

# Trotsky and revolutionary unity: The fight for the Fourth International

Sun, 30/06/1996 - 10:59

Dave Stockton surveys Trotsky's struggle against centrism in the 1930s

In 1933 Hitler destroyed the German labour movement. The magnitude of this defeat had a decisive impact on the path taken by the forces of revolutionary Marxism, the International Left Opposition (ILO), led by Leon Trotsky.

From the earliest days of the degeneration of the USSR and the parties of the Communist International (Comintern) under Stalin's brutal bureaucratic leadership, Trotsky and the Left Opposition had fought to defeat and replace the Stalin faction. They fought to reform the Comintern and the USSR and operated, as their name implied, as an opposition faction.

The German defeat caused Trotsky to rethink his policy towards the Stalinist International. The reform perspective was based on the belief that, in the face of Stalin's disastrous errors, the masses of subjectively revolutionary vanguard fighters within the Comintern could act as a lever for its transformation back into an instrument of revolutionary struggle.

The fractures and divisions in the German Communist Party (KPD) and in other CP's around the world in the years 1928-33 showed that this was not a utopian strategy. Nor was Trotsky's perspective a passive prediction that the Comintern would reform itself. He accepted that its reform was not an inevitable outcome of the struggle, but it was the best possible orientation towards the most advanced elements of the mass proletarian vanguard.

Throughout this period Trotsky warned of the dire effects that would come about as a result of Hitler coming to power—the smashing of the strongest workers' movement in the world, a shift in the balance of class forces internationally and the inevitable drift towards a new imperialist war. He also warned that it would signal the historic bankruptcy of the Third International.

Noting the development of a 'theory' inside the Stalinist movement that Hitler's rise could not be stopped, that indeed it was necessary in order to destroy the Social Democratic workers' 'democratic illusions', that after Hitler it will be 'our turn next', Trotsky warned:

'Were this theory to entrench itself in the German Communist Party, determining its course for the next few months, it would signify a betrayal on the part of the Comintern of no lesser historical proportions than the betrayal of the Social Democracy on August 4, 1914, and at that, with much more frightful consequences.'

Despite Trotsky's passionate advocacy of the workers' united front of the Social Democrats and the Communists against fascism, the Communist Party in Germany flatly rejected such a tactic and insisted on

denouncing the social democrats as 'social fascists'. As a result Hitler seized power with hardly a shot being fired. Trotsky responded swiftly:

'The KPD today represents a corpse. The scorn of the vanguard of the German workers for the bureaucracy which has deceived them will be so great that the slogan of reform will seem false and ridiculous to them. They will be right. The hour has struck! The question of preparing for a new party must be posed openly?2.

After an interval, during which Trotsky hoped for, and urged, a revolt against Stalin inside the Comintern, he realised that it was not only the KPD's 'fourth of August', but also the Comintern's. Apart from a suppressed criticism by the Czechoslovakian section, no parties publicly criticised the KPD/Stalin line on Germany. The Comintern was dead for the purposes of leading the world revolution.

### **The New International**

Trotsky was forced to re-orient his entire perspective. In 1929 he had been exiled to Turkey. A year later the ILO was founded as a coherent international grouping. But even by 1933 Trotsky did not think that the Left Opposition could simply declare itself the new International.

This was not because he thought that in principle the International had to be founded on a loose basis, with many factions and tendencies, revolutionary, centrist and even reformist. Far from it. He believed that the Left Opposition had hammered out the basis which, added to the foundation work of the first four congresses of the Comintern, would be the only revolutionary programme on which such an International could be built.

His reluctance, indeed his avoidance for five years, to found the FI with the forces of the 'Trotskyist Movement' alone, was not because he believed this to be impermissible in principle but rather because he sought to build the new International into a mass force through a struggle to win over large leftward moving centrist currents.

That its optimum results were not achieved (a new mass international, new revolutionary victories, regeneration through revolution of the USSR, the crushing of fascism, the prevention of a new imperialist slaughter) does not invalidate its actual achievements. These were: a new and qualitatively more advanced international programme; the preservation of thousands of revolutionary fighters against Stalinism, fascism, bourgeois democracy and reformism; the arming of these militants with a principled strategy and flexible tactics.

Trotsky was well aware of the numerical weakness of the ILO for the task which faced it. Dreyfus and Broué estimate that there were just 500 militants in Germany, 800 in Czechoslovakia, 300 in Poland, 300 in France, 100 in Belgium, 500 in the USA, 300 in Spain, 2000 in Greece and probably a thousand or so in Soviet labour camps. Groups had been formed in Mexico, Argentina, China and Vietnam.

He was also aware of its lack of hardened revolutionary leaders, both at a national and an international level. Most of the older seasoned cadres from the Comintern were to prove, sooner or later, burnt out, incapable of the tactical flexibility or the principled intransigence needed, in the face of the struggles and the defeats that followed.

At the same time the young cadres who rallied to Trotsky all too often lacked experience of mass organisation or struggles.

Brought up on a diet of propaganda tasks, when the time for action in mass struggles came their tendency was to commit adventurist/ opportunist or abstract propagandist /sectarian errors whenever a major turn in

tactics was required.

