

TROTSKYISM TODAY ★

No. 8 11th August, 1976. 5p.

THEORETICAL SUPPLEMENT TO SOCIALIST PRESS



Bolshevik factory committee 1917

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMME

“What is the sense of the transitional programme? We can call it a programme of action, but for us, for our strategic conception, it is a transitional programme — it is a help to the masses in overcoming the inherited ideas, methods, and forms and of adapting themselves to the exigencies of the objective situation. This transitional programme must include the most simple demands. We cannot foresee and prescribe local and trade union demands adapted to the local situation of a factory, the development from this demand to the slogan for the creation of a workers’ soviet.

These are both extreme points, from the development of our transitional programme to find the connecting links and lead the masses to the idea of the revolutionary conquest of power. That is why some demands appear very opportunistic because they are adapted to the actual mentality of the workers. That is why other demands appear too revolutionary — because they reflect more the objective situation than the actual mentality of the workers. It is our duty to make the gap between objective and subjective factors as short as possible. That is why I cannot overestimate the importance of the transitional programme.”

Leon Trotsky, March 23rd, 1938.

The Transitional Programme for Marxists today embodies a revolutionary tradition, a method, and key principles which form the only road for resolving the immense crisis of leadership confronting the working class and oppressed masses of the world.

This crisis of leadership manifests itself in differing forms in different countries. In Britain the reformist Labour government in league with the Confederation of British Industry on the one hand, and the trade union bureaucracy on the other, carries out historically unprecedented attacks on British working class living standards in defence of capitalism.

In Italy, the mass strength of the so-called Communist Party is prostituted by its Stalinist leadership to a corrupt back-door deal with the capitalist Christian Democratic Party while all proposals of a Communist Party-Socialist Party government are rejected. In Spain, the Stalinists go so far as discussions with the fascists.

In the Middle East, the bourgeois-nationalist leaders of the

Palestinian Liberation Organisation confronted by a concerted right-wing attempt to smash their bases of operations and silence the revolutionary struggle for Palestinian self-determination, turn for support and protection *not* to the Arab masses but to the bourgeois leaders of the Arab states. In Africa, bourgeois nationalist leaders retard the armed struggle necessary to liberate Southern Africa.

And in Poland, the mass struggles of the working class against attacks on their living standards by the Stalinist bureaucracy confront the need for an organised political leadership with the programme and perspective for the political revolution.

Every one of these struggles shows clearly the need for a new political leadership to carry it through to a successful conclusion — to the taking of state power by the working class.

The implications of this crisis of working class leadership were recognised by Trotskyists in 1933. It was in that year that the full extent of the degeneration of the Third (Com-

munist) International, the international movement founded by Lenin and Trotsky on the gains of the victorious October 1917 revolution in Russia, were exposed in practice for all to see.

The Second International, the mass-based international grouping of reformist social democratic parties, had shown its true counter-revolutionary colours in 1914 with the outbreak of the First imperialist World War. In country after country reformist leaders had turned their backs on proletarian internationalism and voted support for their “own” bourgeoisie in the war. And having taken this stand they became and still remain simply the left appendages of bourgeois rule, the recruiting sergeants and labour lieutenants for the military and profit-making machines of capital.

Lenin and a handful of anti-war internationalists split there and then from the social-patriots, declaring the Second International dead. The Third International, long proclaimed a Bolshevik goal during the 1917 crisis, was in fact founded in March 1919. Its platform was proletarian internationalism, its main enemy opportunism, social-patriotism, the agents of the bourgeoisie within the leading ranks of the workers’ movement.

This platform remained intact so long as the leadership within the International itself was a revolutionary leadership. But the emergence within the Soviet Union of the Stalinist bureaucracy, its increasing dominance after 1924, and its reactionary nationalist perspective of ‘socialism in one country’ began to attack the very foundations of the International.

From a movement based on revolutionary Marxism for the furtherance of international revolution, it began to be transformed into a movement based on blind obedience, blind empiricism and eventually simply on the furtherance of the narrow self-interests of the Stalinist soviet bureaucracy.

Disastrous opportunist policies in 1925-27 led to the Stalinists becoming compromised with the British TUC during the General Strike and with the reactionary Chinese nationalist party, the Kuomintang, which murdered millions of Chinese



Soviets covered Germany in 1918

Communists and militants in 1927.

