



Centrism in its dotage: USFI 1980-1991

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Of all the international tendencies claiming to be 'the' Fourth International (FI), the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) has the best claim on at least one score. All the other tendencies (the Lambertists, the Morenoites and the Healyites) are rooted in a national leadership that either left or was expelled from the FI during the period between 1951 and 1963. The USFI can claim an international leadership with a substantial continuity at the level of personnel with the young militants grouped around Michel Pablo who carried out the post-war reconstruction of the Inter-national.

But here the claim to continuity with Trotsky's Fourth International stops. For what is important in the question of revolutionary continuity is not some Marxist version of the apostolic succession. If that were so then the 13th World Congress held in February 1991 represents the 'laying on of hands' and the passing of the symbols of office to a new generation of leaders who have come to the fore in the last ten years as the old team have died or retired.

But the tradition and the method they are inheriting is not Trotsky's. Rather, the method and politics of the USFI owe everything to the decisive degeneration into centrism that took place in the years between the second (1948) and third (1951) world congresses of the FI.

Through nearly four decades the USFI has zigzagged in opportunistic response to the twists and turns of the international class struggle. Travelling ever further from their origins the USFI and its predecessors, the International Secretariat and the Socialist Workers Party of the United States (SWP(US)), have revised and re-revised a centrist version of 'Trotskyism' until it bears scarce any resemblance to the ideas and work of the founder of the movement.

Over the last eleven years the face of the USFI has changed dramatically. One of its major sections, the SWP(US), undertook repeated waves of expulsions, degenerated into neo-Stalinism and finally left the USFI. Once-strong sections in Britain and France shrank or fragmented. Fundamental tenets of revolutionary Marxism—'notably on the nature of the state, permanent revolution and on the political revolution'—were openly repudiated.

The question naturally arises then as to why, despite its centrist method, the USFI has been able to maintain itself for so long? Why has it not been forced by the major events of the international class struggle to cross over once and for all time into the camp of counter-revolutionary Stalinism, social democracy or some other bourgeois current within the workers' movement?

The answer lies in the USFI's marginalisation from most of these historic contests. Distanced from a leadership role the USFI has repeatedly been allowed to shuffle off responsibility for the political betrayals it has presided over: Bolivia 1952, Sri Lanka 1963, Portugal 1974, or Nicaragua or Iran 1979.

Eventually the disastrous consequences of one gross opportunist surrender after another to alien class forces becomes undeniable—'leading to the loss of whole sections and the dispersal of generations of cadres. The USFI then makes a repentant—and exceedingly brief—self-criticism and sets off to adapt to some other alien class force. Despite the continuous vacillations and the steady degeneration there remains the continuity of a specific and identifiable centrist method—an ossified centrism—that lies behind all the twists and turns. 1

The FI degenerated into centrism between 1948 and 1951 due primarily to the world-wide expansion of Stalinism, to the bureaucratically imposed overturns in Eastern Europe, China etc. These historic events apparently refuted Trotsky's

characterisation of the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism as well as his perspectives and prognoses. But the essential confusion was not to be found in Trotsky's analyses but in the interpretation given to the post-war events by the Pablo-Mandel-Frank-Cannon leadership.

If 'revolutions' could be made by Stalin, Tito or Mao then the FI and its programme were unnecessary at least for a whole 'first stage' of the world revolution. This neatly explained the failure of the FI to become 'the decisive force on the planet' as predicted by Trotsky at the onset of the Second World War.

At the 1951 Third World Congress the entire Inter-national adopted a centrist method. It consciously 're-armed' itself with the method of systematic political adaptation to currents within or orbiting Stalinism, petit bourgeois nationalism and social democracy. The fruits of this abandonment of the 'old Trotskyism' (now stigmatised as sectarianism) were not long in coming.

From 1953 the International split, re-unified, split and split again as factional feuds erupted over which non-proletarian class force was to be given hallowed place on the altar of opportunism. This method has led to erroneous perspectives, faulty tactics and disastrous turns in every decade since then.²

The 1980s were no exception. Centrist error was piled on centrist error. From Nicaragua, through Poland to the USSR, the USFI's method has led directly to political and organisational collapse.

What is more, the decade ended with world historic events, the death agony of Stalinism, events that are finally undermining the states whose existence provided a pole star for the FI's centrist course. The disintegration of Stalinism in all its variants, including in Vietnam and Cuba, the collapse of petit bourgeois nationalism, including in Nicaragua, all deprive the USFI of credible 'alternative, empirical unconscious' leaderships to follow.

In the years to come events will occur which will bring the USFI to the precipice, to the point where its forty year old 'method' can lead it no further and where any continued identification with 'Trotsky's mantle' will be seen as a dead weight. The events of the last ten years show an 'International' that History is beckoning ominously with the words of decision: 'Hic Rhodus Hic salta!'³

Nicaragua casts a long shadow

This relatively rapid decay began with the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Following an initial 'sectarian' hesitation, the USFI made a typical capitulation to petit bourgeois nationalism. Abandoning any programme for a working class seizure of power, of a workers' and peasants' government and of course of a revolutionary party to lead this fight, they opted for supporting the Sandinista-dominated popular front government.

Since it would have been too embarrassing to publicly junk Trotsky's condemnation of support for popular fronts, they committed an even more bizarre revision of Marxism. They fell into a ferocious factional struggle over whether Nicaragua was (and still is) a healthy workers' state, or whether it was (up to Violetta Chamorro's victory at the polls) a revolutionary workers' and peasants' government. The theoretical implications of these positions were to fuel a series of faction fights which persist to this day and directly led to the SWP(US)'s final departure from the USFI.

What both sides had to come to terms with was the fact that this 'workers' government' in all its transformations remained absolutely wedded to preserving Nicaraguan capitalism. Indeed, they were unable to deny this. Veteran USFI leader, Livio Maitan, wrote in 1985:

'Five years after the victory of 19 July, the bourgeoisie as a social class maintains a considerable force; it controls vital??not marginal or minority??sectors of the economy of the country as a whole.'⁴

Nor have the results of this preservation of the capitalist economy been hard to see, even if the USFI were unable to foresee them. The workers at least know it from bitter experience. Again according to the USFI, real wages in Nicaragua were cut by 99% during the 1980s!⁵ Yet astoundingly the USFI has described this savage attack as 'a tactic'

which was undoubtedly necessary.⁶ This shameful support for anti-working class policies is the bitter fruit of the USFI's characterisation of Nicaragua as being a workers' state from 1979 onwards despite having maintained capitalist property relations for twelve years.

After a twelve year binge on Sandinism, after the unforeseen debacle of Daniel Ortega's presidential campaign in 1990, the USFI have suddenly become more critical of their former idols. As little as two years ago the Sandinistas were praised for improving on Lenin and Trotsky in their commitment to pluralism and bourgeois democracy. Today the USFI dare to point out the grave errors committed in the course of its years in power, such as the FSLN's oppression of minorities, its bureaucratic control of the mass organisations, the IMF-inspired austerity programme and the adoption of bourgeois democracy⁷—precisely the kind of criticisms which the USFI previously stigmatised as hopelessly sectarian.