In addition Trotsky was denied, by Stalin's relentless persecution and the hostility of various bourgeois governments, the ability to work consistently with the leaders of the sections and the international leadership.

In the years 1933-4 Trotsky consciously set out to lay the foundations of the FI on the basis of a bloc with several independent communist or revolutionary socialist organisations which he considered to be centrist (wavering between revolutionary words and reformist deeds) but which were moving leftwards under the impact of the German tragedy.

This project the Bloc of Four failed, to the extent that it did not mobilise mass forces or forces qualitatively different from those already assembled by the Left Opposition (which in 1933 had renamed itself the International Communist League?ICL). But it did strengthen the ICL and clear away certain centrist obstacles to further progress.

The decision to declare for a new International was finally taken at a plenary of the International Executive of the ILO held on 15 July 1933. An amendment was added to the 'Eleven Points' which formed the initial platform of the ILO. It said:

'The struggle for the regrouping of the revolutionary forces of the world working class under the banner of International Communism. Recognition of the necessity of the creation of a genuine Communist International capable of applying the principles enumerated above.'<sup>4</sup>

Though Trotsky had talked before of a 'Fourth International' he was, for several weeks, reticent as to what name to give the new International. Jean Van Heijenoort, one of Trotsky's secretaries, remembered the discussions that took place when Trotsky settled in France in July 1933 on the name of the new International. He recalls Trotsky's comments:

'There is the secondary and subordinate question of a name. Fourth International? It is not very pleasant. When we broke with the Second International, we changed our theoretical foundations. Now, no; we remain based on the first four congresses (of the Communist International). We could also proclaim; the Communist International is us! And call ourselves the Communist International (Bolshevik-Leninists). There are pros and cons. The title of Fourth International is neater. This may be an advantage as far as the large masses are concerned. For the slower selection of cadres, there is probably some advantage on the other side in being called the Communist International (Bolshevik-Leninists).'

By 1934 Trotsky had firmly settled on the name 'Fourth International', which he saw as blocking the way back to an intermediate 'two-and-a-half' formation, and because it embodied the notion of clear historical progress.

What Van Heijenoort's account also shows is that for Trotsky the question of name and number were 'secondary and subordinate' to the question of the fight to actually build a new International when it became a historic necessity and build it on an operative revolutionary programme and policy. Trotsky made it clear that the 'banner' of a party or an International is its programme.

For the ICL the crucial question was not 'were the workers ready for a new International?', nor in the first instance whether the forces existed to build it.

The first and most decisive question which had to be answered was 'is a new International necessary?'

All other questions flowed from this. Despite the weakness of the ICL Trotsky recognised that there was no alternative to this course.

### The turn to the independent socialist organisations

Almost simultaneously with his change of position on the slogan of the International, Trotsky signalled a major change in orientation towards the various oppositional forces that had emerged over the previous three years and which were not tied to the Stalinist Comintern, the Right Opposition, or to the Social Democratic bureaucracy.

Trotsky was looking to the left-centrist groupings which had criticised both the Second and the Third Internationals' suicidal policy in Germany.

It was here that he hoped to find cadres who considered themselves to be revolutionaries, who had moved leftwards under the impact of events in Germany and who had, to a certain degree, freed themselves from the hold of the bureaucracies of the Second and Third International.

Though these parties were small in relation to the sections of the two Internationals, they were sizeable in relation to the tiny and persecuted groups of the ICL.

Trotsky insisted that the development of these organisations was historically necessary given the bankruptcy of the Social Democracy and the Comintern's demonstration of its impotence. For the workers who had joined these parties and pushed them to the left, this centrism represented, potentially, a stage on the road to revolutionary communism. It was the task of the ICL to aid them through unity in action, pedagogic adaptation and absolute frankness of criticism to hasten their passage down this road:

'With a vigilant eye we must follow the live processes in all the workers' organisations so as to be able at the opportune moment to concentrate our attention in that field which promises the most success. The independent socialist organisations and the left-oppositionist factions within the Social Democracy are either avowedly centrist organisations or they contain within their ranks strong centrist tendencies or survivals. Their positive side is that they develop in a revolutionary direction under the pressure of the historic blows received by them.'<sup>6</sup>

These 'independent socialist organisations' were splits from the Comintern's Bukharinite and Zinovievite wings and from the Second International's left wing. Some were moving to the left and others to the right. In April 1932 the IAG (International Working Community) was founded as a meeting place of these parties and groups. It later became known as the London Bureau.

By 1933 it consisted of a series of parties and groups. The largest and most right wing of these parties was the DNA (Norwegian Workers Party). This was a 'labour party' with trade union affiliates, led since 1918 by Martin Tranmael, a figure with a past in the Second and the Third Internationals. It pursued a reformist policy and was in the process of a rightward evolution from its brief 'communist' phase back towards the Second International.

The other mass party in the London Bureau was also Scandinavian, the SKP (Swedish Communist Party) led by Karl Kilbom. It was the product of a split in 1929 of the Comintern section, one which unusually represented the majority (10,000 out of 18,000 members) of the party. It was closest to the politics of the Right Opposition but had, under the blows of the third period, developed a vague orientation towards a new International.

