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Building The Party: An Assessment of the Trotskyist Experience

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The revolutionary movement today has inherited a rich tradition that was kept alive by the Trotskyist movement in the 1930's. It is an invaluable legacy. Like all legacies it is not to be worshipped, but critically applied to the world as it exists today.

In 1933 the Trotskyist movement launched a campaign to build a new, Fourth International. While it ended in failure, their experiences are rich in lessons for those who are taking up, today, the tasks of organizing mass revolutionary parties.

The following article argues that much of the experience of the Trotskyist movement has been misinterpreted by its own historians who fail to recognize that Trotsky was aiming at two goals: not only preserving the movement's cadres and political principles, but also building parties which could actually take a lead in working class struggles.

The article also argues that part of the reason why this party-building goal failed, is that the conception that such a party could be built from scratch starting with a "full international program" was wrong and could only contribute to failure.

Unlike the Third International (also called the Communist International or Comintern) which had been born as a result of the victorious Russian Revolution, the movement for a Fourth International was born out of the greatest defeat yet suffered by the working class. It was symbolic of the whole period.

In January 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany and proceeded to destroy the most powerful labor movement in Europe. He did so without a serious fight from the German Communist Party (which, acting on Comintern instructions, had refused to build a united front of all workers' organizations against fascism).

Such a disastrous defeat should have forced a re-evaluation of policy upon the Third International. Yet in April the leadership of the Comintern met and declared that the policies of the German CP had been entirely correct! The lesson for Trotsky was clear:

"The Moscow leadership has not only proclaimed as infallible the policy which guaranteed victory to Hitler,

but has also prohibited all discussion of what had occurred. And this shameful interdiction was not violated nor overthrown. No national congresses; no international congress; no discussions at party meetings; no discussion in the press! An organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of the bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it."

Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1932-33, p. 305. Hereafter Writings will be referred to only by date. (Emphasis added).

In 1928, Trotsky had been expelled from the Communist Party in Russia for opposing the growing internal bureaucratization and opportunist foreign policies of Stalin. An international campaign of vilification and even terror was launched against him and his supporters. Any who spoke out in his defence were expelled.

Trotsky had organized his followers into the International Left Opposition (ILO). There was no thought at this time of organizing new parties. For five years they had considered themselves a faction of the Third International, though they had been expelled. They would fight for readmission and struggle to change the policy of the Comintern.

They had still believed that the Communist Parties were revolutionary, no matter how bad the leadership, and that the bulk of revolutionary workers were members of those parties. Toward the thousands of revolutionary workers in those parties, they had aimed their propaganda and their hopes that the workers would rise up against their leaders and reform the Communist International. But the catastrophe of 1933 changed their perspectives.

The International Left Opposition renamed itself the International Communist League (ICL). No longer considering themselves a faction of the Comintern, they were now the embryos of new, revolutionary parties. Initially these embryos were quite small, contrasting starkly with the tremendous tasks that faced them. They would be further weakened by defections.

One of the largest sections of the ICL, the Greek Archeo-Marxist group, claimed 2000 members and was in the process of splitting away to the right. The most important section was organized around Nin and Andrade, in Spain. They would soon leave to organize with Maurin the Workers Party of Marxist Unity (POUM), which accepted the Comintern point of view that the Spanish revolution would be a bourgeois democratic one, not a proletarian revolution.

For the rest, the French section was initially most important, yet it had only about 200 members and was riven with competing factions. One hundred and fifty four members had been reported in the U.S. in 1931. Elsewhere there were similar small groupings or handfuls.

This initial weakness of the movement was unavoidable given its origins:

"The victory of fascism seizes tens of millions. Political prognoses are accessible only to thousands or tens of thousands, who, moreover, feel the pressure of millions. A revolutionary tendency cannot score stormy victories at a time when the proletariat as a whole is suffering the greatest defeats. But this is no justification for letting one's hands hang. Precisely in the periods of revolutionary ebb tide are cadres formed and tempered which will later be called upon to lead the masses in the new assault." (1932-33, p. 306)

With such meager forces at their disposal it was not a matter of proclaiming the Fourth International. That was to come later. For now, the immediate task was to build a movement for a new International. Could these small groups build such a movement?

Trotsky argued against any fatalistic pessimism. The future would depend not only upon the march of historic events, but also on the role played by revolutionaries in the unfolding of those events. "An organization that is armed with a reliable compass, but has for a long period remained in an insignificant minority, can with the advance of a historic turn suddenly rise to a higher level." (1933-34, p. 44).