Yet even now the USFI continue to make pathetic excuses for the FSLN leaders. The 1991 13th World Congress absolved them of all blame. Soviets and workers' militias would perhaps have been better, our revolutionary tourists muse. But there is, after all, the great difficulty of how to develop direct democracy . . . starting in the period of revolutionary euphoria.⁸

The FSLN's refusal to break with capitalism and their preparedness to make the masses pay for the crisis were due to the fact that the economic policy of the Sandinistas was fundamentally due to the limits of the international situation.⁹ The USFI's rejection of Trotsky's line on China (i.e. their rejection of the strategy of permanent revolution)¹⁰ leads directly to the conclusion: 'The Sandinista strategy for the taking of power was the only one possible in a country like Nicaragua.'¹¹

A final absurdity is that for the USFI, despite the bourgeois character of the Sandinistas' programme and policies, despite the uninterrupted existence of capitalism, despite the absence of workers' democracy, despite the savage austerity programme, despite even the coming to power of the Chamorro government, Nicaragua remains a workers' state! Why? Because the Sandinistas still control the army, therefore the 'the revolutionary state has not been dismantled'.¹²

Generalising from the experience of Nicaragua

The 11th World Congress of the USFI was held shortly after the FSLN came to power. Broad conclusions were difficult to draw for the strategy of party building at such close quarters; it was enough for the USFI to give their usual knee-jerk reaction of unconditional and uncritical support. But over the next few years the leadership of the USFI were given plenty of time to muse over the results and implications of the Nicaraguan revolution for their own strategy and tactics.

It has long been a defining hallmark of the USFI that its political perspectives were imbued with a passive optimism in the forward march of the international revolution. For the USFI the 'Process of world revolution' seems to act like a disembodied demiurge or a force of nature. The 1969, 1974 and 1979 congresses—set against the genuine world wide revolutionary or militant class struggle events of that decade—were the most frenzied. The 11th (1979) Congress, for example, argued that 'the revolution is once again knocking on the door of the imperialist mother countries'.¹³

But by the May 1982 meeting of the International Executive Committee, Daniel Bensaïd argued that the time had come for a dose of realism: 'We should set aside any type of Messianic megalomania, look reality squarely in the face, including our own reality, and patiently set ourselves to work.'¹⁴ What was to replace the hysteria of the 11th Congress perspectives, however, was a return to the 1974 10th Congress's analysis of a perpetual 'recomposition of the world labour movement', coupled with yet another version of the USFI's objectivist and processist understanding of the 'world revolution'.

Bensaïd outlined the new orthodoxy within the USFI leadership. The perspective was only a slight retreat from that of the 11th Congress: 'We now stand merely at the threshold of a new wave of radicalisation of international scope that

will be incomparably deeper and more proletarian than that of the late 1960s?¹⁵ he argued.

The revolution might no longer be 'knocking on the door' but it seemed at least to be observed coming up the garden path. This required the usual heavy dose of impressionism and exaggeration:

'Now more than ever, we can see the dialectical unity of the world revolution verified on a day-to-day basis. There isn't a single major event of the international class struggle that doesn't set off an immediate chain reaction all the way to the antipodes.'¹⁶

The objective basis for these apocalyptic perspectives was the Sandinista revolution. The USFI, having re-categorised Nicaragua as a workers' state, had also begun to ponder the consequences of the FSLN victory and the guerrilla war in El Salvador. Coupled with the retreat of the European working class under the hammer blows of the capitalist offensive and betrayals of the reformist leadership, the stage was set for a new 'turn' in the USFI's perspectives, towards revolution in the 'third world'. This was effectively carried out at the 12th World Congress in 1985.

At first sight the Congress seemed to be learning some pretty fundamental lessons about the USFI's past errors of method. 'Each major period in the life of the International has been dominated by a perspective of an overall breakthrough in the short or medium term'.¹⁷ Like an alcoholic claiming to have decisively kicked the booze, the USFI went on to argue that the 'function and future of the Fourth International does not lie in any short-term miracle solution . . . The real perspective is a much longer and more complex process of reconstitution of a vanguard on an international level'.¹⁸

But this apparent accession of modesty and realism was not what it seemed. Rather than marking a turn to building propaganda groups (which is what the sections of the International were and are) as the nuclei of future revolutionary parties, this 'modesty' was the pretext for chasing after another replacement leadership.

As usual the USFI leadership saw their public sections and even the 'Fourth International' itself as an obstacle to the recomposition of yet another new vanguard.

'At this very moment, the international development of the class struggle, the advances of the revolution, the establishment of new workers' states, are fostering a general trend towards a recomposition of the workers' movement and its vanguard. In this context, currents can emerge that no longer vacillate between reformism and revolution, but between revolutionary internationalism and the soviet bureaucracy; or in yet more complex fashion, between revolution, reformism, the Soviet bureaucracy and the Chinese bureaucracy.'¹⁹

This analysis was composed of two parts. First, there was the usual objectivist optimism that can draw no balance sheet that includes defeats as well as victories:

'We stand now merely at the beginning of profound and lasting transformations in the workers' movement.'²⁰

Secondly, there is a clear targeting of 'future Sandinistas in several countries'²¹ and any other tendencies which could be claimed to be 'recomposing'. The Congress clearly expected other 'Sandinistas' to emerge. The task of the USFI sections world-wide was to seek out these elements and urge them on to fulfil their destiny.

The way in which the USFI sought to orient to these tendencies was, of course, not the way that Trotsky sought to relate to a genuine leftward centrist current in 1933-36, which involved proposals for united actions, blocs aimed at outright fusion and in the case of mass parties, the entry tactic.

The 12th Congress claimed that the 1933 'Bloc of Four' proposal by Trotsky implied that 'he did not envisage an International limited to revolutionary Marxists but a broader international of which they would be a decisive component.'²² The Congress theses on Party Building, claiming fidelity to Trotsky's line, stated:

'a rapprochement with other forces can take various forms, ranging from systematic united action to the establishment

of stable liaison committees and unification. In cases of fusions with revolutionary organisations or mass leftward-moving currents, the united organisation's affiliation to the Fourth International should not constitute a principled precondition.²³

But Trotsky's organisational flexibility was combined with an insistence on the clearest criticism of the centrist leaders and the most unremitting struggle for the programme. Above all, the objective—'not hidden for one minute'—was to build a new revolutionary communist international, the Fourth International.

The USFI's position heralded the complete opposite of Trotsky's practice. The clear signal was given to all the sections of the USFI:

'If you can fuse with another group, you should do so; the next international we want to build will be a bloc with the Sandinistas and their imitators, so forget about the FI for the next historic period.'

The sections put the new turn into practice

The first section to take up the 12th Congress' advice and dissolve itself was the German GIM. At the beginning of 1985 they fused with the KPD, a group of ex-Maoists, to form the reformist VSP. The fusion programme not only left the question of the international unresolved, but also the nature of the USSR and the other degenerate workers' states, the nature of the SPD and the Greens, revolutionary tactics in the trade unions, 'socialism in one country' and the nature of the socialist revolution!²⁴

This fusion not only set a world record for unprincipled lash-ups, it was utterly self-defeating as a minimal basis for common action in Germany. This, of course, was far from being at the forefront of their minds. Their main concern was to orient to part of the 'recomposing world labour movement'. Unfortunately, the GIM was fusing, not with a recomposing new leadership, but a decomposing leftover of 1970s' Maoism. Thereafter it became a race to see which element could decompose the fastest.

