

Trotsky's defence and development of the communist programme, 1933-1940

Thu, 17/03/1983 - 18:00

At its foundation in 1938, the Fourth International was the only consistent revolutionary communist tendency in the world. Other tendencies emerging from the degenerating Comintern either collapsed into reformism like the Right Opposition (Bukharin, Brandler, Maurin, Lovestone), or locked themselves up in ossified sectarianism (Urbahns, Bordiga). Many of the leading figures of the International Left Opposition - prominent founders of Comintern sections - failed to resist the pressures arising from the terrible defeats of the working class in the 1930s.

The defeats in Germany, Spain, France and above all the bloody triumph of Stalin's bonapartist clique in the USSR, propelled Left Oppositionists such as Nin, Sneevliet and Rosmer into centrist waverings. This included an unwillingness to support Trotsky's struggle to found a new International. Trotsky had hoped and expected to rally wider forces and a broader spectrum of historic communist leaders from the Leninist period of the Comintern into the new International.

It was not to be. The International Communist League (ICL), and then the Movement for the Fourth International (MFI), alone held to the fundamental principles and tactics of the first four congresses of the Comintern. They alone developed these principles and tactics to face the enormous challenge of the 1930s.

The bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Revolution had immediate repercussions beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. In the Comintern its negative effects were felt over the question of the KPD's failure to lead an insurrection in 1923. Under Zinoviev's leadership it went on to commit a series of disastrous ultra-left errors (e.g. the rising in Estonia). The Comintern sections were heavily bureaucratized under the slogan of "Bolshevisation". National leaderships were selected on the basis of their loyalty to the leading faction of the CPSU.

With the ascendancy of the Stalin-Bukharin bloc, the Comintern swung rapidly into right opportunism in its relations to the British Trade Union bureaucracy. The bloc with them - the Anglo-Russian Committee - was maintained despite the betrayal of 1926 by the TUC. Then, in 1927, after a policy of liquidating the Chinese CP into the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang led to a catastrophe in Shanghai, the Comintern veered left again. It launched the Canton Commune. This ill-prepared rising was brutally suppressed by the former honorary member of the Comintern, Chiang Kai Shek. In Russia itself the emerging bureaucratic caste - headed by Stalin - crushed party democracy, used police methods against all oppositions and vacillated wildly in its economic policies.

On all of these issues, the Left Opposition, led by Leon Trotsky, waged a determined struggle to return the Comintern to the revolutionary course it had followed at its first four congresses. Originating in the Russian Party, the Left Opposition, after Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union, established itself as an International (external) Faction of the Comintern, with the expressed aim of reforming the International, its

sections, and the one state where a section held power - the Soviet Union.

The positions of the International Left Opposition on the Soviet Union, Germany 1923, Britain 1926 and China 1927, were based on the programmatic gains of the Bolshevik party and the Theses and Resolutions passed by the first four congresses of the Comintern.

The Comintern, built in the post-war revolutionary period of 1919-1923, developed an organisation and a political method that stand as models for communists to this day. Its Congresses were democratic forums where the best communist leaders of the day could debate their tactics. Its Executive Committee (ECCI) and its network of agents were the centralised structure through which the decisions taken at those Congresses could be effectively implemented internationally.

The Comintern systematised the method of democratic centralism as the form of organisation for revolutionary combat parties and the world party of communist revolution. It drew a sharp line between communism and reformism by generalising from the experience of the Russian Revolution, and making its goal the revolutionary conquest of power by the proletariat and the internationalisation of the revolution. Not content with a mere declaration of aims, the Comintern sought to build up a number of strong active sections, capable of achieving these aims through the use of revolutionary tactics.

To this end the Comintern from 1919-22 subjected the ever changing world political and economic situation and the balance of class forces thus engendered, to constant scrutiny. It operated with an understanding of the imperialist epoch as one of capitalist decay, wars and revolutions. But it also understood the importance of periods within this epoch - revolutionary or pre-revolutionary periods, periods of stability or retreat, counter-revolutionary periods, etc. On the basis of its understanding of perspectives as a guide to action, it was able to re-focus its programme and adjust its tactical line as different periods opened up after the war.

Thus at the first two congresses the principal slogans were rightly directed at the formation of Soviets and the struggle for power. The victory of the Russian Revolution, the upheavals in Germany, the Hungarian events all pointed to the viability of this line of advance.