Bleak as the present moment might appear to be, it was bound to change as a result of the threat facing the working class.

THE THREAT OF FASCISM AND WAR

"The position of world capitalism; the frightful crisis that plunged the working masses into unheard-of misery; the revolutionary movement of the oppressed colonial masses; the world danger of fascism; the perspective of a new cycle of wars which threatens to destroy the whole human culture — these are the conditions that imperatively demand the welding together of the proletarian vanguard into a new (Fourth) International." (1933-34, p. 51).

No one, at the time, could be unaware of the dangers that the international working class faced. There were, indeed, to be heroic battles. But if history has shown that the crisis did not usher in a new era of world revolution, it was certainly a realistic prospect at the time.

Nor could the parties of the Second (the social-democratic Socialist Parties) and Third Internationals be depended upon to change their policies and lead the working class in battle. Time and again they had proven

their bankruptcy. Trotsky's perspective for the Fourth International was fundamentally based upon the inability of these parties to respond to the danger facing them. The troops for the Fourth International would come from the thousands of workers who were abandoning the Second and Third Internationals, and a new generation of young workers:

"It must not be forgotten, on the other hand, that in every country there are thousands of revolutionaries who have abandoned the official party (CP) or been expelled from it, who did not join us chiefly because to them we were only a faction of that same party with which they were disgusted. An even greater number of workers are breaking right now with reformism, and seeking revolutionary leadership. Finally, amid the putrefaction of the Social Democracy and the wreck of Stalinism, a young generation of workers that needs a stainless banner is rising." (1933-34, p. 23).

Throughout the thirties, as defeat followed defeat, Trotsky never wavered in his belief that these setbacks were only temporary. Given time the working class would learn the lessons of its defeats, and when it did so a new revolutionary upsurge would inevitably result. If yesterday Germany was the key to the situation, tomorrow it would be Spain, then France, and lastly, perhaps, the United States. At some time the tide of history would turn. The tasks of revolutionaries was to be ready when it did.

TWO THEMES

There were two themes in Trotsky's campaign to recast the political orientation of the International Communist League in order to enable it to fulfill its historic tasks, and these themes remained fairly constant throughout the thirties.

First, the ICL must give up its narrow, sectarian orientation and methods of functioning and turn to the masses. Secondly, while engaging in mass work it was necessary to defend the programmatic purity of the movement, its unstained banner, without which success would be impossible. These two themes were combined as complementary aspects of a common perspective.

The turn to mass work would mean breaking with the whole previous orientation. For five years the ILO had functioned as a propaganda group trying to convince members of the Communist Parties of their point of view. Many had grown comfortable with this orientation, which emphasized ideas, instead of action. The ILO was made up preponderantly of intellectuals without any mass base or following in the working class. They had virtually no presence in the trade unions.

The new perspective would require mass agitational work, penetrating and winning influence in the trade unions and other mass working class organizations. At times, it would even mean entering centrist or reformist organizations in order to gain a wider hearing for their program. To accomplish all this, it was imperative to "put an end to narrow propagandism." (1933-34, p. 24).

The initial program of the ICL had been adopted at a time when they were still trying to reform the Comintern. It included as basic points the following:

1. Independence of the Proletarian Party;
2. Recognition of the international and thereby of

the Permanent character of the Proletarian Revolution;

3. Recognition of the Soviet state as a workers state;
4. Condemnation of the [domestic] economic policy of the Stalinist faction;
5. Recognition of the necessity of systematic communist work in proletarian mass organizations;
6. Rejection of the formula of the 'Democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' as a separate regime distinguished from the dictatorship of the proletariat;
7. Recognition of the necessity of mobilizing the masses under transitional slogans;
8. Recognition of the necessity of a developed united front policy with respect to the mass organizations of the working class;
9. Rejection of the theory of social fascism;
10. Recognition of the necessity of the creation of a genuine Communist International (this version of point 10 adopted after the turn)
11. Recognition of party democracy not only in words but also in fact." (1932-33, p. 53)

(Several of these points have importance because of the current line of the CP's at that time, what has been called the "Third Period". This was a classic ultra-left line, emphasizing the immediacy of revolution, denouncing the Social Democratic parties as social fascist, and rejecting any joint work with them, even in defensive struggles against fascism. This was the policy which had allowed Hitler to take power. The Comintern also urged for leaving the reformist unions, and setting up instead "Red" or revolutionary unions. In the U.S. this led to the attempt to organize independent unions around the Trade Union Unity League. This line would be changed to that of the "Popular Front" in 1935.)

