

The struggle against centrism and the founding of the Fourth International

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Comrades, next year will mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, which is today led by and embodied in our world movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

No one would deny that there have been immense changes over the course of the past seven decades, which have seen a world war, as well as innumerable regional wars, the extension of the Stalinist bureaucracy into Eastern Europe, followed by its self-liquidation, the rise and subsequent degeneration of the anti-colonial movements and the decimation of the official labor movement in country after country.

Yet, the essential questions confronted in the founding of the Fourth International and posed so intransigently by Leon Trotsky in the years and months preceding his assassination stay evergreen. That is, the historic epoch in which we live remains that of the world socialist revolution, which has its source in the irreconcilable social and economic contradictions of world capitalism. The essential political problem posed to humanity by this epoch—that of resolving the crisis of leadership within the working class through the development of a world party armed with an international strategy of socialist revolution—has never been posed more acutely.

In 1992, in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the International Committee drew up a political balance sheet of this and previous experiences and arrived at the conclusion that, in the face of the decades of betrayals by the old bureaucratic leaderships and their impact upon the political consciousness of the working class, it was necessary to overcome not only a crisis of leadership in the working class, but also a crisis of perspective. Our task consisted of fighting for a revival of a socialist culture in the working class, a task to which the *World Socialist Web Site* and this school itself are dedicated.

Under conditions in which a growing radicalization of the working class is becoming evident all over the world, a serious study of the history of the Fourth International is a decisive preparation for the coming struggles. It is only this party that consciously assimilated the strategic experiences of the working class through the course of the momentous and often tragic struggles of the twentieth century.

As we reviewed in earlier lectures, the decision to found the Fourth International was taken in 1933 in response to the catastrophe in Germany. The coming to power of Hitler, without any organized resistance from the working class, and the absence of any subsequent discussion in the Communist International over the implications and causes of this unprecedented defeat, proved conclusively that the Third International was dead for purposes of revolution, having been transformed into an agency of the Kremlin bureaucracy and an organizer of defeats for the working class.

Trotsky's decision to call for the building of a new international was obviously not taken lightly. Over the previous decade, he had insisted that,

despite the crimes of the Stalinist leadership, the struggle to reform the Communist International and win its parties back to the revolutionary program of its first four congresses could not be prematurely abandoned.

Hitler's victory, however, was for the Third International what the voting of war credits had been for the Second—proof positive that it was finished as a revolutionary organization. A new world revolutionary party was required.

For Trotsky, the call for a new international was not—as many of his centrist opponents saw it—merely a tactical or organizational question, but rather an unpostponable historical necessity.

This conception was substantiated further by his analysis of the Soviet regime in the wake of the German catastrophe, which was reviewed in the previous lecture on *The Revolution Betrayed*. The material interests of the bureaucracy that had usurped both political power in the Soviet Union and the leadership of the Third International were irreconcilably opposed to those of the working class itself. This counterrevolutionary bureaucratic apparatus could not be reformed, but had to be overthrown by means of a political revolution.

The founding of this new international party was prepared through the decade of struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition between 1923 and 1933, in which Trotsky and his followers fought the development of the Stalinist bureaucracy and carried out a merciless critique of its programmatic zigzags. In the course of this struggle, the fundamental questions of Marxist strategy and tactics were defended and positively developed, most important among them the perspective and program of revolutionary internationalism against the Moscow bureaucracy's national reformist orientation.

Forces were assembled around the International Left Opposition on the basis of agreement on the fundamental strategic experiences of the working class, including the betrayals of the British General Strike and the Chinese revolution, and defense of the perspective of permanent revolution against the Stalinist theory of socialism in one country.

Trotsky was more conscious than anyone else of the impact of the defeats suffered by the working class as a result of the betrayals of Stalinism and social democracy, and he was very aware of the relatively modest size of the forces adhering to the program of the International Left Opposition. Yet, his historical prognosis was based on a scientifically grounded optimism that the crisis of capitalism was insoluble and that a correct political program would cut a path to the working class, which, despite these betrayals, remained a revolutionary class and in many countries was entering into mass struggles of an objectively revolutionary character.

The London Bureau

The five years between Trotsky's call for the Fourth International in 1933 and the holding of a founding conference in 1938 were marked by a continuous struggle against a wide range of centrist political organizations active during this period, particularly in Europe, many of which professed sympathy with Trotsky's perspective and some of which declared themselves for the Fourth International.

The struggle against centrism and the necessity for the Trotskyist movement to intervene in this milieu was posed sharply in the summer of 1933, when the British ILP (Independent Labour Party) called a conference open to all organizations outside the Second and Third Internationals to assess the crisis confronting the international workers movement in face of the Nazi victory. The Trotskyist movement decided to participate in the conference to fight for its positions and try to win over the best elements there to the struggle for the Fourth International.

This intervention was formalized in the "Declaration of the Four," a document signed by the International Left Opposition, the German SAP (Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei—Socialist Workers Party) and two Dutch organizations that would subsequently merge under the leadership of Henricus Sneevliet.

