UNDERSTANDING THE 1928 PROGRAMME OF THE COMINTERN BY PHIL SHARPE

The 1928 programme of the sixth Congress of the Communist International (CI) is considered to be the consolidation of Stalinism by the supporters of Leon Trotsky. (1) The programme is regarded as support for the doctrine of socialism in one country and the completed adaptation of the role of the CI to the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy of the USSR. However the programme is actually adopted in a period of transition, or before the completed victory of Stalinism, when Bukharin was still one of the most prominent leaders within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and CI. Hence it is not surprising that Bukharin is one of the major theoreticians responsible for the programme, and so is concerned to defend the worker-peasant alliance as the perspective of world revolution. In this context the programme is different to the resolutions adopted at the seventh CI Congress which explicitly emphasise the tasks of defeating fascism rather than advancing the aims of world revolution. Consequently this article will argue that the 1928 programme is the standpoint of centrism and is not the explicit defence of counterrevolutionary Stalinism.

In the introduction to the Programme the inaugural paragraph issues a defiant challenge to the domination of capitalism: “The epoch of imperialism is the epoch of dying capitalism. The world war of 1914-18 and the general crisis of capitalism which it unleashed, bring the direct outcome of the profound contradiction between the growing productive forces of world economy and national barriers, prove that the material prerequisites for socialism have already matured in the womb of capitalist society; they prove that the capitalist shell has become an intolerable restraint on the further development of mankind, and that history has put on the order of the day the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist yoke.”(2) This comment seems to be an orthodox understanding of the contradictions of capitalism after 1914. What will define whether this approach is principled or otherwise will be decided by the character of the strategy that is adopted in order to further the progress of world revolution. It is important to emphasise this point because it is quite possible that the standpoint that the era represents declining capitalism could promote illusions about an inevitable victory of world revolution. Indeed this perspective seems to be encouraged when the document also contends that the outcome of the contradictions of capitalism ‘gives rise to inexorable world-wide imperialist wars which shake the entire prevailing regime to its foundations, and leads with iron necessity to the proletarian world revolution.’(3)

In other words it is one thing to suggest that the economic and political situation is transitional between capitalism and socialism because of the decay of capitalism and the intensification of its contradictions, but it is another thing entirely to consider that this situation will result in the inevitable victory of world socialism. The latter view can only result in political complacency and the standpoint of catastrophism or the illusion that the crisis of capitalism can bring about the automatic demise of capitalism without conscious class struggle. Instead the most principled position would be to clarify these comments and to indicate more precisely that whilst the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism are enhancing the favourable possibility of the victory of world socialism this perspective is not justified by historical certainty or necessity. What could be considered crucial is the role of the CI and the development of a strategy that will promote the development of international class struggle.

The document goes onto argue that the crisis of imperialism means the primary task of the working class is the seizure of power but the impression is being justified that the onset of fundamental crisis and the period of transition to socialism is both creating the objective conditions for victory and the generation of the subjective factor of the willingness of the working class to struggle for socialism: “Thus, while developing and completing the process of creating the material prerequisites of socialism, imperialism at the same time mobilises the army of its own gravediggers by compelling the proletariat to organize in a militant international workers association.”(4) However what is not mentioned in this context is that the crisis of capitalism does not necessarily express itself in a process of continuous victories for the working class in the class struggle. There has been the stabilisation of Germany, and the defeat of the British general strike, together with the tragic repression of the Chinese labour movement. Consequently the very transition between capitalism and socialism is contradictory because it is possible that the working class can suffer serious defeats and therefore generate a situation in which the balance of class forces can favour the capitalist class despite the overall decline of capitalism. The document is at least partially aware of the difficulties involved because it does emphasise the importance of the role of Social Democracy as an ‘agency of imperialism within the working class’. (5) This means the political strength of the working class is divided into competing forces, and the implication is that this situation does undermine the ability of the Communist International to mobilise the working class for the task of the overthrow of world capitalism. However the very ability of the CI to develop a programme that aims to evaluate and comprehend the class struggle is an indication that its claim to be the successor of the First International and the best period of the Second International is based on serious credentials. But the claim to have a principled programme cannot be exclusively based on assertions of connections to the legacy of the past and the success of the October revolution. What is crucial is that the programme is able to assess and understanding events in a manner that enhances the strategic ability to advance the prospect for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. In this context progress has been made with the formation of the CI. But the CI has been ridden with tensions caused by the very discussion of strategy in relation to the dramatic events of the class struggle. Hence the crucial question that arises is whether the development of the programme will be able to resolve these differences and promote the advance of the CI.