However, with the defeats of 1919-20 in Germany, Hungary and Italy, thanks to the treachery of the Second International parties and the vacillation of the centrist USPD and PSI, the Comintern immediately re-examined its perspectives. At the Third Congress in June 1921 these defeats, their impact on the working class and the temporary respite they gave to the principal capitalist governments were acknowledged.

The line of advance was changed from the immediate conquest of power to "conquest of the masses". The sections utilised the method employed by the Bolsheviks in February to September 1917 - the method of the united front with reformist parties and the demand that they break with the bourgeoisie and base themselves on the masses.

This method led directly to the "workers' government" slogan and to transitional demands as a means of winning the masses to communist leadership. These positions were embodied in the Third Congress' Theses on Tactics. They were elaborated further in the Fourth Congress' Theses on Tactics (December 1922), the Programme of Action in the Unions (Third Congress) and the Theses on the United Front (Fourth Congress).

In addition to its general tactical and programmatic guidelines, the Comintern developed positions on a whole range of specific questions. On the National Question, and later the Anti-Imperialist United Front, its

Theses pointed to the progressive nature of national liberation struggles, and the duty of communists to support them against imperialism. But at the same time it stressed the centrality of maintaining the independence of the working class in the oppressed nations.

National liberation for the Comintern was not the end goal. It was a component part of the struggle for proletarian revolution.

Work amongst the oppressed masses - women, youth, blacks, the unemployed, the peasantry - was stressed by the Comintern as obligatory for Communists. In this the Comintern broke resolutely with the labour aristocratic aloofness of the Second International which had given scant attention to the colonial masses and the oppressed nationalities.

At the centre of all of the Comintern's positions lay two fundamental principles - the political independence of the working class, that is to say, of its programme; and the use of tactics like the united front as a means to win the masses to the communist goal, the dictatorship of the proletariat. The first condition of a tactical compromise was that the Communists publicly express their strategic positions and retain the freedom to criticise their temporary allies.

The Comintern never completed its work of re-elaborating the Marxist programme. The bloc of restorationists and bureaucratic centrists under Bukharin and Stalin eventually enshrined their reactionary slogan of "socialism in one country" in the Comintern's degenerate programme.

The failure of the Comintern to complete its tasks of programmatic re-elaboration and re-focusing was to be of enormous significance to those communists who fought to refound a communist international after the degeneration of the Comintern.

All of these principles were sacrificed by the Stalinised Comintern.

In Britain the Trade Union leaders were praised, not fought in, 1926; in China the banner of the proletariat was pulled down by the communists while that of the bourgeois nationalists was hoisted up.

In the ultra-left "Third Period" the Comintern committed opposite, but equally disastrous errors. The programme of the Sixth Congress in 1928 infused with the theory and practice of "Socialism in One Country", abandoned the internationalism of the early Comintern.

Sections became pawns of Stalin's foreign policy. The united front was rejected in favour of the Red Front, of "United Front from below" a tactic predicated on the idea that Social Democracy and Fascism were twins. The programme itself was confined to abstract generalities about capitalism. It failed, as the positions of the early Comintern had not, to base itself on the most recent vital experiences of the international class struggle.

The Sixth Congress highlighted the thoroughgoing Stalinisation of the Comintern. The rotten fruit of this process was finally borne in 1933 when the pride of the Communist International, the KPD, was destroyed by fascism without a fight. It was not primarily the guns and knives of the fascists that defeated the German working class.

It was the treachery of the Social Democracy and the ultra-left politics of the KPD. Their abandonment of the united front led directly to the defeat in Germany. This event was decisive. It exposed the criminal policies of Stalinism. Yet not one single Comintern section acknowledged this.

Stalin's line on Germany was endorsed retrospectively by all of them.

The Comintern thus proved definitively incapable of learning from its errors. It was dead for revolution.

Trotsky and the left Opposition held a position that, up to 1933, the German defeat and its aftermath, the Comintern could have been reformed. The International Left Opposition repeatedly requested to be re-admitted to the Comintern as a faction. This in no way hindered the International Left Opposition from raising its position on Britain, China and later on Germany and the rise of fascism. Trotsky was clear that the Comintern had abandoned the revolutionary programme at its Sixth Congress, when it adopted Bukharin's programme.

Thus the programme of the Comintern was not decisive for Trotsky's reform perspective. At the same time the definitive class collaborationist turn (crossing of class lines) of the Comintern did not come until 1935 with the Stalin-Llval pact and the turn to the Popular Front policy in France, and later internationally.

