I would like to begin my contribution to this important debate with two quotes, which will be the reference points for what I have to say.

The first is a comment of Engels to the effect that at the end of the day the working class has only two weapons in its fight against capitalism – theory and organisation.

It was part of received Marxism that the capitalist mode of production itself provided the basic organisation because workers stood together at their labour in factory and workshop. They constantly interacted with each other at work, and this interaction provided the context for using their organisation for other purposes, the improvement of their conditions.

We all know that the nature of work, certainly in Europe and North America has changed totally from that. There has been an atomisation of labour, which we need to analyse as we confront the effective passivity of the working class faced with the current appalling crisis.

And theory? The theory of an alternative and how to get it is confounded by confusion and difference, with the working class more and more confined to the sidelines to look on at the propertied classes’ games of politics. I’ll come back to the nature of this confusion of theory, the reasons for it and how to combat it.

My second quote is something that the Gaelic revolutionary Mairtín Ó Cadhain said. Writing *mar phoblachtóir neamhleithscéalach* as an unrepentant republican, Ó Cadhain looked back on Irish history and declared: *Sé an dóchas a fheicim riamh anall i stair na tire ná an maidhmiú cuartach: an dóchas ag gint an mhsinigh, agus an misneach ag gint an ghnímh.* The hope I see back in the country’s history is the chain detonation: hope generating courage, and courage generating action.

It is my contention that despite the widespread anger at austerity, shown by opinion poll results again and again here in Ireland, the lack of action, despite the example of riots and strikes in Greece, reflects a lack of belief in the possibility of an alternative.

The failure of Soviet communism raises doubt about any suggestions of striking out in an alternative way, while social democracy is in an even more parlous state, having been thoroughly integrated into the system.

Social democratic welfarism is discredited in Sweden, Blairism is still rampant in British Labour, and our own pathetic crew take the lead in imposing an austerity that benefits the rich and the bankers.

Éamon Gilmore and his friends no longer talk of socialism, and rightly so. But they consciously came to the view that the word and the idea was a ‘put off’.

So what we see is an angry working class that has nowhere to go to express its anger. Sinn Féin is increasingly filling this gap, but the cul de sac of the armed struggle is still a millstone dragging it back. And indeed can we be sure that its ideological development is strong enough that it will not compromise in the future?

I am not talking about the necessary tactical compromises of advancing a complicated struggle for both social emancipation from the ravages of capitalism and for national liberation from the putting down of our aspirations and democratic potential by foreign powers. The issue here is how to find a safeguard against ideological compromise, a path that leads back into the swamp in which social democracy is foundering.

It is only the elaboration of a clear theory of social change and the modern nature of class struggle that can provide the ideological strength to avoid fatal compromise. And that brings us back to Engels, and back to the failure of communism in Eastern Europe.

There were many factors that led to this calamity – and it is a calamity as far as I’m concerned. The working class throughout the world has been massively weakened by this defeat, as capitalism is freed from the fear that workers in the West could follow the Soviet path.

The rolling wars in the Middle East and the US threats of death all over the globe have been enhanced by communism’s defeat.

And we must answer the question of why it happened.

There were many factors of course, but foremost I believe was the contradictory fact that people were NOT engaged in politics. Soviet friends of mine have told me how during the collapse they waited for instructions from above as to what to do. No instructions came because it was the top that was corrupt.

Soviet society had become lethargic, cynical and non-political.

For the working class now to be won back to a belief that this class can create a new future, we must paint a true picture of how Soviet society negated its own theoretical foundations by rejecting in practice the dialectic that was the fount of its theory: the contesting of ideas and policies with new ideas, and their negation in turn as society evolves – but, for socialism, evolves in an active ever-renewing way.

But all communism’s mistakes cannot excuse the role of social democracy in the naked betrayal of working people. PASOK has paid a price in Greece, and Labour here, if the opinion polls are to be believed, will pay a similar price here when we get a chance to vote.

But is that all it is? The parties of the Left collapsing in mutual recriminations? Or can we rebuild, and if so on what basis?

The truly astonishing thing is that this crisis, which should have capitalism on the ropes, is giving that system the chance to row back on all the advances made by organised Labour during the time of capitalism’s fear of Russia. Wages and conditions are being savaged throughout Europe, workers’ protections are being stripped away, but the working class of the most affected countries are without direction – so much so that in Greece, while PASOK was savaged, a neoliberal conservative party won the election, not Syriza.

In the Meath East by-election here, parties that favour austerity took a big majority of the votes, while Labour was trounced humiliatingly.

And such is the lack of faith in states that have effectively become dysfunctional that workers are afraid NOT to put their trust in the foreign powers that have actually devastated them.

Take Syriza: does it have a clear stand on the Euro? No, but without answering that question there is no coherent way forward.

In Ireland too, it is only fringe voices that clearly pose this challenge: we can only take the economic measures we need to take, including telling the German bankers to get stuffed, if we disengage from the Euro and reject the European Project. Genuine economic cooperation and assistance yes; integration as a periphery of a European state, no.

We cannot expect a capitalist controlled media to give those who advance these ideas access to the people through those media. This is a debate that must be taken out of the edge and brought into the centre of the labour and trade union movement.

And I believe that the collapse of Labour offers a chance for this. What is needed now is for a battle to be fought in Labour for a new socialist theory that proudly asserts James Connolly’s real inheritance – against European imperialism, against the Euro and for a united Left fighting for national freedom and working class interests.

Developing the theory of socialism and the theory of revolution, evaluating the new nature of work, and the sense in which working people see themselves in class terms, all of that is part of arming a force whose organisational shape has to be recast.

A new theory will be the measure against which all parties must be tested. Then when we have a clear objective and purpose for struggle, then we can have hope.

And the history of our people is that hope generates courage and courage generates action.

Sé an dóchas an maidhmiú cuartach!