The pivotal aim enunciated in this statement was the formation of the Fourth International in the shortest possible time:

"While ready to cooperate with all the organizations, groups and factions that are actually developing from reformism or bureaucratic centrism (Stalinism) towards revolutionary Marxist policy, the undersigned, at the same time, declare that the new International cannot tolerate any conciliation towards reformism or centrism. The necessary unity of the working class movement can be attained not by the blurring of reformist and revolutionary conceptions, nor by adaptation to the Stalinist policy, but only by combating the policies of both bankrupt Internationals. To remain equal to its task, the new International must not permit any deviation from revolutionary principles in the questions of insurrection, proletarian dictatorship, soviet form of the state, etc." [1]

This declaration set out the principled attitude that the nascent Fourth International took towards these centrist parties, which at that moment were turning sharply to the left. The Trotskyist movement was obliged to conduct this intervention both to clarify the political questions that separated it from centrism and to win over the best elements that otherwise could become trapped in this milieu.

In two of the previous lectures, we have already reviewed the political trajectory of two of the more significant of these parties—the Spanish POUM and the German SAP.

It is worth making a brief survey of some of the other organizations in the camp of centrism during that period. Among the best known was the British ILP, an organization that predated the Labour Party, with which it was long affiliated. Imbued with pacifism and even Christian beliefs, it had opposed the First World War, resulting in the jailing of its principal leaders, including Fenner Brockway.

In 1920, it disaffiliated from the Second International and voiced sympathy for the Soviet Union. Its centrist wavering between reformism and revolution found peculiar expression in its request to be admitted to the Third International with a special waiver allowing it to disavow support for armed insurrection. Needless to say, its application was denied. In the early 1920s, it joined with other European left socialist groups in a body that became known as the Two-and-a-half International.

Its call for the 1933 international conference came less than a year after it disaffiliated from the Labour Party and began to turn leftward.

The French PSOP (Socialist Party of Workers and Peasants) was led by Marceau Pivert, who joined the French Socialist Party (SFIO) in 1919 and consistently remained on the party's left wing. He was a member of the "Bataille Socialiste" (Socialist Battle) tendency, which refused to support a bourgeois government and in 1935 founded the "Gauche Revolutionnaire" (Revolutionary Left) faction. In addition to his strictly

political role, he was also involved in the production of a number of political films, and under the Popular Front was given responsibility for the French media, including press, radio and cinema.

Pivert welcomed the mass strikes and factory occupations, publishing the 1936 article "Everything Is Possible," in which he appealed for revolutionary action. (The Stalinist French Communist Party published a reply, "*Non! Tout n'est pas possible!*"—"No! Not Everything Is Possible!" defending the pro-capitalist policies of the Popular Front government).

Pivert was forced out of the SFIO as a result of his left-wing views and founded the PSOP. In Pivert, however, these left politics coexisted with membership in the Freemasons, an organization dominated by petty-bourgeois morality and hypocrisy that deliberately covered over class divisions. In the end, Pivert proved incapable of breaking with the right-wing reformists. His PSOP dissolved with the outbreak of the war, and, after the war, he returned to France to rejoin the SFIO.

Then there was the Dutch group led by Henricus Sneevliet. As a young railroad worker, Sneevliet had led a number of militant strikes, including one national walkout in defense of striking seamen. Disillusioned with the failure of the conservative union and social democratic bureaucracies to support these actions, he left the Netherlands for the Dutch East Indies, the former colony that corresponds roughly to present-day Indonesia. There he organized both a rail union and a socialist society that brought together Dutch and Indonesian workers in a common organization. With the war and the Russian Revolution, his political work achieved growing success, including among the Dutch troops, leading to his expulsion by the colonial authorities.

He was given major responsibilities by the Communist International, including as its representative in China, where he became one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. He soon came into clashes with the Stalinist leadership of the Dutch party, breaking with it in 1927. In 1933, he was jailed for publicly supporting a mutiny by sailors on a warship off the Dutch Indies, calling it the opening shot of the colonial revolution. He was released only as a result of his election to parliament.

While he affiliated to the International Communist League (the name adopted by the Trotskyist International Left Opposition following 1933), he broke with it five years later. He was unwilling to subordinate national tactical considerations involving his trade union work in Holland to the strategic task of building a new revolutionary international party and opposed Trotsky's critique of the role of the Spanish POUM. Sneevliet disbanded his party after the German occupation, founding a resistance group known as the Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg Front. Captured by the Nazis, he was executed by a firing squad in 1942.

Loosely organized in the so-called London Bureau, formally known as the International Bureau of Revolutionary Socialist Unity, most of these parties consisted of organizations that had split from either the Second International or the Third, but adopted a centrist position between them and Trotsky's struggle to build the Fourth.

The London Bureau was a body with no clear political banner, some of its affiliates moving to the left, others to the right, some orienting towards social democracy, others to Stalinism. The Norwegian NAP and the Swedish Socialist Party, among the original mainstays of the organization, ended up back in the fold of Social Democracy as participants in capitalist governments. In the end, all of these groups, some of which were considerably larger than the parties adhering to the Fourth International, ended up confirming Trotsky's prediction in the "Transitional Program" that "The great events which rush upon mankind will not leave of these outlived organizations one stone upon another." Barely a trace was to emerge of any of them in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The leaderships of these disparate groups were united only by their insistence on the need for a "broad" "non-sectarian" international organization, by which they meant one that would leave each of them free to pursue its own interests by orienting to different sections of the existing

bureaucratic leaderships in their own national political environments.