These two parties were regarded as the mass base of the London Bureau. They exerted a strong pull on

the centrist parties to their left who saw them as representing the masses and for whose sake it was necessary to stay within the London Bureau and indeed to make concessions to in order to keep them in it.

In Germany, from Social Democracy came the SAP. In Holland there were two left centrist parties; one originating in a split from the CP and politically very close to the ICL, the RSP (Revolutionary Socialist Party), and the other in a left split from the Social democracy, closely linked to the German SAP, P J Schmidt's OSP (Independent Socialist Party).

The RSP was a party of about a thousand members. Its principal leader, Henk Sneevliet, was a veteran socialist of both the Second and Third Internationals. He had an illustrious record in the pre-1914 Social Democracy and was an active participant in the Comintern. In 1933 he was elected as an MP to the Dutch parliament and at the same time moved significantly closer to the ICL and its project of building a new International. He was a figure of national and international standing in the workers' movement, an important ally in the struggle to found a new International, albeit one with centrist positions which were to prove ineradicable in the longer term.

In Spain there was Joaquin Maurin's BOC (Workers and Peasants' Bloc). Trotsky had had over three years conflict with the leader of the Spanish Left Opposition, Andrés Nin over his co-operation with Maurin, a Right Oppositionist.

In Britain there was the Independent Labour Party (ILP) led by James Maxton and Fenner Brockway, which had disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1931. Trotsky had higher hopes of the ILP although its political level was lamentable by continental standards. It had nevertheless taken several thousand members out of the Labour Party on a leftward trajectory. There were other groups as well, but most of them were regarded by Trotsky as inveterate right-centrists from whom nothing could be hoped. The main axis of his hopes in this period was the SAP.

### **The SAP**

The SAP was founded in October 1931 as the result of the expulsion of six SPD Reichstag deputies 'for indiscipline'. In fact, it was for opposing the SPD's line of 'toleration' of the Brüning government as a lesser evil to the front of the Nationalist Right with the Nazis—a policy that would lead the SPD to support the reactionary Hindenberg for President 'to keep out Hitler'.

Its initial leadership was made up of life long right centrists. But the SAP's importance lay in the fact that it attracted some 14,000 former SPD members and that its cadres held some important positions in the German workers' movement.

Trotsky had characterised it unequivocally as a centrist party and its leaders as inveterate right centrists. But he also considered the direction of its evolution as being from reformism towards communism, a direct product of the deep revolutionary crisis affecting Germany and the criminal policies of the SPD and the KPD.

The SAP had no programme, not just in the formal sense of a document, but no strategic assessment of the key lessons of the international class struggle since the war and the October revolution. Instead the SAP leaders were reducing their entire politics to the tactical necessity of a united front against fascism. Under the guise of the calls for unity they were seeking to bury all the key questions of programme which would necessarily arise the moment a united front was formed. Trotsky 'hardly one to underestimate the importance of the anti-fascist united front' pointed out:

'In any case the policy of the united front cannot serve as a programme for a revolutionary party.'

He showed how for the SAP leaders, 'the policy of the united front is carried into the party itself, it serves to smear over the contradictions between the various tendencies. And that is precisely the fundamental function of centrism'.<sup>8</sup> For the SAP 'unity' was the answer to everything. Trotsky said that though in moments of great crisis this was indeed the spontaneous consciousness of the masses it did not constitute a sufficient answer. As the sum total of the SAP's programme it was proof of the organisation's centrism.

Although for the masses centrism is only a transition from one stage to the next, for individual politicians centrism can become a second nature. These leaders have to be fought and fought openly at the same time as displaying an honest and comradely attitude to the rank and file of the party:

'To reconcile oneself with the centrism of the SAP for the sake of its general progressive role would mean that one would thereby liquidate its progressive role. The task of the Communists consists in giving timely aid to the workers of the SAP, to purge their ranks of centrism and to rid themselves of the leadership of their centrist leaders. To achieve this it is imperative that nothing be hushed, that good intentions be not accepted for deeds, and that all things be called by their own names. But only by their own names and not by fanciful ones. One must criticise, not vilify.'<sup>9</sup>

Throughout 1932 and early 1933 Trotsky tried to persuade the German Left Opposition to undertake a serious approach to the SAP. By April 1933 Trotsky addressed himself to the question of seeking unity with the SAP. The main tactical difference with the SAP independent party or faction was in the process of resolution. Trotsky pronounced himself in favour of a united effort to build the new party in Germany noting that with such tactical differences out of the way:

'The problem should reduce itself to that of the programme, the policy and the regime of the new party. We need obviously not general abstract formulas, but the affirmation on paper of the experience of recent years in which both organisations have participated.'<sup>10</sup>

The SAP conference had declared its sympathy with both the Brandlerites and the Left Opposition but had not specified on what issues:

'In not taking their stand on the most important problems the leaders of the SAP give the impression that they desire to have the Bolshevik-Leninists on their left, the Brandlerites on their right and by separating the two flanks to conserve their independence (which is not a calamity) and their lack of precision (which is very bad).'<sup>11</sup>