In carrying out mass work it would be important to emphasize points 5, 7 and 8. Several programs of action involving partial, democratic and transitional demands were developed by Trotsky for particular countries, culminating in the Transitional Program in 1938.

Trotsky emphasized that a small group would need a reliable compass in order to successfully navigate the long journey to socialist revolution. The program would, he believed, be that compass. Summing up the lessons of the past 15 years, it represented the only revolutionary policy that would lead to victory. Time and again Trotsky would fight against any attempt to change the program, or reduce it to a more minimal program, as a capitulation to centrism or reformism.

In France, Trotsky would attack the idea of organizing the revolutionary youth around a minimal program of Marxist principles. "The formula [of a minimal program] is almost classic as the beginning of a downsliding on the opportunist incline." (1934-35, p. 90)

It is hard not to see a sectarian, all-or-nothing attitude in Trotsky's intransigence on the program. But Trotsky could argue, with reason, that it was precisely upon these fundamentals of program that the success of the whole venture depended. The perspective of a new International made little sense otherwise.

He was also partly motivated by a fear of the political dissolution of the ICL as it turned to mass work. The pressure of the more conservative masses would create strong centrifugal pressures on the small forces in the ICL. This was not an idle fear. There are, sadly, far too many

examples of those who split with Trotsky finally capitulating to reformism, and not only individuals but entire groups.

The continuing series of defeats would take its toll in political disorientation:

"A revolutionary organization whose cadres have not absorbed into their blood and bones the strategic lessons of the last decade cannot possess, under present conditions, the necessary force of resistance to the decomposing tendencies; and in any case, it will prove incapable of leading real masses." (1933-34, p. 201)

Any numerical success, without the necessary political program, would be short lived:

"In the epoch of dissolution, ferment and confusion, political half-heartedness may sometimes register great successes that are of the greatest surprise to itself and blind it; but these successes are not trustworthy; they disappear together with the political conjecture that gave birth to them." (1933-34, p. 230)

Trotsky felt that the international discipline of the ICL would be strong enough to overcome any problems of adaptation in the national sections. In the final analysis this meant that Trotsky became the international arbiter and guardian of the unstained banner. He would be dragged into every dispute, no matter how petty (which partly explains the voluminous quantity of his writings during this period).

In the hands of his followers these two themes were sometimes turned around against Trotsky. More than once he would complain that "some comrades, homesick for the mass organizations, exhibit a desire to gather fruits that are still unripe. Others, anxious about the purity of the principles of the Left Opposition, regard all attempts to approach the larger mass organizations with distrust." (1932-33, p. 276)

Throughout the thirties Trotsky would play upon these themes, depending on whether or not he felt the greatest danger to the movement consisted in its isolation and sectarianism, or rather in the reformist pressures of its mass work. First he would bend the stick one way, then the other, which explains why some of his writings have a particularly one-sided character.

It is easy today to question whether these two themes are in fact compatible in a party-building perspective. It is hard to see how a small group can create a mass party while maintaining its programmatic intransigence. It appears to expect the mountain to come to Mohammed.

Trotsky justified his perspective by the entire historical character of the epoch; not only its revolutionary potentialities, but also its reactionary and dissolving tendencies as well. It is on the basis of those historical conditions that one must evaluate Trotsky's attempts to build the Fourth International.

TO THE MASSES I

Any immediate prospects for building new parties depended upon various centrist organizations and currents. (The term "Centrism" has a specific meaning for revolutionary Marxists. It has nothing to do with middle-of-the-road politicians in the center of the political spectrum

from right to left. Rather it refers to parties and groupings whose politics represent a middle ground between social democratic reformism and revolutionary Marxism. Typically, centrists talk revolution while practicing reformism. While their heart may be in the right place, their courage is lacking. Faced with great tasks calling for decisive action they tend to vacillate between the poles of revolution and reform.)