The growth of centrism in this period had deep-going objective political roots. On the one hand, the catastrophic and systemic crisis of capitalism that characterized the 1930s had rendered the programs of those parties affiliated to the Second International, which proposed the gradual amelioration of the conditions of the working class by means of incremental reforms rather than social revolution, manifestly unviable. On the other hand, the Communist International, which still attracted the support of millions of workers around the globe based on its false identification with the October 1917 revolution, was incapable of and opposed to the organization of the working class for revolutionary purposes.

Ultimately, centrism represented—and still represents—a secondary agency of imperialism, whose specific tasks are to block the path of the revolutionary party to the working class and throw up ideological obstacles to the working class' theoretical and political clarification.

Many of these groups were prepared to swear formally to internationalism and accept that the Stalinist bureaucracy had betrayed the working class and suppressed the genuine Bolshevik Leninists in the Soviet Union. On principle, they were even prepared to accept the necessity for a new international. But in practice they maintained that the time was not right, that Trotsky's call was premature or that a new international could not be created in a period of defeats.

Trotsky insisted on the necessity of distinguishing between the centrism of the workers, who inevitably pass through centrist phases and even centrist organizations on the road to revolution, and the professional centrism of the leaders of these organizations, whose task is to contain the movement of the workers and divert it back into the safe channels of reformism and subordination to the bourgeoisie.

Trotsky sought patiently to win those layers of workers passing through these organizations to the Fourth International, while waging an implacable struggle against the opportunism, skepticism and pessimism that prevailed within the leaderships of these groups.

The characteristics of centrism

Centrism by its very nature is vague and ill defined, oscillating now to the left, now to the right. It is characterized as much by what it lacks in terms of clear ideological groundings and political principles as by what it espouses.

Nonetheless, in 1934, Trotsky spelled out in his article "Centrism and the Fourth International" [2] some of the fundamental traits of these organizations. Reading it today calls to mind the saying—the more things change, the more they stay the same.

"Theoretically," Trotsky wrote, "centrism is amorphous and eclectic; so far as possible it evades theoretical obligations and inclines (in words) to give preference to 'revolutionary practice' over theory, without understanding that only Marxist theory can impart revolutionary direction to practice...."

He continued, "In the sphere of ideology, centrism leads a parasitic existence. It repeats against revolutionary Marxists the old Menshevik arguments...usually without suspecting this. On the other hand, the main arguments against the right it borrows from the Marxists, that is, first of all from the Bolshevik Leninists, dulling, however, the sharp edge of criticism and avoiding practical conclusions, thereby rendering their criticism meaningless...."

Because of their inability to clearly define their political positions, Trotsky said, the centrist "views with hatred the revolutionary principle: state what is. He is inclined to substitute for a principled policy personal

maneuvering and petty organizational diplomacy."

And, in an observation that anyone with any experience in our movement will find quite familiar and contemporary, he stated, "The centrist frequently covers up his dawdling by referring to the danger of 'sectarianism' by which he understands not abstract propagandist passivity, but an active concern for purity of principles, clarity of position, political consistency and organizational completeness."

Also of immense significance was Trotsky's assessment of centrism's role on the international arena. The centrist, he wrote, "does not understand that in the present epoch, a national revolutionary party can be built only as part of an international party. In the choice of his international allies, the centrist is even less discriminating than in his own country."

Indeed, this aspect, or rather this essential characteristic, of centrism would emerge again and again in the context of the struggle between the nascent Fourth International and the parties orbiting around the London Bureau.

For example, in 1933, just a year after the British Independent Labour Party (ILP) had disaffiliated from the Labour Party and made a sharp shift to the left and towards the Fourth International, the party published an English edition of Trotsky's powerful speech delivered in Copenhagen, "In Defense of the October Revolution."

The edition included an introduction by party leader James Maxton, recommending it to socialists, but insisting that the issues in the struggle between the Left Opposition and the Stalinist bureaucracy were ones about which "only Russian socialists are competent to decide."

While Trotsky saw the ILP as standing on the left wing of the London Bureau and at that point was publicly seeking a discussion of the program and principles of the Fourth International with this group, he responded with characteristic intransigence to this hands-off approach to the struggle against Stalinism.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

"By these few words the international character of socialism as a scientific doctrine and as a revolutionary movement is completely refuted," he wrote. "If socialists (communists) of one country are incapable, incompetent, and consequently have no right to decide the vital questions of the struggle of socialists (communists) in other countries, the proletarian International loses all rights and possibilities of existence.... [Maxton] expressed himself in hidden form on the essence of the dispute and, in effect, in favor of the Stalinist faction, since our struggle with it concerns precisely the question as to whether socialism is a national or international matter." [3]

Trotsky's prescience in this matter was soon born out. The ILP ended up opposing the demand for an international commission of inquiry on the Moscow Trials, with its leader Brockway instead proposing a commission of social democratic scoundrels to investigate the political activity of Leon Trotsky. By 1938 the national reformist perspective that Trotsky had detected in Maxton's introduction 5 years earlier found completed expression in the ILP leader's delivering a public speech in which he thanked Tory Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain for saving the "peace of Europe" by reaching an accommodation with Hitler at Munich.