The SAP leaders also criticised the ILO for demanding that they take a position on all the international issues of the last ten years. It was impossible, they claimed, for thousands of workers to study all these issues, indicating that they regarded this as sectarian fetishisation of the theses. Trotsky formulated his answer carefully. Of course it is not possible for the membership of a sizeable party to study every question in depth:

'But it is correct for us to demand that those leaders who take upon themselves the initiative of forming an independent proletarian party indicate now their attitude towards the fundamental problems of proletarian strategy and to do that not in general and abstract form, but on the basis of the living experience of the present generation of the world proletariat.'<sup>12</sup>

### **The Bloc of Four**

In June 1933 a clandestine meeting of the SAP leadership decided to call for a new unified German party and a new International. Rather than calling an international conference itself, the SAP pressured a London Bureau meeting in Brussels to adopt a resolution which noted the 'failure of the two

Internationals? and declared for the ?re-creation of the international workers? movement?. The London Bureau agreed to convene an open conference in Paris towards the end of August.

Trotsky realised two things. First, the London Bureau was the principal obstacle to the building of a new International because it attracted those forces most willing to consider the bankruptcy of the Second and Third Internationals and to consider the founding of a new one. But it was another ?Two and a Half International? in the making. The larger reformist and right centrist parties would try to prevent the formation of a new International, pressing instead for the unification of the two old Internationals on the basis of a return to the live and let live practices of the pre-1914 Second International. In the era of fascism this was a reactionary utopia.

Second, there was an acute danger that the hitherto leftward moving centrists, even the more left wing of them like the SAP and the RSP, would be mesmerised by the ?masses? of the right-wing parties, would make all sorts of concessions to them, including a failure to criticise betrayals. They would become enmeshed in the London Bureau awaiting permission from the big organisations to found a new International or to draft a programme?permission that would never come.

Despite these dangers Trotsky realised that the London Bureau contained explosive contradictions. It encompassed the left centrist forces essential to the building of a new International in the short term?i.e. the SAP, the RSP, the OSP?and it was vital to ?rescue? them from the influence of the right. This could be accomplished by drawing them into comradely work on the programmatic basis of the new International, by achieving principled fusions between their organisations in Germany and Holland and the sections of the ICL and by encouraging them to fight the right wing in the London Bureau.

Trotsky also recognised that there was a middle ground of ?right communist? and ?left social democratic? organisations in movement, like the Swedish CP and the ILP. A firm lead from a grouping on the left could pull them further from their old positions. Trotsky advised his small group of British followers to enter the ILP, as Walcher and Frölich had entered the SAP, and win it for the Fourth International.

In France Trotsky sought meetings with the leaders of the RSP and the SAP. From 17- 20 August 1933 he engaged in intensive discussions with Henk Sneevliet of the RSP and Jakob Walcher of the SAP. At the same time the International Secretariat of the ICL overwhelmingly approved Trotsky?s initiative towards the SAP and the RSP. Trotsky had himself prepared a draft resolution which he proposed that the ICL, the SAP, the OSP and the RSP should submit for voting to the Paris conference of the London Bureau at the end of the month.

Jakob Walcher himself made a summary of these discussions which Trotsky checked and approved. This showed both the potential for agreement, but also the key stumbling blocks.<sup>13</sup>

Walcher expressed warm agreement with the ICL?s approach to the Paris Conference and further that, ?the time is ripe for a unification of the SAP and the Left Opposition and that starting now it is important to overcome the remaining obstacles as rapidly as possible?. Trotsky is reported as saying that maximum efforts must be made to avoid two disastrous outcomes, ?the discussion dragging on to the point that it ends not in an agreement but in a split? or a unification realised ?without the necessary explanations on both sides? so that ?too late it reveals itself not to be solid and ends in a fiasco?.<sup>14</sup>

Walcher?s statements reveal the still centrist approach of the SAP. He claims that ?there was no difference of opinion between Trotsky and Schwab (Walcher) on the main appreciation to be made of the Norwegian Labour Party (DNA) except on the tactical approach to be adopted towards it?, and that ?no one in the SAP was under any misapprehension as to the true nature of the DNA, but that we must not

ignore the fact that the DNA is the party of the Norwegian working class?<sup>15</sup>

Further, he explained that "the possibility exists of influencing this development (of the DNA) in a decisive and positive way towards communism". Here lay the principal stumbling block for Walcher, and even more so for the rest of the SAP leadership who were more wary of Trotsky and the ICL than Walcher himself. Winning the mass DNA was their real priority, unifying with the ICL, producing a programmatic basis for the new International, even fighting for the new International were, in reality, secondary questions.

Given that they had "no illusions" about the DNA's reformist leadership the SAP believed that a diplomatic silence had to be maintained on criticism of these leaders in order to influence their mass following with their (abstract) propaganda for communism.