The beginning section of the programme is a summary of Bukharin and Lenin’s theory of imperialism which explains how the development of monopoly capital and finance capital led to the expansion of the productive forces and the development of imperialism and inter-imperialist rivalry, which resulted in wars. Intensification of the contradictions of capitalism meant that the acute situation of increasing crisis promotes the development of the class struggle as an attempt to overthrow the state power of finance capital: “Lastly, the two main revolutionary forces gather in opposition to the powerful concentrated forces of finance capital – the workers of the capitalist countries and the popular masses of the colonies, held under by finance capital, who are advancing under the leadership of the international revolutionary proletarian movement.”(5) Mention is made of the power of the state and its ability to repress the working class but the overall impression of this analysis is one of growing crisis and the inexorable intensification of the class struggle. Thus what is absent from this analysis is any mention of the periods of the stabilisation of capitalism and the expansion of the productive forces. As a result consideration of the defensive character of the class struggle in the mid 1920’s because of stabilisation is not mentioned and the importance of the growing hegemony of the USA is not outlined. Instead of this cautious analysis, the document argues in an over-generalised manner that: “In this fashion capitalist development, particularly in its imperialist phase, reproduces the fundamental contradictions of capitalism on an ever widening scale.”(6) This economic determinism which outlines a perspective of the intensifying crises as an expression of the decaying character of capitalism implies that acute recessions and inter-imperialist wars are inevitable and increasingly frequent. This analysis would seem to suggest that the demise of capitalism was likely in the short-term. However this optimism is modified by recognition of the importance of the Social Democratic parties and the trade union bureaucracy for the political stabilisation of the system. Thus there is a tension between the increasing economic contradictions of the system and the political stabilisation realised by the actions of Social Democracy. But in the longer term the economic situation of increasing crisis will undermine the role of Social Democracy. Reliance is bestowed on economic determinism for undermining the influence of Social Democracy within the working class: “For the heightening of imperialist contradictions, the worsening of the position of large masses of workers and mass unemployment, the enormous costs of military conflicts, the loss by certain powers of their monopoly position on world markets, and finally the loss of Colonies, etc, undermine the foundations of social imperialism among the masses.”(7) This view implies that unfavourable economic conditions will undermine the influence of Social Democracy. Economic determinism will define political outcomes and so undermines the importance of strategy and tactics in relation to the approach the CI should have towards Social Democracy.

The programme outlines how the tendency is towards the creation of a global state capitalist trust but the uneven development of capitalism as imperialism intensifies the contradictions of the system and results in national conflict and inter-imperialist rivalry that leads to wars. The monopoly capital character of capitalism leads to decay but simultaneously the material pre-requisites for socialism are being generated. The process of the socialisation of production also increases the strength of the working class organisations and prepares them for international proletarian revolution: “Thus imperialism is decaying, dying capitalism. It is the last stage of capitalist development as a whole; it is the onset of the socialist world revolution.”(8) And: “The capitalist system as a whole is approaching its final collapse. The dictatorship of finance capital breaks down and yields to the dictatorship of the proletariat.”(9) This perspective is the justification of extreme objectivism. What is being argued is the outline of a process of the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism as imperialism which bring about the maturing of the conditions for world revolution. There is scanty mention of the role that the class struggle has in enhancing the prospects for revolutionary change. Instead it could be argued that the quotes defend the view of an automatic process of transition from capitalism to socialism. In other words the perspective defends the view that the very decay of capitalism is generating the tendencies for socialist realisation that require human activity as only the culmination or the logical end result of this process.