While not every one of the centrist parties around the London Bureau sunk so deeply into political reaction, all of them ended up opposing the Fourth International on similar nationalist grounds.

The tragic consequences of the attempt to steer a middle course between revolutionary Marxism on the one hand and Stalinism and Social Democracy on the other found full expression in the equivocal policy of Andres Nin and the POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) in Spain, which contributed decisively to strangling the Spanish revolution and led to the POUM's

destruction and Nin's murder. The POUM's role, in the final analysis, was to provide a left cover to the popular front, while actively isolating the revolutionary Marxists from the masses. In this sense, it functioned—despite Nin's intentions—as the principal obstacle to the building of a party capable of leading the Spanish revolution to victory.

The politics of the POUM—its electoral maneuvers with the Spanish People's Front and the ultimate entry of Nin into a bourgeois government—were supported by the London Bureau, and the illusions that it promoted about the POUM's revolutionary potential found a certain resonance within the ranks of the Trotskyists as well as sections of revolutionary workers.

Despite his denunciations of the Stalinist repression in Spain and his immense sympathy for the personal fate of Nin, Trotsky insisted on telling the truth about Nin's policies—that he had carried out the greatest conceivable political crime of joining a bourgeois government under conditions of socialist revolution.

This became the basis for a split with various left centrists both in and around the Fourth International who either openly or shamefacedly defended Nin's record.

Among the former was to be found Pivert, of the French PSOP. In response to Trotsky's statement that the POUM's bowing before the popular front was one of the main causes of the defeat in Spain, Pivert proclaimed that the cause of defeat was not any capitulation by the POUM, but rather “the efforts of British-French imperialism, of Italian German imperialism and also those of the Stalinists.”

In response, Trotsky wrote, “One can neither expect nor ask for a movement of greater scope, greater endurance, greater heroism on the part of the workers than we were able to observe in Spain. The imperialist ‘democrats’ and the mercenary rabble of the Second and the Third Internationals will always behave as they did towards the Spanish revolution. What then can be hoped for? He is criminal who instead of analyzing the policy of bankruptcy of the revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary organizations invokes the ignominy of the bourgeoisie and its lackeys. It is precisely against them that a correct policy is needed!” [4]

This is an exchange that has found persistent echoes to this day. Similar things were said at the recent congress in Madrid on the 70th Anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, with an entire school of bourgeois historians insisting that the cause of fascism in Spain lay not in the absence of revolutionary leadership, but the perfidy of London and Paris. In every defeated revolution since—one could cite the cases of Bolivia in 1971 and Chile in 1973—centrists have always sought to curtail any examination of the role played by quasi-revolutionary organizations—that is, centrist parties—in preparing the defeats, laying the blame instead on imperialism and the CIA.

Pivert also leveled the accusation that the “sectarian methods” of the Trotskyists were responsible for the weakening of the revolutionary vanguard. He accused them of “brutalizing the intelligence of the militants” and “interpreting with no indulgence whatever the inevitable fumbblings in the search for revolutionary truth.” The combination of opportunism, wounded subjectivism and slander evinced by Pivert are the hallmark of countless individuals and tendencies that have broken from the Fourth International while trying to disguise their own right-centrist politics. [5]

As Trotsky pointed out, similar charges were leveled against Marx, Engels, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg: that they were too sharp or lacked sensitivity and diplomacy in dealing with their political opponents. This was to be explained, he said, by the fact that centrists, who had failed to break with bourgeois public opinion and felt the duplicity of their own position, did not like criticism. On the other hand, revolutionaries, acting on the basis of an objectively determined revolutionary perspective, are prone towards confronting centrists who try to evade the implications of the political situation and their own positions.

Within the Trotskyist movement itself, the leader of the Belgian section, George Vereeken, took the position that the Fourth International was as much to blame as POUM because its sharp criticism of the Spanish party's entry into the government had pushed Nin away. Here was a classic hallmark of centrism: attributing political differences to issues of personal friction or problems of regime, rather than questions of fundamental principle.

Ultimately, the dispute over Spain led to a break with Vereeken as well as with Henk Sneevliet, whose RSAP (*Revolutionair Socialistische Arbeiderspartij* [Dutch], Revolutionary Socialist Workers' Party) was among the largest parties signing the 1935 call for the Fourth International. While taking the form of a split and an apparent organizational crisis, this battle against centrism constituted the essential political preparation for the founding of the new world party.

The founding of the FI

The Fourth International was founded in September 1938 under conditions in which Trotsky and his followers were subjected to the most intense persecution, assassinations and even mass murder on the part of both the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and fascism.

It came just six months after the third of the Moscow Trials, whose defendants included Nikolai Bukharin, former editor of Pravda and head of the Communist International; Alexei Rykov, official head of the Soviet government for five years after the death of Lenin; Christian Rakovsky, former head of the Ukrainian government; and N.N. Krestinsky, former secretary of the Central Committee and Politburo member.