On the possibility of a principled fusion with the ICL again there was a general optimism, but the differences added up to very serious obstacles:

"Schwab first of all took up a position on the Platform of the Left Opposition which was adopted in the February of this year; he declared that the SAP was in agreement with the essential principles and methods of this platform, but did not regard as correct the division of the Communist camp into three groups".<sup>16</sup>

Why this was the case was clear from the list of disagreements. Walcher considered that the Right Opposition's KPO stood to the left of the KPD leadership from 1928-33. He considered Brandler and himself had been right in 1923 on the issue of the "German October" against the Left Opposition, that the Anglo-Russian Committee of the trade unions, in which he had been directly involved, was correct in its first phase at least, and that it was correct for the Right Opposition (IVKO) to be invited to the Paris Conference (it had refused, though its Swedish, Swiss and Norwegian affiliates were to attend).

When the proposal for a joint journal of the SAP and the ICL was proposed by Trotsky they proposed that the IVKO be invited to participate in its editorial board.

These differences amounted to a failure to see the right-opportunist character of Brandler and the IVKO on the main historic issues. To these principled differences were added a series of accumulated subjective differences; the claim that Trotsky played too big a role in the ILO/ICL, the accusation that its spokespersons "mechanically dragged in the same questions; the Chinese question, the Russian question, and the Anglo-Russian Committee".

After Sneevliet and Walcher's visit came P J Schmidt and Jaques de Kadt of the OSP, with whom agreement was also reached on the Declaration. Later Trotsky also discussed with Charles A Smith, John Paton and Jenny Lee of the ILP but no agreement was reached.

The "Declaration of the Four", finally agreed in Saint Palais where Trotsky was staying, was based on the core revolutionary principles of the ICL. But it necessarily excluded those points which the SAP would not agree to. It did not include the characterisations of the three currents calling themselves communist, it did not mention the key issues of differentiation of the 1920s. However, it drew the left-centrist groups a good way towards these positions. The joint declaration was issued on 26 August 1933.

It consisted of eleven clauses. The first emphasised the "mortal crisis of imperialist capitalism", the need for a break with reformism and the immediacy of the tasks related to "the conquest of power and the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship". It thereby affirmed the immediacy of the revolution and rejected the idea that there was a stage when a revolutionary party and international was not needed or when some sort of reformist and centrist replacement would do. Hence the urgency of the struggle to

create a new International.

The second emphasised the international character of this revolution and categorically rejected the theory of 'socialism in one country'. This latter point not only drew a line of principle with the Stalinists but with the Right Opposition, since Bukharin shared authorship of this 'national reformist theory'. This position was to be harder for some of the signatories to put into practice than to agree with in a document.

On the Comintern, the declaration stated that it had 'proved not only incapable of fulfilling its historic role but became more and more an obstacle in the way of the revolutionary movement'. Social Democracy was characterised as a stinking corpse and that the 'overcoming of the organisations, aims, and methods of reformism is the necessary prerequisite for the victory of the working class over capitalism'.

This was essential for all cadres coming over from Social Democracy, including those on its left wing. As we shall see the SAP leaders had not really broken definitively with 'left' Social Democracy. They remained tied to it with the excuse of the need to relate to its mass base.

The key commitment Trotsky won from the left centrists was the declaration's recognition that international conditions:

'... imperatively demand the welding together of the proletarian vanguard into a new (Fourth) International. The undersigned obligate themselves to direct all their forces to the formation of this international in the shortest possible time on the firm foundation of the theoretical and strategic principles laid down by Marx and Lenin'.<sup>17</sup>

The urgency, the totality of commitment, and the pledge to create a programmatic foundation were again to be a severe test for the signatories, indeed they were to be the fundamental test.

Were they willing to put their theoretical assent into practice, when this practice meant a hard struggle within the labour movement against those who opposed these principles? Whilst in no way seeking to stand in isolation from the masses, and joining in their struggles at every opportunity, were the signatories prepared to stand alone if necessary, telling the truth no matter what the cost?

The declaration itself suggested they would:

'... the undersigned, at the same time declare that the new International cannot tolerate any conciliation towards reformism or centrism. The necessary unity of the working class movement can be attained not by the blurring of reformist and revolutionary conceptions nor by adaptation to the Stalinist policy but only by combating the policies of both bankrupt internationals.'<sup>18</sup>

Trotsky had won the SAP to make, in words, the pledge to fight centrism as well as reformism. It would be hard, indeed impossible, to make good this promise in practice without itself breaking fundamentally from centrism, even its most left-wing variant.

The declaration also embodied the key positions of the ICL on the USSR, which was recognised as a workers' state, 'by its social foundations, incontestably prevailing forms of property and therefore the necessity for defending it against imperialism and internal counterrevolution'.<sup>19</sup> This clearly and unequivocally rejected the ultra-left and Menshevik peddlers of the theory of 'state capitalism'. It made defence of the gains of the October revolution a cornerstone of the Fourth International.

The need for party democracy?freedom of criticism, election of functionaries from top to bottom, control of the apparatus by the rank and file?was stressed. The new International as well as the parties adhering to

it, must build their entire inner life on the basis of democratic centralism.

