

THE NATURE OF OUR ACTION PROGRAMME

A Socialist Programme of action is neither an optional nor an arbitrarily chosen weapon for a party with the politics and the goals of the I-CL. Its nature sums up the essential content of our politics — proletarian self-liberation.

It expresses the most advanced lessons of the attempts by the proletariat between 1848 and 1919 to hammer out a political practice which linked the goal of socialist revolution with the day to day organic struggle imposed on the working class by capitalism.

Social Democracy: Minimum and Maximum Programmes

In the epoch of social democracy before the great international labour movement collapsed into national

fragments at the feet of the warring bourgeoisies in 1914, socialists operated with a minimum programme and a maximum programme.

The maximum programme was the millennium, the unseen goal in the far distance, the subject of abstract propaganda, holiday speeches and moral uplift; the theoretical property of an elite within the loose parties of social democracy. The minimum programme consisted of limited practical goals and the immediate aims of the everyday struggle of the working class.

What was the link between the two? The party and the trade unions, being built in the struggles and through propaganda. (A sect like IS[SWP] today provides a miniscule historical fossil for students of the tragedy of the Second International and its methods).

Capitalism was advancing organically; so was the labour movement. The 'right' Social Democrats saw the process continuing indefinitely until capitalism became transformed by its own evolution, of which the evolution of the labour movement was part — "The movement is everything, the goal nothing", said their theoretician, Eduard Bernstein. The mainstream Left believed evolution involved qualitative breaks and leaps, and that the evolutionary process would have to culminate in a revolutionary proletarian seizure of power.

Both failed to link the daily class struggle with the goal of socialism. For the right, accommodating to capitalism and moulding what it could of the labour movement accordingly, this separation made sense, and their rigorous thinkers attempted to make **theoretical** sense of it. For the Left, the separation led to sterile 'maximalism' and hollow 'orthodoxy' (Kautsky).

In practice, control and hegemony was left in the hands of those whose practice corresponded accurately to the minimum/maximum model; in turn, this overweening reality of the labour movement led the 'orthodox' Left to accommodate to the Right. Ultimately, having won one hollow verbal victory after another in debate, they capitulated to the Right in practice.

Central to both wings of mainstream Social Democracy, for differing reasons but with the same consequences, was the same failure. They failed to see in the creative self-controlling activity of the working class — including workers who were initially, at the beginning of struggle in which they could learn, formally backward politically — the central force for socialism.

Left and Right had in common a bureaucratic, elitist conception of socialism. Their operational image of the relationship of the revolutionary party to the revolutionary class was one of pedagogic teacher to passive pupil, or self-substituting bureaucratic instrument to inert mass.

The Revolutionary Marxists in the Second International

Rosa Luxemburg, first, in company with the orthodox 'left', exposed the relapse to utopian socialism implicit in Bernsteinian 'revisionism' and also the relapse to the substance of utopia-building within capitalism involved in reformist practice.

She then, by 1910, came to under-

stand the empty futility of the political victories of the 'orthodox' and the practical impotence of those, like Kautsky, who accommodated to the dominant forces in the Second International. She learned from the tremendous self-mobilisations of, especially, the working class in the Tsarist empire during the 1905-7 Revolution, and came to see the reality of European Social Democracy clearly.

The Russian Bolsheviks did not see the nature of the European 'Left' until it capitulated to the openly chauvinist Right in 1914 — but they did, right through, relate to the central truth of Marxist socialism, which the tremendous combativity and creativity of the Russian working class kept before their eyes.

They had the advantage over Luxemburg and her small circle in Germany of not over-reacting to a bureaucratised, routinised, essentially elitist party, which they could only see a future for by looking to the explosive latent creative power of the working class to correct it 'when the time came'. The Bolsheviks built a revolutionary party which was uniquely sensitive to the creativity of the working class, in tune with the central and irreplaceable chord of Marxist socialism; which learned from the working class, absorbed the lessons of its struggles, synthesised them with the experiences of the international struggle, and codified them scientifically — thus educating a stable cadre.

Transitional demands and the Comintern

The communist movement, reorganising itself during and immediately after world war 1, resolved to have done with the minimum/maximum division, with its inescapable consignment of the masses to passivity vis-a-vis the struggle for socialism, which the leaders would talk of and History would take care of.

The central thread of their revolutionary conceptions was summed up in the idea of **Soviets** (workers' councils) — at the same time the broadest, most responsive, most democratic and most effective means for the immediate struggle against capitalism, and the essential organs of the revolutionary proletarian regime. (Significantly, the first notion of a transitional programme is expressed in Trotsky's analysis of the 1905 Russian Revolution — the revolution that first produced Soviets).

Resolved to **mobilise the working class** to fight immediately for socialism, the communist movement elaborated the conception of a transitional programme — to link the everyday struggles of the working class with the goal of socialist revolution; to focus every struggle so as to rouse working-class masses and direct those masses against the pillars of capitalist society.

Luxemburg, at the foundation of the Communist Party of Germany in 1919 (shortly before her assassination) and the Communist International at the 3rd and 4th Congresses began to elaborate such a concept.