During the summer of 1933 an international conference was called by the Independent Labor Party of Great Britain, a left centrist group which had recently left the Labor Party. The purpose of the conference was to discuss how to respond to the recent victory of Hitler in Germany. Fourteen parties and groups, including the ICL, participated. The largest party by far was the left reformist Norwegian Labor Party (NAP). While it was a significant mass party, it was also the most conservative, and was shortly to form a reformist government in Norway.

The Trotskyists hoped to get enough other groups to join them in a call for a new International to enable them to launch a serious international campaign. Only three other groups were willing to do so. These were the German Socialist Workers' Party (SAP), an emigre group which had recently left social democracy; and two Dutch groups, the Independent Socialist Party and the Revolutionary Socialist Party. A permanent commission was set up to continue the work of these four groups in promoting a new International.

This initial success quickly evaporated. While the four were to call a conference of their own later that year, shortly afterwards nothing was left. The SAP quickly moved to the right, breaking with the ICL in order to maintain its ties with the NAP and other reformist and centrist organizations. The two Dutch organizations meanwhile merged to form the Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party. It too, however, shortly split in support of the POUM against Trotsky.

A year later the ICL was back where it started. It was time for a new turn.

TO THE MASSES II—THE FRENCH TURN

The construction of a new international seemed as distant as ever. Indeed, even historic events were working against them now. In February of 1934 Austrian clerical reactionaries smashed the Austrian Social Democratic Party and set up a dictatorship with fascist trappings. Unlike Germany, the Austrian social democrats fought back, being defeated after bitter resistance. As a result parliamentarism suffered a blow, and there was a shift to the left in other social democratic parties.

In France the fascists organized a riot during that same February in an attempt to bring down the government. Its near success resulted in a general strike in Paris. Changing directions, the Communist Party even took part, marching shoulder to shoulder with the social democratic workers they had only yesterday denounced as social fascist. By June the Comintern had dropped its line of the "Third Period", in favor of building People's Fronts of all anti-fascist forces.

The desire for unity in the fight against fascism now gripped the working class. Indeed, it appeared to

confirm everything Trotsky had written on Germany. Yet it also worked against the call for a new International. After all, to many workers it seemed that would mean new splits, and more divisions, when what was necessary was unity.

With no immediate prospects for a new International, the main danger facing the ICL was its isolation, and hence its inability to influence events or even numbers of workers.

"In the unity of the ranks, the masses now see their only means of salvation. Everyone who remains outside the common ranks, everyone who criticizes from the sidelines, the masses look upon as an obstacle...With the rise of the movement, the task of the Marxists consists in, *supported by the wave*, bringing the necessary clarity of thought and method." (1934-35, p. 42)

Trotsky's solution was to propose a radical new turn—the actual entering of the reformist social democratic parties. Trotsky gave several reasons for this new strategy.

First, it was still necessary to overcome sectarian practices that members had developed in isolation (a serious problem in France).

Secondly, the Socialist Parties were developing strong left wings and attracting thousands of revolutionary workers, who thus were not being attracted to the ICL.

Thirdly the ICL was too insignificant to participate in the coming united front as an independent organization. To be on the inside, it would have to be inside one of the larger mass parties, and that meant the social democratic parties.

Fourthly, the CP's would not let them join, and in any event would be losing members.

Lastly, he emphasized that the ICL was entering the reformist organization, not to give up the fight for a new International, but to be able more effectively to carry out that fight.

There was tremendous opposition throughout the ICL to this proposal, which did not auger well for its success. Over a year of endless debates would take place before Trotsky would win a majority, and this led to the inevitable splits.

In France the turn became a farce, as the group split on the way in, while they were in, and when they came out, only to reunite and then split again, all of this drearily recorded in "The Crisis of the French Section". Yet in spite of this they met with some initial success. By the summer of 1935 they had 300 members and were receiving as much as 20% of the vote in the Paris sections of the SFIO (French Socialist Party) and the bloc in the youth group had about a third of the delegates.

It must have come as quite a surprise that at precisely this moment Trotsky was arguing for leaving the SFIO. Less surprising was the fact that the SFIO was taking steps to expel or force out the Trotskyists. (Reformists, always so ardent in their support of "democracy", are quick to deny democratic privileges to their left wing).

In "A New Turn is Necessary" Trotsky argued that the French section, "thanks to the entry, has changed from a propaganda group into a revolutionary factor of the first order." (1934-35, p. 315)

Nothing could have been further from the truth. By April 1936, after splits and reunifications, the French section still reported only 615 members. They were never to be a serious factor in French political life. If so little had changed in the strength of the ICL, why argue for an independent course?