For Trotsky, what was decisive in the reform perspective was that during its revolutionary period, the Comintern had, in certain key countries, organised a mass revolutionary vanguard. The existence of this vanguard, particularly in Germany where the fate of Europe was being decided, was seen by the International Left Opposition as a potential lever of reform in the Comintern. It was potentially a very powerful force that could be turned against the Stalin clique.

But the condition of this was that it could remove its leaders before their policy led to its own destruction at the hands of fascism. This consideration, the existence of a mass vanguard, determined the Left Opposition's orientation up to 1933. The destruction of the mass KPD and the failure of any other section to respond correctly to this event, undermined the basis of the reform perspective.

The other communist parties had, themselves, withered under the impact of the policies of the "Third Period". The loss of membership was dramatic, reducing many of the parties to small sects. In France the PCF, which in 1924 claimed 110,000 members against the SFIO's 35,000 was down to a claimed membership of 30,000 in 1932, with probably no more than half of that number being active members. In Britain the same process, on a smaller scale, was evident. By 1930 party membership had slumped to 2,500, less than half the number claimed in 1922. It was a relatively huge drop in numbers from the 1926 highpoint of 10,000 members.

The perspective of reform had to be changed. Max Shachtman, a leading member of the International Left Opposition in 1933, spelled this out in his foreword to *The History and Principles of the Left Opposition*. "The collapse of the German Communist Party removes from the dwindling ranks of the Communist International the last of its sections possessing any mass following or influence... Suffice it to say that the German events, and the bureaucratic self contentment and unconcern, deepening of the errors and disintegration of Stalinism and its parties which have followed them bring us to the ineluctable conclusion: That the Communist International has been strangled by Stalinism, is bankrupt, is beyond recovery or restoration on Marxist foundations". 1

Thus it was the ability of the Stalinist bureaucracy to strangle the Comintern and the masses grouped within it, that proved that those masses were not, and could not become, a lever for reform. Henceforth the Trotskyists set out to rebuild new parties and a new International.

The task became one of breaking the masses from the Comintern, social democracy and all forms of centrism, and winning them to a new International. In a period of defeats (the 1930s), this proved enormously difficult. However, the ILO/ICL/MFI forces kept alive the traditions, methods and theoretical conquests of the communist movement. As such their struggle was a pledge for their future. Trotsky himself realised the importance of this achievement, limited as it may seem to those who, impatient to

become leaders of the masses, end up regarding communism as an obstacle between them and the masses:

"How the new International will take form, through what stages it will pass, what final shape it will assume - this no-one can foretell today.

And indeed there is no need to do so: historical events will show us.

But 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".²

Under Trotsky's guidance the International Left Opposition and its descendants (ICL/MFI) had correctly analysed the class nature, role and dynamic of fascism - a mass movement based on the petit-bourgeoisie and lumpenproletariat, whose service to finance capital was to crush into atoms the proletariat's organisations. The revolutionary tactical answer to this threat was the anti-fascist workers' united front.

Such a tactic could have allowed the communists to expose the bankruptcy of the reformist leaders without jeopardising the united struggle of the working class. It could have crushed fascism, allowed the communists to win the leadership of the working class and thereby enabled them to go forward to the seizure of power. The Trotskyists analysed the degenerative process in the USSR. The isolation of the Soviet state and the extreme material and cultural backwardness of Russian society at the time of the revolution had provided fertile soil for the growth of a vast parasitic bureaucracy. This caste, headed by the Stalin faction, had usurped political power from the working class, terrorising and annihilating its vanguard.

The Trotskyists explained this degeneration at each stage and formulated the strategy of political revolution against the bureaucracy as the only means of restoring proletarian political power in the degenerated workers' state. At the same time, the ICL/MFI correctly maintained a policy of unconditional defence of the remaining gains of the October Revolution (statified industry, monopoly of foreign trade, planning) against the capitalist restorationist efforts of the imperialists.

In France and Spain, the Trotskyists analysed and fought the Stalinist and Social Democratic class collaborationist policy of the Popular Front, which subordinated the organisations and interests of the working class to the policy of the imperialist bourgeoisie. Trotsky guided the small groups of the Fourth International movement in the use of tactics adapted to conditions in the more stable imperialist democracies Britain and the USA. In these countries and in France he developed 'entryism' as a short or medium term tactical manoeuvre aimed at placing revolutionaries at the head of vanguard elements of the proletariat unwilling (temporarily) to break with the mass reformist organisations.