In Peru, a similar tactic was carried out. But whilst the GIM was long past its prime the Peruvian section, the PRT, had been relatively strong. In 1978 Hugo Blanco, the internationally-known leader of the Peruvian section, had won over 9% of the votes in the presidential election. Despite this strong base, in 1985 the PRT was 'formally' dissolved into the left-reformist PUM. Soon it became clear that there was nothing formal about it. The Peruvian section simply ceased to exist.

Entry into the PUM soon drove the old PRT leaders into ever more opportunist positions. The PUM called for a vote for the reactionary neo-liberal bourgeois candidate, Fujimori, in the 1990 Peruvian presidential elections. The excuse was that the masses had illusions that reactionary Fujimori was 'better' than the reactionary Mario Vargas Llosa.

The USFI has never criticised its supporters for this line. The 1991 World Congress passed over it in silence. Even faced with the ferocity of Fujimori's austerity attacks, the most the USFI supporters in Peru have been able to muster is to mumble about the 'confusions' caused by calling for a vote for Fujimori.²⁵ Hugo Blanco, elected a senator with only 0.2% of the vote, is, however, quite unrepentant for advising the Peruvian workers and peasants to vote for a bourgeois candidate. This despite the fact that, as he freely admits, 'Fujimori is of course following the same programme as Vargas Llosa'.²⁶ He blithely says of this betrayal 'I still believe it was not a mistake'²⁷ for the bizarre reason that because the masses now feel deceived by Fujimori they are fighting harder than if the Thatcherite novelist had been elected!

Never mind the duty of revolutionaries to say what is, to warn the masses in advance so that later at least their vanguard will say: this party warned us, it did not share our foolish illusions, it knew how to hold to a class line.

Opportunism in relation to bourgeois figures has been a regular feature of the USFI's policies, from Péron in Argentina and Ben Bella in Algeria onwards. Most recently the jewel in the USFI's Latin American crown, the Mexican PRT has followed this well trodden path. The object of its attention is Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, a radical

bourgeois who split from the ruling PRI. His programme was a return to pure populist nationalism. Without openly supporting Cardenas the PRT began to imitate his politics.

Rosalía Pereó-Aguilar, one of the PRT's public figureheads and deputies, argued in parliament before Cardenas split:

?'To make this country progress another road needs to be taken, a national, popular and democratic road which enables the needs of the workers to be satisfied and the sovereignty of the country to be defended against foreign aggression.'²⁸

The PRT's policy was described by another of its leaders as 'building political fronts with other forces in order to put pressure on the bourgeois nationalists'.²⁹

Cardenas ran the PRI candidate a close second in the presidential elections of July 1989. A minority of the PRT, under veteran Mexican Trotskyist Adolfo Gilly, dissatisfied with the party's decision to stand an independent candidate, split from the PRT to support Cardenas. The PRT—whose politics were not so distinct from those of Cardenas—got the worst of both worlds and saw its vote slump to 0.38% according to the official figures and 1.5% according to its own, thus losing its parliamentary representation.

For the PRT there is no question of building working class and poor peasant resistance to the policies of the bourgeois nationalists. Rather the leaders of the bourgeoisie have to be 'pressured'. Since the elections the PRT's opportunism has been refined—or rather reduced—to the simple class-collaborationist project of establishing 'a privileged alliance' with Cardenas? PRD.³⁰ Having lost a number of members to Cardenas, the PRT is coming back for more.

At the 13th Congress this line was codified in a set of theses on Latin America. The Congress considered that 'the revolutionary left neglected the struggle for democracy and the defence of the oppressed nation'.³¹ The key lesson to be learned, say the USFI, is the importance of 'the people'—a sociological characterisation based on wealth criteria, without any explicit class content—and the strategy of 'forming political fronts' which are 'the basic instrument in the fight for hegemony in possible alliances or in society. They have a function that is not just conjunctural, but long-lasting'.³²

The political basis of such organisations, and the objectives that justify their inevitable longevity, are left unstated. Are they united fronts, or blocs for common propaganda? Are they crypto parties or some amorphous combination of all of these? The only thing that can be guaranteed is that they are a pretext for not building parties on a clear programme.

Between the 12th and 13th Congresses the trickle of unprincipled fusions and pacts became a flood as USFI sections around the globe rushed to dissolve themselves in any nationalist, reformist or right centrist organisation that would have them

' In Colombia, the section disappeared without trace into a vague reformist front, A Luchar.

' In Italy the LCR entered Democrazia Proletaria (DP), only three years after having refused to do so on programmatic grounds. DP has itself recently decided to join the MRC, formed by ex-PCI members who refused to go along with the social democratisation of the party.

' In Britain the USFI's supporters split into two camps over which section of the Labour left should be adapted to. John Ross's Socialist Action merged with the Livingstone-ites, whilst Socialist Outlook became the footsoldiers for Tony Benn. Both sections refused to countenance a sharp criticism of the 'left' trade union bureaucrats in the 1980s as they searched for ways in which to 'recompose' the vanguard.

' In the Basque country, the LKI fused with the nationalist MKE on the basis of a completely opportunist position on the national question.³³

' Corsican members of the French LCR fused with a Corsican nationalist group in the middle of 1991, leaving their USFI membership behind them.

? The Bolivian POR-Gonzales effectively collapsed having participated in Lechin's DRU slate in the elections to the COB trade union federation in 1985. Lechin, a nationalist reformist bureaucrat, was in turn an ardent supporter of the reactionary MNR coalition.

? In Switzerland the PSO participated in a 'Socialist Green Alternative' slate during the November 1990 elections. One of the PSO leaders, Hanspeter Uster, was elected Minister of Justice and Police in the Canton of Zug, south of Zurich!

The fusion manoeuvres did not always succeed. Where the sections failed to fuse, the results have been as telling as in the so-called 'successes':

? In France the LCR did its best to fuse with the ex-Communist Party members around Pierre Juquin. Despite a long series of flattering articles and resolutions, and the LCR doing a great deal of leg-work for Juquin in the May 1988 presidential election campaign, Juquin turned down their overtures, having first recruited a number of LCR members.

? In Belgium, the PTB proposed fusion with a Maoist organisation which claimed that Trotskyism was counter-revolutionary! The Maoists turned out to be more principled than the USFI and refused to go along with this opportunist proposition.

In other areas of the world where the USFI did not have sections and where it decided there were already actual or potential 'Sandinistas', no attempt was made to bring together an open revolutionary nucleus.

? In South Africa the USFI was unable to make up its mind as to where the 'leftward moving current' was to come from. Initially pinning its hopes on AZAPO and the National Forum, by February 1986 the IEC decided that the National Forum had lost out in its struggle for the hegemony of the mass movement. Although the IEC resolution mentioned 'once!' the need for a revolutionary party in South Africa,³⁴ the key question for the USFI 'as in the USSR today' was that of pressurising the mass leadership. The inevitable conclusion was drawn less than a year later when the IEC stated that 'the organisations of the Fourth International should everywhere try to particularly develop their links with the ANC'.³⁵

? In the Philippines, the USFI refused to try and build a section and advised revolutionaries to tail the Cory Aquino bourgeois leadership, arguing in favour of passive support for Aquino in the presidential elections in order 'to avoid at all costs breaking the unity of the struggle against Marcos'.³⁶

? In Sri Lanka this class-collaborationist 'anti-imperialist' electoral line has also been applied. The NSSP, having broken its links with the British Militant Tendency, was accepted as a sympathising section at the 1991 13th World Congress, despite its collaboration with the reactionary Bandaranaike.

