

What is centrism?

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"One may state it as a general rule that antipathy toward the concept centrism, and toward all further subdivisions of centrism is typical of tendencies that are either centrist themselves or have not yet finally freed themselves from their intellectual amorphousness." Trotsky Writings 1933/34 p169

Two attempts have been made so far to draw up a political balance sheet of the Workers Revolutionary Party's degeneration. Despite the sharp disagreements of Hunter and Banda over the history of the Fourth International, one thing unites them: an "antipathy toward the concept centrism".

This is not unique on the British left. Whilst the word "sectarianism" is generally bandied about as an insult, the term "centrism" is seldom heard. Militant, for example, refer to all their political opponents as "tithe sects", The SWP in turn characterises Militant as "revolutionaries with centrist tendencies". The RCP refer to us all as the radical left",

In recent years the WRP itself worked with only two political categories: "dialectical materialist" and "police agent". Before this, the International Committee characterised its rival the USFI as "Pabloite revisionist". The Thornett group and its former international affiliates were similarly unwilling to call degenerate Trotskyism "centrism" unless of course it was "centrism with special features". (GBL Theses on the Crisis of the Fourth International, 1979)

For us, on the other hand, an understanding of the Fourth International's history, and of the fragments which today clutter the ground between reformism and revolutionary communism is impossible without understanding centrism and its different subcategories.

Can we define Centrism?

Trotsky's writings on centrism in the mid 30's contain the most developed understanding of centrism, its different features, stages of development and laws of motion. Yet, whilst Trotsky wrote in 1935; "the concept of centrism has a precise meaning in a Marxist dictionary" (Writings 35/36 p 153) he also warned repeatedly about the difficulty of positively defining centrism.

He wrote, for example, that centrism "is characterised to a much greater extent by what it lacks than by what it embraces" (Writings 33/34 p232) This is because "centrism", like every Marxist concept, embraces a process. It is not a motionless category. Outside of metaphors, there is no "Marxist dictionary." For this reason, Trotsky wrote, any general definition of centrism: "of necessity always has a conjunctural character." Trotsky Writings 33/34 p233

We must however start with a provisional definition of centrism. For Workers Power centrism is a current

which stands between reformism and revolutionary communism, often borrowing from both or vacillating between the two, or confining its revolutionism to theory and its reformism to practice. It is also essentially a transitional phenomenon, moving either towards or away from Marxism. Paradoxically, its transition can be swift or it can take the form of years of ossified, motionless centrism. Unlike reformism and Marxism centrism has no historic class basis, but it has, nevertheless material root in the class struggle itself.

We think the whole FI collapsed into centrism between 1948 and '51, and that the split of 1953 which formed the IC, was an incomplete break with centrism, Unlike Banda, who says the IC "fought Pabloism with Pabloism" we prefer the more scientific formula: they fought centrism with a different kind of centrism. We have explained this in detail elsewhere. The task of this document is to develop an understanding of centrism, by looking at the historical development of the concept itself,

As Trotsky wrote in 1940:

"Dialectical thinking gives to concepts by means of closer approximations, corrections concretisation, a richness of content and flexibility." Trotsky In Defence of Marxism New Park p65

Whilst centrism entered the Marxist lexicon after 1914, it was explained with the greatest "richness of content and flexibility" by Trotsky in the 1930s. The degeneration of two internationals was the material premise for this. The degeneration of yet another Trotsky's Fourth International calls for even more "dialectical thinking" on the subject of centrism. We can rise to this task only if we reconquer the gains of understanding embodied in the writings of Lenin and Trotsky on centrism.

The Second International

The concept centrism was first developed in relation to the Marxist "centre" of the Socialist International after 1914.

From the end of the 19th Century the main conflict in the Second International was that between "orthodoxy" and 'revisionism". Bernstein, the chief revisionist attacked the Marxist goal of a revolutionary transition to socialism. He argued that capitalism had become more stable, and that the struggle for social reforms within capitalism had to replace the Second International's formal commitment to abolishing it.

Against Bernstein, "orthodox" Marxism was defended by a number of writers, and most consistently by Karl Kautsky, the main theoretician of German Social Democracy, The problem was, however, that the Trade Union and 'Parliamentary right wing of the Second International was perfectly willing to stand by "orthodox" Marxism in theory, whilst being thoroughly reformist in practice.