Only a year later that right-wing orientation was to be suddenly and empirically reversed. The long-predicted Soviet economic crisis warned of by the Left Opposition set in. The bureaucracy's constant refusal to undertake long-term planned industrialisation or systematic collectivisation had brought complete disruption to the economy, and cultivated a whole layer within the Soviet society prepared to fight to restore capitalism.

Stalin and his supporters suddenly recognised that here hung in the balance the very power base of the bureaucracy itself. Without the nationalised property relations of the October Revolution, the positions of power and privilege they had established would be in jeopardy. Hastily, with no planning or understanding, Stalin declared this the start of the "Third Period", the 'final assault' against capitalism, and launched an all-out crash campaign of dispossession of the wealthy peasants, bureaucratically managed industrialisation, and a purge of the right-wing both from the Russian and the Comintern party bureaucracies.

The absurd ultra-leftism which led Communist Party members to denounce social democrats as "social fascists" began in this period from these material roots. The Comintern, seen by Stalin only as an extension of the Russian bureaucracy, was "cleansed" of all dissenting voices and equipped with a bankrupt and disastrously sectarian programme — a programme which was to make possible the crushing of the most powerful workers' movement in Europe under the heel of fascism.

SPLIT

Split in two by the policies of the Comintern, and denied any practical lead by either reformist or Stalinist leaderships, the German working class was exposed to the brutal attacks of Hitler's fascist bands.

The failure of the German Communist Party to offer the slightest resistance to Hitler before his victory in March 1933 caused Trotsky at once to declare that a new Communist Party had to be built in Germany. But he held back on the call for a new International, to see if the traumatic shock of the German events could possibly provoke splits or discussion within the Comintern. Nothing of the sort took place. In July 1933, therefore, Trotsky declared that "It is Necessary to Build Communist Parties and an International Anew". He showed in the article why this conclusion had not been drawn earlier, and why it had to be drawn at this point.

"Theoretically, the collapse of the KPD [German Communist Party] still left two courses open to the Stalinist bureaucracy: either a complete review of the politics and the regime; or, on the contrary, a complete strangulation of all signs of life in the sections of the Comintern. The Left Opposition was guided by this theoretical possibility when, after advancing the slogan of a new party for Germany, it still left open the question of the fate of the Comintern...."

The Moscow leadership has not only proclaimed as infallible the policy which guaranteed victory to Hitler, but has also prohibited all discussion of what had occurred. And this shameful interdiction was not violated nor overturned. No national congresses; no international congresses; no discussions at party meetings; no discussions in the press! An organisation which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of the bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it. To say this openly and publicly is our direct duty toward the proletariat and its future. In all our subsequent work it is necessary to take as our point of departure the historical collapse of the official Communist International."

Writings 1932-33 pp305-306 (emphasis added).

DIED

The Third International had died — but in the process its leaders had been fought on every issue, and the line of Bolshevism upheld by Trotsky and the Left Opposition. The passing of the Comintern onto the opposite side to the fight for revolutionary leadership had seen the steeling of a small but crucial nucleus of cadres internationally, experienced in the struggle against all forms of bureaucratic opportunism and centrism. The Left Opposition did not begin with a blank sheet or the need to start anew.

But the construction of a new International was still a huge step posing the gathering of forces and the careful drawing of a balance sheet of the experience of sixteen years since October 1917.

Already in December 1932 this had begun with the publication by the International Left Opposition of a document entitled *The International Left Opposition, Its Tasks and Methods*. This stressed the essential continuity of revolutionary principle embodied in the Opposition:

"The International Left Opposition stands on the ground of the first four Congresses of the Comintern.....all the essential principles (in relation to imperialism and the bourgeois state; to democracy and reformism; problems of insurrection; the dictatorship of the proletariat; on relations with the peasantry and the oppressed nations; soviets; work in the trade unions; parliamentarism; the policy of the united front) remain even today the highest expression of proletarian strategy in the epoch of the general crisis of capitalism."