In the words of Salah Jaber, who gave a report on the NSSP to the Congress:

'The NSSP . . . publicly accepted to support Madame Bandaranaike as the common opposition candidate in case of elections, but with a separate platform presented by a candidate of their party (the NSSP), who they would, however, not call to vote for.'³⁷

Jaber continued, somewhat disingenuously: 'In the specific conditions of the island, the broad masses might possibly not see this as a tactical question'.³⁸ Indeed! The NSSP's position 'still not publicly disavowed by the USFI' was a betrayal of the struggles of the workers' and peasants' of Sri Lanka, to say nothing of the national struggle of the Tamils, all of whom have been subject to bloody repression by the Bandaranaike government. Their 'tactic' of presenting a fake candidate was nothing more than a fig-leaf to hide their reformist positions.

Political revolution in Poland

The 1980s began and ended in major upheavals in the Stalinist states. The political revolutionary crisis which wracked Poland in 1980-81 was a dress rehearsal for the tumultuous events of 1989-90. An acute crisis of the bureaucratically

planned economy led to mass workers' struggles against Stalinist dictatorship. For the first time an independent trade union movement, Solidarnosc, won legal recognition. Embryonic workers' councils came into existence.³⁹

The question of leadership was posed particularly acutely. The Walesa leadership of Solidarnosc adopted a programme that envisaged a 'reformist' road to the restoration of capitalism. The working class as a whole, however, was far from united behind the Walesa leadership's programme, and the potential for a struggle for political power for the working class remained until the day that Jaruzelski's tanks crushed the movement in December 1981.

The USFI, as was to be expected, quickly rolled up and stowed away the banner of political revolution. Not a word was spoken of the need to build a revolutionary Trotskyist party to lead the anti-bureaucratic revolution. Instead the latest 'blunt instrument' of the world revolution was none other than the Walesa leadership and its programme. Criticism of Walesa was muffled in the extreme.

Instead of orienting towards the proto-soviet organs of struggle, fighting to develop them into instruments of the struggle for power the USFI leadership tailed the parliamentarism of the Solidarnosc leaders who argued for a second chamber parliamentary chamber (the Sejm), trying to render it more profound by arguing 'for the centralisation and development of workers' committees and their national representatives in a second chamber of producers.'⁴⁰

The first chamber would be elected by 'normal' bourgeois means. Borrowing this 'combination' of workers' and bourgeois democracy from the right centrists of the early 1920s, they touted it as a 'transition' to workers' council democracy. In fact, as the experience of Germany after the 1918-19 revolution or the Polish workers' councils of 1956 showed, any workers' councils that allowed themselves to be thus neutered would be doomed to disappear in short order

The atomised indirect democracy of bourgeois parliaments which enforces passivity on the workers maximises the dead weight of the peasantry and the 'middle class'. It allows the executive and the state bureaucracy to act systematically against the interests of the producers. In short, it is no neutral organ. It is, even in the absence of a bourgeoisie and of capitalist property relations, a bourgeois instrument, one aimed against the proletarian dictatorship.

The Stalinists used these fake and ornamental parliaments to replace workers' soviets and to disguise, however ineffectively, the dictatorship of the party of the bureaucracy over the workers. The triumph of real parliamentary democracy over the bureaucratic dictatorship will in its turn be a diversion and a disguise for the triumph of political forces intent on rapid restoration.

To advocate or support bourgeois parliamentarism is a terrible betrayal of the programme of political revolution. Workers' councils, of which Poland and Hungary have direct experience, should have been the centre of revolutionary agitation and propaganda. We make no apology for saying that, far from combining bourgeois and proletarian democracy, Trotskyists should have counterposed the latter to the former. This was not simply or mainly a propaganda task but a task of concentrating on winning the inter-factory committees to an action programme for conquering power and using it to solve Poland's economic crisis by a democratically worked out plan.

After Jaruzelski's coup a series of debates broke out inside the prison camps, in exile and in clandestinity, as the Polish left struggled to learn the lessons of Solidarnosc's failure. Supporters of the USFI played a key role in trying to assemble the nucleus of a new organisation in Poland. But already they were looking for another replacement leadership to tail. This time a key component was the openly counter-revolutionary WSN (Liberty Justice Independence) led by Jacek Kuron. This organisation was formed after the dissolution of the KSS-KOR in October 1981, and clearly favoured parliamentary democracy and the restoration of the market as an integral part of the future Polish revolution.

The USFI refused to characterise the WSN as seeking the restoration of capitalism, and trimmed to Kuron by arguing that 'in no way does the character of the property of the means of production flow from the system of parliamentary democracy'.⁴¹ Pure sophistry! It may not flow from parliamentary institutions, but parliamentary democracy is a

mighty instrument for bringing it into existence! Kuron, whilst undoubtedly grateful for the left cover given to him by the USFI, had bigger fish to fry, and he increasingly rejected even the fig-leaf of 'socialist' rhetoric.

Paralysis and adaptation faced with Gorbachev

Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost seem to have caught the USFI off guard. Their first programmatic statement came at an IEC in 1987,⁴² over two years after Gorbachev came to power. However, as a precaution against the possibility that the Soviet Bonaparte might prove to be an empirical agency of Trotsky's programme, they shuffled away from any mention either of the political revolution or of the need for building a section in the USSR to fight for it.

Instead, the IEC advanced a programme for 'deep glasnost', as USFI Soviet expert Catharine Samary put it. This combined a series of basic democratic demands (abolition of censorship, freedom of political prisoners, right to strike, etc) with a maximum and abstract call for 'generalised workers' control over all economic activities'⁴³ which as usual left out that little question of workers' councils, something that the deluded Trotsky thought was the keystone of the Transitional Programme.

As in the previous crises of the 1950s to the 1970s the USFI sought instead to pressurise the reforming wing of the bureaucracy. For the USFI, 'political revolution' (on the few occasions they dare to speak its name) is simply a description of mass involvement in reform, not the seizure of power by the workers. When 'forms of self-organisation' are mentioned, it is as vehicles for propelling the bureaucracy towards radical reform, not as embryonic organs of political revolution.

Four years on Gorbachev is totally discredited in the eyes of the masses. Moreover he stands exposed as the chief usher on the door that leads to capitalist restoration in the USSR. In the light of this the 13th Congress finally dared to raise the 'perspective' of creating sections of the USFI in the USSR. But they still see this as happening through developments inside the CPSU:

'The CPSU remains a composite organisation which must certainly explode and disappear as an instrument of the bureaucracy so that a real workers' party can be built.'⁴⁴

The crisis of Stalinism in Eastern Europe

In Eastern Europe during the events of 1990 the USFI were not only completely unable to offer an action programme for the political revolution: they actually hailed the coming to power of the social counter-revolutionary forces.