This tactic involved the creation of a revolutionary communist wing and a sharp 'struggle against left centrist 'revolutionary' opposition as well as the right-wing bureaucratic leadership. Whilst the development of centrist tendencies by the reformist parties was the context of entry, in no sense was it the task of Trotskyists to create such a centrist bloc or themselves to advance centrist policies. No inevitable stage of centrist leaderships or parties was envisaged, let alone advocated, by the Fourth Internationalists.

Trotsky also developed the tactic of splits and fusions in relation to leftward moving centrist organisations, on the basis of winning them to a clear revolutionary programme. In the colonial and semi-colonial countries (Asia, Latin America, Africa), the Trotskyist movement, even where it participated in the Anti-Imperialist United Front with non proletarian elements, fought for the programme of proletarian, permanent revolution, against the 'stages theory' - a Menshevik theory resurrected by Stalin, which subordinated

the independent interests of the proletariat to the national (bourgeois) revolution.

By 1938, with the second imperialist world war imminent, Trotsky drew together the fundamental doctrines and method of the communist tradition (from Marx to the first four Congresses of the Comintern) extending, developing and enriching them with the lessons learnt by the Trotskyists since 1923. This resulted in the production of a programme?The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International? - the Transitional Programme.³The FI was founded on the basis of this programme. We affirm the absolute correctness of the FI's formation in 1938.

Indeed, had the FI not been founded in 1938, there would undoubtedly have been an even greater dispersion and weakening of revolutionary forces during the war and even less possibility for the voice of revolutionary internationalism to be heard. Neither the organisation nor the ?internationalism? of the centrists (British ILP, French PSOP, Spanish POUM etc) stood the test of war. In no way can the later disintegration be attributed to the FI's ?premature? formation.

We also reject the linked error that only mass national parties with deep roots in the proletariat of their respective countries can form an International. This conception is a thoroughly nationalist, Second Internationalist one.

Faced with the degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals and the hesitations of the centrists, the internationalist revolutionary programme of the Trotskyists required an international party. The centrists who argued against the founding of the FI had themselves set up national parties. This double standard showed how, for the centrists, an international party was a luxury, thus betraying their nationalism. If the party is the programme then this applies also to the World Party.

As soon as a developed international programme exists, as soon as a stable international leadership, united around this programme has been established, then there can be no cause for delay. This was the case in 1938. Even though the political leadership of the FI existed mainly in the person of Leon Trotsky, this was initially sufficient in the period of the FI's formation. He was, in many respects, an embodiment of the FI's continuity with Bolshevism.

The FI was an ?International? which unlike the First, Second and Third did not consist of mass workers' organisations. It comprised in most countries propaganda groups struggling to escape the isolation that their numbers and the murderous hostility of the Stalinists forced on them. Partial exceptions were the USA where the SWP had developed systematic agitation in the blue collar unions and led sections of workers on a local basis (Minneapolis), and the deep roots of the Vietnamese Trotskyists in the proletariat of Saigon.

But, if the Fourth International was weak in numbers it was in Trotsky's words ?strong in doctrine, programme, tradition, in the incomparable tempering of its cadres. Trotsky's perspective was that the national sections of the FI and the international itself were posed to develop rapidly into a serious force within the proletariat. In the proletariat's crisis of leadership which the imperialist war would immeasurably sharpen, the FI would, given the correct programme and a firm and seasoned international leadership, develop into a decisive mass force capable of resolving the crisis. That this perspective did not materialise in no way invalidates in our view the decision to found the FI in 1938. Trotsky's FI, its programme, its theses and its cadres, despite the later degeneration, saved and communicated to a later generation the precious heritage of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

We stand in the tradition of the FI founded by Trotsky. Its programme, the Transitional Programme, represented the culmination of the programmatic work of previous generations of revolutionary Marxists. It

was developed on the shoulders of all previous Marxist programmes - the Communist Manifesto, the programmatic declaration of the Bolshevik Party, and above all, on the principles and tactics developed by the revolutionary Comintern.

It represented a transcending of the old Social Democratic programme, divided into minimum and maximum demands, which in the imperialist epoch enshrined the reformist practice of the Second International, and developed instead, on the basis of work already started in the programmatic debates of the revolutionary Comintern, a system of transitional demands.