Trotsky wrote of Kautsky's orthodoxy: "Kautsky untiringly defended the revolutionary essence of Marx and Engels doctrine, although the initiative in repelling revisionist sallies was often taken by the more derisive elements (Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Parvus). In the political arena, however, Kautsky made total peace with the Social Democracy in the form it had acquired, never commenting on its profoundly opportunist nature and, never responding to the efforts to make the party's tactics more resolute. As far as that went the party, i.e. the ruling bureaucracy also made peace with Kautsky's theoretical radicalism." Trotsky, Portraits Political and Personal (1922) p31

The nature of the right wing's commitment to orthodox Marxism was summed up in the famous comment of Ignaz Auor to Bernstein: "My dear Edo the sort of thing you ask for is not done by passing a resolution; one does not say it, one does it." H Grob, History of German Labour Movement p 82

Prior to the outbreak of the First World War the weakness of the Kautskyite "centre was that was able to

defend orthodoxy, but not apply it consistently in practice. The emergence of Imperialism,, the threat of war, the appearance of revolutionary crises all demanded that revolutionary Marxism develop a new kind of programme different to the Maximum and Minimum programme of Social Democracy, and a new kind of party, based on class combat and with disciplined organisation, as opposed to the electoral broad church of the Socialist Parties.

Marxism developed these new tools partially, separately and in a one sided way before 1914, often with the "centre" taking a more or less correct position in the debates. However when war broke out in August 1914 the whole of the "centre" sided with the social chauvinists. Under pressure from the left and the right the Kautskyite "centre" vacillated between the two. At the anti war conferences of the left Zimmerwald and Kienthal the centre sought to reconcile the left with the old reformist bureaucracy. Clearly the concepts "orthodox" and "revisionist" were no longer adequate to describe the conflicting political tendencies, or to understand the betrayal of the centre.

The war, "drew a balance of the leaders of the Second International. It required the Marxist left to evolve a new characterisation of the Kautskyite centre, This characterisation was put into place by Lenin alongside the other key elements of the communist programme for the Imperialist epoch, at the end of the war.

Writing in 1917 Lenin described three distinct tendencies within the labour movement: the social chauvinists, the revolutionary left and the "centre". Referring to the third group, Lenin outlined the fundamental features of Kautskyite centrism:

"Historically and economically speaking they do not represent a separate stratum but are a transition from a past phase of the labour movement the phase between 1871 and 1914, which gave much that is valuable to the proletariat particularly in the indispensable art of slow, sustained and systematic organisational work on a large and very large scale to a new phase, a phase that became objectively essential with the outbreak of the first imperialist world war, which inaugurated the era of social revolution." Lenin tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution

He continued: "The Kautskyans, the "centre" are revolutionaries in words and reformists in deeds; they are internationalists in words and accomplices of social chauvinists in deeds," Lenin *ibid*

Two important points spring immediately from Lenin's initial understanding of the concept centrism. First, he sees it as a transitional phenomenon, from one kind of politics to another. Secondly, he tries to explain its material roots in history and the class struggle. These two qualities, discovered in Kautskyanism by Lenin, were to form the basis of the later, more generalised concept of centrism.

It is important to note also, that in dealing with Kautsky and co, labelling them centrist, Lenin is not simply lumping them together with the social chauvinists. Neither is he insulting them, He describes their contribution as 'valuable', despite their inability to adapt Marxist orthodoxy to the new epoch. In the same way when we describe the Socialist Labour League, the precursor of the Workers Revolutionary Party as "centrist" we are not implying that it could not make correct and "valuable" criticisms of Pablistism, nor that its history of intervention in the class struggle should be "written off".

What we are saying is that even at its point of origin, the concept centrism better describes the process of degeneration of Marxism toward reformism, a process that was to be repeated several times after Kautsky, than the labels "orthodox" and "revisionist" It does so because, in the 20th century, Marxism is not a series of truths and theories to be defended against bourgeois professors and systematically explained to the working class: it is a guide to revolutionary action. In our epoch working class leaders no longer stand or fall by their ability to read "Capital" to the masses, but by their programme. Centrism encompasses better

than any other concept the process of programmatic degeneration which was a feature of Kautsky, and was to be a feature of the Stalinist Comintern and the post war Fourth International.

From 1917 to 1923

To describe the emergence of Kautskyite centrism is not to exhaust the subject of centrism and the Second International. Towards the end of the war a different kind of centrism emerged the centrism of the masses. Under pressure of defeat and extreme privations masses of workers in Europe were pushed away from their old social chauvinist political leaders in the direction of the newly founded Comintern. Often too, a section of the old leadership was likewise propelled leftward by the pressure of the newly radicalised mass.

Rather than fading away, as might be implied from Lenin's original definition of centrism, centrism was renewed by the leftward surge of the workers. Centrist parties, and centrist factions within parties now emerged. The Comintern leaders saw them correctly as both an expression of and an obstacle to the movement of large numbers of workers towards communism.