Finally, the declaration committed the four organisations to four immediate tasks which would ensure that their commitment to pledges made was not merely platonic. It committed them creating permanent commission whose tasks were;

- a. to elaborate a programmatic manifesto as the charter of the new International;
- b. to prepare a critical analysis of the organisations and tendencies of the present day workers' movement (theoretic commentary to the manifesto);
- c. to elaborate theses on all the fundamental questions of the revolutionary strategy of the proletariat.
- d. to represent the four organisations in the eyes of the whole world.<sup>20</sup>

This was a pledge to create organised co-operation between the left centrist organisations and the ICL's bloc. Its task was to draft the programmatic manifesto on the basis of which the struggle for the Fourth International would take place.

It soon became clear, however, that whereas Trotsky hoped that it would be a wedge to split the London Bureau, opening up a principled struggle between the four and the right wing of the London Bureau, the SAP saw it as creating a pressure group on the left of the London Bureau with the long term purpose of winning the Social Democratic and right centrist mass parties over to communism.

The SAP was willing to devote as much time to this as the reformist leaders wanted, to subordinate their fusion process with the ICL to this, and to draw forces to their right into the Bloc in order to offset the ICL's pressure from their left.

Worse they were willing to hide their own estimate of the reformists in the name of 'winning over the masses'. This eventually wrecked the Bloc of Four.

Agreement with the declaration did not and could not, of itself, break the SAP and the Dutch organisations from centrism, but it aimed to 'help them make the right choice', as Trotsky put it. Describing the declaration of the Bloc of Four, Trotsky wrote:

'The Declaration of Four does not give and, under the circumstances, could not give an answer to all the problems of programme and strategy. It is clear that it is impossible to build a new International on the basis of this declaration. But we did not intend anything of the sort. The declaration itself states clearly that the organisations that signed the declaration obligate themselves to elaborate, within a short time, a programmatic manifesto, which should become the fundamental document of the new International.'<sup>21</sup>

### **The Bloc of Four in Practice**

Trotsky hoped to win the support of at least some of the middle ground for this declaration—the Swedish Communist Party and maybe even the ILP. But by the time the conference began it carried only the four signatures (the SAP, the OSP, the RSP and the ICL).

When the conference opened on 27 August, a misunderstanding between the SAP and the ICL about the declaration immediately emerged. Walcher claimed to have understood the declaration as simply that, not as a resolution to put to the conference for voting. However seeing that if this was the case it would not enter the minutes and perhaps never reach the mass membership of the participating organisations it was agreed that Walcher would submit the declaration to the conference commission on resolutions.

The British at once objected that since the declaration did not exist in an English translation they could not be expected to consider it. This was a cynical excuse; the declaration was not much more than a thousand words long. This was ?a conscious and deliberate manoeuvre by (ILP) leader John Paton? to prevent its discussion as a resolution.<sup>22</sup>

Walcher gave in to this manoeuvre and accepted that it be simply submitted to the records of the conference. Even a short amendment from ICL members Pietro Tresso and Pierre Naville calling for a new International and the constitution of a commission to publicise this idea fell 7?7.

The SAP and its OSP ally defended the Declaration of the Four but in the end also signed the final vacuous, diplomatic conference resolutions. Trotsky criticised this but wished to continue with the attempt to win the SAP to the positions and method of the ICL:

?We cannot pass by the fact that two of our allies (the German SAP and the Dutch OSP) joined not only the bloc of four that signed the declaration but also the committee of the majority (together with two representatives of the ILP and one representative of the Norwegian party). We, the Left Opposition, cannot expect and do not expect anything positive from this committee. We consider the participation of two of our allies (SAP and OSP) in the committee (the RSP, the party of Sneevliet, did not enter the committee) as a glaring contradiction. We also consider the voting of the representatives of the OSP and the SAP for the resolution of the majority as a grave political error that is capable only of sowing illusions and confusion.?<sup>23</sup>

While discussions aimed at fusion of the Dutch organisations went forward to some degree, the aftermath of the Conference witnessed increasing friction between the forces grouped within the Bloc. Why were the positive subjective attitudes of both Trotsky and Walcher at the Saint Palais discussions so rapidly dissipated?

It may well be that Walcher, influential leader though he was, went further in signing the declaration than some of the other SAP leaders wished. According to Broué, ?Walcher?s correspondence actually shows that he ran into a certain resistance in his organisation?<sup>24</sup> Certainly there was considerable hostility between some SAP rank and filers and their former unsparing critics in the Trotskyist IKD. All this pressure, plus the gradual loss of urgency as the impact of the Nazi victory receded, meant a return to the more normal centrist methods of the SAP.

Now Walcher raised participation in the new journal by the Brandlerites as essential. Behind Brandler and Thalheimer were many excellent comrades. He protested against Trotsky and the ICL?s negative characterisation of both the Paris conference and its resolutions. He agreed they were not good for the vanguard but they were a step forward for the masses and should be welcomed.

He thought that Trotsky?s criticisms of the decision of the SAP and the OSP to participate in the standing committee of ?the London Bureau? were wrong . They were participating for information. He also objected to Trotsky?s calls for a break with the DNA as ?premature? and his hostility to the SAP?s failure to criticise its leader, Tranmael, as sectarianism towards the masses who supported the DNA.