Writings 1932-33 pp51-52

These principles had now to be developed to take into account the emergence of a new form of labour bureaucracy feeding off the revolutionary gains of the workers' state — Stalinism. It was necessary to pose the fight for political revolution to overthrow Stalinism while unconditionally defending

devote a great deal of attention to precise analysis of this problem.

But also crucial — now more than ever for the small forces of the Opposition — was not simply to restate and strengthen the basic principles of proletarian internationalism summed up in Lenin's 21 points for acceptance of parties into the Comintern, but to develop a tactical approach to the winning of a mass base of support in the working class and peasantry of each country. The seventh of the eleven points of the 1932 document was therefore:

"Recognition of the necessity to mobilise the masses under transitional slogans corresponding to the concrete situation in each country, and particularly under democratic slogans insofar as it is a question of struggle against feudal relations, national oppression, or different varieties of openly imperialist dictatorship (fascism, Bonapartism, etc)."

Ibid p 53, (original emphasis).

This was the more important when we remember the objective difficulties faced in building a new International. The Second International had been built alongside the basic organisations of the working class in each country, and commanded the support of millions of workers through their unions and reformist parties. The Third International had established itself on the prestige of the Russian Revolution in a period of revolutionary upsurge and had quickly found a mass base in a number of countries.

But the decision to build the Fourth International had to be taken in the period of the German defeat, the temporary ebb of revolutionary movements, and on the basis of an understanding of the degeneration and betrayal of the Comintern and the bureaucratisation of the world's first workers' state.

Only the most concrete programme advanced in each country, the most rigorous defence of principle, the most flexible use of tactics such as the united front could enable the forces of the Fourth International to reach out to the masses.



China 1927: the Canton Massacre

Yet the changing orientation of the first years of the Comintern had produced important lessons for the new movement. The First Congress of the Comintern of course had centred on differentiating the new International from the bankrupt remnants of the Second International. It had been convened on the crest of the wave of international revolutionary struggles throughout post-war Europe. The 'Invitation to the Conference' showed clearly that immediate revolution was seen as the perspective:

"2. The task of the proletariat now is to seize State power immediately. The seizure of State power means the destruction of the State apparatus of the bourgeoisie and the organisation of a new proletarian apparatus of power."

The main attention was not therefore on any transitional steps to revolution but more on ramming home the full weight of the betrayal of the Second International, the strength of the working class and the possibility for a rapid wave of revolutions. The May Day Manifesto of the Communist International in 1919 stated:

"The communist revolution is growing before our eyes. A Soviet republic in Russia, a Soviet republic in Hungary, a Soviet republic in Bavaria — these are the results of the recent struggles of the working class."

The whole of Germany is shaking under the strain of civil war.... In France huge workers' demonstrations have begun.... In Italy the struggle has reached boiling point and the communists are calling for the dictatorship of the proletariat. In England strikes have taken on an epidemic character....

Before a year has passed, the whole of Europe will be Soviet. In every country the workers have realised that the decisive moment has



Lenin with other a

But of course the great revolutionary hopes for the "great International Soviet Republic" by 1920 were to be dashed on the one side by the betrayals of the still-influential leaders of the social democratic parties, energetically working with the bourgeoisie, using troops and all forms of repression against the working class, and on the other by the inadequacy of revolutionary leadership — the lack of genuine Bolshevik-type parties outside Russia.

Increasingly the attention of the Communist International was forced to turn from simply summoning the masses to action — action which in many, many cases workers themselves were clearly prepared to take — to the question of exposing and defeating the treacherous reformist leaders and building mass Communist Parties to lead revolutions in each country.

But the defeats suffered by the working class in the year between the First and Second Congresses brought a more penetrating analysis of reformism and the labour bureaucracy. Trotsky pointed out in a meeting in August 1920 the undeniable fact that:

"If, since the First Congress, the world proletariat has suffered defeats and has sometimes had to retreat, that was because it did not follow the road pointed out by the Communist International."

Lenin also recognised that the task of combatting the Second International and its reactionary leaders was far from over, and that the acute crisis of capitalism by no means brought automatic revolution or automatic collapse:

"Opportunism is our chief enemy....Without the support of the opportunist leadership the bourgeoisie could not maintain themselves in power."

