Reflections on Elections

Whenever there is an election, like last year or currently in Germany, the person in the street — the so-called ordinary voter — suddenly becomes very popular. Any number of political parties are anxious to please them and make them all manner of tempting promises, if they in their turn will agree to vote for their party’s candidate. Election time, in other words, is the time when there is an enormous hunt for Votes.

The bait which is used in this hunt is largely made up by promises. All other parties offer this bait, and the generosity of their promises is usually in inverse proportion to the likelihood of their getting power. The Labour and Conservative Parties cannot be too extravagant; the Liberals can be a little more wild; the Greens and the far Left can promise almost anything. And so on.

Most of the promises in an election are about things like modernisation, housing, education, pensions, wages and prices, war and peace. To read the literature of these other parties, it seems that all that has to be done to solve overnight all the problems connected with these issues is to vote for their candidate. They will all, it seems, bring British industry up to date, build affordable housing, give everyone a fair chance of the best education, keep prices stable while wages increase, protect the environment, banish war from the earth.

These promises sound very fine and in one election after another millions of working people vote for them. And presumably, when they do so, they think that they are contributing to the solution of our problems.

But stop and think about it.

Firstly, it is obvious that election promises are not a new thing. Political parties have been making them for as long as anyone can remember – and always about the same sorts of problems.

Now what has been the result of all this?

The housing problem remains with us despite repeated promises to deal with it. The sort of education we get is governed by the financial standing of our parents. There are still millions of old age pensioners living on the tightrope of destitution — and it only needs something like a severe winter for many of them to loosen their precarious hold on life.

Prices are rising. Wages are still stagnating. Whatever the respective level of prices and wages, we always find that our wage packet only just covers our food, clothing, entertainment and whatever else goes to keep us ticking over.

War is just as much a universal problem as ever. There are always minor wars going on somewhere, punctuated by more serious clashes such as North Korea and Syria. Over it all hangs the threat of a war fought out with nuclear weapons.

It is not accidental that the politicians make so many promises and that they have so little effect upon the ailments they are supposed to cure. The world is full of chronic problems, but this is not because political parties have not thought up reforms which are supposed to deal with them nor because their leaders are not clever or knowledgeable enough.

The fact is that the problems persist whichever party is in power — and this suggests that their roots go deep into the very nature of modern society.

We live today in a social system which is called capitalism. The basis of this system is the ownership
by a section of the population of the means of producing and distributing wealth — of factories, transport, communications and so on. It follows from this that all the wealth which we produce today is turned out with the intention of realising a profit for the owning class. It is from this basis that the problems of modern society spring.

The class which does not own the means of wealth production – the working class – are condemned to a life of rationed dependence upon their wage or salary. This expresses itself in inferior housing, clothes, education, and the like.

The basis of capitalism throws up the continual battle over wages and working conditions with attendant employment disputes. It gives rise, with its international economic rivalries, to the wars which have disfigured recent history.

Every other party stands for capitalism, whatever they may call themselves. And whatever their protestations, they stand for a world of poverty, hunger, unrest and war. They stand for a world in which no human being is secure.

The way-out is a world in which everything which goes to make and distribute wealth is owned by the people of the world. Because socialism is the direct opposite of capitalism, it follows that when it is established the basic problems of capitalism will disappear. There will be no more war, no more poverty. People will live a full, abundant life; we shall be free.

But socialism cannot be brought about by promises. It needs a knowledgeable working class who understand and desire it. They alone can establish the new world system we need.

When we contest elections our candidates from the Socialist Party do not make any promises; they do not try to convince voters that they will do anything for them. What they offer is the case for a new social system. We are seeking to spread knowledge and understanding of socialism and to give as many people as possible the opportunity of voting for a world of abundance, peace and freedom.

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