But the very experience of the class struggle between 1918-1928 indicates the one-sidedness and methodological limitations of this deterministic approach. Despite what could be defined as the decline of the system caused by world war the favourable situation of economic stagnation has not resulted in the overthrow of the capitalist system because of the inexperience of the Communist parties and the importance of defeats in the class struggle. This situation has led to an upturn in the development of the productive forces and the renewal of capitalist stabilisation. In other words the subjective possibilities have lagged behind the potential of the objective for many complex reasons. The conclusion that can be drawn from this situation is that the overthrow of capitalism is not the inherent result of the intensification of the economic contradictions of capitalism in the form of imperialism. Instead what can be recognised is that the outcome of class struggle is open-ended. The prospect of success does not simply rely on the increasing decay of capitalism and is also dependent on the role of the Communist parties, the significance of strategy and the willingness of the proletariat to struggle against capitalism.

On the surface it would appear that the programme does not acknowledge these lessons. It describes a general situation of political instability in relation to the period 1918-28 in terms of the outcome of the effects of the October revolution. The programme suggests that what was occurring was the development of a world revolutionary process whereby the international revolution was being expressed by uneven development in national terms. This situation is described as being: “World history has entered a new stage of its development, the stage of the long-drawn out general crisis of the world capitalist system.”(10) What seems to be justified is a description of various events in the advance of world revolution and the fact of defeat is not taken into consideration. However the apparent optimism and dogmatism of this perspective is challenged by an acknowledgement of the periods of setback in the world revolutionary process. The first period of revolutionary advance and defeat was between 1918-21. The lack of support for communism within the working class and the reactionary role of Social Democracy ended the revolutionary offensive of these years: “These defeats enabled the bourgeoisie to achieve a partial stabilization of capitalism by increasing the exploitation of the proletarian masses and the colonial peoples and by steeply reducing their standard of living.”(11) In other words the dogmatic optimism and economic determinism of the CI perspective is modified and what is accepted is the importance of the balance of class forces. The initial period of advance and mass opposition to capitalism within Europe is over by 1921 and the result of this situation is the ability of the capitalist class to initiate offensive struggles against any of the gains made by the working class in the revolutionary period. This is why the partial stabilisation of capitalism represents a period in which the working class has been put onto the defensive and has to resort to the united front approach in order to try and generate unity between the Communists and Social Democrats in the struggle for limited economic advance.

Hence within the programme there is tension between two conflicting perspectives. The first suggests that there is a continuous process of economic decay related to the effects of imperialist war and the October revolution. The second approach acknowledges the importance of the partial stabilisation of capitalism and the significance of the period of the defeats of the working class. This tension could express the inability of Bukharin to be able to articulate the importance of partial stabilisation in the manner in which he would have liked and instead had to accept the more extreme formulations about the crisis of capitalism. This tension did not mean that the partial stabilisation of capitalism was denied but it did mean that the programme tended to emphasise the importance of decline and decay. The result of this approach was the tendency to indicate the importance of the radicalisation of the working class and to downgrade the significance of defensive periods in the class struggle. What is interesting about the programme is that the attempt to develop the united front is considered to be a failure and instead Social Democracy is portrayed as the most ardent supporters of the period of partial stabilisation. The programme argues that although Social Democracy can support economic struggles of the workers its major function is to undermine the united front and destroy its possibilities: “The principal function of social democracy today is to undermine proletarian unity, which is essential for the struggle against imperialism. By splitting and destroying the united front of proletarian struggle against capital, social democracy is becoming the chief pillar of imperialism within the working class.”(12) This point must refer to the treacherous role of the British trade union bureaucracy during the general strike of 1926 which resulted in discrediting British-Soviet trade union unity.