Trotsky's reasons were partly based upon the new international situation, and partly by contradicting his motivation for entering.

The rightward drift of the Comintern, Trotsky felt, was the prelude to the outbreak of a new world war. The threat of war made it imperative for the ICL to carry out propaganda for a new international. Since the SFIO was trying to muzzle the Trotskyists, this meant leaving and setting up an independent organization.

He also now argued that the workers were, in fact, not in the SFIO. To carry their message to those workers they would have to leave.

Lastly, there was the danger of the political adaptation of some elements of the French section to centrists they were working with, primarily the grouping around Marcel Pivert. (This primarily concerned negotiations with Pivert on conditions for the Trotskyists remaining in the SFIO).

Upon leaving, however, wouldn't the masses of workers once again view them as an "obstacle", as mere outside critics? Trotsky admitted that this might initially be the case, but he felt that the unfolding of the crisis would soon justify them in the eyes of the advanced workers. In any event, given that the SFIO was intent on silencing them at a minimum, any attempt to stay in would probably have meant capitulating on their ability to raise and fight for their program.

This entire process was then repeated one year later in the U.S. With the departure of their right wing, the Socialist Party appeared to be moving left. Again Trotsky argued that thousands of revolutionary workers were joining the party. (He mistakenly believed that the SP had reached a membership of 25,000. It was probably less than half that figure. No matter, it did not approach the 130,000 in the SFIO.)

Unlike France, however, the American Trotskyists were meeting with some success. In 1934 they had led the tremendous struggle of the Minneapolis Teamsters which resulted in victory. They had also successfully carried out a merger with another small socialist organization led by A.J. Muste, to form the American Workers Party. With the mass industrial workers' movement for the CIO just beginning, prospects for the Trotskyists were certainly improving.

This very success, combined with the weakness of the American SP relative to its European counterparts, caused considerable opposition to carrying out entry in the U.S. Once again, after a year of debate and the inevitable split, the majority of Trotskyists did finally enter the SP in 1936.

They would be expelled in September 1937, after having gained a few hundred members. This was not soon enough for Trotsky, who had been urging a split since May. His reasons were similar to those in France.

He was again worried about the political adaptation of his followers to the milieu of the SP. In "A 'Critical' Adaptation to Centrism" he attacked the line of the American comrades as "opportunistic". These comrades believed the SP was closer to the politics of revolutionary socialism than any other party in the Second or Third International (certainly, an exaggeration) and that consequently it was possible for the Trotskyists and others on the left to gain a majority.

For Trotsky, the SP was a "miserable centrist political abortion" and it was a dangerous illusion to talk of conquering it. Such a policy of passive adaptation "threatens, on the contrary, the loss of members of your own faction." (1936-37, p. 307)

He called for denouncing the leaders of the SP as "traitors and rascals", as "agents of the Stalinist-reformist hangmen of the Russian revolution as well as the Spanish revolution." (1936-37, p. 335) Furthermore, only by such an attack "can we prevent hesitations among our sympathizers and the best elements of the Clarity faction." (p. 335) (The Clarity faction was a caucus which won a majority at the 1937 convention and was pledged to oppose any expulsions. Under pressure from the right, it eventually did expel the left in September.)

Trotsky also defended his recommendation for a split on the basis of the international situation, which, as previously in France, necessitated an independent organization. Primarily his analysis concerned the CP. The defeat in Spain, the failure of the Popular Front government in France, and the repression (massive purges and show trials) in Russia would combine to cause a crisis in the CP. "This party cannot possibly be left intact by the above-mentioned political factors. Crises and splits are inevitable. It is possible that by fall we can prepare an amalgamation of a part of the CP with our own independent organization." (1936-37, p. 335)

Here Trotsky's internationalism got the better of him. Certainly international questions must be considered when developing a national policy, but they are hardly sufficient. As Craipeau noted: "For a rank and file worker the discussion on the Anglo-Soviet Committee or the Kuomintang appeared completely abstract. Their preoccupations were elsewhere." * (Cited in Hallas, *International Socialism* 53, p. 32).

Eventually, in fact two years later, with the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939 there was indeed a crisis in the CP, and thousands left in disgust. But this brought no benefit to the Trotskyists. Throughout the thirties it was to remain the case that workers, disgusted with the betrayals of the Second and Third Internationals, lacked the energy to try once again, and simply gave up.