In combat with such forces, the Comintern developed the concept of centrism from a specific characterisation of Kautsky (one of the earliest centrist formations in this period was the SPD led by both Kautsky and Bernstein!) to a more general concept. In particular the Italian "maximalists" of Serrati and later the Frossard-Cachin tendency within the French Communist Party were characterised as centrists.

Summing up the period of the Comintern's programmatic struggle with leftward moving centrism, Trotsky wrote, in March 1923: "After the war, an irresistible leftward movement set in amongst the working masses the genuine revolutionary section of the working class was unable in the space of a few months either to find or educate new leaders find it must be recognised that during its initial years the Communist International had many sections headed by some leaders who were revolutionary but inexperienced and not firm enough; and by others who were semi revolutionary and eternally vacillating but possessing considerable authority and political aptitude... the qualitative sameness of the politics of Paul Levi, of Frossard and the rest shows that involved here are not at all peculiarities inherent in any specific situation which of course must be carefully taken into account - but a wholly internationalist tendency in the spirit of left centrism, which is prepared to adopt the external ritual of the Communist International, to swallow 21 and more conditions without a grimace, but all on the sole condition that everything go on exactly as before." Trotsky, Balance Sheet of the completed period First 5 years of the Comintern, Vol 2 p33

With the crystallisation of a revolutionary communist programme and International, also came the crystallisation of "centrism" as a concept describing a whole series of tendencies with the same essential features. Like the centrism of Kautsky, the centrism of 1917 to 1923 also had its material roots in the transition of the masses from reform to revolution. As with Kautsky, this centrism was not dust derided and written off: over and above attempting to win the masses and their leaders away from centrism, Trotsky recognised the "political aptitude" of the leaders, as well as their political ineptness.

The defeat of the revolutionary wave after the first world war had the effect of stabilising the mass movement. Where organised centrist currents continued to exist separately from the Second and Third Internationals they did so by virtue of their marginalisation from mass pressure

However the defeat and stabilisation post 1923 also, in an indirect way provided the conditions for the emergence of yet another form of centrism: with different material roots to that of the Second International but exhibiting many of the same features. This form of centrism emerged from the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International itself.

The Centrist Comintern 1923 1933

Even before 1923 the Comintern's sections committed centrist errors. It is very important to understand the qualitative difference between these mistakes and the systematic centrism of the Comintern after 1923. As we saw above, it was necessary to incorporate leftward moving centrist elements into the early Comintern. Later, even before 1923, the Executive Committee of the Communist International itself presided over centrist vacillations, such as that of Zinoviev and Kun on the question of the "revolutionary offensive", and the mistakes of Levi in Germany.

Despite this however, we describe the period of the first four congresses of the Comintern, from 1919 to 1923, as a healthy, revolutionary period. Why?

Because in this period the Comintern was creating a revolutionary programme against which centrist errors could be judged, and a leadership capable of judging them. The revolutionary legacy of the early Comintern is thus embodied in the theses and resolutions of the first four congresses and in the work of the Comintern sections in this period.

After 1923 a qualitative break occurred. Starting with the German events of 1923 the Comintern leadership became seriously disoriented. Between 1924 and 1925 the Comintern endorsed ultra left, adventurist "putsches" in Germany, Bulgaria and Estonia. At the same time it also developed bureaucratic and opportunist pacts with non proletarian forces (e.g. the foundation of the Peasant International). This right wing tendency increased and was consummated with the disastrous adaptation of the British CP to the TUC "lefts" in the 1926 General Strike, then in the liquidation of the Chinese CP in the Kuomintang, which led to the crushing of the Chinese Revolution in 1927.

Following this defeat, and the expulsion of the Trotskyist opposition, the Comintern, again veered left, inaugurating the "Third Period". This again combined strident ultra-leftism (where Social Democracy was equated with fascism and the United Front rejected) with accommodation to certain right wing and bourgeois democratic figures; in the case of Germany even to right wing national chauvinism.

The end result of the "Third Period" was the defeat of the German proletariat at the hands of Hitler, and the rise of fascism. This in turn provoked a new opportunist swing, i.e. the Comintern's popular (or peoples front) line. First of all in France, then as a generalised tactic, the Comintern elaborated the Popular Front strategy. For Stalinism, the rise of fascism made necessary an alliance with so called democratic capitalist parties, and with capitalist countries where "democracy" held sway because this involved the conscious and open betrayal of the workers of the "democratic" countries such as the Stalin/Laval pact of 1935 which endorsed the 'defence and security' of French Imperialism. The Popular Front policy signalled the end of the Comintern's centrist period. Its evolution into a counter revolutionary, reformist international was complete, and its self liquidation in 1943 already inevitable.

