



Chapter 9 - The transitional programme

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Amidst all the struggles of the 1930s, Trotsky never lost sight of the most important condition for establishing a new International:

? . . . it is necessary to begin by proclaiming a programme that meets the tasks of our epoch. On the basis of this programme it is necessary to mobilise co-thinkers, the pioneers of the new International. No other road is possible.?

Why this stress on programme? Because the programme of a political party is its declaration, to its members and to the world, of its aims, what it is fighting for, and what it intends to do. It is the only justification for the independent existence of a party.

A revolutionary Marxist party aims to change the world not through parliamentary reforms but through the action of the working class itself.

Its programme is not a list of promises for the future, but a guide to action for millions of workers in the here and now.

The founding congress of the Fourth International adopted a programme drafted by Trotsky, ?The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International?. This short pamphlet has become one of the most important documents in the history of communism.

No study of the ideas of Trotsky would be complete without examining its contents and its meaning.

Building the bridge

The Second International was founded in a period when the capitalist system was enjoying long years of relatively peaceful progress and economic advance.

The imperialist system of monopoly capitalism did not dominate the globe; the working class made steady progress in organising its unions and mass Social Democratic parties. These were years of preparation, of organising the workers for the great battles of the future.

In this period the Social-Democracy adopted a programme that was divided into two distinct parts: the minimum programme and the maximum programme.

The minimum programme was a series of demands that could be achieved within the capitalist system. It dealt with the most pressing needs of the working class and exploited masses: the need for a working day of no more than 8 hours, health care, education, homes and welfare for all, an end to poverty wages.

It set out the democratic rights necessary to allow the workers to organise and to prevent the worst abuses of the capitalists: the right to vote, to sovereign parliaments, to elect the judges and to bear arms.

These were all demands that the capitalists would try to resist - but they would still leave the capitalist system intact. Even if all these demands were granted, a boss would still be a boss at the end of the day.

The maximum programme, on the other hand, set out the goal of socialism and working class power. This was a statement of the eventual goal of the movement. But it was not linked to the rest of the programme in a practical way.

Because of this, the opportunist trend in the Second International was able to treat the goal of socialism as a distant and far off prospect, with no practical consequences for the daily struggles of the workers and their party.

This division of the party programme into minimum and maximum elements allowed the right wing of Social Democracy to concentrate all its efforts on campaigning for reforms alone.

It is therefore no surprise that it was the Russian Communists and the Communist International who made the first significant steps towards overcoming it.

In his pamphlet, 'The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it?', written on the eve of the October revolution, Lenin put forward a series of demands which addressed the immediate needs of the working class and which at the same time, if met, meant an immediate break with the capitalist system.

In the heat of a revolutionary crisis and the breakdown of capitalist society, Lenin's programme was straightforward, but it could not be carried out without confiscating the private property of the rich and putting political power into the hands of the workers themselves.

It was a programme that served as a bridge between the immediate aims and the revolutionary tasks of the workers.

This method was then used by the Communist International as a basis for influencing the programmes of the Communist Parties after World War One.

The Third Congress of the Comintern adopted a set of 'Theses on Tactics' which described the old minimum programme of the reformists as 'a counter-revolutionary deception.'

They went on to explain that Communists should continue to fight for the immediate interests of the workers - however partial they might be. But they should do so not to rescue the capitalist system, but to destroy it.

The Transitional Programme

By the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928, the slide into bureaucratic centrism was well under way. With Stalin's support, Bukharin drafted a programme which was completely abstract. The minimum-maximum divide that the revolutionary Comintern had tried to abolish had been reintroduced. Trotsky was harsh in his criticism of the draft:

'The proletarian vanguard needs not a catalogue of truisms but a manual of action.'

For this reason the Fourth International's programme of 1938 took the real situation facing the world working class as its starting point. It then developed a series of transitional demands to build a bridge between the struggles of the present and the fight for revolution and socialism.

Trotsky wrote the programme draft after examining the lessons of the entire history of the movement, and the advances that the Comintern had made between 1919 and 1924. In that sense, as he explained, the new Transitional Programme was 'the summation of the collective work to date.'

The Transitional Programme begins by summing up the main lesson of the whole period in history that had opened up with the collapse of the Second International in 1914:

'The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.'

Capitalism had already created the conditions under which a socialist society could be built. The world was not only ripe for socialism, but this ripeness had 'begun to get somewhat rotten'.

One thing and one thing only had saved capitalism in the crisis-ridden years of the 1920s and 1930s: the absence of a revolutionary leadership for the working class.

The failure of the working class to take power had led the world to the brink of catastrophe: economic collapse, fascist barbarism and war.

