Introduction to the 2009 publication Documents of the League for the Fifth International Volume 1, available to buy online [1]

The organisations that make up the League for the Fifth International are marked by one characteristic that sets them apart from other groups. As our groups emerged, often as splits from previous organisations, we discovered a painful truth; that there was no unbroken continuity of Trotskyism stretching back to the founding of the Fourth International in 1938. There were certainly several organisations claiming to be the Fourth International: the United Secretariat led by Ernest Mandel (1923-1995) and Joseph Hansen (1910-1979), the International Committee, led by Gerry Healy (1913-1989), the Organising Committee for the Reconstruction of the FI led by Pierre Lambert (1920-2008) and the International Workers' League of Nahuel Moreno (1924-1987). However, despite these currents' organisational origins in the Fourth International, what became clear to us was that all of them had rejected or falsified key elements of its political method and principles, in short, its programme.

In 1983, with the publication of the Death Agony of the Fourth International and the Tasks of Trotskyists Today we identified the breaking of this revolutionary continuity with the capitulation of post war Trotskyism to Stalinism, first in the form of Tito in Yugoslavia in 1948, then Mao in China and later Castro in Cuba. At its Third Congress, in 1951, the Fourth International, under the leadership of its then Secretary Michel Pablo supported by Ernest Mandel and Joseph Hansen, James P Cannon and Gerry Healy, began to abandon key aspects of Trotsky's programme.

We concluded:

?For us the task is not to ?reunify? or ?reconstruct? the Fourth International out of the degenerate fragments of Trotskyism, but rather a task of rallying the best elements within those fragments to a new, unspotted programmatic banner. In the first place this means that genuine Trotskyists must set as their central task the re-elaboration of the Trotskyist programme, refocusing it towards the new period of economic and political crisis that has opened up in the 1970s/80s.?

When we began to re-evaluate the contributions of Trotsky to the revolutionary tradition, and undertook the task of building an international tendency, it became clear that all the above claimants were firmly wedded to their own particular ?traditions? and that all of them represented severe centrist distortions and a degeneration of Trotsky's method and programme. This included an anti-Leninist attitude to party building (sometimes grossly sectarian in a Third Period Stalinist mode; sometimes opportunist in a Menshevik manner) and an ignorance or light-minded revision of the lessons of the previous generations of communist struggle.

This book is a collection of documents and resolutions that we have produced over the last 30 years that
An attempt to codify and outline our understanding of some of the key issues that face communists. It is a testimony to the seriousness with which our tradition approaches these subjects that so much time and effort has gone into these documents.

One of the first priority areas on which we focused as a young group was the analysis of reformism. The first issue of Workers Power’s theoretical journal Permanent Revolution, published in 1982, carried extensive theses on the question of reformism in the working class. At the time, Workers Power was in discussion with Trotskyists in Germany, France, Italy and Austria, as well as the UK, where ?Trotskyism? was divided between those who generally characterised the Social Democratic Parties as simply bourgeois parties, essentially no different from Christian Democrats or Conservatives, and those who were committed to long-term entry work in the belief that such parties represented an inevitable stage in the political development of the working class. For the first of these, any use of tactics such as critical electoral support or demanding that leaders promote workers’ interests, was an unprincipled sowing of illusions amongst workers who lacked class-consciousness. In contrast to this, the second current believed it necessary to camouflage their Trotskyism behind left reformist language and programmes in order to remain within the mass parties. Our Theses on Reformism, therefore, combined a presentation of the classical Marxist analysis of reformism with a detailed examination of united front tactics aimed at winning working class militants away from the reformist parties.

As our international organisation grew, many new tasks presented themselves. The founding meeting of the Movement for a Revolutionary Communist International (MRCI) was held in London in April 1984 at the beginning of the Great Miners’ Strike in Britain. It issued a Declaration of Fraternal Relations, signed by the Groupe Pouvoir Ouvrier (France), the Gruppe Arbeitermacht (German Federal Republic), the Irish Workers Group and Workers Power Britain. The MRCI set itself the task of developing sets of theses to elaborate our understanding of key elements of the communist tradition, particularly drawing on the work of the Communist International’s first four congresses (1919-23) and the resolutions and documents of the International Left Opposition and the Fourth International before it degenerated (1923-48).

Moreover, since many socialist groups also ?base themselves? on these documents, we recognised that building a revolutionary international also required agreement on how to apply that tradition in the modern world. The MRCI held regular international meetings of delegates of the sections at which resolutions were adopted on the recent and ongoing events of the international class struggle; Poland and the repression of Solidarnosc, the European Economic Community, the great strike movement and the birth of Cosatu in South Africa in 1986, the miners’ strike in Bolivia in 1986, Gorbachev and the disintegration of Stalinism.