EXCLUDED

The Second Congress focussed on these two key questions — adopting the rigorous series of 21 statutes drafted by Lenin to exclude any opportunist bureaucrats from straying into the International from the Second International and to purge the ranks of careerists of all types; and at the same time giving attention to combatting "ultra-leftism" which, Lenin pointed out, "leads to an incorrect appreciation of the role and tasks of the party in relation to the class and the masses and of the obligation of revolutionary communists to work in bourgeois parliaments and reactionary trade unions."

The 'Theses on the Trade Union Movement, Factory Councils and the Communist International' passed at the Second Congress contained a section on workers control showing how the daily struggles of workers on jobs and wages pose the necessity for workers' control — which arms them for the fight for socialist revolution:

"...because of this economic disorder, it is the duty of the Communist Party to organise all workers, and to arm them for the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship by extending and deepening the struggle which they all understand, for workers control over production."

(emphasis added).

The Theses called for Communists to work to win control of the reformist trade unions and transform them into instruments of revolution. Other Theses outlined how revolutionaries should work in relation to bourgeois parliaments.

Yet even so the importance of a tactical approach to the masses through a programme of demands was seen as very much a secondary question at the Second Congress — the main attention remained focussed on summoning the masses to revolution.

By the time of the Third Congress, however, in June-July 1921, the Comintern clearly had to reckon with a new objective situation internationally, in which the fight for immediate



legates entering the Second World Congress of the Comintern.

within the mass workers' movement. Attention had to be given to the tactical method and approach of the new Communist Parties themselves. Trotsky wrote later that:

"With the Third Congress it is realised that the post-war revolutionary ferment is over....The turn is taken to winning the masses, using the united front, that is organising the masses, on a programme of transitional demands."

In the 'Theses on the International Situation and the Tasks of the Comintern' drafted by Trotsky and Varga the problem is sketched in the opening section:

"The revolutionary movement at the termination of the imperialist war and after this war is marked by an amplitude unequalled in history....This mighty wave, however, does not succeed in overthrowing world capitalism, not even European capitalism."

But after analysing the economic situation, the conclusion is that, despite some appearances capitalism has in no way permanently restored equilibrium:

"At bottom the question of reestablishing capitalism on the foundations outlined means the following: will the working class be willing to make under the new and incomparably more difficult conditions those sacrifices which are indispensable for reinstalling the stable conditions of its own slavery, harsher and crueller than those which reigned before the war?....The present state of the world proletariat furnishes the least justification for a prognosis of this kind."

Instead of renouncing hopes of revolution, the Communist Parties must prepare for future struggles and upheavals.

"40. The fundamental task of the Communist Party in the current crisis is to lead the present defensive struggles of the proletariat, to extend their scope, to deepen them, to unify them, and in harmony with the march of events, to transform them into decisive political struggles for the ultimate goal...."

"41. Whether the revolutionary movement develops in the next period at a swift or slow tempo, the Communist Party must in either case remain the party of action."

It was to be this approach, summed up in 1921, which contained the key to the method of the revolutionaries who fought to prepare a programme and orientation for the Fourth International. In particular, the concept of fighting to turn and develop defensive actions by the working class and its allies into actions which organise the class and lead workers to challenge the capitalist system itself is vital to the method of the Transitional Programme.

Indeed this method runs as the common thread through the Bolshevik mobilisation of the workers and peasants for the October Revolution, the early years of the Comintern, the struggles of the Left Opposition and the Transitional Programme itself.

It runs diametrically counter to the empirical and wooden understanding of the Stalinist bureaucracy with its opportunist adaptations nationally and internationally.

For the empiricist there is simply either offensive or defensive. And for the bureaucrat the offensive simply means giving an arrogant command while the retreat means grovelling capitulation to the enemy. For them there is no idea of revolutionary preparation for forward movement within temporary retreats.

RETREAT

So, for the Stalinists, the ebb of international revolution after 1923 implied simply a retreat had to be made from all of the goals of socialism. Instead they turned to compromise with the rich peasant in Russia and the labour bureaucracy or bourgeois nationalist leaders elsewhere (TUC and Kuomintang).