The trial was accompanied by what can only be described as an exercise in political genocide, in which all those Communists who continued to defend the principles and program of the October 1917 revolution, that is the Trotskyists, were systematically exterminated. After a decade of repression, Stalin feared Trotsky and his followers more than ever, recognizing that the threat of war carried with it the threat of renewed revolution.

The killings were not restricted to the Soviet Union. The months leading up to the founding conference of the Fourth International were marked by the assassinations of Trotsky's son Leon Sedov, murdered in a medical clinic in Paris, the brutal slaying and dismemberment of Trotsky's German secretary Rudolph Klement, who was to chair the conference, and the abduction and murder in Spain of Trotsky's other international secretary Erwin Wolff.

This repression and the defeats suffered by the working class led some in the Trotskyist movement to oppose the founding of the Fourth International up to and including at the founding conference itself. One of those was Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher, who subsequently was to provide a revisionist theory of Stalin's role as a kind of Soviet Napoleon, a theory that provided a key ideological inspiration for the Pabloite liquidationism that attacked the Fourth International in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Deutscher in the third part of his trilogy on Trotsky, *The Prophet Outcast*, cites the objections to the founding of the Fourth International made by the delegates of the Polish Trotskyist group, whose arguments he had helped formulate.

“They pointed out that it was hopeless to try to create a new International while the workers' movement as a whole was on the ebb, during ‘a period of immense reaction and political depression,’ and that all previous internationals had to some extent owed their success to the fact that they had been formed in times of revolutionary upsurge.”

He goes on to quote the Polish delegates as saying, “No significant

section of the working class will respond to our manifesto, it is necessary to wait.” While proclaiming that they agreed with Trotsky that the Second and Third Internationals were “morally dead,” they “warned the conference that it was frivolous to understate the hold these Internationals had on the allegiance of the working class in many countries...” [6]

These arguments were typical of those centrists who had drawn closest to the Trotskyist movement. They insisted that they agreed with Trotsky on many questions, but not the practical conclusion that a new international party had to be built to assemble the Marxist cadres that were indispensable for a successful socialist revolution. Their objections that the time was not ripe only served as a cover for their own orientation towards and awe before the existing social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies.

Trotsky’s starting point in the struggle to found the Fourth International and in the method that permeates its founding document, the Transitional Program, is that of a principled and scientific estimation of the objective crisis, class relations and political forces on an international scale. He grasped the founding of the Fourth International as an objective historical necessity based on the crisis of capitalism and the betrayals of the existing bureaucratic leaderships in the workers movement.

The centrist critics who opposed the founding of the Fourth International, however, based their own arguments on wholly subjective considerations. While they insisted on their agreement with Trotsky over the nature of Stalinism and Social Democracy, they nonetheless began from their own assessment of the grip of these bureaucracies over the masses—abstracted entirely from the struggle of the revolutionary party to break that grip—and concluded that the launching of the Fourth International was merely a futile gesture.

The parties adhering to Trotskyism were too small and isolated, they insisted, to “proclaim” a new international. Only a new “great event” like the October Revolution could create the conditions for launching a new world party.

Against centrists like Deutscher, Trotsky insisted that the new international was founded on great events—the greatest defeats in the history of the international workers movement—in Spain, Austria, Germany, China, Italy and elsewhere—together with the extermination of socialists in the Soviet Union—events that had established the bankruptcy and counterrevolutionary character of the old bureaucracies dominating the workers movement. If humanity was not to suffer a worldwide catastrophe, the working class had to build a new revolutionary international party.

The centrists who opposed the founding of the Fourth International on the grounds that the Stalinists were still too strong or that the masses would not understand were in fact only contributing to the stranglehold exercised by the old bureaucracies, condemning the working class to a political blind alley. Trotsky dismissed with scorn this fixation with the supposed “subjective causes” for not building a new international.

He wrote: “And what else is the task of Marxists if not to raise the subjective factor to the level of the objective and to bring the consciousness of the masses closer to the understanding of the historical necessity—in simpler terms, to explain to the masses their own interests, which they do not yet understand? The ‘profound problem’ of the centrists is profound cowardice in the face of an undeferrable task. The leaders...do not understand the importance of class conscious revolutionary activity in history.” [7]

The centrists also conveniently ignored the fact that Lenin issued his call for the Third International in the wake of the great betrayal carried out by the Second, in which the social democratic parties of Europe all went over to the support of their own bourgeoisies in the First World War. At the time, Lenin had admitted that those socialists adhering to the perspective of revolutionary defeatism that he championed constituted a minority within a minority that could have fit into a single railway car. And they

remained a small minority of the socialist movement up until the victory of the October Revolution.

Writing half a year before that revolution, in his “April Thesis,” Lenin insisted on the immediate founding of a new International. This was not only because of the betrayal carried out by the social chauvinist leadership of the Second International, which, as he said, constituted the class enemy, but also to draw a sharp dividing line between revolutionary Marxists and what he termed the “centrists” of the Zimmerwald International, those who vacillated between social chauvinism and genuine socialist internationalism, who supported internationalism in words, but not in deeds.

“It is we who must found, and right now, without delay, a new, revolutionary, proletarian International, or rather, we must not fear to acknowledge publicly that this new International is already established and operating.

“This is the International of those ‘internationalists in deed’... They and they alone are representatives of the revolutionary, internationalist mass, and not their corrupters.

