

The “transition period”

There are many people who cannot shake themselves clear of the Labour Party because they believe that Socialism cannot be established as a complete and revolutionary revolution change. They believe that between Capitalism and Socialism lies a period of State ownership which, they contend, will be neither Capitalism nor Socialism. Consequently they pin their faith to the Labour Party as the party which will inaugurate this “transition period”.

The idea of a transition period, during which some fundamental features of capitalism would still remain, is old, and was taken for granted by the reform parties that sprang up during the second half of the last century and the idea has persisted until to-day.

The Utopian Socialists of the early part of last century proposed a complete break with capitalism by building a new society upon an entirely different basis. But this society, instead of growing out of the old, was to be built within present society but without having any connection with it at all. They were to be communistic oases in the desert of capitalism that would serve as an example and an inspiration to the world at large. This was Robert Owen’s early idea. When, later, it was found impossible to build these groups inside highly developed Western civilisation, attempts were made to set them up upon the relatively virgin soil of America and Australia. But even there they were failures; capitalism was too strong for them. Co-operative societies still remain a pale and stunted reflections of those grand old fantasies.

When the Utopian approach to the abolition of capitalism gave place to the scientific, and it became generally accepted that Socialism was a system that must grow out of capitalism and not be imposed upon it, the new attitude took three different forms, for which the low standard of education of the workers was partly responsible. One form was that capitalism must be subjected to repeated reforms until finally it was reformed out of existence and Socialism introduced without the mass of the people being aware of what was happening. The second form consisted of building up small, vigorous groups which would lead the workers into Socialism by a frontal attack upon capitalism. This was later the basis of the Russian Bolshevik movement and its early popularity as the Blanquist movement in France. The third and final form was one propagated by Marx and Engels in which the Socialist revolution was to be accomplished by a working class that realised the source and nature of the antagonisms within capitalism, and also the nature of the new social order they intended to build out of the ruins of the old.

From the beginning the two earlier methods were afflicted with the same old disease; an acceptance of the idea that the mass of the people are incapable of properly understanding the meaning of Socialism and therefore, in its early days, Socialism would be fraught with difficulties to solve which some forms of organisation similar to what we have to-day would persist for some time after the accomplishment of the revolution. The principal, and almost overwhelming, difficulty anticipated was how to get people to produce and distribute the needful things when private ownership of the means of production, and therefore wages, no longer existed. How would an equal share of work be performed and a fair share of needful things be provided without some principle analogous to what exists under capitalism? It was agreed that when Socialism had been firmly established and a new generation had grown up under free social conditions then no such arbitrary principle would be necessary, but until that time this hangover from capitalism must remain.

This period between the overthrow of capitalism and the final establishment of a fully developed Socialist society has been called “the transition period”. Limited space will only permit us to discuss one aspect of the question here.

The troubles of the early Bolsheviks, who were endeavouring to build Socialism out of an undeveloped capitalist base, led them to exaggerate the nature and the importance of this transition period and their followers have given to State capitalism the unwarranted distinction of being *the* transition period. In defending their claims the early Bolsheviks—Lenin, Trotzky and their associates—appealed to the writings of Marx and Engels, and particularly to Marx’s criticism of the Gotha Programme of 1875.

In his criticism Marx argues that during the transition period between capitalism and Communism a worker will withdraw from the common pool a value in hours of labour equal to the hours of labour he

has worked minus the contribution to the reserve for the aged, the sick, future production and repair. Whether this period will be long or short Marx does not say; in fact, it is not even clear that he accepted more than there will be a period of difficulty to be met by temporary expedients, as his statements are arguments against erroneous assumptions in the Gotha Programme, and he is showing that where there is unequal distribution their phrase “just distribution of the proceeds of labour” in that programme is meaningless wind. We may add that taking the most extreme view of what Marx says it certainly could not produce conditions that would give rise to anything approximating to Soviet millionaires!

Let us now consider what are likely to be the conditions existing, as far as the distribution of products is concerned, at the time when the new society is being born out of the present, as far as we can envisage it to-day. We must bear in mind that the change will not come “like a thief in the night”, but in full daylight with the understanding and agreement of nearly the whole of society.

First of all, people will be accustomed to receiving wages with which to buy what they produce.

Secondly, the means of production and distribution will have been converted into Social ownership by an immediate act. This must be so as there cannot be any gradual or partial transformation.

The problem, then, is how will production be arranged when people will not receive any wages for working, and how will distribution be arranged when people will have no money to buy?

Finally, what will be the position of those who work in unnecessary occupations that will be abolished, and also of those who have never worked at all?

Before answering these questions let us first clear some of the ground.

We have absorbed what Marx and his co-workers gave to the world from their painstaking studies and we have added a good deal ourselves from our own studies since Marx, seventy years ago, criticised the Gotha Programme. We have profited from the development that has gone on since his day. One of the most important things we have learned is that the mass of people are essentially reasonable, once they understand a problem. For instance, workers will put up with considerable hardship and privation during strikes if they are convinced that the strike is necessary.

Our appeal is to all types of workers and our ranks include people from all occupations. In our propaganda we make it clear that the abolition of capitalism means the common ownership of the means of production which in turns involves from each according to his capacities, to each according to his needs. We point out that the workers must capture political power for the immediate purpose of introducing Socialism; and we further insist that there must be a majority of people understanding and desiring Socialism before it can be established.

Our propaganda, therefore, solves the problems of the transition period. From the outset the majority of workers will be satisfied with the meeting of their elementary needs; they will not expect everything at once. Furthermore workers inspired with the desire for Socialism will not be worried whether they are doing more work than somebody else. The enthusiasm for the change will spur many to work harder than they have ever done for capitalism. If for a time the tradition of capitalism weighs so heavily upon some that they shirk doing their best, what will it matter? Time itself will soon iron out this problem. At the worst there are very few people thick-skinned enough to be content to remain permanently objects of scorn.

When the movement reaches the point when Socialism is imminent it will contain within itself the organisation and the people capable of assessing the various needs of the population and how and where to organise production to meet those needs. At first the road may be rough, but it will be rapidly smoothed with the powers of production society will have at its disposal.

It is the nature of production, or the productive form, that determines the nature of the distribution. A freely associated productive form will involve a free distribution.

At first some occupations that are unpleasant may have to continue until there is time to remould the whole of production from top to bottom and eliminate what is burdensome and unpleasant. Thus some

people may have unpleasant jobs for a while and others pleasant. But our propaganda will have made the necessity of this clear before the change takes place.

Thus the transition period will not be another social form but only the difficult time of reorganising production and distribution on a Socialist basis; settling down to Socialism. There will be no need for labour tickets or anything of that kind, as the workers as a whole are intelligent people.

The progress of Socialist understanding in the advanced countries proceeds at about the same pace. A revolutionary change in one of them will inspire a similar change in the others. Consequently there need be no lack of essential products or break in international supplies.

The Socialist movement is a working class movement, a movement in the interests of the great majority. Workers support each other internationally on the industrial field during strikes. There will be no lack of mutual assistance when the greatest working class movement of all, the movement to free the toilers for ever from the domination of a master class, reaches the point that it can call upon them for international solidarity in striking the final blow.

(January 1946)