The Trotskyists, who formed the only consistent opposition to the Comintern's centrism, were able to pinpoint the material roots of this centrist evolution in the state and party bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. The 1936 theses on "The Evolution of The Comintern" outlined this understanding.

"The two methods adopted by the Comintern for handling the masses on the one hand, unprincipled, adaptation to existing circumstances and the bourgeois democratic and petty bourgeois reformist parties, and on the other the sudden unprepared appeals to the revolutionary instincts of the masses have their roots in the social position of the Soviet bureaucracy (the Comintern bureaucracy being its obedient appendage). Owing to its social character, the Soviet bureaucracy inclines towards adapting itself to the privileged and exploiting sections of Soviet society (Kulaks, intellectual strata, labour aristocracy). However

as soon as the development has reached a critical point, where these strata become so powerful socially that they threaten the bureaucracy's position of political privilege, the latter saves itself only by an appeal to the masses..." The Evolution of the Comintern Documents of the Fourth International p 119-120 Pathfinder

For this reason Trotsky adopted the label "bureaucratic centrism" for the Comintern in the period 1923-1935. Although originating in the vacillating petty bourgeois interests of the Soviet bureaucracy, Comintern centrism exhibited all the classic features of previous centrist groupings. It vacillated between reformism and revolution, violently swung between ultra left and right opportunist errors, elevated Leninism into a rigid orthodoxy whilst departing from it at every turn. Like previous centrist formations however it also contained competent leaders, was able to make correct criticisms of reformism, syndicalism anarchism; it educated cadres in Marxism and provided thousands of heroic martyrs for the revolutionary cause.

As well as illustrating yet another type of centrism, the Comintern contains other valuable lessons. The tactics of the International Left Opposition toward the centrist Comintern passed through different stages, taking account of the qualitative phases within the Comintern's centrist evolution.

Throughout all the defeats which the Communist International presided over, through all the left and right zigzags, and even despite their official expulsion in 1928, Trotsky and his followers remained loyal to the Comintern. They argued this was necessary as long as the possibility of reforming the Comintern existed. They argued that the existence of masses of subjectively revolutionary workers, particularly in Germany, within the Communist Parties, offered, under the pressure of those masses, the possibility of a return to the revolutionary programme elaborated in the first five years. Following the defeat of the German workers in 1933 Trotsky abandoned this perspective. Not simply because of the defeat itself, but because no section other than the International Left Opposition criticised the Comintern's errors from a revolutionary standpoint. With the destruction of the KPD, the Comintern's biggest section outside the USSR, it was not possible to regenerate the International from within. From July 1933 Trotsky argued for the creation of a new International.

It is important to understand here that Trotsky's break with the Communist International did not come at the point it became centrist; neither did he declare for a new International because the Communist International had "crossed class lines" (it was not to do that until two years later in France) in the manner of the second International in 1914. The break occurred because the Comintern had preyed itself incapable of being reformed from within. It was irredeemably centrist. This fact has important implications when we come to look at the Fourth International after the war.

1933-1938 Trotskyism versus Centrism

The task of building the Fourth International was made especially difficult by the need to combat the various shades of centrism which now existed. On the one hand there remained the Comintern, on the other there were elements of the "right opposition" who had been expelled from the Communist International in the "Third Period" and who had, because they too were centrists, made some correct criticisms of the Comintern. As well after 1933 there occurred yet another mass movement of the Social Democratic workers towards the left, under the threat of fascism and during severe economic depression. This new turn created centrist formations within and on the fringes of the second International: the followers of Pivert in the French SFIO, a section of the British Independent Labour Party, A. J. Muste in the USA, etc.

Faced with such a panoply of centrism, Trotsky was driven to write in 1934:

"For a revolutionary Marxist the struggle against reformism is now almost fully replaced by the struggle

against centrism." Trotsky, Writings 1933/34 p235

In the struggle against centrism of the mid 1930s Trotsky further concretized and developed the Marxist understanding of centrism. This mature conception, outlined in the writings of the period as well as in the day to day tactical relationship of the Movement for the Fourth International to various centrist groups, is extremely useful to us today.