“And if socialists of that type are few, let every Russian worker ask himself whether there were many really class-conscious revolutionaries in Russia on the eve of the February-March revolution of 1917.

“It is not a question of numbers, but of giving correct expression to the ideas and policies of the truly revolutionary proletariat. The thing is not to ‘proclaim’ internationalism, but to be able to be an internationalist in deed, even when times are most trying.”

Concluding his thesis with a withering critique of those who resisted a definitive break with social democracy, summed up in the proposal that the Russian party rename itself as the Communist Party, Lenin concluded, “It is time to cast off the soiled shirt and to put on clean linen.” [8]

The Transitional Program

Such was the case with the founding of the Fourth International in September 1938. In evaluating the decision to hold this conference and reject the objections of all manner of centrists that the time was not ripe, the question should be posed: What would have been the consequences for the revolutionary Marxist movement if the Fourth International had not been founded before the outbreak of World War II less than a year later and Trotsky’s assassination barely one year after that?

Obviously, the Trotskyist movement would have been deprived of the political and programmatic clarity that proved decisive in allowing it to survive the immense pressures and tragic losses of the war years, under conditions in which all of the centrist organizations that opposed the founding were wiped off the political map.

The founding conference approved a series of resolutions and adopted the Transitional Program, whose full title was “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International.”

Taking as its starting point the objective crisis of world capitalism and the class struggle, this document drew upon the strategic experiences of the working class in order to advance a program of transitional demands aimed at uniting the masses in every country in the revolutionary struggle for power.

“It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution,” Trotsky wrote. “This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today’s conditions and from today’s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.” [9]

There is perhaps no part of the political and theoretical heritage left by

Trotsky that has been the object of more sustained and diverse attacks and revisions on the part of the centrists than the conception of transitional demands. While Trotsky viewed this system of demands as an instrument for overcoming the contradiction between the advanced state of the objective crisis of capitalism and the immaturity and confusion prevailing within the consciousness of the working class, these latter-day centrists and revisionists have invariably sought to transform it into a means of adapting to spontaneous consciousness, and thereby subordinating the working class to the existing bureaucracies.

As we explained in our 1988 perspectives resolution: “Not least among the betrayals of the Pabloites has been their persistent effort to transform the Transitional Program into a recipe book for opportunist adaptation and centrist evasion; that is, by tearing isolated demands out of their genuine revolutionary context and suggesting that they be presented to the working class as a substitute for a genuinely revolutionary program. According to the proponents of this revisionist method, transitional demands are a means of adapting to, rather than combating, the backward consciousness of the masses. In essence, the proponents of this position deny the necessity of any open struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. It is not necessary, they claim, to patiently nourish the workers movement with the rich fruit of Marxist culture. Rather, it is enough to dish out a few simple demands which will supposedly entice the masses and lead them to socialist revolution without even being conscious of their ultimate destination.” [10]

From a bridge between the objective crisis and the undeveloped political consciousness of the masses, various revisionist movements have sought to transform the Transitional Program into a bridge between themselves and all manner of petty-bourgeois and bourgeois nationalist movements.

Notorious in this regard was the American Socialist Workers Party. Its degeneration three decades after it had played the principal role together with Trotsky in formulating and fighting for this program for proletarian revolution was seen in its efforts to craft new “transitional” programs and demands for the black nationalist, student power and feminist movements that were thrown up by the middle-class radicalization of the 1960s. Elements of the program that were addressed to the working class upsurge of the 1930s—the sliding scale of wages and hours, in particular—became a bridge to the anti-communist trade union bureaucracy of the AFL-CIO.

In an article drafted in 1971, the late George Novack described the program as a “tool kit” in which one could rummage around for the right implement to suit any given occasion. He noted proudly that the sliding scale of wages had broken out of its “propaganda form” when the United Auto Workers won an escalator clause in its contract with General Motors. [11]

A particularly grotesque form of this tendency can be found in the positions put forward by Alex Callinicos of the British Socialist Workers Party. This self-styled Marxist intellectual advanced a supposedly modernized “Transitional Program” in his book, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*.

Of course, this modernization consisted of turning the program inside out. The document drafted by Trotsky and the nascent Fourth International began from the insoluble world crisis of capitalism and the overcoming of the obstacle posed by opportunist leaderships seeking to subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie. Callinicos, on the contrary, begins from the standpoint of ameliorating the conditions created by capitalism and providing “left” advice to the modern-day versions of the tendencies upon which Trotsky had declared unending war.

Thus, his “Transitional Program” is advanced not as the weapon of a revolutionary party seeking to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership and bridge the gap between the advanced state of the objective crisis and the relative immaturity of the consciousness of the working class. Rather, it is put forward as a set of suggestions for “diverse anti-capitalist tendencies,” by which he means primarily the reformists,

centrists and professional non-governmentalists who inhabit the World Social Forum.

He readily acknowledges that his laundry list of demands represents “responses to contemporary realities, and have all been raised by existing movements.”