The Transitional Programme was, after Trotsky's death, both misused and misunderstood by his supposed disciples. As we shall see it was eventually liquidated as an operative programme and worshipped as a lifeless idol. Unlike the Third International, the Fourth had no proletarian masses grouped beneath its banner. Its integrity and its ability to survive was concentrated in the scientific correctness of its programme and in its cadres' ability to win the proletarian vanguard to it.

Defence of the programme against its vastly stronger opponents; utilisation in the class struggle; the development and re-elaboration of it to meet new situations and new tasks, were heavy responsibilities for a cadre weak in numbers with limited class struggle experience and with few theoreticians of stature. A correct understanding of the Transitional Programme - its nature, doctrine and method is thus vital to Trotskyists who seek to rediscover and re-appropriate these historic gains - long distorted and obscured by the 'theory' and practice of Trotsky's epigones.

Trotsky's programme marked the successful resolution of programmatic problems that originated with the Erfurt Programme of 1891. It represented the programmatic resolution of the problem of the disjuncture between the struggle over immediate and partial demands and the struggle for power.

The old minimum programme was limited to demands within the framework of capitalism. These included demands for the amelioration of the proletariat's conditions - the 8 hour day, measures of social welfare, improvement of wages, and a series of democratic demands universal suffrage and a sovereign assembly, an elected judiciary, the dissolution of the standing army and the creation of a people's militia etc. These demands did not transcend the concessions possible within the framework of bourgeois society though in many countries the most militant, indeed revolutionary, methods of struggle would be necessary to win them.

In the early 1890s, Engels, who supported the Erfurt Programme with reservations, hoped that the mobilisation of the masses by parliamentary and trade union means to fight for these goals would result in a decisive struggle that would crack the framework of the capitalist state and the bureaucratic, semi-absolutist regimes of many continental states, opening the road to proletarian power. Engels' successors (Kautsky, Bernstein, Bebel etc) transformed this perspective into one of peaceful evolutionary growth in the present, combined with an inevitable collapse or catastrophe for capitalism at some time in the distant future. They thus falsified Engels' perspective and the strategic and tactical methods of the founders of Marxism.

In practice, in a period of capitalist expansion (the opening phase of the imperialist epoch) significant concessions were made to the working class simply on the basis of the threat posed by the growth (in numbers and in votes gained) by the workers' parties and in response to trade union action. The leaders of the social democracy, for their part, were content to achieve piecemeal reforms and build up the parties and unions - ie to struggle for reforms outside and apart from the perspective of proletarian power. The latter became a distant 'final goal', the subject of abstract propaganda. The strategy of the conquest of power was replaced by the isolated tactic of social reform.

Thus a chasm opened between the maximum and minimum programme. Bernstein, the father of revisionism argued that this contradiction should be resolved by Social Democracy daring to appear as what it was - a democratic party of social reform. The 'final goal' was nothing, the 'movement' was everything.

The radical left of Social Democracy, especially Lenin and Luxemburg, argued for revolutionary tactics in pursuit of the major demands of the minimum programme (ie mass strike, armed insurrection etc to attain the democratic republic). They fought to purge the ranks of the workers' parties of the revisionists and reformists. They noted and analysed the gathering forces within modern capitalism making for reaction at home and wars abroad (Imperialism).

In a partial manner the prewar Social Democratic Left posed the necessity of transcending the Erfurt style programme and the associated parliamentary and pure trade union tactics. They raised the 'final goal' as the strategic object of revolutionary tactics. Within the left, Trotsky, despite a series of vacillating positions, particularly on the question of the Party and Bolshevik/Menshevik unity, came nearest to completely transcending the minimum/maximum divide.

The theory of Permanent Revolution, at that time applied only to Russia by Trotsky, raised as the immediate goal of the proletariat (with the mass strike and insurrection to achieve it) a proletarian revolution and a workers' government that would not stop at solving the democratic tasks, but would press on, to fulfil the tasks of a socialist revolution. In a backward country like Russia, made up predominantly of peasants, Trotsky recognised that the proletarian revolution would have to win the support of the peasants and would have to be linked to the internationalisation of the revolution. However even Trotsky did not develop a fully rounded programmatic alternative to the Erfurt programme.