When the Mazowiecki government was formed in Poland in August 1989, Zbigniew Kowalewski, a Polish USFI member who passed for a 'left' at the time, hailed this development as 'a new step on the road of the anti-bureaucratic political revolution'⁴⁵ and, in what was to become a refrain for the USFI over the next two years, called for 'the formation of a Solidarnosc government without bureaucrats, for immediate free elections and for the convocation of a constituent assembly'.⁴⁶

Not a word was said about the profound changes which had taken place between the foundation of Solidarnosc the mass independent trade union in 1980 and the creation of Solidarnosc the political party which effectively won the election in 1989. Indeed, Kowalewski insisted that no such change had occurred.

The USFI did not consider what such a Solidarnosc government would mean for the Polish masses, nor the problems of limiting their programme to the call for a constituent assembly. History, however, played them a cruel trick. Their programme was realised! The results can be seen today as the last vestiges of planning are demolished and capitalism prepares to reign in Poland for the first time in over forty years.

Three months later, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, USFI leader Ernest Mandel scuttled any notion of workers' councils or proletarian political revolution in the DDR:

?The objective of free elections for a parliamentary-type institution is completely correct. It deserves the support of all revolutionary socialists who are not completely blinded by sectarian dogmatism.?47

Substantial illusions in bourgeois democracy clearly exist amongst the masses in the degenerate workers' states. Following decades of brutal and stultifying Stalinist dictatorship, this is hardly surprising. The key question, however, is how to break those illusions. For the USFI, the only solution is to reinforce them! It was in fact possible to challenge these illusions, and using the transitional method, open the road to political revolution.

The LRCI did just this when in November 1989 we argued:

?In reality parliamentary elections have an unlimited ability to deceive the masses . . . The working class can and should start the process of 'free elections' for itself by electing factory committees, town and city workers' councils. In these elections there should be freedom of parties, programmes and platforms so that workers can decide which parties they recognise as their own. If, however, the bureaucracy is obliged to call parliamentary elections then we call for the workers to call prior mass meetings to select their candidates and to hear the candidates of all parties. The workers should demand annual elections and deputies who are recallable by their constituents. They should demand of all candidates a pledge to defend statified and planned property. By these means the fraud of bourgeois parliamentarism can be exposed, its dangers minimised and the principles of a system of workers' councils fought for.?48

Another striking example of the USFI's opportunism during the anti-bureaucratic movements of 1989-90 was displayed in Czechoslovakia. Following the 1968 Soviet invasion, leading USFI member Petr Uhl had repeatedly been persecuted and jailed by the Stalinists for his refusal to bow before bureaucratic rule. He had enormous prestige as an oppositionist.

But despite his undoubted personal courage Uhl showed himself incapable of steering any course for political revolution. In the autumn of 1989 he was a founder member of the Left Alternative, soon to be swallowed up by the bourgeois Citizen's Forum. The Left Alternative put forward a reformist programme for . . . the restoration of capitalism! It argued:

?We consider that the development of the market, that is the rehabilitation of financial and market relations, is an economic necessity.?49

The political form which would correspond to these relations of production was also pretty unvarnished:

?We consider that representative democracy should form the basis of a future democratic system; it should be of a parliamentary type.?50

The danger signals had long been there for those who cared to see them. Petr Uhl's 'Trotskyism' was never particularly strong. At the beginning of the 1980s he published a book in which he clearly distanced himself from the politics of the Bolsheviks⁵¹ and scotched all talk of organising a Leninist party in favour of 'an ideological grouping of intellectuals which would better defend the interests of the workers',⁵² and opposing all attempts to build a clandestine organisation.⁵³

It is therefore hardly surprising that Uhl, still a leading member of the USFI! went on to become the spokesperson of the restorationist Havel government, as director of the official CTK Press Agency.

At the same time as vouching for the harmlessness of bourgeois parliamentary forms in the degenerate workers' states, the USFI severely under-played the danger of restoration throughout 1989 and the early part of 1990. Ernest Mandel, once again playing the role of Karl Kautsky, the eternal optimist, blithely declared in April 1989:

?The European bourgeoisie does not look favourably on this destabilisation. It has no hope of recovering Eastern Europe for capitalism.?54

In October 1989 leaders of the French section insisted that it was necessary to 'put aside the idea that at stake in the current developments in these countries is the restoration of capitalism'.⁵⁵ Mandel again repeated the same line: 'The main question in the political struggles underway is not the restoration of capitalism'.⁵⁶

The refusal to recognise this palpable danger flowed from the whole adaptationist history of the USFI. First, there was the idea that the degenerated workers' states were a superior transitional mode of production that could not be overturned by a more primitive one—capitalism. Though this theme had been down-played in the 1980s it clearly played a role in bolstering Mandel's congenital passive optimism. Secondly, there was Mandel's faith in pluralism and in the neutrality of democracy. Thirdly, there was the commitment to the various dissident alternative leaderships whose pro-capitalist views were seen as little more than personal foibles.

The restoration of capitalism in the GDR must have been a very rude awakening for these centrist sleepwalkers!

Perspectives for Eastern Europe??and for the USFI

The failure of the crisis of Stalinism to immediately give rise to a viable socialist alternative has posed revolutionaries with a major dilemma. Is the current situation the opening of a new period? Does it represent a temporary setback or a major defeat on the road to socialist revolution?

At previous turning points in the international class struggle the USFI announced the impending victory of the socialist revolution; today it foresees a major period of reaction. The fundamental analysis advanced at the 13th World Congress was that 'The era when the international workers' movement situated itself in relation to the victory or degeneration of the Russian Revolution is coming to an end'.⁵⁷

In explaining this position and detailing how 'to make the socialist project attractive and credible',⁵⁸ the USFI shows how far they accept the bourgeois argument that Bolshevism led inevitably to Stalinism, and have adapted to the anarchistic and social democratic prejudices amongst intellectuals in the workers' states, junking all favourable references to the Bolshevik project.

The Congress claimed that a qualitatively new situation has arisen, one which the revolutionary programmes of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky were not designed to meet:

'The desire to decide consciously on one's fate has become the characteristic feature common to popular movements . . . Increasingly complex societies cannot be managed by a system of economic centralisation . . . Generalised self-management is taking shape as the socialist alternative to Stalinism . . . a decentralised mode of regulation'.⁵⁹

Despite the USFI's obsession with the 'newness' of all this, it is the very stuff of revolutionary politics and has been for 150 years. Of course, the masses wish to control their own lives—both at the political and economic level. That is precisely the driving force in Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto. It is the lesson of the Bolshevik Revolution. It runs through every line of Trotsky's writings.

The workers' and poor peasants' councils of 1917, and the subsequent preliminary attempts at national, co-ordinated planning, represent the real 'socialist alternative to Stalinism'. The USFI's version of this alternative is a catalogue of petit bourgeois prejudices relating to individual 'liberty' and individual production, a recipe for the total dislocation of the economy of any workers' state so foolish as to attempt to put it into practice.