In his article "Centrism and the Fourth International", Trotsky outlined the general features of centrism as it existed in 1934. Despite the difficulties outlined before of precisely defining centrism, it is worth quoting this passage in full. It will strike a chord immediately with any critical observer of the British left, and of the SLL/WPP tradition in particular:

1. In the sphere of theory centrism is impressive and eclectic. It shelters itself as much as possible from obligations in the matter of theory and is inclined (in words) to give preference to ?revolutionary practice? over theory; without understanding that only Marxist theory can give to practice a revolutionary direction.
2. In the sphere of ideology, centrism leads a parasitic existence: against revolutionary Marxists it repeats the old Menshevik arguments (those of Martov, Axelrod, and Plekhanov) generally without re valuing them: On the other hand it borrows its principle arguments against the ?rights? from the Marxists, that is, above all, from the Bolshevik Leninists, suppressing, however, the point of the criticisms, subtracting the practical conclusions and so robbing criticism of all who object.
3. Centrism voluntarily proclaims its hostility to reformism but it is silent about centrism more than that it thinks the very idea of centrism ?obscure?, ?arbitrary?, etc.: In other words centrism dislikes being called centrism.
4. The centrist, never sure of his position and his methods, regards with detestation the revolutionary principle: State that which is; it inclines to substituting, in the place of political principles, personal combinations and petty organizational diplomacy.
5. The centrist always remains in spiritual dependence upon right groupings, is induced to court the goodwill of the most moderate, to keep silent about their opportunist faults and to regild their actions before the workers.
6. It is not a rare thing for the centrist to hide his own hybrid nature by calling out about the dangers of ?sectarianism?; but by sectarianism he understands not a passivity of abstract propaganda (as is the way with the Bordigists) but the anxious care for principle, the clarity of position, political consistency, definiteness in organization.
7. Between the opportunist and the Marxist the centrist occupies a position which is, up to a certain point, analogous to that occupied by the petty bourgeoisie between the capitalist and the proletariat; he courts the approbation of the first and despises the second.
8. On the international field the centrist distinguishes himself, if not his blindness, at least by his short-sightedness. He does not understand that one cannot build in the present period a national revolutionary party save as part of an international party; in the choice of his international allies the centrist is even less particular than in his own country.
9. The centrist sees as outstanding in the policy of the Communist International only the ?ultra left? deviation; the adventurism, the putchism, and is in absolute ignorance of the opportunist right zigzags. (Guomindang, Anglo-Russian Committee, pacifist foreign policy, anti-fascist bloc, etc.).
10. The centrist swears by the policy of the united front as he empties it of its revolutionary content and transforms it from a tactical method into a highest principle.
11. The centrist gladly appeals to pathetic moral lessons to hide his ideological emptiness, but he does not understand that revolutionary crisis can rest only on the ground of revolutionary doctrine and revolutionary policy.
12. Under the pressure of circumstances the eclectic centrist is capable of accepting even extreme

conclusions but only to repudiate them later indeed. Recognizing the dictatorship of the proletariat he leaves plenty of room for opportunist interpreters: Proclaiming the need for a fourth international he works for the creation of the two and a half international.

Notwithstanding its latter day period of sectarian isolation who can fail to see all these lines in the SLL/WRP? Who either can fail to distinguish the character traits of the Thornett group, the Socialist Labour Group, or the Spartacists in Trotsky's pen portrait of centrism

In addition to this general definition of centrism we also find Trotsky exploring, in the 30s, some of the "further subdivisions" of centrism which are also important for an understanding of today's centrism:

a) Left and right centrism

Under the pressure of the masses some of the Social Democratic leaders were prepared to step out of their reformist garb and put on the clothes of centrism. In his 1934 Manifesto "War and the Fourth International" Trotsky drew a distinction between "masked reformist or right centrists" and the "left centrists who are distinguished in turn by a great number of shadings.?"

Trotsky exposed the right centrists (such as De Man) as wanting to drag in the defence of the fatherland "under the cover of a socialist plans?, whereas the Left centrists "arrive in words at the denunciation of the defence of the fatherland. But from this bare denunciation they do not draw the necessary practical conclusions." (Writings 33/34 p311)

b) The direction of centrist formations

On top of the characterisation "left' and "right", Trotsky also carefully distinguished, between rightward and leftward moving centrism. This is crucial, since a concept which encompasses transition would be useless if it didn't have a sub category which told us the direction of transition. As Trotsky wrote:

"In front of each centrist group it is necessary to place an arrow indicating the direction of its development from right to left or from left to right." Trotsky Writings

In turn the ability to distinguish between leftward. and rightward moving centrism dictated the tactics the Fourth International adopted towards the various groupings. For example Trotsky bitterly criticised the POUM of Spain which was the result of Nin and Andrade's evolution away from Trotskyism and did not flinch from a split with Nin, and advocated the formation of an independent nucleus in Spain. Towards the American Workers Party of A. J. Muste however, a leftward moving organisation, the Trotskyists carried through a tactic of fusion. "We took a liberal and conciliatory attitude on the organisation questions, reserving our intransigence for the question of programme" wrote Cannon of the Communist League of America's fusion with Muste. Cannon, History of American Trotskyism, p181.

c) The centrism of the masses

Trotsky often contrasted, the spontaneous and temporary centrism of the working class with the systematic centrism of the leaders and of small groups. He wrote in the war manifesto for example: "For the masses centrism is always only a short transition stage." The consciousness of the working class evolves rapidly and under fire; its centrism, its uncertainties, are very quickly put to the test.