And when crisis struck the bureaucratically dislocated Russian economy in 1928, it meant for the Stalinists a complete reversal of all policies — from class collaboration to the grotesque ultra-left sectarianism of "social fascism"; from talk of "rehabilitated" capitalism to talk of the "final crisis".

road avoiding these two completely destructive poles of policy at home or abroad.

But Lenin had taught otherwise, and the Left Opposition had based its fight against Stalinism on his revolutionary method:

"The first stage in our struggle was to create a genuine Communist Party, so that we could know with whom we were talking and in whom we could have complete confidence....The second stage, after we have created the party, must be to learn how to prepare the revolution. In many countries we have not even begun to learn how to win the leadership."

The 'Theses on Tactics' at the Third Congress highlighted perhaps for the first time the huge gulf between the dangers of the objective situation and the unpreparedness of working class leadership:

"....despite the objectively revolutionary situation, political and economic,the majority of the workers are not yet under communist influence....From the day of its foundation the Communist International has clearly and unambiguously made its goal the formation not of small communist sects, trying by propaganda and agitation only to establish their influence over the working masses, but participation in the struggle of the working masses, the direction of this struggle in a Communist spirit, and the creation in the course of this struggle of experienced, large, revolutionary, mass communist parties...."

Towards implementing this turn, the 'Theses on Tactics' included a prominent section on "Partial Struggles and Partial Demands" which was to form the basic starting point for the tactics of the Transitional Programme. It stressed that:

"The Communist Parties do not put forward any minimum programme to strengthen and improve the tottering structure of capitalism. The destruction of that structure remains their guiding aim and their immediate mission. But to carry out this mission the Communist Parties must put forward demands whose fulfilment is an immediate and urgent working class need, and they must fight for these demands in mass struggle, regardless of whether they are compatible with the profit economy of the capitalist class or not...."

"If the demands correspond to the vital needs of broad proletarian masses and if these masses feel that they cannot exist unless these demands are met, then the struggle for these demands will become the starting point of the struggle for power."

Here again, then, is contained the concept of defensive demands being turned by Marxist intervention into the basis of a revolutionary offensive.

"In place of the minimum programme of the reformists and centrists, the Communist International puts the struggle for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for a system of demands which in their totality disintegrate the power of the bourgeoisie, organise the proletariat, represent stages in the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship, and each of which expresses in itself the need of the broadest masses, even if the masses themselves are not yet consciously in favour of the proletarian dictatorship...."

"These partial demands, anchored in the needs of the broadest masses, must be put forward by the Communist Parties in a way which not only leads the masses to struggle, but by its very nature also organises them."

(emphasis added).

Here is the model of the Transitional Programme's "system of transitional demands" which must stem from "today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably [lead] to the final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat."

And of course, at their base, the Comintern's 'Theses on Tactics' depended, as do today's transitional demands, upon the economic analysis of capitalist crisis insisted upon by Lenin and Trotsky, but scoffed at by reformists, centrists and all forms of opportunist:

"The revolutionary character of the present epoch consists precisely in this, that the most modest conditions of life for the working masses are incompatible with the existence of capitalist society, and that therefore the fight for even the most modest demands grows into the fight for communism."

(emphasis added)

Such a statement was no pious expression of hope. It had behind it the living experience of the role of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution, as well as the continuing obvious economic dislocation of capitalist Europe.

The Third Congress went on to endorse, in the 'Theses' on the work of the Red International of Labour Unions, a "programme of action", which included demands for full pay for the unemployed, and an end to business secrets:

"For this purpose special control commissions must be set up, to supervise raw materials, fuel, orders....Specially elected control commissions must thoroughly investigate the financial relations between the concern in question and other concerns, to do which it will be necessary to suggest to the workers as an immediate practical task to put an end to commercial secrecy."

(emphasis added)

Here the mass appeal of the demand for an end to business secrets is recognised together with the importance of the dual-power organisations — factory committees, "control commissions" — which pave the way for the struggle for power. Yet in each case the demands focus not on attack but on defence — of jobs, of living standards, of the means of production against closure. The living struggles of the working class against capitalist attack are seen clearly as the starting point for organisation and political education of the as yet non-political masses. "To the masses!" was the battle-cry of the Third Congress — with its crucial lessons for today's revolutionaries carried forward in the Transitional Programme.

