficient numbers of people (or all people for a time) from direct productive activity to ensure safe, clean, humane and interesting cultural, educational, leisure environments exist.

However, we cannot know in advance exactly what kinds of products and services future associated working people will decide are necessary and how they will create them. We don't know how working people will do this or what they will choose as priorities. Nor should we be crystal gazing and trying to tell them. We know from studying the experience of other revolutions that to get to such a revolutionary situation that the rule of capital will have to undergo sufficient of a crisis (structural or episodic) to shake the existing socio-political set-up to its foundations. But exactly how or when will that happen? Lenin didn't know and nor can we. We know from the experience of Britain, Germany, and Russia, as well as Cuba, Nicaragua and perhaps Chile, that this revolutionary upsurge and even overthrow could be triggered in an isolated advanced country or an isolated outpost of capitalism, but we don't know which or when. We know from the experience of Germany, Britain, Russia, Chile and Nicaragua, that the capitalist class will in such a country fight to the death and will if they need help call upon other capitalist countries to come to its aid. We know this but we don't know how it will unfold. We may prefer revolution to break out simultaneously in many or all countries, since this would weaken the international capitalist class and neutralise any possible military interventions, but real life events may not follow our preferences.

We know from the negative experience of reformism and reformist labour parties that the revolutionary working class and its allies will have to adapt their specific orientation to the circumstances of their own struggle, all the time with the general aim of seizing political and military power and by arming itself resist being crushed. But we cannot know in advance how this will occur, or which troops will defect to the workers' side or what weapons will be secured and used. We know from Marx, and the experience of the Paris Commune, Germany, Britain and Russia that the working class is able to create political forms of its own and if powerful enough, and the ruling class weak enough, can seize and abolish the ruling classes political form, their parties and state. We cannot know in advance, however, who will prove strongest or weakest on the day, or exactly what configuration those working class political forms will take. We know from Marx and now we know from the Russian experience that the state will have to be smashed, not transformed or reformed. And all formal politics will need to be abolished, since politics easily becomes the potential base for a new ruling elite, and the alternative working class social forms of organising – committees, communes or soviets – will need to become not just the means of declaring this abolition, but of carrying it out.

We know from Marx and the experience of Russia that after the abolition of the state that the communal form of working class organisation will need to designate and declare all citizens as “workers” either by hand or brain, recognising no other category of citizen. Even this division has to be overcome as a deliberate process. They will have to assign or re-assign

themselves or confirm their voluntary assignment to some productive activity approved of by the local communal form of organisation. We cannot, however, predict how this will occur or tell them how to do it, nor should we try. They may try different ways simultaneously or sequentially. We know from Marx, and common sense, that these communal forms will have to commence, or continue, the seizure of factories and shops and rebuild any damaged industries and homes caused by the revolutionary upheaval and the collapse of the capitalist system. We know these communal forms of production and distribution will need initially to concentrate on ensuring the production of sufficient necessities for all citizens.

We know from Marx that the communal forms of organisation will need to abolish wage labour and institute a temporary system of payment by voucher. (Modern plastic credit cards may seem to offer a possible socialistic form, once freed of capitalist accounting and profit-making, but they may not be at the cutting edge of technology by then.) We know from decimalisation and the rise of the euro that the name of the unit of payment already changes under capital and causes only temporary problems and uncertainties. Providing the system of economy allows communal production and access by producers to sufficient necessities, and collective decision-making and control over access to any available extras during the first stage of transition, then this won't be a problem. If it is or becomes one then the future groups of associated workers will sort it out themselves using their knowledge of the situation and the available resources and possibilities available at the time.

We know from Marx, from the experience of the Paris Commune and from the Russian soviets, that the communal forms of organisation will need to choose certain people from among themselves to work outside of the full-scale meetings, but as "delegates" rather than permanent representatives. We know from Marx and from the experience of Russia that, for as long as such positions are required, those delegates will need to be elected for their ability and suitability – not party affiliation. They must be subject to instant recall and paid only the communal average. We know from the Paris Commune and the early experience of Soviet Russia that these communal forms of organisation will need and want to negotiate with other such communal forms locally, regionally and nationally. Whether and to what extent they can do so internationally – we know this from the experience of Russia, Cuba and Nicaragua – will depend upon what has happened meanwhile within other capitalist countries. However, the daily experience of shopping will tell us that they will need to begin to develop economically the links we know they will have undoubtedly made politically during the pre-revolutionary situation and during the revolution itself.

We know from the positive experience of the Paris Commune and the negative experience of the Russian Soviets, that working people through these communal

form of organisations will need to ensure that the decision-making processes in the economy and society will stay with them and not be permanently delegated to a class of representatives or permanent group of specialists however much they say they are on the side of working people.

We don't know and can't know precisely how the future associated workers will choose to carry out many of the other things outlined above – but we also don't need to know. There will also be other important general points or orienting principles to add to those above, but we can't be sure they will be of this kind of generality until much closer to their actual unfolding. But such guiding principles cannot simply be cobbled together into a programme. So why do some socialists struggle now, for example, with defining just who will be allowed to vote in the transitional period between capitals collapse and fully achieved socialism? At the same time, others agonise over defining which capitalist or pre-capitalist occupations should be classified as proletarian or not in some future soviet or commune. Why are some calling for "state ownership", "freedom of political parties", "higher levels of productivity than present day capitalism", "a workers' state which must follow a programme", and so on. Why do all this, if it isn't to provide a programme now for the future associated workers to follow, and for present revolutionary humanists and workers to accept or to decline at the price of being excluded (or marginalised) by those who do accept such a programme? And it must be said that some of these demands upon the future are highly debatable now, given the history of the 20th century.