On the other hand, despite the fact that centrism is essentially a transitional phenomenon, it is possible for centrist tendencies to exist for prolonged periods, provided the class struggle doesn't confront them with a decisive choice between revolution and counter-revolution; defeatism or chauvinism, etc.

As early as 1925 Trotsky had described this type of centrism, with regard to the British ILP:

"The main feature of socialist centrism is its reticence, its mediocre half and half nature, it keeps going as long as it does not draw the ultimate conclusions and is not compelled, to answer the basic questions set before it point blank, ... as a rule centrism is most typical of small organisations which precisely through their lack of influence absolve themselves from the need to provide a clear answer to all questions of politics and bear practical responsibility for this answer. Just such is the centrism of the Independent Labour party." Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?* p112

He returned to the subject of centrism again in 1935 in more general terms:

"In our epoch there are to be found a good many circles in various countries that have acquired a Marxist programme, most often by borrowing it from the Bolsheviks, and who then turned their ideological baggage into a greater or lesser degree of ossification." Trotsky, *Writing 35/36* p154

The concept of "ossified" centrism is important in our analysis of post-war Trotskyism. It is an apparent contradiction in terms: a transitory phenomenon frozen by objective circumstances in its process of transition. However, neither for us nor for Trotsky does this contradict the essential feature of centrism ? i.e. that it is a process of change from reform to revolution vice versa. Neither is such a phenomenon unknown elsewhere in Marxist theory: one immediately calls to mind the dictatorship of the proletariat as it exists today in the USSR: frozen, blocked in its transition to socialism.

Trotsky wrote of the Independent Labour Party, which had assumed office in the Labour government of 1924-5: "From the very moment that centrism became a political force it had to pass beyond the bounds of centrism, that is either draw revolutionary conclusions from its opposition to the Imperialist state or openly enter its service. The latter of course is what happened " Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going*.

In this instance the ILP's prolonged centrist existence came to a close when it assumed power.

However, returning to the ILP which by 1932 had become again a distinctly centrist current (it had split with the Labour Party) Trotsky wrote: "The bureau suffers the fate of all centrist organisations in times of acute class struggle; it is destroyed by the release of centrifugal forces within itself. History could not arrange a better demonstration of the correctness of our understanding of centrism," Trotsky, *Writings 35/36* p27

Unlike the masses' centrism, which is always transitory, it is possible for small organisations to exist as centrist currents relatively ossified, stabilised. by their isolation from the class struggle. However when decisive questions are posed in action such forces must complete their evolution either in the manner of 1923 (by crossing class lines) or in the manner of the 1930's (when the ILP's centrifugal forces propelled a section towards the Fourth International).

The concept of centrism

We have reviewed at length the history of the concept centrism. So much has been lost or given away by the post-war epigones of Trotsky that such a review is absolutely necessary before we attempt to employ ?centrism? as a tool to understand the degeneration of the Fourth International In this way we can make analogies and comparisons, but avoid the dangers of complacent" and "facile" comparison referred to by Mike Banda.

Let us sum up what we mean by centrism:

1) Centrism, is a political current in transition between reformism and revolutionary communism.

- 2) It can emerge from either Marxism or reformism and travel in either direction.
- 3) Insofar as it exists separately from these two currents, centrism borrows from and vacillates between both, always blinding and obstructing the political development of the working class.
- 4) Centrism cannot exist forever in this state, however where material circumstances absolve it from practical responsibility for its politics, centrism can exist in a prolonged "ossified" state
- 5) Centrism has no historic roots in either the bourgeois or proletarian classes.
- 6) It is necessary to understand the different phases, types, and directions of centrism in order to operate Marxist tactics towards it.

Now let us turn to the Fourth International after Trotsky's death: the subject of many words from both Banda and Hunter, but not a great deal of "dialectical thinking".

The Fourth International from Trotskyism to Centrism

Mike Banda was correct to warn against facile analogies in his article "27 Reasons...". How often have we heard the Mandelites whine, during yet another "unity" drive: "when did we commit our August 1914?" But we cannot abandon analogies and comparisons; only complacency.