Whilst some progress was made in exchanging background documents and theses for the work on the manifesto, the permanent commission remained a dead letter. In short the SAP was giving priority to its bloc within the London Bureau/London bureau over the Bloc of Four.

This was ominous for the whole development of it as a tactic to launch a serious campaign which might lead to the founding of the Fourth International in the near future. A positive development, however, was the adherence of the RSP to the ICL. Sneevliet attended the 18/19 November plenum of the International

Secretariat which assessed the progress of the tactic. The fusion discussions in Holland were making slow progress. De Kadt was proving openly hostile to the ICL.

The ICL proposed that the Bloc of Four itself hold an international conference open to all who supported the declaration. This met in Paris on 30 December with Trotsky, De Kadt and Walcher in attendance. Pierre Broué says that "the entire meeting went on in a tense atmosphere, with frequent interruptions, with murderous formulations and harsh replies on both sides."<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the "murderous formulations" and the "harsh replies" the Bloc of Four did not disintegrate at this point. However the relations with the SAP became much more publicly confrontational. On 11 January Trotsky finished a letter to the SAP:

"The fight of the SAP against the Communist League does not bear a progressive character; it is conservative; it is a fight to preserve its own amorphousness and its privilege not to think out political ideas to their conclusion. As always happens in such cases, this struggle is refracted in the consciousness of the comrades of the SAP and appears to them as a struggle against our "sectarianism".<sup>26</sup>

He went on to make it clear what the problem was the SAP's softly voiced "critical" orientation to the Norwegian Workers Party.

"You are no doubt aware that, together with my closest German friends, I stood for a merger as soon as possible with the SAP, hoping that the education of a unified organisation would be hastened by our joint experience coupled with mutual criticism. But after initial vacillations, the leaders of the SAP have rejected the merger. The immediate reason was provided by the question relating to the Norwegian Labour Party (or what is practically one and the same thing, the London Bureau). They refused to merge with us in order to have the possibility of continuing their hapless romance with Tranmael."<sup>27</sup>

The SAP and OSP called a Youth Conference for 24 February 1934 and indeed set up an International Bureau of Revolutionary Socialist Youth Organisations, (later known as the Stockholm Youth Bureau), allied to the London Bureau. The SAP's 20 year old youth leader Willy Brandt ran rings around the ICL's delegation, headed by 23 year old Walter Held. Held, drawn into drafting the resolutions for voting, gave in on a series of vital questions.

He accepted the exclusion of the name communist from the title of the organisation without a fight. He accepted that the declaration remain silent on the ICL's participation. He accepted that the declaration contain no reference to the need to struggle against centrism and that it called not for the Fourth International but rather for "transcending the Second and the Third Internationals"? a "classic Menshevik formulation" as Trotsky called it.

Indeed, Trotsky was now certain that even the slogan for a "new International" was a dangerous and evasive phrase in conditions where the SAP was using it to cover its capitulation to the DNA. Such formulations could mean a two and a half international.

It was clear that the SAP had become scarcely disguised opponents of the struggle to build the Fourth International. They reserved all their fire for the ICL who they accused of wanting to proclaim the Fourth International, to dominate it with the ICL's principles and politics. Trotsky replied in a series of articles drawing the main lessons about the past period—the particularly dangerous role that centrism of the SAP variety plays when bold historic changes are objectively necessary in the international workers' movement.

The SAP's turn to the left had been the product of the German events a year previously. By early 1934 the Nazi regime had pulverised not only the mass organisation but also the medium and small sized groups

like the SAP. Even the ICL's illegal German section was in the process of being smashed in the first months of 1934. 28

The SAP cadres and leaders in exile, especially those in Scandinavia, saw their saviours in the large reformist and right-centrist organisations like the DNA and the SKP.

Given the unchanged political background of the SAP leaders the evolution of the SAP back towards the right was inevitable once it had rejected the course of fusion with the ICL.

It remained for Trotsky to sum up the lessons of the ICL's relations with the SAP:

It is clear that the work of fusing the revolutionary forces under the banner of the Fourth International must proceed apart from the SAP and against the SAP.<sup>29</sup>

Trotsky pulled together the lessons of a year's orientation to, alliance with and struggle against the left-centrist organisations in his classic essay 'Centrism and the Fourth International'. He draws the lessons of how revolutionary communism differs from the most left-wing form of centrism:

The chase of the 'extreme left' centrists after the ordinary lefts, of the lefts after the moderates, of the moderates after the rights, like the chase of a man after his own shadow, cannot create any stable mass organisation.<sup>30</sup>

And he concludes that revolutionaries can succeed only if they reject the methods of these centrists and determine:

- a. Not to outsmart the historic process, not to play hide and seek, but to state what is;
- b. To give ourselves a theoretical accounting of the changes in the general situation, which in the present epoch frequently take on the nature of sharp turns;
- c. To heed carefully the mood of the masses, without prejudices, without illusions, without self-deception, in order on the basis of a correct estimate of the relationship of forces within the proletariat to avoid opportunism as well as adventurism and to lead the masses forward, not to throw them back;
- d. Every day, every hour, to answer clearly to ourselves what our next practical step must be, tirelessly to prepare this step and on the basis of living experience to explain to the workers the principled difference of Bolshevism from all other parties and currents;
- e. Not to confuse tactical tasks of a united front with the basic historic task: the creation of new parties and a new International;
- f. Not to neglect even the weakest ally for the sake of practical action.
- g. To watch critically the most 'left' ally as a possible adversary.
- h. To treat with the greatest attention those groupings that actually gravitate to us; patiently and carefully to listen to their criticism, doubts and vacillations; to help them develop toward Marxism; not to be frightened by their caprices, threats, ultimatums (centrists are always capricious and touchy); not to make any concessions to them in principle;
- i. And once more: not to fear to state what is.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The ICL's attempt to break the left centrist organisations from centrism was entirely correct. It brought tangible gains for the movement in Holland in late 1934, with the fusion of the RSP and the majority of the OSP, to form the RSAP. And, in a parallel development in the USA, a fusion of the Trotskyists and the leftward moving Workers' Party, led by A J Muste, led to the creation of a 1,000 strong section of the ICL.

However, objective factors meant that the full potential of the tactic of the Bloc of Four was not realised. In particular a split with the SAP became necessary when that organisation vacillated on, and then rejected, the key slogan of the Fourth International.

While this phase of building the Fourth International did not bring mass forces to Trotskyism, it did furnish later generations with priceless lessons with regard to centrism. In the first place it demonstrated the importance of determining in which direction to the left or right a centrist organisation is moving.

On the basis of this revolutionaries must decide upon their orientation: whether to help left centrists complete a development to revolutionary communism or to launch an all-out assault on rightward moving centrists. But such assistance to left centrists was not an excuse for abandoning or diluting the revolutionary programme in the interests of diplomacy or to service a manoeuvre.

On the contrary, the experience of the Bloc of Four demonstrated that the only way left centrism can be helped is if it is faced with the communist programme and obliged to make a decision between consistent revolutionary politics or a retreat towards reformism. If it is not confronted in this way it will hide behind vague phrases and shift the responsibility for making hard choices from its own shoulders and on to those of the 'historical process'.

In other words centrism refuses to advance clear precise revolutionary answers to the problems faced by the masses. Instead it waits for the 'historical process' to provide those answers for it. In doing so it paralyses itself. If it has any influence over the masses it merely serves to confuse and disarm them. And it paves the way for the triumph of the right wing traitors inside the workers' movement.

Major new political developments occurred in 1934.

In February, the uprising of the workers Schutzbund was smashed in Vienna and large fascist demonstrations were held in Paris. The sections of the Second International—especially the French SFIO—felt the knife against their throat. Their mass membership began to press for the united front, for practical measures to protect the workers' organisations, for a questioning of the policies of the SPD and the Austrian Social Democracy.

The left and centre of their leaderships began to orient leftwards to avoid losing touch with their mass basis. Here were the mass forces which could, perhaps, build the Fourth International if the workers were able to expose the reformist and centrist fakers.

The task of the ICL was to help them do this. Given the tiny size of the ICL and its exclusion in most countries from an effective independent relationship to these masses, in July 1934 Trotsky, remembering the tactical success of Walcher in the left Social Democratic milieu in 1932, developed the idea of entry into the SFIO by the French section—the French turn. From 1934 this replaced the Bloc of Four tactic as the central approach to building the Fourth International.

## Footnotes

1. 'Germany, the key to the international situation'. Leon Trotsky The Struggle Against Fascism In Germany Pathfinder New York 1971, p124.

2. KPD or New Party ?March 12, 1933 Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932-33 p137.
3. Introduction and notes to Volumes 1 and 2 of the Leon Trotsky Oeuvres
4. ?Eleven Points of the International left Opposition? Documents of the Fourth International the Formative years 1933-1940 pp23-25
5. With Trotsky in Exile ; From Prinkipo to Coyoacán Jean van Heijenoort.Harvard University Press 1978 p 34
6. The Left Socialist Organisations and Our tasks Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932-33 p 275
7. The Left Opposition and the SAP Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932-33 p210
8. ibid
9. ibid
10. ibid
11. ibid
12. ibid, p213
13. All quotes are from ?Notes on Conversations Between Trotsky and Walcher 17-20 August 1933? Revolutionary History volume 5, no2 Spring 1994. pp92-102.
14. ibid
15. ibid, emphasis added
16. ibid
17. The Declaration of Four Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34 pp50-51
18. ibid
19. ibid.
20. ibid p52
21. Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34, p81
22. Trotsky, Pierre Broué, Paris 1988
23. Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34, p67
24. Pierre Broué, op cit, p785
25. ibid p 768
26. ?The SAP, The ICL and The Fourth International?A Letter to a Group of SAP Comrades?,Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934-35, p201
27. ibid p205
28. See Oscar Hippe?s, And Red is the Colour of Our Flag, London, 1992.
29. ?Centrist Alchemy or Marxism?, 24 April 1935, Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934-35 p285
30. ?Centrism and Thes Fourth International? February 22, 1934 Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34, p236
31. Ibid p237

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