UNITED FRONT

The Fourth Congress of the Communist International developed further on this orientation, particularly focussing on the tactic of the "united front" of working class parties against capitalist attack. This slogan, again starting from defence of the working class, was designed both to unite the ranks of the workers in struggle and to expose and isolate the treacherous reformist leaderships of the mass organisations, winning the working class to the banner of revolution.

The first five years of the Comintern thus laid up an invaluable heritage for revolutionaries — a record and a platform scorned and rejected, distorted and inverted by the Stalinists, who transformed nearly every single decision into its bureaucratic-conservative opposite.

The real lessons of the defeats, blunders and setbacks of the 1920s were therefore learned not by the mass of workers, nor by their bureaucratic leaders, but only by the cadres of the Left Opposition. In 1933 these cadres confronted the task of building anew on this heritage.

From the beginning it was understood by Trotsky and others that:

"A new International cannot be prepared without practical participation in the unfolding events. To counterpose a programmatic discussion to the revolutionary struggle would, of course, be false. It is necessary to combine the two." (Declaration of the Bolshevik Leninist Delegation at the Conference of Left Socialist and Communist Organisations, Writings 1933-4 p44).

The fight for the Fourth International therefore continued on several fronts. On the one side the continued critique of Stalinism and reformism, with the advocacy of alternative programme and perspective in the major struggles emerging internationally, particularly in France and Spain. At the same time a process of internal clarification and discussion began within the ranks of the Opposition on a balance sheet of the past struggle and perspective for the Fourth International. And while proceeding with these struggles, pressure was also brought to bear on a number of centrist groupings internationally which still clung to illusions in the Comintern or social democracy — trying to persuade them to make a break with these bankrupt bodies and to declare for the Fourth International.

Almost at once the emergence of acute class struggle in France with the threat of fascist repression presented a challenge for the development of the Opposition. In the face



Hitler's victory in 1933 - fatal fruits of Stalinist ultra-leftism.

parties, only the Trotskyists put forward from the very beginning a comprehensive programme for working class self-defence against fascism. In March 1934 Trotsky declared "France is now the key to the situation" and called for the arming of the working class, along with the setting up of a proletarian militia to oppose fascism. This declaration was followed in June 1934 by a much more comprehensive "Programme of Action for France", which distilled many of the most basic lessons of method and tactics both from the Bolshevik experience and from the German defeat of 1933.

The "Programme of Action" in many respects exactly anticipates demands of the Transitional Programme four years later — though the sliding scale of wages and sliding scale of hours were not included and appear not to have been thought of in 1934.

Prominent among the "Programme's" demands were the call for the abolition of business secrets; the fight for workers' control exercised through committees of workers, of peasants and of small functionaries; a series of demands including the shortened working week and increased wages, equal pay for women; nationalisation of banks, key industries and transport; monopoly of foreign trade; an alliance of workers and small farmers; workers control of social services; disbanding of the police, political rights for soldiers; and the call for a workers' and peasants' government based on local independent committees of workers and peasants.

It was followed in November 1934 by Trotsky's pamphlet *Whither France?* which laid stress on the acute crisis confronting the French working class and the necessity for bold leadership to avert the dangers of fascism. Trotsky stressed the complete betrayal of the social democrats in seeking a road of compromise with the bourgeois Radical Party which subordinated the independent interests of the working class to the supposed prejudices of the middle class supporters of the Radicals. Yet less than a year later the Stalinists too would have taken a leading role in formulating precisely such a class-collaborationist policy not only in France but internationally, under the slogan of the "Popular Front". This was formally adopted as policy at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in August 1935.

POPULAR FRONT

Under the "Popular Front" all the disastrous class-collaboration of the Stalinists' flirtation with the Chinese Kuomintang was brought back to life, only now alliances were not simply sought with bourgeois nationalists, but with any bourgeois party verbally opposed to fascism.

In various forms this policy has predominated as the one most fitted to the international class collaboration of the Stalinist bureaucracy ever since 1935. Its consequences for the European working class were immediately as destructive as they had been for the Chinese workers and peasants eight years earlier. In France the working class was tied by its mass parties to a bloc with the bourgeoisie which denied any leadership to its revolutionary struggles and left it open to fascist attack. In Spain the impact was even more shattering. During three years of revolutionary civil war the Popular Front piecemeal sapped the strength of the anti-fascist forces, cut them off from the necessary alliance with the peasantry, demobilised the factory committees and the workers' militia, worked with GPU special detachments to murder Trotskyists and other left-wing militants, and opened the door to the eventual victory of Franco in 1939.