The USFI gives us the reason for this retreat into pseudo-scientific socialism, redolent of Proudhonist co-operatives:

'The impasse of reformist policies in the capitalist countries and the bankruptcy of the bureaucratic system result in doubt being cast on any socialist project . . . it puts a brake on this social energy being crystalised around a new revolutionary project of social transformation and weighs heavily on the development of class-consciousness'.⁶⁰

Or, more poetically, 'Memory and hope must be rebuilt'.⁶¹

The collapse of Stalinism and its failure to be replaced by a revolutionary socialist alternative has undoubtedly demoralised certain sections of the international working class, notably those in capitalist countries with once-strong Stalinist parties. But the situation is not entirely negative. Far from it.

From the very outset, the Trotskyists were those who argued that Stalinism did not represent a new social class, that despite its brutal dictatorship it would inevitably collapse, shaking the world order to its foundations. The decline of what Trotsky termed 'the syphilis of the labour movement' represents a tremendous opening for revolutionary Marxists. The new democratic liberties in Eastern Europe provide us with opportunities which would have been dismissed as fantasy a mere two years ago. The collapse of Stalinist police dictatorship gives us a freedom to intervene which should be a source of enthusiasm, not pessimism, amongst revolutionaries.

Stalinist fellow-travellers, wilfully blind to the bureaucratic horrors of life in the degenerate workers' states, are most shocked by the current situation. So too are the USFI, whose systematic adaptation to Stalinism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere extends back to the centrist degeneration of the Fourth International itself in the period 1948-51. The demoralised centrists of the USFI are like hung-over revellers, paying the price for their excesses of the night before. And like all such penitents, they clutch their heads and say 'Never again!'

Not everything in the East European garden is rosy. The temporary ideological triumph of the west means that hard political battles will have to be fought, within what remains of the degenerate workers' states and without. But to win such battles the starting point must be to keep a firm grip on our main political weapons?'political revolution through revolutionary workers' democracy, democratic planning, the centrality of the revolutionary party. In every respect the USFI are junking 'the old Bolshevism'. The feeble 'combat' they will engage in is doomed to failure. They are preparing their own future defeats.

The SWP(US): from gangrene to self-amputation

The degeneration of the 1980s within the majority of the USFI was bound to have consequences in two directions. On the one hand, the most rightist elements would draw the conclusion that there was little point in staying within the 'Fourth International' with these politics. On the other hand, the pace and scope of the degeneration was inevitable going to spawn some oppositional disquiet. The best example of the former development was provided by the SWP(US).

Throughout the 1970s the USFI was marked by a long and bitter faction fight between the International Majority Tendency (Mandel et al) on the one hand, and the Leninist-Trotskyist Faction (SWP(US)) on the other.⁶² All this was par for the course in the internal life of the international.

At the beginning of the 1980s, however, a qualitative change occurred in the relations with the SWP. The relatively new Barnes-Waters-Jenness leadership, which replaced the old Hansen-Novack team in the mid-70s was deeply affected by the Sandinista revolution. Possessed by the perspective of actually forming an international organisation with the Castroite and Sandinista 'revolutionary leadership?', they began to make a series of ever deeper political adaptations to Stalinism which were to make them break first with the ideological remnants of their Trotskyism and after some years of cold split to sever all relations with the USFI.

In August 1980 the SWP's Educational Conference in Oberlin, Ohio, centred on the need to orient to the Cuban CP, the FSLN and the Grenadan New Jewel Movement. As Jack Barnes put it in March 1982:

'A glorious new chapter in the socialist revolution opened . . . This, of course, was quite a help to us. How could the extensions of the socialist revolution under revolutionary leaderships be otherwise!'⁶³

Over the next decade no praise was too fulsome to be heaped on the heads of Castro, the FSLN and Maurice Bishop. Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks were unfavourably compared with these new heroes. Their long winded and tedious meanderings to captive audiences in the plazas of Cuba and Managua were reproduced in full in the SWP's press. The baggage of formal Trotskyist positions, and indeed the very name, were an impediment to closer relations with a Castro

or a Tomas Borge.

By 1983 Barnes argued:

‘Permanent revolution does not contribute today to arming either ourselves or other revolutionists to lead the working class and its allies to take power . . . it is an obstacle to reknitting our political continuity with Marx, Engels, Lenin and the first four congresses of the Communist International.’⁶⁴

This embracing of Stalinism was described by Barnes as ‘coming out of more than twenty-five years of semi-sectarian existence’.⁶⁵

Between 1982 and 1985 a series of polemical articles were exchanged between the SWP and the European leadership over the question of permanent revolution, the nature of the Bolshevik revolution and the relationship between Lenin’s programme and that of Trotsky. From the outset the SWP argued that the October 1917 revolution heralded ‘a workers’ and farmers’ government’ which presided over capitalist property relations.⁶⁶

This reborn ‘stageist’ theory of revolution was rapidly put to the concrete test of the class struggle in the shape of the South African revolution. Here the SWP firmly allied themselves with the Stalinist ANC’s perspective of a democratic stage, rejecting all question of a socialist revolution. Even as early as 1981 the SWP had aped Castro by refusing to participate in demonstrations against the crushing of Solidarnosc by Jaruzelski’s coup.⁶⁷

This shift to the right went hand in hand with a wave of purges. Between 1982 and 1984 veteran members of the SWP, unable to swallow this rubbishing of the entire history of the party, were expelled. At the same time the SWP effectively withdrew from all leading bodies of the USFI, which it described as ‘an ultraleft sect’ led by ‘a secret faction’,⁶⁸ denied the USFI access to minutes of all its leading committees,⁶⁹ and with astonishing impudence stated:

‘The concept of an International made up of parties that will take orders from ‘higher bodies’ is alien to everything the Fourth International has ever stood for.’⁷⁰

This assertion, scandalous as far as Trotsky’s Fourth International or Lenin’s Communist International were concerned, is all too true of the SWP in the post-1953 period. In fact it was in essence the real reason for Cannon’s split in that year, and it was a pre-condition of re-unification in 1963.

The USFI leadership’s response, far from insisting on the necessity and purpose of democratic centralism in an International, emphasised the federal nature of the USFI and pleaded pathetically that there was no question of the international leadership ‘laying down a line’.⁷¹ When the SWP bureaucratically expelled majority supporters, the USFI congress limited itself to impotent calls for their re-admittance and to recognising three-and-a-half USFI groups in the USA!⁷²

Even on the question of permanent revolution, the USFI were incapable of mounting an effective defence. Although Mandel could repeat Trotsky’s analysis of the October revolution, his understanding of permanent revolution is that of the weakest side of the pre-1917 Trotsky. The latter’s error on the nature and centrality of the party in the pre-war period was not merely an organisational question, but affected his spontaneist, objectivist first formulation of theory: ‘No matter under what political flag the proletariat has come to power’ Trotsky wrote in *Results and Prospects* (1906) ‘it is obliged to take the path of socialist policy . . . The barrier between the minimum and maximum programme disappears immediately the proletariat comes to power’.⁷³

Of course Trotsky thought this was a question of the masses correcting their own revolutionary party, rather as Rosa Luxemburg thought the SPD could be corrected. Both of them saw Lenin as a sectarian, and his splits and factional struggles as an example of Russian backwardness. To rely heavily on the 1906 formulations rather than on those of his 1928 work *Permanent Revolution*, is in its own way as shady a method as the SWP’s use of the pre-October Lenin. The weak formulations of *Results and Prospects* have been repeatedly stretched by Mandel and co to ‘explain’ how Tito, Mao and Castro were obliged to become ‘unconscious revolutionaries’ by the objective logic of the permanent

revolution.