There seems to be a contemporary assumption that revolutionary humanists need a detailed theoretical "programme" around which to unite and that without it a healthy unity cannot be achieved. Not so. We could unite around a number of things, a basic platform or manifesto for example! Many did so around the one produced by Marx which actually also came out of the practical search for unity and did not precede it, and which has yet to be bettered. However, it should be clear that any unity achieved around even an agreed theoretical programme will simply be a theoretical unity! Not only that, it risks leaving out of practical unity all those who for whatever reason can't agree with the ideas of the programme or its suggestions for action. Even for those who are not so excluded I'm afraid a unity on paper remains no more than a paper unity which still needs to be achieved in practice. And, worryingly, unity around a theoretical programme perpetuates and elevates unity around abstract procedural ideas above unity around real practical action.

Besides, "What is to be done?" should not be seen as a general ahistorical question, to be answered by producing a comprehensive programme leading all the way to the conquest of power and beyond. It is a recurrent question. Each time it is considered, the answer will depend upon the specific conditions facing

those who ask the question. In response to a letter regarding a suggestion that a Dutch party congress would discuss "what legislation should be enacted by socialists after they had gained control", Marx criticised the whole idea of such a discussion. Criticising the question itself, he added:

What should be done at any definite moment of the future, and done immediately, depends of course entirely on the given historical conditions in which one has to act.....The doctrinaire and inevitably fantastic anticipation of the programme of action for a revolution of the future only diverts one from the struggle of the present." (Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence, pp 317-8)

Marx's comment draws our attention to the fact that socialists a long time before us have spent time constructing speculative "programmes of action", trying to anticipate the future based upon some "vision" created in the present. In evaluating such "fantastic anticipations" Marx concluded that they diverted attention away from the struggle of the present. Having just "leaned on Marx" to lend support to the essence of my argument I return to standing on my own two feet and suggest that among the many elements of the "current historical conditions" in which revolutionary humanists have to act are the following:

- A) a maturing structural and (likely) episodic economic crisis within the world capitalist production and financial processes;
- B) a complete abandonment of any socialist pretence by "modern" and "modernised" social-democratic (including ex-Stalinist) reformist political parties;
- C) the spectre of Stalinist sectarianism which still haunts, distorts and suppresses the collective, socialist aspirations of working people;
- D) the divisive and debilitating residue of Leninist and Trotskyist sectarianism among those remaining in the revolutionary humanist tradition.

Instead of considering definitive and speculative programmes with which to publicise what must remain for a long time ultimate aspirations, I suggest that what we need to do first of all, and certainly for the next period, is

- a) to follow Marx's long-unheeded 19th century advice and overcome in practice the multi-faceted and ingrained sectarian habits that have developed among us socialists;
- b) thoroughly evaluate the failure of Bolshevik, Leninist, and Trotskyist vanguards;
- c) extend and develop an international network of workers and revolutionary humanists;

d) assist and support workers in struggle when and wherever they are in conflict with capital or the state;

e) share with these workers in struggle and other workers sufficient of the previously noted general understandings derived from Marx to begin to positively re-assert the potential of the socialist perspective for humanity from within the workers movement.

None of these have been yet adequately recognised and analysed from within the revolutionary left. They cannot be carried out comprehensively in a programme, nor without overcoming sectarianism. Without this, I doubt if revolutionary socialists will ever again be trusted, or deserve to be.

I suggest that the above points (a-e) are "what should be done at the moment" and they should form the basis of the present struggle for unity among revolutionary humanists – for they are those elements which can best prepare us for the next shift in the development of the "historical conditions" and they are elements which themselves can, if successfully achieved, create something qualitatively new with which to greet those future historical conditions. Working out detailed programmes for the future can only divert us from these particular struggles for, as Marx noted, debate on such programs will more often than not "end in endlessly repeated general banalities", however learned and practical they may try to sound. Seriously addressing the above points within the ranks of revolutionary humanists and taking the results among working people will also provide a firm practical foundation from which working class socialist self-activity, imagination and creativity can again begin to positively respond to historical conditions and to flourish in new forms.

Of course if readers have not drawn the same or similar conclusions to myself from their experience of sectarianism, their analysis of Bolshevism and Trotskyism, their reading of Marx, and their experience of the creativity of the working class, then nothing will come of the ideas and thoughts in this article. This at least will prove the earlier assertion that ideas and words don't automatically lead to people following them or carrying them out. Unless these particular thoughts and conclusions speak directly to the reader's experience and also unless the reader has the time and inclination to act upon them, then the ideas I present will definitely not be taken up. But then those who produce ideas about a vanguard and a programme have exactly the same problem. They will have to see whether their ideas speak to the experience of those who have read Marx and considered the experience of Russia from the standpoint of the working class and not simply from the standpoint of the vanguard. And later on they will have to see whether those ideas speak to the experience of working people in struggle.