It must be remembered that all these tactics had two basic goals, not just one. James P. Cannon, a main leader of the American Trotskyists during the thirties, emphasized only the first consideration, the need to preserve the cadre, in his history of that period. (*History of American Trotskyism*, p. 249). But to do so is to recognize the relative failure of the entry into the SP. As an attempt to achieve the second goal, that is to change the balance of forces, to change from a propaganda group into at least a small party, no serious headway was made.

In fact, Cannon was forced to admit in 1940 that the whole experience of two years of factional struggle had caused them to "let the great movement of the CIO pass over our heads." * (*Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, p. 59).

Justifying the split from the SP solely on the need to preserve the cadre was contrary to Trotsky's own intentions. In fact, in a letter to Cannon in October 1937 he criticized the pessimism of some members, and insisted that the "development of the Fourth International will be connected in the next period with a new crisis and the in-

evitable disintegration of People's Front policies and the Third International." (1936-37, p. 488).

TO THE MASSES III— THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL?

By 1937 pessimism was understandable. After almost five years of activity the movement for a Fourth International did not have much progress to report. Nowhere was it even on the verge of emerging as a real party able to influence events. While in the U.S. there had been some progress, elsewhere there was only stagnation or collapse.

Conditions got grimmer as the Stalinists unleashed an international campaign of terror against the Trotskyists, and against any internal opposition in Russia. Numerous leaders of the Fourth International were assassinated, including Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov, and eventually Trotsky himself in 1940.

Furthermore, the increasingly right wing policy of the Comintern did not lead to its disintegration, but rather to tremendous growth. In France the CP grew from 34,000 in 1934 to 150,000 in 1936, with another 100,000 in the youth. In Spain it grew from 1000 in 1934 to 117,000 by July 1937. In the U.S. the CP would also reach 100,000 during the late thirties.

In fact, the entire workers' movement had shifted to the right as defeat followed defeat. Trotsky was well aware of this:

"We are not progressing politically. Yes, it is a fact which is an expression of a general decay of the workers' movements in the last fifteen years. It is the more general cause. When the revolutionary movement in general is declining, when one defeat follows another, when Fascism is spreading over the world, when the official 'Marxism' is the most powerful organization of deception of the workers, and so on, it is an inevitable situation that the revolutionary elements must work against the general historic current." (1938-39, p. 63)

In this time of demoralization and defeat, Trotsky declared that it was time to proclaim the Fourth International. Only a year before he denounced such an idea as idiotic. Had he now gone mad?

It must have appeared that way to some of his followers. At the founding conference of the Fourth International in September 1938, only 11 countries were represented. Only the Americans had any strength at all, claiming an inflated 2500 members. For the rest only tiny groups existed. Some delegates represented only themselves. (The delegate from the USSR, where the Trotskyists had been physically exterminated, was 'Etienne' a Stalinist police agent.)

Pierre Frank, a leader of the French Trotskyists, has written more recently that the formation of the Fourth International was necessary to defend the political integrity of the movement. "For him [Trotsky] the most important consideration was not the numerical size of our forces, nor the readiness of a more or less large sector of the workers to understand our decision; but above and beyond all, it was a question of political perspective and political continuity. Trotsky was acutely aware that the workers movement in general, and our movement in particular, was about to enter an extremely difficult period—the imperialist war—in the course of which we would be sub-

jected to extraordinary pressures by the class enemy and by powerful centrifugal forces. These pressures could very well destroy an organization as weak as our own." * (History of the FI, in Intercontinental Press).

Like Cannon before, such an approach reinterprets the entire experience of the thirties in terms of defending the cadre, rather than building mass parties. It is to focus on only one side of Trotsky's writings, misrepresenting his fundamental perspective.

"Reactionary epochs like ours," he wrote in 1937, "not only disintegrate and weaken the working class and its vanguard but also lower the general ideological level of the movement and throw political thinking back to stages long since passed through. In these conditions, the task of the vanguard is above all not to let itself be carried along by the backward flow: it must swim against the current. If an unfavorable relation of forces prevents it from holding the positions that it has won, it must at least retain its ideological positions, because in them is expressed the dearly purchased experience of the past. Fools will consider this policy 'sectarian'. Actually it is the only means of preparing for a new tremendous surge forward with the coming historical tide." (1936-37, p. 416. Emphasis added)

With the coming historical tide! To the end, Trotsky never wavered in his belief that in spite of all defeats, in spite of Stalinist and social democratic betrayals, the coming imperialist war would once again force the working class onto the road of revolution. Once on that road it would need leaders armed with a program of socialist revolution. For that, they would turn to the unstained banner of the Fourth International.