The Communist Parties attempted to root themselves in the immediate working class struggles and relate those struggles to an overall struggle for socialism. They began to bring 'socialist' propaganda down from the cloudy skies and harness it to the hard daily grind of working class struggle.

The full socialist programme was broken down into a linked chain, each link of which might successfully be grasped, and the movement hauled forward, dependent on the degree of mobilisation, intensity of struggles, and relationship of forces.

Everyday demands, as on wages, were expressed not within the framework of acceptance of a capitalism that the socialists believed to be maturing towards some optimum time for ripeness, when it would fall. They were expressed **against** capitalism, so as to challenge capitalist prerogatives and the assumptions of capitalist society on a day-to-day basis.

This transitional programme, in the hands of a party organised for immediate war on capitalism and neglecting at the same time neither general propaganda nor the most 'minimalist' concerns; that was the weapon that the communists armed themselves with (though the Comintern never actually **formalised** a transitional programme).

It summed up the pillars of the bitter post-1914 knowledge on which Marxist socialism reconstructed itself — War on capitalism, not coexistence with capitalism waiting to inherit its legacy either peacefully or with a little bit of last-minute force. Mobilisation and involvement of the broadest layers of the working class in immediate conflict with capitalism, a break with elitism, propagandism, and evolutionism. The integration of the various fronts of the class struggle, ideological, political, economic, into one strategic drive.

The Transitional programme for the Comintern and for us

The conception of a transitional programme and transitional demands was the product of the great Marxist renaissance and lessons drawn from the terrible collapse in 1914.

Certainly it was part of a world view that saw the struggle for socialism as immediate. But the conception itself, the criticism of the theory and practice of the Second International out of which it came, was a major conquest in understanding the relationship of the daily struggles of the working class to the struggle for socialism, even if the possibility of struggle for socialism were not quite immediate. The Communist International seriously began to discuss transitional demands at about the same time as it accepted that capitalism had survived the post-world war 1 earthquake and reached temporary stabilisation.

Fighting against the ultra-left conceptions of many within its own ranks that because, in an epochal sense, revolution was on the agenda after 1914, a permanent revolutionary 'offensive' by the party was necessary, it declared: "The alternative offered by the Communist International in place of the minimum programme of the reformists and centrists is: — the struggle for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for demands which in their application undermine the power of the bourgeoisie, which organise the proletariat, and which form the transition to the proletarian dictatorship, even if certain groups of the masses have not yet grasped the meaning of such proletarian dictatorship" (3rd Congress, 1921).

Using transitional demands

Above all, the conception of a transitional programme represented a break with the elitist, bureaucratic, evolutionary socialism, to which its central core, mass mobilisation in class struggle, is the very antithesis.

The essence of transitional demands is not that they cannot be realised under capitalism. Rather, as Trotsky put it, "'Realisability' or 'unrealisability' is in the last instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle".

If demands from a transitional programme are conceded without the bourgeoisie being overthrown, they will either be taken back by the bourg-

eoisie once the moment of danger is passed, or they will be robbed of their revolutionary content and neutralised within the structure of capitalist society. Even workers' councils can be neutralised this way: after the failure of the working class to seize power in the German Revolution of 1918, the councils were given a legal position as organs of 'codetermination' within the framework of normal factory life.

The revolutionary significance of transitional demands lies in their interaction and their interlinking with mass mobilisations of the working class.

The United Front

The concept of transitional demands was closely and logically linked with that of the united front. In the fight for partial demands, communists struggle for the involvement in united action of the broadest sections of the labour movement; and, unavoidably, so long as reformist and bureaucratic leaderships survive, this will involve even those leaderships. Broader and more extensive mobilisation both corresponds to the immediate need for maximum strength in the struggle, and opens the way for more radical demands and mobilisations and thus for the verification by the workers, through their own experience, of the ideas of the communist programme.

In the fight for and in the united front, the communists prove themselves as steadfast fighters for the workers' interests. The class-collaborationism of the reformist leaders is made clear to the masses by their

desertion from the united struggle — whether it comes at an earlier or a later stage — on condition that the communists have at all times maintained strict political independence in their agitation and propaganda. 'March separately, strike together' is the watchword of the united front.

Essential to the concept of transitional demands and of the united front is an orientation to the logic of class struggle and the potentialities of mass direct action, as opposed to all conceptions which offer the working class no role other than to join the organisation which will see to their liberation.

Nominal adherence to the method of transitional demands of the Communist International or of the 'Transitional Programme' written by Trotsky in 1938 is no **guarantee** against Second Internationalist conceptions. There are no such guarantees. Within nominal adherence, there has been a general reversion in the Trotskyist movement to the level of the Second International. One can even find 'Trotskyists' for whom transitional demands are clever devices to manipulate the working class, to con them into socialism; others for whom they are only lists of measures to demand of this or that government; others, again, for whom they are merely propaganda formulas for the literary 'exposure' of the reformists; some, indeed, for whom they are semi-religious talismans.

But in history the idea of transitional demands summed up the break with the evolutionary, bureaucratic, elitist conception of socialism. That is what it means for the International Communist League.