The problem with Banda's document, to date the most critical account of the post war Fourth International to emerge from the WRP, is that it fails to distinguish between the various stages of the Fourth International's degeneration. It is not much more than a list of crimes committed not only by the IC and IS, but also the post war Fourth International, the Fourth International after 1940, and in the case of Cannon, apparently as early as 1934/5. What is missing is precisely the concept centrism and an understanding of its different sub-species and phases.

We believe that the Fourth International in 1938 was the one and only revolutionary party. Whatever the mistakes made by the constituent groups of the Movement for the Fourth International, whatever mistakes made after 1938, and there were some during Trotsky's lifetime, the Fourth International was a revolutionary organisation precisely in the same way as the early Comintern: by virtue of its programme and the existence of a leadership which embodied that programme, put it into practice, checked the errors and vacillations of its members against this programmatic criterion.

The outbreak of war disoriented the Fourth International as did the murder of Trotsky and some of his most capable followers by Stalinism and Fascism. Cannon committed centrist errors on the proletarian military policy, and the French and British sections mirrored each other in opportunist and sectarian application of the programme of revolutionary defeatism.

By 1944 however, at the International Conference the Fourth International was able to reorient itself on a revolutionary basis. It set about reconstructing an international leadership and intervening in the post war upsurge. In the maelstrom from 1938 to 1948 the Fourth International's revolutionary programme was a beacon to the workers of the world. Whatever mistakes it made in this period it was fundamentally revolutionary.

After 1948 however, the Fourth International again became disoriented. It had failed to revise its perspectives to take account of the post war political stabilisation of Stalinism and imperialism. As a result it saw in the Tito-Stalin split and the Cold war only a confirmation of the old perspective of imminent collapse, imminent revolution correct in 1938, but no longer accurate ten years and a world war, later.

Based on a perspective that saw first Tito and then Mao as "no longer Stalinist", that saw the Yugoslav events as a slightly imperfect proletarian revolution, and that predicted the imminent War/Revolution, the

Pablo leadership of the Fourth International revised the Marxist programme. The lack of time to build real Trotskyist parties, the necessity of long term deep entry into Stalinist and petty bourgeois movements, the possibility of an epoch of "workers governments of workers parties" i.e. Tito style social overturns, all were enshrined in the Yugoslavia resolution of the Fourth International's 1951 Congress

Unlike the Comintern the Fourth International had never been in reality a mass organisation. Its strength lay in its programme alone. The utter negation of Trotskyism which it adopted, in 1951, and the fact that no tendency or section correctly criticised the Yugoslav Resolution, signal the passing of the Fourth International decisively into its centrist phase. From then on it would have been necessary to form a faction, conduct an open fight for leadership and not to flinch from a split and the formation of a new international organisation.

It is undoubtedly correct to label Pabloism centrism, whilst proclaiming allegiance to Bolshevik Leninism it accommodated voraciously, first to Stalinism and then to petty bourgeois nationalism. Whilst in possession of the banner of the Fourth International it also projected long term entry into the parties of the dissolved Comintern. It was, in conformity with Trotsky's definition, "Amorphous and eclectic", it "substituted for a principled policy, personal manoeuvring and petty organisational diplomacy". It "remained silent on the opportunist sins" of Tito and Mao, and "covered up their actions before the workers". In transforming the entry tactic and the workers government demand into strategic aims, Pabloism embodied to the letter Trotsky's dictum:

"A centrist readily swears by the policy of the united front, emptying it of its revolutionary content and transforming it from a tactical method, into a supreme principle."

If it is correct to call Pabloism centrism however, is it not true that the International committee split with that centrism in 1953? Yes it split with "Pabloism" but not with centrism. The IC never criticised the 1951 Congress resolutions which were the programmatic basis of "Pabloism" If Pabloism was "revisionist" then the "orthodoxy" of the "Open Letter" and "Under a stolen flag" was the orthodoxy of a Kautsky and Zinoviev. It covered up rank adaptation to Bevanism in Britain and to Social Democracy in France. The insult 'liquidationist' aimed at Pablo disguised the liquidation by Healy of British Trotskyism into the Labour left. And by 1964 the Socialist Labour League was working with a perspective every bit as catastrophist as that of Pablo's 1951 prognosis.

The 1953 split, as we have said before, occurred simultaneously too early and too late. It occurred without a principled fight within the International, and was largely prompted, by the break up of the international non aggression pact that substituted for democratic centralism in the Fourth International. On the other hand it occurred long after the critical resolution on Yugoslavia was passed at the 1951 Congress.

One objection to this analysis which often arises is the following: "if you are quick to abandon the Fourth International, to call for the formation of a new International after 1951, how do you explain its existence as a centrist current for over 35 years. Is not centrism only a transitory phenomenon??