The main job of revolutionaries was to overcome the gulf between the ripening of the conditions for socialism and the lack of political readiness on the part of the working class to take power into its own hands.

The key to this was 'a system of transitional demands, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very foundations of the bourgeois regime.' This transitional programme replaced the old minimum programme of Social Democracy.

The main economic diseases infecting capitalist society on the eve of World War Two were unemployment and high prices. The Fourth International's programme put forward answers to these ills which strengthened the self-organisation of the working class and took forward its struggle for power. It demanded jobs for all, a guaranteed minimum wage and a strictly limited working week.

To ensure these demands were not subverted by the capitalists, it called for the workers' organisations themselves to form committees to draw up a plan for dividing all the necessary work among all those available to do it, with no loss of pay.

Wages, it declared, should rise to cover any rise in prices. If the capitalists could not 'afford' to pay this, then their property should be taken from them:

'If capitalism is incapable of satisfying the demands inevitably arising from the calamities generated by itself, then let it perish.'

The programme examined the situation facing the workers' organisations. It was absolutely essential for communists to participate in the trade unions, to strengthen them and raise their militancy, opposing all attempts by the capitalists to control them or weaken them, whether through police repression or the more subtle dictatorship of 'binding arbitration'.

It rejected the sectarianism of the Stalinist 'Third Period', when the Communist parties withdrew from the mass trade unions, describing this self-isolation as 'tantamount to a betrayal of the revolution.'

Yet at the same time, the programme recognised the limitations of the trade unions, calling for a struggle against the conservative union leaders and the creation of bodies embracing the whole fighting mass of the working class, 'strike committees, factory committees and, finally, Soviets.'

Just as it would be criminal to turn one's back on the mass trade unions, so the revolutionaries should not flinch from a break with the union apparatus if necessary to advance the struggle at a given moment:

'Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to the proletarian revolution.'

The Programme went on to argue for workers' control of production, the opening of all the economic secrets of the capitalists to inspection by the workers themselves, and the drawing up by the workers of a general plan for the reorganisation of economic life.

This struggle for control would be a declaration of war against the employers, who would resist it all the way. At the same time it would be the best preparation for the workers in running society themselves, as 'a first step along the road to the socialist guidance of the economy'.

The programme called for the key branches of industry and the banks to be expropriated, taken out of the hands of private capitalists and put under the control of the state. At the same time it made quite clear that this would 'produce favourable results only if the state power itself passes completely from the hands of the exploiters into the hands of the toilers.'

The Transitional Programme approached the whole question of self-defence in a manner as practical as it was revolutionary.

It pointed out how the working class faced not just the violence of strike-breakers and the police, but increasingly that of the hired thugs of the employers, and of the fascist gangs. Persuasion alone was not enough:

‘The struggle against fascism does not start in the liberal editorial office but in the factory - and ends in the street.’

Taking the strike picket as its point of departure, the programme argued for youth groups and trade unionists to begin to drill, to get familiar with the use of arms, and to organise workers’ groups for self-defence. The eventual aim of this work should be the construction of a workers’ militia:

‘to root out . . . the traditions of submissiveness and passivity; to train detachments of heroic fighters capable of setting an example to all toilers; to inflict a series of tactical defeats upon the armed thugs of counterrevolution; to raise the self-confidence of the exploited and oppressed; to compromise fascism in the eyes of the petit bourgeoisie and pave the way for the conquest of power by the proletariat.’

The Transitional Programme also dealt with the tasks facing workers in specific parts of the world. In the colonial countries, it stood by the conclusions of the theory of permanent revolution: that the struggle for national liberation and democracy can be won only under the leadership of the working class.

It addressed itself openly to the workers of countries suffering under fascist regimes. Recognising the great difficulties in conducting the struggle under the eye of the secret police, it recommended patient propaganda work which would yield results in the future, when the class struggle would re-emerge with redoubled force.

For the working class in the USSR, the Transitional Programme correctly judged that the upsurge of revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy would begin with ‘the struggle against social inequality and political oppression.’ The programme fought for freedom for the trade unions and the press, and for the right to hold mass meetings as essential steps for the recreation of genuine workers’ councils and Soviet democracy.

It called for a complete revision of the planned economy, and combined a revolutionary defence of the gains of 1917 with a call for a ‘victorious uprising of the oppressed masses’ in an insurrection against Stalin and the dictatorship of the privileged bureaucratic elite.

In the face of the imminent world war, the Fourth International’s programme took up the fight for the revolutionary internationalism of Lenin, Liebknecht and Luxemburg. It called for workers’ control over war industries, the confiscation of military profits and an end to all secret treaties and deals.