Although the political break between the USFI and the SWP(US) was codified by the mid-1980s, it was not consummated at the organisational level until June 1990.⁷⁴ This is very different from the Australian SWP, whose degeneration into pro-Soviet Stalinism was more rapid, and whose departure from the USFI in 1985 more explosive. The reason for the SWP(US)'s relations with the USFI decaying rather than being sharply broken off is to be found in the balance of forces within the SWP leadership. Important sections of the leadership, such as Malik Miah and Barry Sheppard, accepted theoretical revisions but insisted on retaining the link with the USFI. It was only once these elements had been driven out that the final split could take place.

The political and organisational collapse of the SWP into Stalinist policies and practices shows that despite the relative longevity of the USFI's ossified centrism it is not possessed of eternal life. Sooner rather than later, without a revolutionary programme, without a healthy, international democratic centralist regime, it will collapse either into an openly anti-Trotskyist form of right centrism or into some variant of left reformism.

Can the new oppositions save the USFI?

The impasse of the USFI, coupled with crises within key sections, led to the emergence of new opposition groupings which challenged the majority line on one question or another at the 13th Congress.

The three oppositions—the Tendency for Building the Fourth International (TBFi) led by Matti in France, Socialist Action (US) and the Left Tendency led by Franco Grisolia in the Italian section—all restrained their opposition to the level of building tendencies. None of them was prepared to declare a faction—which would imply a struggle, not against this or that policy, but against the whole political method of the leadership and attempt to replace it. Still less did they dare to openly characterise the leadership as centrist.

The largest of these, the long standing Matti grouping, insisted that it did not even consider the leadership to be 'opportunist'⁷⁵ and dissolved itself as an international tendency at the IEC meeting immediately following the Congress.

Such tendencies are little more than implements for winning positions for clique leaders. Factional struggle, which Trotsky considered a necessary evil even when it was over principled questions, has been converted into essential mode of political existence for these characters.

All three oppositions were united in their criticism of the majority with regard to party building. The USFI majority has always been in doubt as to the 'Fourth International's' historic *raison d'être*. Even less are they committed to the existence of its sections. Faced with an empirically revolutionary force they have repeatedly demolished the obstacle that a USFI section might pose to 'fusing with the mass movement'. This policy goes back to the FI's centrist adaptation to Stalinism in Yugoslavia after 1948, and has been repeated in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam and Nicaragua etc.

In 1979 the international opposition led by Nahuel Moreno made the question of 'building sections in every country' one of the key planks of its platform. This refrain has been taken up by all subsequent opposition groupings, most recently with regard to the USSR. Following the Gorbachev reforms and the opening up of political debate in the USSR, the USFI majority, especially the East European cell led by Sandor and Verla, argued against trying to build a section of the USFI in the USSR. This was to open the way to amalgamation with 'opposition' tendencies within the CPSU (a policy still being ardently pursued to this day with regard to Buzgalin's 'Marxist Platform') plus a marked reluctance to raise the slogan of political revolution.

This opportunist blemish was a tempting target for the three opposition tendencies, all of which, from 1989 onwards, responded by calling for the building of sections of the USFI in every country. Left at a purely organisational level this criticism is utterly toothless. The majority can say that they are approaching this task by tactical compromises (entrism etc) practiced by Trotsky.

Unless you point to what programmatic surrenders are being made in the name of this misnamed tactic then to harp on about the need for sections appears the merest organisational fetishism. Since these oppositions have no deep rooted objection to the method of the USFI, once the musical chairs of a World Congress is over for another five years, they can all carry on as before.

Worse, they can be outflanked by the leadership deciding to call for the building of a section. Thus the 1991 World Congress document on the USSR⁷⁶ albeit somewhat half-heartedly⁷⁷ proclaims that the USFI is in favour of building section(s) of the USFI in the USSR. The question is how and on what programme? Here one waits in vain for a reply either from the majority or its critics.

The Matti tendency's only attempt to address this problem was abject in the extreme. For them the key programmatic question in the construction of a section was merely that of 'support for the revolution in the three sectors' (i.e. the imperialist and imperialised world and the degenerate workers' states). Yet the TBFI was the most successful of the oppositions, in terms of votes at the Congress (11%). Matti has long been an oppositionist within the French LCR, still the European flagship of the USFI due to its size, history and proximity to the international centre.

Matti's politics⁷⁸ and those of his British co-thinkers in the TBFI⁷⁹ are what used to be known as 'orthodox Trotskyism', i.e. they draw their inspiration from the Stalinophobia of the old International Committee tradition, notably its Lambertist variant, which is particularly strong in France. Like their political parents in Lambert's⁸⁰ organisation, the PCI, the TBFI's hallmark is the combination of radical sounding critiques of the USFI with gross opportunist adaptations towards social democracy and even to radical bourgeois tendencies.

Faithful to their Lambertist forebears, the TBFI argued in favour of the unification of Germany without even considering the consequences for post-capitalist property relations in the ex-DDR. Matti went so far as to deny that there was anything progressive in the post-capitalist property relations which characterise the degenerate workers' states: 'These systems did not constitute a progress and were in no way and under no circumstances an advance over capitalism.'⁷⁶ Indeed, for Matti, the reunification of Germany 'is good for the whole of humanity and first and foremost for the workers.'⁷⁷

This mechanistic view, unable to grasp the political and class dynamics at work, was coupled with a wild enthusiasm and catastrophism, again typical of the rotten International Committee tradition. Freed⁸¹ according to Matti⁸² from the counter-revolutionary influence of Stalinism, the working class East and West:

'... will tend to unify their social gains at the highest level, to win new ones and to enlarge the range of democratic liberties and political democracy. This reality is already clearly undermining all the plans of the European bourgeoisie.'⁷⁸

It is certainly the case that a future united German working class will fight against the capitalist offensive and will win new social gains. But the first step for revolutionaries is to say 'what is?', and the East German working class suffered a substantial defeat by being unable to seize the moment and fight for political leadership between November 1989 and April 1990.

The destruction of the bureaucratically planned property relations and of the few social gains which the Stalinists were obliged to accept, represent a defeat for the working class, east and west. The current capitalist ideological hegemony amongst large sections of the working class will change, but we need to recognise that this unfavourable situation for revolutionaries is our starting point, rather than indulging in consolatory fantasies about future struggles.

The Stalinophobia of the TBFI further blinds them to the reality of differences within the Stalinist bureaucracy, which they see as an undifferentiated block. For Matti et al, as for the Lambertists, the bureaucracy is purely and simply the agent of imperialism in the labour movement, and is therefore utterly and totally in favour of the restoration of capitalism:

'In our view there was a class polarisation between two camps⁸³—imperialism and the bureaucracy on one side, the

working class on the other.⁷⁹

The unreality of the TBFI's position on Eastern Europe is further shown by their blithe indifference as to the threat of capitalist counter-revolution. As late as March 1991, Matti argued that "Capitalist restoration will not happen tomorrow in Eastern Europe and the USSR."⁸⁰ Poland and Hungary will soon prove him very wrong.