This reformist hodge-podge includes such demands as the introduction of the Tobin tax, the premier goal of the ATTAC movement, which proposes the implementation of a small tax on international currency transactions in order to discourage speculation. The anti-globalization advocates of this measure claim that its proceeds could be used to ameliorate global poverty while strengthening national economies. Its principal aim, however, is to stabilize world capitalism by warding off crises caused by speculative attacks on national currencies. For that reason, governments, not only in Latin America, but in such “respectable” countries as Canada and Belgium, have had no difficulty embracing it. [12]

Other organizations claiming to be Trotskyist, of a seemingly more orthodox cast, have developed the retrograde position that the transitional demands, particularly the sliding scale of wages and hours, can somehow magically and automatically lead the working class to carry out a socialist revolution without it ever being conscious that they are doing so. Generally, emphasis is placed on these demands, which are compatible with an adaptation to the existing trade union consciousness of the working class, while the key demand advanced in the Transitional Program, the political independence of the working class and the struggle for a workers’—or, as it was formulated in the 1938 program, a workers’ and farmers’—government, is relegated to the sidelines.

This is generally combined with the contention that somehow the 1938 document not only represents *the* program of the Fourth International—essentially subsuming all other fundamental programmatic documents from *Permanent Revolution* to *Revolution Betrayed*—but is also essentially the last word on the subject, unchanged by the subsequent seven decades of historical development and all of the rich and consciously assimilated experiences through which the Fourth International has passed.

Such schemes are entirely opposed to the perspective elaborated by Trotsky and go to the heart of the centrist attack on Marxism. For Trotsky, the most important question was that of class-conscious revolutionary activity in history—that is, the role of the revolutionary leadership. He fought intransigently against all those who sought to present the historical process and revolution itself as something that developed independent of human consciousness, some kind of mechanically predetermined result of objective conditions.

The role of Pabloism

A comprehensive review of the role played by centrism in the period following the Second World War and in the present situation would require far more time than is allotted for this lecture. Suffice it to say that throughout this period, centrist movements, to a large degree the product of the Pabloite revisionist attack on the Fourth International, have played critical roles in organizing defeats and betrayals of revolutionary struggles.

The Pabloite organizations fully repudiated the essential conceptions advanced by Trotsky in the concluding section of the Transitional Program.

Outside of the cadres of the Fourth International, Trotsky wrote “there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name. If our international be still weak in numbers, it is strong in

doctrine, program, tradition, in the incomparable tempering of its cadres. Who does not perceive this today, let him in the meantime stand aside. Tomorrow it will become more evident...

“The present crisis in human culture is the crisis in the proletarian leadership. The advanced workers, united in the Fourth International, show their class the way out of the crisis. They offer a program based on international experience in the struggle of the proletariat and of all the oppressed of the world for liberation. They offer a spotless banner.” [13]

As Trotsky affirmed in 1938 that, outside of the Fourth International, there existed not a single revolutionary tendency on the face of the earth, so today we can state clearly that outside of the cadres assembled under the banner of the International Committee there exists no tendency that has defended and upheld this conception of the decisive role of a conscious revolutionary leadership organized in a world party.

All the revisionist and centrist organizations that claim or once claimed to be Trotskyist have long ago renounced this heritage, either explicitly or in practice, adapting themselves to reformist, Stalinist or bourgeois nationalist leaderships and seeing their role—at best—as groups exerting left pressure on these organizations.

In this sense, one can say that while many of these tendencies exhibit the same traits described by Trotsky 70 years ago, there has been a serious degeneration of centrism, which, in the form of Pabloite revisionism, is based on the explicit and longstanding renunciation of revolutionary Marxism. Thus, when one looks today at the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), the Lutte Ouvrière or the Lambert group in France, one sees organizations that are far to the right of Pivert’s PSOP of the 1930s and which have far less to do with the working class.

One of the latest and most revealing examples of this tendency has come in the form of an utterly degraded public discussion that the Pabloite international grouping—which, it should be noted, now refers to itself as the IC, in an attempt to obscure and deny the historical struggle of Trotskyism against revisionism—and its erstwhile Brazilian section, the Democracia Socialista.

The Brazilian group has maintained itself as a prominent tendency in the ruling Workers Party, even as many other leftists—including some of its own prominent members—have been expelled for daring to question the right-wing IMF-inspired policies of the Lula government.

Indeed, its members have taken prominent posts within the government—most notably Miguel Rosseto, who became minister of agrarian reform, where his defense of the capitalist program of the Lula government and his attacks on land occupations resulted in landless peasants burning him in effigy. Another leading member took the post of general secretary of the PT, even as this ruling party sunk into ever more filthy corruption scandals.

For over four years, the Pabloite international gave this operation its political sanction, declaring that while it had concerns about the “controversial” policy of a supposedly revolutionary party entering a bourgeois government, it didn’t want to pose this question in “dogmatic terms,” and instead wanted to accompany the Brazilian group in this experience.

As compensation for this servile opportunism, Democracia Socialista has broken with the Pabloites in all but name only, issuing a public statement at the end of 2005 accusing them of practicing “bad internationalism, infested with the vices of the 20th century.”