It opposed a single penny being spent on the imperialist war and a single person being called up or sent to their deaths. But at the same time it rejected pacifism as a useless illusion:

‘The only disarmament which can avert or end war is the disarmament of the bourgeoisie by the workers. But to disarm the bourgeoisie, the workers must arm themselves.’

It demanded that military training be placed under the control of the workers and committed the Fourth International to defend colonial countries and the USSR from imperialism, through methods of class struggle such as boycotts and strikes.

The twin cancers of sectarianism and opportunism plagued the socialist movement in Trotsky’s day as in ours. The Transitional Programme waged war on both. It mercilessly mocked the refusal of sectarian groupings to struggle for the elementary interests of the working class:

‘they have no need of a bridge in the form of transitional demands because they do not intend to cross to the other shore. They simply dawdle in one place, satisfying themselves with a repetition of the self-same meagre abstractions.’

It spoke with contempt of those who do not seek a road to the masses and who want to do nothing but discuss, describing them as 'a dead weight to the party.'

Against opportunism, the programme gave its support for any and all methods which raise the consciousness of the workers and their readiness for self-sacrifice:

'To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as well as big ones; to base one's programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives - these are the rules of the Fourth International.'

Finally, the Transitional Programme turned resolutely to those layers of the working class ignored by the opportunists, who by nature concentrate only on the top layers of the working class where new careerists and officials can be found.

The oppressed sections of the class - in particular the women and the youth - were given special emphasis, the youth for their 'fresh enthusiasm and aggressive spirit' and the women workers for their 'inexhaustible stores of devotion, selflessness, and readiness to sacrifice'.

The programme concluded with a defence of the Fourth International itself. Though it was weak in numbers, it was strong in its ideas, programme and the training of its members, cadres and leaders. Only the Fourth International offered a programme that could lead a way out of the crisis about to engulf humanity. The conclusion rang clear:

'Workers - men and women - of all countries, place yourselves under the banner of the Fourth International. It is the banner of your approaching victory!'

The Transitional Programme today

Is the Transitional Programme unrealistic? Would it not be better to raise only demands which are acceptable to the prevailing opinions of the working class

In discussions with members of the Fourth International, Trotsky dealt with precisely this objection:

'Our tasks don't depend on the mentality of the workers. The task is to develop the mentality of the workers. . . Some will say: good, the programme is a scientific programme; it corresponds to the objective situation - but if the workers won't accept this programme, it will be sterile. Possibly. But this signifies only that the workers will be crushed, since the crisis can't be solved any other way but by the socialist revolution . . . even in the worst case, if the working class doesn't sufficiently mobilise its mind and its strength at present for the socialist revolution . . . the best elements will say, 'We were warned by this party; it was a good party.' And a great tradition will remain in the working class . . . Naturally, if I close my eyes I can write a good rosy programme that everybody will accept. But it will not correspond to the situation; and the programme must correspond to the situation.'

The Transitional Programme was written on the eve of World War Two. Writing in 1938, Trotsky expected that the war would end either in socialist revolution or the crushing of the USSR and the victory of fascism in every advanced country.

In fact, there was a third possibility that he did not expect - the survival and expansion of Stalinism in Eastern Europe, and long decades of relative stability and democracy in the advanced Western capitalist countries.

Some believe that this error of perspectives means that the entire Programme needs to be junked; but the method that Trotsky embodied in the programme was correct. The programme must correspond to the situation.

In 1938 the perspectives embodied in the programme did correspond to the situation. After all the USSR was invaded and whole chunks of it were subjugated to the ruthless restoration of capitalism at the hands of the Nazis. In France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and the whole of Eastern Europe, fascist governments reigned supreme.

Bear this in mind and Trotsky's perspectives - even though the eventual outcome of the war proved them wrong - were not at all far fetched. They actually applied to most of Europe up until 1943.

What is wrong, however - and this is how the post-war followers of Trotsky fell into error and eventual collapse - is to cling on to perspectives after life has proved them wrong. Every programme is a guide to action in concrete circumstances.

No programme will last forever without needing to be re-adjusted to meet new conditions. After all, that was why Trotsky wrote the Transitional Programme. He did not just re-issue the old Bolshevik Party programme.

Revolutionaries today neither abandon the Transitional Programme nor to treat it as if it is set in stone. They apply its method as a guide to refocusing the programme of revolution at every major historical turn, just as Trotsky himself did.

There have many new developments in the world and the class struggle since 1938. How could it have been otherwise?

The method of the Transitional Programme needs to be used to tackle each new problem: to build a bridge between the immediate tasks of the movement and the fight for working class power.

That is what marks the Trotskyist programme, out from other trends in the working class movement.

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