The 'Marxist Centre' of Social Democracy, represented by Bebel and Kautsky, refused to unite theory and practice as Bernstein and Luxemburg, in different ways, wished. They defended an increasingly abstract inevitabilist Marxism against Bernstein. They defended parliamentary and trade union cretinism against Luxemburg.

The sharpening crises, economic and political, of the pre-war period, heralded an epoch of wars and revolutions, that made the Erfurt synthesis a disguise for the rise of a conservative, counter-revolutionary bureaucracy within the workers' organisations. The Second International, under pressure from the proletariat and the Left, was committed to opposing any European war (which it defined in advance as imperialist on the part of all the major powers) and of transforming any such war into the occasion for struggling to overthrow capitalism. In August 1914, the voting of war credits by the German SPD indicated the renunciation by the leaders of that party (and they were soon followed by all the major parties of the Second International) of their formal Marxism, in favour of social chauvinism.

The Bolsheviks were the only major party to carry out their pre-war promises and obligations via the policy of revolutionary defeatism ("Turn the imperialist war into a civil war"; "Defeat of one's own country is the lesser evil"). Elsewhere minorities fought the social chauvinists (Liebknecht - "The main enemy is at home"). Bolshevism developed an understanding of the real roots of the war in the theory of imperialism as a new epoch of capitalist crisis, war and revolution.

The Bolsheviks also developed revolutionary methods of struggle for power - the united front, the mass strike, armed insurrection - and an understanding of the nature of proletarian state power - the smashing of the bourgeois bureaucratic military state machine and its replacement with soviet power, the commune-type state etc. These theoretical and practical conquests made Bolshevism by 1917, the crucible for the creation of a new programme - a programme dominated by the posing of the need for the proletariat to

seize power as an immediate task.

This did not obliterate the need to raise immediate and partial demands, but it posed the question of revolutionary methods of struggle, and of demands which met vital and immediate needs (war, famine, unemployment, inflation, economic chaos - all caused by the convulsive crises of imperialism). The struggle for such demands organised and directed workers towards the struggle for power. These transitional demands utilised by the Bolsheviks in 1917 (see Lenin's programmatic pamphlet "The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it") became part of the international proletariat's armoury as a result of the work of the Comintern between 1919 and 1923.

In the Third and Fourth Congresses the CI systematised the United Front tactic, the action programme of immediate and transitional demands, the workers' government as means of overcoming the ideological subjective weakness of the proletariat evidenced by the existence of reformist leaderships, in order to facilitate its struggle for the conquest of power.

The CI broke resolutely from the Kautskyian heritage of the Second International. First of all it recognised the nature of the epoch as transitional - transitional between capitalism and socialism. This was not an objective process. It existed thanks to objective conditions, but its resolution depended on a struggle between parties and classes. From this analysis the CI concluded: "The character of the transitional epoch makes it obligatory for all communist parties to raise to the utmost their readiness for struggle.

Any struggle may turn into a struggle for power. Thus, in the imperialist epoch, where immediate demands clashed with capitalist priorities, direct action for such demands posed the possibility of developing into a struggle for power. Therefore, revolutionaries has to stress the interlinked nature of all proletarian demands, and the need to fight for all demands and to organise itself at every level for this. Because this confronted capitalism it was necessary to state the consequence: destroy capitalism to defend ourselves.

"The communist parties do not put forward any minimum programme to strengthen and improve the tottering structure of capitalism. The destruction of that structure remains their guiding aim and their immediate mission. But to carry out this mission the communist parties must put forward demands whose fulfilment is an immediate and urgent working class need, and they must fight for these demands in mass struggle, regardless of whether they are compatible with the profit economy of the capitalist class or not."⁶ And again, "If the demands correspond to the vital needs of the broad proletarian masses and if these masses feel they cannot exist unless these demands are met, then the struggle for these demands will become the starting point of the struggle for power.

In place of the minimum programme of the reformists and centrists, the Communist International puts the struggle for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for a system of demands which in their totality disintegrate the power of the bourgeoisie, organise the proletariat, represent stages in the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship, and each of which expresses in itself the need of the broadest masses, even if the masses themselves are not yet consciously in favour of the proletarian dictatorship."⁷

The Comintern developed the idea of a bridge to facilitate the transition from the struggle within capitalism to the struggle against capitalism. Clearly this bridge, this system of demands, this programme, had to correspond to objective conditions - the state of the economy, the actual needs of the masses, the nature of the period, the recent experiences of the international class struggle and their impact on the masses. These considerations guided, for example, the various action programmes developed by the CI. .