Now, as you all are no doubt aware, we have entered the 21st century and all those 20th century vices—the struggle for program and principles, assimilating and taking seriously the historical lessons of the struggles of the international working class (none of which, it should be pointed out, are indulged in by the Pabloites)—are to be jettisoned. It is no accident that Hugo Chavez has proclaimed his aim to be that of “21st Century Socialism,” and that this slogan has been embraced by all manner of revisionists and centrists.

The Democracia Socialista document claims that the Brazilian group had affiliated with the Pabloites on the basis of their 1979 congress document. In this document, the Brazilian revisionists asserted, “The FI ceased to consider itself the world party of socialist revolution or to try to have an international leadership that centralized its national sections.” Democracia Socialista cites the document’s insistence that “it was no longer possible to work with the idea that a mass revolutionary party would form ‘around’ or ‘under the leadership’ of the FI, but that the FI would be one of its components, with the perspective of a shared vanguard....” This “shared vanguard” was supposedly to include such movements as the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and the Salvadoran Farabundo Marti front, groups that have long since transformed themselves into thoroughly bourgeois parties. [14]

The Pabloite leadership has now at last responded to this challenge, publishing its own statements last May. It explained its delay by referring to the 2006 national election in Brazil, declaring that it “did not constitute a favorable moment for a relaxed discussion on internationalism...since other more important tasks took up our forces.”

These “more important tasks,” it should be pointed out, consisted of the electoral work of two rival factions of the DS, one of which campaigned for the reelection of Lula, the other supporting a challenge by their expelled member and legislator, Heloisa Helena, who joined in forming the PSOL on the dubious program of upholding the original values of Lula’s PT. During this campaign, the Pabloite international limited itself to urging dialogue between the rival election campaign teams.

The Pabloite response is revealing. It begins by affirming that “most of what is written in the DS document are reflections that would be shared by most of the militants of the Fourth International in their respective countries.”

It raises concerns only about which bourgeois governments in Latin America should be adapted to and promoted—Chavez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia are fine, but there are reservations about Lula in Brazil and Kirchner in Argentina or Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay.

The dividing line is drawn not according to the class nature of these governments—they are all bourgeois—or their attitude towards the working class movement, but rather largely over their respective positions on free trade agreements. This criterion speaks volumes about the class nature and orientation of modern-day Pabloism.

The Pabloite international leadership goes on to defend itself against the accusations of the DS by citing the liquidation of its forces in Italy into Communist Refoundation, its Colombian group into a bourgeois electoral front, and so on.

Finally comes the plaintive appeal: “It is necessary to know that the very existence of the Fourth International...has not now become, for the [Brazilian] comrades, another one of the ‘errors of the past.’” [15]

Well, of course, it has, and this is merely the logical conclusion of the entire Pabloite perspective. If Democracia Socialista’s erstwhile international co-thinkers still misappropriate the name Fourth International, and even that of the International Committee, it is only in an attempt to better serve their essential function as a secondary prop of capitalist rule and a barrier to the penetration of Marxism into the working class.

Marxism is materialist. It accepts these objective conditions—the conflict between the productive forces and social relations, between the nation-state system and global economy—as primary. But this has nothing to do with fatalism. It recognizes the constant dialectical interaction between the objective and the subjective in the development of the class struggle.

Above all, it recognizes that the explosion of class struggle generated by these objective conflicts can be transformed into the socialist revolution only by means of a conscious intervention by a revolutionary party based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

There is no linear relationship between the development of the objective

crisis and the emergence of this conscious revolutionary leadership capable of organizing the struggle for power. On the contrary, the deepening of capitalist crisis is inevitably accompanied by the growing ideological pressure of the bourgeoisie on the workers' movement, which gives rise to centrist tendencies that seek to isolate revolutionary socialism from the working class.

The revolutionary party must be prepared in advance and must seek to educate the most advanced sections of workers and youth, while winning authority within the working class as a whole. That was the task set by the founding of the Fourth International and prosecuted in the struggle against centrism. And that is the task that the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections carry forward today.

Footnotes:

1. *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1933-44]* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), pp. 49-52
2. *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1933-44]* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), pp. 232-37.
3. *Trotsky's Writings on Britain*, vol. 3 (London: New Park Publications, 1974), "The ILP after Disaffiliation," p. 67.
4. "Centrism and the 4th International," Letter to Daniel Guerin, March 10, 1939, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/03/psop.htm>.
5. Ibid, Letter from Marceau Pivert to Leon Trotsky, Jan. 26, 1939.
6. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast* (London: verso, 2003), p. 341.
7. *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934-35]* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971), "Centrist Alchemy or Marxism," pp. 262-63.
8. V.I. Lenin, *The April Thesis* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), pp. 48-54.
9. *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International, The Transitional Program* (New York: Labor Publications, 1981), pp. 3-4.
10. *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Task of the Fourth International, Perspectives Resolution of the International Committee of the Fourth International, August 1988*. (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1988), p. 73.
11. *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2005), George Novack, "The Role of the Transitional Program in the Revolutionary Process," p.59.
12. Alex Callinicos, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (London: Polity Press, 2003).
13. *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, pp. 42-3.
14. International Viewpoint Online: IV389, May 2007, Brazil debate "An internationalist policy for the 21st century," Democracia Socialista: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1263>
- [15] Ibid, "The new internationalism and the Fourth International: A first response to the document of DS": <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1264>



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