

The Politics of the Alternative Economic Strategy

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Bob Rowthorn's article on the alternative economic strategy (AES) and the Ted Knight interview in January's *Marxism Today* made fascinating reading. However, apart from a mention by Bob Rowthorn of the expansion of the social services being one of the basic proposals of the AES there appeared to be no link between the two.

Bob Rowthorn's article was welcome, it was a refreshing development to see the AES fitted into an overall political framework and perhaps even more interesting to find someone with the courage to examine specifically how armed opposition may or may not arise in British conditions in particular circumstances. Having said this I would like to draw attention to what I consider to be the main shortcomings of the article.

Is the alternative economic strategy democratic?

Rowthorn points out that the so called AES is much more than this, but states that supporters of it usually present it in purely economic terms. But this is hardly surprising, the basic proposals that Rowthorn outlined are almost all economic demands, and as long as the AES is an alternative *economic* strategy, opponents and supporters are likely to view it as just that. Tacking social reforms onto the end of the list isn't likely to change that.

The article argues that the AES is democratic rather than revolutionary in character because it seeks to shift the mixed economy in favour of the working class and because it wishes to extend democratic control over economic and political life. This implies that democratic demands are not revolutionary *per se*. If this is the case, at what stage do democratic demands become revolutionary? Is there a sudden revolutionary leap from a mixed economy to a socialist economy which is not democratic in nature? In fact it can be argued that the AES is not democratic because, as Rowthorn states, since 'the orthodox Left in Britain as in other countries is rather conservative' the programme has been handed down from above.

I would also challenge Bob's estimate that the programme is beginning to reach significant sections of the population. At the last general election the AES was nearly as big a mystery as the Loch Ness Monster. The initiated knew about it but the mass of the labour movement including many Communist Party members, let alone the mass of the electorate, couldn't tell you what its content was. Since then, it is true, it has surfaced on occasions but still mainly by those who could already recognise it. The exception has been when one or two of the demands have been taken up in a particular struggle.

The professional politicians and economists of the Left may know what its all about but what about the rest? If the AES is the immediate stage in the *British Road to Socialism*, why hasn't it been discussed up and down the Communist Party? How can a so called democratic programme be presented, let alone won, if the most dynamic movement of the last ten years — the feminist movement — has not been involved in formulating it or its demands incorporated in the programme. How can it be a democratic programme if it argues for more state controls, but doesn't outline the democratic changes that are necessary if it is going to convince many of the Left as well as the Centre that this is desirable? The central point about the AES is not just to popularise it but to transform it by democratic changes from below. Unless this is the case won't it be yet another example of what somebody up there thinks is good enough for us down here? Not a good basis for support, especially as the ruling class and the media will fight the demands tooth and nail.

Are workers' plans enough?

In conjunction with this the other major criticism I wish to make is the apparent narrowness of who can take up and popularise the AES. This is obviously linked with the previous points, for if the programme is a narrow economic one, the potential for involvement is much less. Bob

Rowthorn uses an excellent illustration in Lucas Aerospace — a development not often mentioned in Communist Party journals — and makes what I consider to be a key point when he writes that the workers involvement in this gave 'them confidence in their ability to change society'. But from this example he generalises that workers' plans could be drawn up throughout Britain and become a vast movement for economic and political change. Isn't this much too narrow? Leaving aside the fact that sizeable industrial enterprises are decreasing everyday, doesn't it imply that the AES is only the concern of the workers — and perhaps only industrial workers? But if the AES is to become the basis of the return of a Left government, much wider circles need to be involved.

An obvious example of this is the area of community struggles. Britain's economic crisis not only hits people at their place of work — if they have got one — but at home and in the locality, at their children's school, lack of transport, cutbacks in hospitals etc. Here the economic crisis not only affects workers, but the unemployed including youngsters who have never had a job, the

other claimants of all descriptions, tenants and other ratepayers, feminists and black people, students and so on. In the locality it is not just economic questions that are at stake, but a wide range of other social problems. Again this indicates the need to transform the AES so it really is a programme for social change.

Cuts campaigns and the AES

Here I would like to go back to the point I made at the start. I found it strange that the Ted Knight interview did not mention the AES. The only way the cuts can be combatted, and social services not only restored but developed in a positive way is by a number of the key aspects of the AES being implemented. Without a viable industrial and commercial base it is not possible, whatever government, to have the sort of social services we need. If this is so it follows that cuts campaigns can be an ideal vehicle for not only popularising the AES, but changing it. It is quite clear from the Lambeth and other examples that the rates question is an explosive issue. This is explicitly linked to cuts in local services and

unless the Left presents viable alternatives the rates issue will remain wide open for the Right. 'Keep rates down, cut public services and jobs' will win popular support. Why not reform the rating system, bring down interest rates and improve services instead? Central government policies on rates have brought about a crisis in the localities and this gives us a chance to raise the AES as an alternative: equally it is quite clear that rate reform needs to become one of the central demands of the programme. In Kensington and Chelsea the cuts campaign is attempting to do this. It is not easy, but we are making a start. We have a real spur, one of our ratepayers is Margaret Thatcher. Last year when she was made a freeman (*sic*) of the Borough, she said 'Everything that you (the council) have done locally, we (the government) intend to do nationally.'

Whilst we wouldn't wish to make grandiose claims like this, if these and many other sorts of action were carried out up and down the country to transform the AES into a popular social programme, the desire for change could develop into a positive force moving in the direction of the *British Road to Socialism*.

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