This perspective was summed up in the rising tones of the transitional program adopted at the 1938 convention, and called "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International."

The "objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only 'ripened'; they have begun to get somewhat rotten... The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership... The laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus. No matter how the methods of the social betrayers differ [i.e. the reformists and Stalinists]... they will never succeed in breaking the revolutionary will of the proletariat... The strategic task of the next period—a prerevolutionary period of agitation, propaganda, and organization—consists in overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard... The advanced workers, united in the Fourth International, show their class the way out of the crisis... They offer a spotless banner." * (Founding Documents of the FI pp 181-2, 218).

Duncan Hallas aptly summed up the foundation of the Fourth International as a desperate gamble, required by the desperate conditions facing the working class. If the odds for success were not great, no one was offering better ones. If it began without the necessary forces, it was organized in expectation of the development of those forces in the future.

THE BALANCE SHEET

All Trotsky's attempts to build new revolutionary parties

during the thirties ended in failure. They had to, for his analysis of key factors in the nature of the period were proven faulty.

The Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia and the Communist Parties throughout the world were not destroyed by the war, but emerged stronger than ever. The continuing defeats of the working class, culminating in the slaughter of World War II, finally did break the revolutionary will of the working class. This defeat, of world historical proportions, paved the way for a restoration of capitalist prosperity following the war and put an end to revolutionary opportunities in the major capitalist countries for an entire generation.

The thirties was, indeed, a "reactionary epoch". The historical tide never did come in. The Fourth International was still-born.

In the final analysis one of Trotsky's main successes, and a remarkable one at that, was keeping alive the revolutionary tradition, the fundamental intellectual capital of the working class movement. But the fact that this was a successful defense of the cadre does not justify interpreting his policies as solely aimed at that accomplishment.

Throughout the period, the two themes remained as complementary aspects of a common party-building perspective. That perspective made sense if one accepted Trotsky's entire analysis of the period.

It was only later that leaders of the Fourth International, unwilling to accept its failure, would be forced to defend its party building perspectives as correct for any time and period. Desperate measures would be reinterpreted as the highest revolutionary wisdom.

Cannon would write in his history: "I think one of the most important lessons that the Fourth International has taught us is that in the modern epoch you cannot build a revolutionary political party solely on a national basis. You must begin with an international program, and on that basis you build national sections of an international movement... You organize people, no matter how few there may be in each country, on the basis of the international program; you gradually build up your national sections." * ('History', p. 42)

Or more schematically: "We worked out our program, formed our cadre, did our preliminary propagandistic work first. Then, when opportunities arose for activity in the labor movement, we were ready to put our activity to some purpose." (p. 104).

History has announced its verdict on such a perspective—it is bankrupt. It is a perspective, not for building mass parties, but only for organizing numerous small insignificant sects.

Today, the Fourth International continues, still more fiction than fact. Its survival signifies, not the triumph of Trotskyism, but its degeneration. It has turned the program into a dogma, to be defended like holy writ. It also defends the independent existence of the Fourth International with a sectarian intransigence that has prevented it from influencing any of the real revolutionary movements that have developed, but does not prevent it from sharp internal disputes and divergent political lines on almost every important issue.

Fundamentally, the mistake is one of believing that the nucleus or embryo of the revolutionary party already exists, organized around the full international program, and that the task is simply one of recruiting more numbers.

It would be hard to find one mass party which has developed from such a perspective. Mass parties are not built through recruitment of individuals to the full program, but through the identification of the party with certain issues that are of decisive importance to the masses.

Today a new crisis grips capitalism. Once again we are faced with the tasks of organizing mass revolutionary parties. As important as the party's program is the authority of the individuals who carry it, and that authority can only be developed over years of participation in the ongoing struggles of the working class.

Exactly what the crucial issues are, what the character of the program must be, depends on the *specific* historic conjuncture and the immediate tasks facing revolutionaries. The key test of revolutionary leadership is the ability to correctly grasp these issues, and to determine what the next steps are, not the ability to repeat formulas learned by rote.

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