In another homage to Lambertism, the TBFI argues that the key line of advance for the world proletariat is that of democratic demands. "Radical democracy pushed to the end is revolutionary" claims Matti.⁸¹ It was this position that led the TBFI to raise first and foremost the slogan of a constituent assembly in a united Germany rather than that of workers' councils.⁸²

From the outset, the TBFI accepted that there would be a "democratic" stage to unification, that it would inevitably pass through a period in which the constituent assembly was the key slogan. Even as late as the beginning of 1990, the TBFI failed to raise any call for workers' councils.⁸³ This is no "accident". It is a product of their right centrist method, which seeks to follow the "democratic" road rather than fighting for workers' democracy and workers' power.

Socialist Action (US) provided another trend of opposition to the majority's line that a workers' state was created in Nicaragua. On the other hand, they insist that the FSLN is "a party of revolutionists-of-action",⁸⁴ implying that the FSLN merely need pushing in the right direction a bit, and they are deliberately vague on the need for political revolution in Cuba, preferring to say that they "advocate soviet forms of government".⁸⁵ Despite their statement that "without a change of leadership in the International, the FI will be led to its demise".⁸⁶ Socialist Action offer no qualitative break with the centrist method of the USFI.

Given the similarity of many of the positions of Socialist Action and the TBFI, it is difficult to see why they did not form a joint opposition, as was initially proposed in 1989. For whatever factional reasons, negotiations broke down, and at the beginning of 1991 Socialist Action was severely weakened by a split to the Lambertists which took several leading members, including the instigators of many of their Lambertist positions.

At the same time, a series of ex-SWP leaders (e.g. Sheppard, Miah and Lund) have joined Socialist Action over the last 18 months proclaiming their complete political agreement with the SWP's neo-Stalinist positions. It thus seems at least possible that SA will drop its "left" mask and re-enter the majority fold over the next period.

The Left Tendency (LT) comes from a different political tradition, but is equally wedded to the centrism of the USFI. They rightly state that "the politics of the International over the last few decades have been a series of errors of analysis, strategy and tactics"⁸⁷ but do not draw the obvious political and methodological conclusions: the leadership of the USFI is irredeemably centrist and the USFI as a whole cannot be transformed into a revolutionary organisation.

The LT document as finally presented to Congress (where it got one vote) is substantially shorter than that originally presented internally. Criticism of the leadership line on Nicaragua was replaced by a vague and oblique reference to permanent revolution. Whether this was done to escape the wrath of the leadership or to weld an opportunist alliance, the end result was the same: despite their pretensions, the LT showed themselves to be a loyal opposition within the USFI.

In neither version of the document was there one word about Gorbachev or the crisis of the USSR. Not the slightest concrete criticism was made of the USFI's record on the key question of political revolution. As is traditionally the case with USFI oppositions, general remarks are taken as coded explanations of precise political differences. This will not do. Diplomatic formulas and a refusal to say what is are the marks of centrism, not of Trotskyism.

With regard to the "specially oppressed", one of the LT's fetishes, they are completely in tune with the USFI's method, arguing for "autonomous" cross-class movements and a "strategic alliance" between the oppressed and the working class.⁸⁸ Finally, the whole strategy of the LT and their co-thinkers in the International Trotskyist Committee is shown by the reaffirmation of their position that the USFI is a representative of a special kind of "centrism of Trotskyist origin" which is qualitatively superior to centrism coming from Stalinist, social democratic, nationalist or syndicalist

origins.

In a remarkable statement which owes more to metaphysics than to Marxism, they claim that 'the Fourth International is living but it lives through the life of its different organisationally separate factions'.⁸⁹ In other words, despite the errors which the LT points to, when it comes to the crunch, our brave revolutionaries see Mandel, Lambert and the rest as leading organisations which, collectively, make up a 'Fourth International' which merely needs 'politically regenerating'.

Whilst this centrist nonsense may comfort supporters of the LT inside and outside of the USFI, it does nothing to clarify the programmatic issues at the heart of refounding a revolutionary communist international, nor does it clearly state the centrist bankruptcy of all the organisations which claim the banner of the Fourth International. It is a recipe for centrist confusion, a pledge of loyalty to a rotten centrist tradition which has continued for over forty years.

The writing on the wall

The lack of confidence with which the USFI faces the future is nowhere expressed more clearly than in its slow organisational collapse. At its 13th World Congress in February 1991, the European sections registered a dramatic 25% loss in membership.⁹⁰ Half a dozen sections have dissolved themselves in the last five years in the name of the latest turn. Others have split. The Swiss section did not even bother to attend the Congress.

Demoralisation is widespread within both the rank and file and the leadership. During the 1980s the leadership bodies of the USFI increasingly adopted a 'hands off' approach. The supposedly six-monthly IEC did not meet for nearly two years between 1982 and 1984, and has barely scraped an annual rhythm since then, whilst the monthly Secretariat was meeting quarterly.

The quality of documents produced by the various bodies is increasingly poor, generally based on verbal reports or articles, with even lower programmatic content than usual. The 13th Congress revelled in the loose-knit federal nature of the USFI:

'Each national organisation has its own political profile, its own united front relations and its own responsibility and competence to make decisions.'⁹¹

No wonder the international leadership meets so infrequently and intervenes so little! What difference would it make? Each section effectively has national sovereignty over its line.

The USFI is preparing its own disintegration along national lines. The disappearance of so many of its sections into reformist, nationalist or right centrist organisations is the first phase of an organisational collapse which neither the leadership nor the membership seems inclined to halt. The continued existence of slender political and organisational threads will prevent the complete disappearance of the USFI, but the 'Fourth International' is clearly approaching a watershed.

There is no sign that a thoroughly critical and revolutionary opposition will develop to halt this degeneration. Even if the leadership were to execute a new centrist turn and 'save the day' at the last minute, the reprieve could only be temporary. Only a total break with the four decade-old centrist method of the USFI will enable the rank and file to find a programme and an organisation which can chart the road to political revolution in the east and social revolution in the west.

The USFI, despite its claims to be the Fourth International of Trotsky, is ridden with doubts and uncertainties as to its historical role. Rightly so. In 1938, Trotsky finished his Transitional Programme, the founding programmatic document of the Fourth International, with a resounding rallying cry: 'Workers?men and women?of all countries, place yourselves under the banner of the Fourth International! It is the banner of your approaching victory!?' In 1991, the best the USFI could muster was a pathetic: 'We are convinced our programme and analyses deserve to be known'.⁹² The difference says it all.

There is little sign of life inside the USFI. Nevertheless, they remain an important tendency on an international scale. They will continue to peddle their degenerate version of Trotskyism in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Their politics will confuse and miseducate future generations. In a few countries they will be a major roadblock to the construction of a revolutionary party for many years to come.

The fight for the revolutionary programme within the working class is not only a question of political clarity, it is also a matter of political criticism and the combat of differing programmes. Those members of the USFI who are repulsed by their organisation's battered and degenerate version of 'Trotskyism' should learn the lesson of history, rather than repeating it. The USFI cannot escape from its ossified centrist method. The time has come to break with it.

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