By 1989, by which time we had added sections in Bolivia, Peru and Austria, we were ready to codify these agreements on perspectives, programme and tactics into an international programme and to adopt a constitution based on democratic centralism (prior to this its international leading body was composed of delegates of the sections and it took all its decisions at first by consensus and later by majority).

Meeting in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the MRCI adopted The Trotskyist Manifesto and, to express its changed organisational and political status, changed its name to the League for a Revolutionary Communist International, LRCI.?We now operated as a democratic centralist international with a developed programme and method.

The Trotskyist Manifesto was our major programmatic work and laid the political basis for electing a quarterly meeting International Executive Committee at congress, which in turn elected a weekly meeting International Secretariat. Like its predecessor, the LRCI recognised the need to continue the work of excavating and re-elaborating the communist tradition. We adopted the resolution on the Early Stages of Party Building, a subject that was taken up again in 2007 when we adopted the Theses on Communist
The Resolution on the Characterisation of the Working Class originated as a document in the German section of the League in the mid 90s. It was an attempt to outline what the working class was and how it was changing in Europe and North America under the onslaught of monetarism and neo liberalism - replying to the much repeated claim that the working class no longer existed? if it was not based primarily in the factories and the mines. Although the document was translated and debated at an International Executive Committee meeting in London before being passed unamended, it was unfortunately never published in English, an oversight that is remedied in this book.

Another document that was written and debated but not published was the Theses on Communists and the Trade Unions. Discussed at an IEC in 1996, it was adopted as a substantive and then referred for further amending. This process was not completed at the time, but the International Secretariat took up the project again in 2009, when the original resolution was edited to remove out of date reference to the work of the LRCI sections in the mid-1990s. We would have liked to complete the documents with (i) an overview and analysis of developments in trade unionism over the last thirteen years and (ii) a serious attempt to transcend its limitation to the conditions prevailing in Western Europe and North America. Nevertheless, it does provide an analysis of the role of trade unions, from the rank and file to the upper echelons of the union, and also a summation of how communists operate in trade unions. Given the importance of trade unionism in the struggle for socialism, we hope the article will be a useful guide for communists working at the coal face as it were, and that further discussion and experience of working class organisation in a range of countries, including South Asia and Latin America, will allow it to be further developed in the future.

The next two documents focus on two contentious issues in communist tactics: the united front and electoral tactics. Despite the extensive documents that the Communist International produced on the united front after its Third Congress and at its Fourth, and despite Trotsky's extensive writings in the 1920s and 1930s on the subject, many socialists fall into opportunist adaptation to the union or reformist leaderships or into sectarian abstention. The Theses on the United Front start from the overall principles and then seek to provide guidance for operating the tactic with various forces, from the working class, through to non-working class forces and then the anti-imperialist united front.

The next document covers the thorny issue of electoral tactics. The vagaries of the bourgeois political system throw up many and varied political formations and alliances, coalitions and special interest groups, all vying for the vote of the working class. In the imperialist world (with the exception of the US) workers have, by and large, stuck to the reformist workers' parties that originated in the Second and Third Internationals but this is not a universal law, and flexibility should always be the watchword in the case of tactical decisions. Some things are certain though, parliament is an accursed pigsty as Lenin called it, and the main purpose of standing communists candidates is to use it as a platform to spread revolutionary views and win support for the only thing that can ensure a real change of society, a revolution.

The 30 Theses in Defence of Trotskyism is included in this collection as a short summation of some of our key positions. It is an extended version of 22 Theses in Defence of Trotskyism, written after the split in Gerry Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party in October 1985, when various regroupment initiatives were launched. The document was updated in 1992 and the points it makes are a general outline of the main features of what Trotskyism is and what it is not. It is included as a useful outline of the main viewpoints of Leninism-Trotskyism, but should be supplemented with further reading to develop a deeper analysis. This theses has stood the test of time - but where our positions have been changed or developed since its
publication a note has been provided for explanation.

Reading the 30 Theses now, many younger comrades might be bewildered by the multitude of names and organisations, many of which are either no longer as important as they used to be or have even disappeared. The debate is worth revisiting, because they all represent a method or practice which is alien that of genuine revolutionary communism.

It is a lesson of history that a revolution cannot occur without its cadres, tirelessly working, sacrificing themselves in the struggle for human freedom. Cadres are forged both in the fire of struggle and through systematic application of themselves to education in the methods of Marxism. As Lenin said ?without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary action.? This book is a collection of documents that are designed to help with that task - although, as ever, there is so much more to learn.

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