Yet the betrayals of the Popular Front took place at a high point of the international wave of militant resistance which swept through the European and American working class in 1935-7, marked by a surge of sit-down strikes and a determined struggle for unionisation in the United States which gave birth to the CIO confederation.

The contradiction of the ripeness of the situation for revolution and the complete lack of mass revolutionary leadership sharpened to its extreme. The growth of the war danger, which escalated alongside Hitler's imperialist expansion and the growth of national antagonisms between the bourgeois states, reemphasised the need for an *international* party of revolution to rally the most militant and determined layers of the proletariat to the struggle for socialism.

BALANCE OF FORCES

In summing up the political balance of forces at the time of the Founding Conference of the new International, which was held in Paris in September 1938, Trotsky pointed to both the strengths and the weaknesses of the movement:

"At present, sections of the Fourth International exist in thirty countries. True, they are only the vanguard of the vanguard... But the position of the revolutionary vanguard is far more favourable today than it was twenty-five years ago. The main conquest is that before the war there already exist in all the most important countries of the world tested cadres, numbering hundreds and thousands of revolutionists in growing numbers, welded together by the unity of a doctrine, and tested in the school of cruelest persecutions by the imperialist bourgeoisie, the Social Democracy and, in particular, the Stalinist Mafia.

The Second, the Third and the Amsterdam Internationals cannot at present convene their congresses, because they are paralysed by their dependence on imperialism and because they are torn asunder by "national" contradictions. On the contrary, the sections of the Fourth International, despite their extremely meagre resources, the difficulties of obtaining visas, the murder of their secretary and the hail of repressions, were able in the most critical moment to convene their international congress and adopt unanimous decisions in which the tasks of the present titanic struggle are formulated precisely and concretely, on the basis of all historic experience."

(Writings 1938-9)

But progress was hard for the International which was in Trotsky's words "born amid the roar of defeats". The dead weight of the betrayals of two mass Internationals weighed down on the living struggle of Trotskyists for the building of revolutionary parties. The method of the programme — the demands, the tactical approach to the masses — could not be hoped alone to overcome the huge difficulties objectively posed by history.

In discussion in April 1939, Trotsky compared the previous period to the period of reaction after the 1905 Revolution in Russia when:

"Everybody invented slogans and methods to win the masses and nobody won them — they were desperate. In this time the only thing we could do was to educate the cadres and they were melting away. There was a series of splits to the right or to the left as to syndicalism and so on. Lenin remained with a small group, a sect, in Paris, but with confidence that there would be new possibilities of a rise. It came in 1918. We had a new tide, but then came the war to interrupt this development. During the war there was a silence as of death among the workers.....

Our situation now is incomparably more difficult than that of any other organisation in any other time.....

You have....the degeneration of the Third International on the one side and the terrible defeat of the Left Opposition with the extermination of the whole group. These facts are a thousand times more convincing for the working class than our poor paper with even the tremendous circulation of 5000 like the *Socialist Appeal*.....

....We must wait and prepare — a new element, a new factor in this constellation.

(Against the Stream, Writings 1938-9 pp 253&255)

The Second imperialist World War was soon to take a further savage toll of the revolutionary vanguard. Murders, repressions, illegality, Stalinist terror squads, jails, tortures and the draft piled up persecution upon persecution on the small forces of internationalists in each country. There were some desertions from the revolutionary camp, and there were the pressures of social patriotism, of Stalinist class collaboration working alongside bourgeois propaganda on the "war for democracy" to create a harsh climate for recruiting new forces.

MURDER

The Stalinists' murder of Leon Trotsky in 1940 struck a further crucial blow at the political leadership of the International. The post-war problems that beset the International are discussed in our International Document, *Fourth International: Problems and Tasks*.