The answer to this has two sides, both completely in accord with Trotsky's definition of centrism.

We describe the fragments and splinters of the Fourth International as "ossified" or "petrified" centrism, i.e. centrism which by virtue of its isolation from the masses can remain in limbo between reformism and communism. The possibility and precedent for such a development is outlined in Trotsky's writings on the ILP, in both early 1920s and mid 30s, reviewed above. To the question, how can centrism become "stable" in such a way, we answer; In the same way as reformism and Stalinism after the war: on the basis of the most gigantic economic growth in world history under capitalism, and on the basis of the defeat of the

revolutionary upsurge after 1944.

On the other hand, such centrism cannot remain stable forever. After two decades of relative stagnation the splits and disintegration suffered by the centrist currents in Britain in the heat of a new period of crisis testify to this. Under the pressure of key events it is possible for "ossified" centrism to dissolve in either direction. The example of the LSSP in Sri Lanka whose historic "August 1914" occurred in 1964 when they entered the bourgeois Bandaranaike government proves this. So, conversely, may the WRP in its future.

The SLL/WRP as centrism

We have outlined elsewhere our criticisms of the SLL/WRP. That it "made mistakes" is for us, not in dispute. The question still at issue however is: what was the character of those mistakes? The answer to this question is linked fundamentally with the question of the WRP's future.

By trying to prove the SLL/WRP was centrist we are not implying that the whole history of the organisation must be written off; we are not attempting to deliver the WRP the ultimate insult; neither are we simply trying to "stick a label" on the WRP. Lenin and Trotsky's understanding of centrism was able to encompass its positive as well as its negative elements. When the SLL/WP criticised Pabloism, it built strikes and shop stewards organisations, defended Trotskyism against "state capitalist" theories, they were fighting a necessary fight; they were on the right side of the battle lines, but fighting with inadequate political weapons. That is why the fight against Pabloism evolved into a criminal slander campaign, that is why the fight against "liquidation" ended up with the assertion that no revolutionary party was needed in Libya etc. That is why the ATUA became a sterile and sectarian shell; that is why the SLL itself ended up with a form of state capitalist analysis of Cuba.

The alternatives to understanding centrism as the root of the WRP's political crisis still not resolved decisively six months after the expulsion of Healy were demonstrated graphically in the original Banda/Hunter exchange. For Banda the Fourth International's demise was the product of totally subjective factors; the inadequacy of the cadre, etc. Hunter was right to label this a "bad men" theory of history. For this, however, Hunter substituted a "bad circumstances" theory. The Fourth International's degeneration was seen as the inevitable result of adverse objective conditions. The boom, the isolation from the masses, the strength of Stalinism and reformism mean for Hunter that we made mistakes but we could have done it no other way". Both positions are fundamentally one sided and undialectical. Both are fatalistic.

The concept centrism on the other hand is profoundly dialectical. It allows us to see the material roots of the past mistakes without endowing them with "objective" inevitability, It also allows us to characterise the stages of the Fourth International's degeneration in a way not attempted by Banda. It allows us to understand when and how quantitative mistakes become qualitative centrism and how centrism itself, posed in practice with vital questions, must make another leap either back into the camp of the proletarian revolution or into the camp of its enemies.

The WRP, posed with such vital questions during the miners strike, entered into a period of political crisis still not ended. The key to projecting a revolutionary future for the WRP, for resolving positively its centrist period, lies in the re elaboration of a transitional programme for today's class struggle. One of the most vital prerequisites for this is a scientific understanding of the WRP's past as centrist.

Centrism is the concept which developed in the epoch of revolution, in the epoch of transitional programme. It developed to cope with the reality that a correct understanding of Marxist "orthodoxy", of economic theory, even of the materialist dialectic was no guarantee of programmatic correctness. As a concept it developed historically, as we have outlined. It developed, like all human thought post festum?

after the event. This incidentally explains why the charge that we call Lenin or Trotsky "centrist" before 1914 is completely unfounded. To measure the leaders of the past against programmatic yardstick which could only exist in the present would be completely anti-Marxist.

However with the post war Fourth International it is a different matter. In the case of Pablo; in the case of Cliff and Grant, Mandel and Cannon, in the case too of Healy, Banda, Hunter and co. the "yardstick" already existed. It was the Transitional Programme and the whole history of Trotsky's fight with Stalinism and reformism. The task we face is to re-erect it, re elaborate it for today. We cannot do this unless we understand how it was possible for these loaders to proclaim allegiance to that programme in words and systematically negate it in deeds. In this lies the burning importance of the concept centrism and its "further subdivisions" for the current debates in the WRP.

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