However, by the time that the CI came to debate its programme the authors of the Theses on Tactics - the CI's "Transitional Programme" had been expelled. The "scholastic" Bukharin, acting as hired scribe for

the bureaucratic philistine Stalin, drew up the programme. In order to cover over the Comintern's errors and justify the reactionary theory and practice of 'Socialism in One Country' the programme was reduced to being an abstract, redundant document. The transitional method was gone. The need to relate the programme to objective conditions went with it. Trotsky in his critique of Bukharin's document defended and developed the Comintern's earlier position:

"But a programme of revolutionary action naturally cannot be approached as a bare collection of abstract propositions without any relation to all that has occurred during these epoch-making years. A programme cannot, of course, go into a description of the events of the past, but it must proceed from these events, base itself upon them, encompass them, and relate to them. A programme by the position it takes, must make it possible to understand all the major facts of the struggle of the proletariat, and all the important facts relating to the ideological struggle within the Comintern. If this is true with regard to the programme as a whole, then it is all the truer with regard to that part of it which is specifically devoted to the question of strategy and tactics. Here, in the words of Lenin, in addition to what has been conquered there must also be registered that which has been lost which can be transformed into a 'conquest' if it has been understood and assimilated. The proletarian vanguard needs not a catalogue of truisms but a manual of action. "8

Confronting the task of developing a new International, Trotsky had to develop a Transitional Programme. The fundamental features of the 1938 programme, 'The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International' embodied the lessons of the Comintern and its collapse. In the first place it was a programme that corresponded to the objective situation - acute economic crisis, impending war, the rise of fascism, the collapse of the Communist International.

It was sharply focused towards resolving the crisis of leadership within the pre-revolutionary situation that these factors were bound to create. Those who accuse this programme of 'catastrophism' should consider the magnitude of the catastrophe - the war - that followed its publication. Like Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto, it anticipated a sharp crisis and tried to orient the working class towards a revolutionary outcome. In this sense it was not fatalist, but imbued with the spirit of revolutionary optimism and the will to triumph over the most daunting obstacles.

It proceeded from the experience of the class struggle over the preceding ten years. Unlike Bukharin, Trotsky had nothing to hide in his programme. The lessons of the German defeat, the Popular Front in France and Spain, the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, the anti imperialist struggle in China were all encompassed in the programme.

Its slogans flowed from the experience - positive and negative - of these momentous events.

The programme was an international programme. The impending war pointed to the urgent need for an international line of march. Trotsky provided it, drawing on the experience of the MFI's sections, analysing the contradictions and inter-connections within the world capitalist system and the USSR. In the Transitional Programme is a codification of Permanent Revolution. That is, the revolution must internationalise itself or go down to defeat. In backward countries the tasks of the democratic revolution can only be solved by proletarian revolution.

This whole strategy can only be fulfilled if the crisis of leadership is resolved by revolutionary communist parties winning the loyalty of the masses and leading them into permanent revolution against imperialism.

Most important, the Transitional Programme was - like the famous Section Two in the Communist Manifesto, the Theses on Tactics of the Comintern, the 'Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It' of

the Bolsheviks - an action programme, focused towards the tasks of the period ahead. It was truly a guide to action. In the 'Review of the Founding Conference' in 1938, the FI recognised this crucial aspect of the programme: 'What a contrast it offers to the vague generalisations and deceptive abstractions which the official leaderships of the working class offer as guides to action in the present tumultuous world situation!

It is not, or rather is not so much, the basic programme of the Fourth International, as it is its programme of action for the immediate period in which we live? 9

Its programme of action for the proletariat was transitional. Its demands were interlinked and allied to the same goal - the seizure of state power by the proletariat. For this reason every demand designed to meet the needs of the masses (against unemployment, for example), is linked to the struggle for workers' control, the formation of factory committees, mass action, factory occupations, etc. These fighting organs of the proletariat culminate in the keystone of the programme, the call for Soviets as organs of struggle against the capitalist regime.

The demands for a sliding scale of wages and hours, for the opening of the books, etc, expose the anarchy of capitalism, pose the essence of the planned economy and create the organised forces both to win and exercise the state power necessary to effect a transition to a fully planned economy.