Yet the principles, the tradition and the method of Bolshevism as fought for throughout the preceding years had been embodied in active form in the programme of the movement — the Transitional Programme. The orientation of revolutionaries towards the two wings of labour bureaucracy; towards worker and peasant; and the method of mobilisation for socialist revolution is distilled in the Programme from the experience of both victorious and defeated revolutions.

Those groups today who seek merely to pay lip-service to the Transitional Programme, who refuse to fight for the demands and slogans it advocates and explains, who retreat from the living struggle for principle and leadership in the daily struggles of the working class internationally are no Trotskyists but propagandists, centrists and sectarians.

In pulling back from the fight to mobilise the class around the programme they buttress the work of the reformists and the Stalinists whose every effort is directed to *preventing* the working class learning its strength and political lessons in struggle. The task is to *raise* the consciousness of the working class from that of trade union struggle to the struggle for power. It is possible to do this because the working class *learns* in its conflicts with capitalism, and its political consciousness is in no way fixed. Trotsky pointed out to all those who simply attack the working class as "backward" or "nationalist":

"The mentality of the class of the proletariat is backward but the mentality is not such a substance as the factories, the mines, the railroads, but is more mobile and under the blows of the objective crisis the millions of unemployed, it can change rapidly."

(May 19th 1938).

CONFIDENCE

It is on this unshakeable confidence in the revolutionary role and strength of the working class, on the firm conviction of the persecuted International Left Opposition that "the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus", and that the only way forward for the masses must be under the banner of the continuity of revolutionary Marxism, the Fourth International, that the Transitional Programme is based.

And in taking (in many instances for the first time in a Trotskyist party) the programme's transitional demands into the mass struggles of today's workers' movement, testing, enriching and developing our programme and perspectives in the experience of the struggle, the Workers Socialist League is undertaking the material fight to shake off the propagandist and sectarian shackles of the past and to return to the spirit which inspired the Bolshevik pioneers of our movement.



French strikers demonstrate in 1936 - year of the Popular Front



French Popular Front leaders - Blum (left) and CP leader Thorez (second left).



Spanish workers man barricades against Franco.

Only in this way can we play our role nationally and internationally in fighting for the reconstruction of the Fourth International on the basis of a thorough examination both of the past and unresolved present theoretical problems of the disorganised array of groupings laying claim to be part of the Trotskyist movement, and the past and present *practice* of those groups and groupings.

And only a Fourth International based on the principles, tradition and method of Trotsky, functioning as an organising centre for the world party of socialist revolution, can resolve the crisis of leadership in the international workers' movement.

BY JOHN LISTER

BOOKS

OUT NOW

THE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMME

The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International
by Leon Trotsky

Now available in a new edition with a brief glossary and an introduction by Alan Thornett.
Price 30p plus 10p p&p

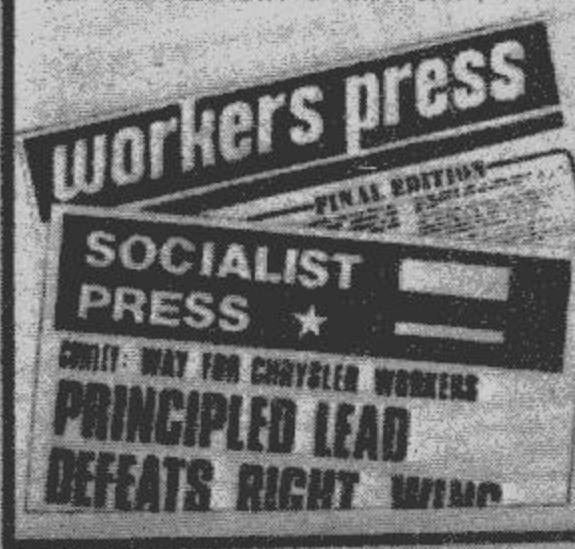
BEHIND THE SMOKESCREEN



An analysis of the sectarian politics of the Workers Revolutionary Party. Articles reprinted from Socialist Press.
Price 40p plus 10p p&p

THE BATTLE FOR TROTSKYISM

DOCUMENTS OF THE OPPOSITION EXPULSION FROM THE WORKERS REVOLUTIONARY PARTY IN 1974



Documents of the Opposition expelled from the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1974, with an account of the expulsions.
Price £1 plus 20p p&p