Only such a programme allows the fight for socialist revolution to be linked to the everyday struggles of the proletariat. Trotsky spelt this out in the programme itself:

"The strategic task of the Fourth International lies not in reforming capitalism, but in its overthrow. Its political aim is the conquest of power by the proletariat for the purpose of expropriating the bourgeoisie. However, the achievement of this strategic task is unthinkable without the most considered attention to all, even small and partial, questions of tactics. All sections of the proletariat - all its layers, occupations and groups - should be drawn into the revolutionary movement. The present epoch is distinguished not because it frees the revolutionary party from day to day work but because it permits this work to be carried out indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution". 10

The means for doing this was the system of transitional demands, demands which start with today's needs (not today's mentality of the workers, a fact Trotsky repeated to SWP (US) members) and lead to the revolution. Since Trotsky's death, many avowed Trotskyists have used individual demands, plucked from the system of transitional demands, either as isolated trade union demands or as part of a programme for reforming the institutions of the capitalist state (Ernest Mandel of the USFI put them forward in the 1960s as a series of 'structural reforms').

Others like the British 'Militant' group advance them as a trick - 'fight for these demands now' is what they shout; 'and later we'll reveal that they're directed against capitalism' is what they whisper amongst themselves. Both views lead inevitably to opportunism. Trotsky himself was clear that Transitional Demands were neither reforms nor tricks, not one of our demands will be realised under capitalism. That is why we are calling them transitional demands.

It creates a bridge to the mentality of the workers and then a material bridge to the socialist revolution. The whole question is how to mobilise the masses for struggle...The revolutionaries always consider that the reforms and acquisitions are only a by-product of revolutionary struggle. If we say that we will only demand what they can give, the ruling class will only give one tenth or more of what we demand.

When we demand more and can improve our demands, the capitalists are compelled to give the maximum. The more extended and militant the spirit of the workers, the more is demanded and won. They

are not sterile slogans; they are a means of pressure on the bourgeoisie, and will give the greatest possible material results immediately". 11

Thus they are both a means of winning real concessions and a means of mobilising the masses on the basis of their own needs against capitalism in a struggle that can easily turn into a struggle for power.

Of course the use of the Transitional Programme and its demands inevitably varies in different circumstances. The emphasis on particular demands, the refocusing of the programme itself, will depend on the state of the class struggle, the state of the economy, the state of political life and so on. But what remains valid, in periods of boom as well as crisis, periods of retreat as well as of advance, in backward countries and in advanced ones, is precisely the method lodged within the Transitional Programme - that the goal of revolutionaries is to take workers across the 'transitional bridge' from their present situation to the socialist revolution. All of these features were embodied within the Transitional Programme. This programme was not the invention of Trotsky. In his words: 'It is the summation of the collective work up until today'.¹²

After Trotsky's murder in 1940, preceded by the Stalinists' extermination of his closest collaborators (his son Sedov, Rudolf Klement, Erwin Wolf etc), and the desertion of leading members of the International (Serge, Leonetti, Muste, Zeller, Fischer, Naville, Rous, Shachtman, etc), the central leadership of the FI effectively ceased to exist. The Trotskyists were responsible for acts of unparalleled heroism during the war, but as an international organisation the FI disintegrated.

This collapse, exacerbated by war-time dislocation, might be the fate of any revolutionary organisation without mass parties or state resources at its disposal. Initially the sections had the Transitional Programme and the FI's declarations on the war and other issues, as their basis for unity. However the sections soon began to diverge from these positions and from each other.

FOOTNOTES

1. M.Shachtman, Ten Years - History and Principles of the Left Opposition (New York,1974) p.5.
2. L Trotsky, Writings 1935-36 (New York,1977) p.159.
3. This will be referred to hereafter as The Transitional Programme. All references are to L Trotsky, The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (New York, 1977).
4. *ibid.*, p.152.
5. Jane Degras, The Communist International 1919-1943 (London,1971) Vol 1, p.250.
6. *ibid*, pp. 248-9 7. *ibid*, p 249 (our emphasis) 8. L Trotsky The Third International After Lenin (New York,1970), p.79.
9. Documents of the Fourth International 1933-1940 (New York,1973), p.161.
10. LTrotsky, The Transitional Programme, *op.cit.*, p.114.
11. LTrotsky, 'The Political Backwardness of the American Workers' in *ibid.*, pp159-160.
12. L Trotsky, 'Completing the Programme and Putting it to Work', in *ibid*, p.112.