The result of this effective rejection of the ability of Social Democracy to become part of a united front with the CI was to encourage the view that the Social Democracy had fascist tendencies in the sense that both fascism and Social Democracy represented extraordinary expressions of the defence of capitalism. What is being ignored by this viewpoint is the considerable difference between Fascism and Social Democracy and the recognition that the latter had considerable support and influence within the working class and trade union movement. The ultimate result of this sectarian attitude was that the CI was not able to uphold the standpoint of the united front and instead was able to dogmatically outline how the attempts to construct the united front were bound to fail because of the reactionary character of Social Democracy. The problem is that whilst the CI was disillusioned with the results of attempts to construct the united front with Social Democracy in the period of the partial stabilisation of capitalism it did not have any strategic alternatives. Consequently instead of being able to outline a strategy for the period of the partial stabilisation of capitalism the CI instead suggests in dogmatic economic terms that the rationalisation of production has not resulted in an improvement in the conditions of the workers and only in external terms will the prospect of inter-imperialist war and renewed class struggle end this defensive period in the class struggle: “Greater competition between imperialist states and the constant danger of war, the ever heightening tension of class conflicts are creating conditions in which the general capitalist crisis and the proletarian world revolution will reach a new and higher stage of development.”(13) This prediction is empty in substance because in 1928 it was still possible for American loans to subsidise the German economy and provide the general climate for the upswing of the world economy.

Furthermore, as the programme acknowledges it was possible in this period for Fascism to come to power in Italy and inflict a repressive dictatorship which represented a historic defeat of the working class. But the programme also makes the conclusion that governments of either Fascism or Social Democracy are an expression of the development of a general capitalist crisis. They represent governmental formations that indicate the period of the partial stabilisation of capitalism is coming to an end: “For normal capitalism both Fascism and coalition with Social Democracy are extraordinary methods. They indicate the existence of a general capitalist crisis and are used by the bourgeoisie to halt the advance of the revolution.”(14)This viewpoint drastically modifies the pervious economic determinist approach of the programme. Instead of an emphasis on the role of economic factors for explaining the demise of the period of partial stabilisation reference is made to the significance of the development of the influence of Fascism and Social Democracy. What is not allowed for is the prospect that the ascendency of Fascism and the importance of Social Democracy could occur in a period of the partial stabilisation of capitalism. The rise of Fascism was explained as the development of a mass counterrevolutionary movement that could end the period of working class militancy in Italy, and the importance of Social Democracy in Europe was in order to justify the stabilisation of capitalism to the working class. In this context both Fascism and Social Democracy were not extraordinary governments and instead were the logical outcome of the balance of class forces. The very influence of Social Democracy was an indication that the partial stabilisation of capitalism was not over and instead continued. The very ideological role of Social Democracy was to justify the partial stabilisation of capitalism as an alternative to the proletarian revolutionary perspective of the CI.

However the argument that is the most flawed in the programme is the view that the intensification of the differences between the Soviet Union and the capitalist world are an indication that partial stabilisation is coming to an end. The class struggle is being expressed by the conflict between two blocs and the result will be the generation of a new phase of the contradictions of capitalism: “The existence of the Soviet Union with its influence on the working and oppressed masses of the entire world, is itself the clearest expression of the profound crisis of the world capitalist system and an unparalleled extension and heightening of the class struggle.”(15) This viewpoint is the justification of voluntarism as an addition to the role of economic determinism. The actual economic and political strength of the USSR within the world is not elaborated and instead its influence is defined in the vague terms of its level of support within the international working class and colonial peoples. In some vague manner what is being implied is that the USSR has the capacity to facilitate the end of the period of the partial stabilisation of capitalism although this aim is not defined in terms of how this prospect is precisely realised. Instead in a vulgar idealist manner we have to believe that the very existence of the Soviet Union can bring about the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism. The result of this concession to philosophical idealism is that the international class struggle is no longer understood in terms of the antagonism between the working class and capital and instead it has been modified to imply that what is occurring is conflict between a socialist camp and a world capitalist camp. But the authors of the programme are aware that it would be a drastic concession to idealism and voluntarism to define the class struggle exclusively in these terms. It is still necessary to locate the role of the USSR within the context of the international class struggle. This means creating a synthesis between the previous economic determinism and the recently justified idealism and voluntarism. In this manner it may be possible to provide a definitive explanation as to why the period of the partial stabilisation of capitalism is coming to an end. The ingredients of this understanding have been outlined but what has yet to be established is the inter-action between these different aspects.

The starting point for this analysis is the recognition that the very existence of the USSR is incompatible with the stability of the capitalist system: “Thus a new basic contradiction emerged from the first round of imperialist wars, epochal in scope and significance – the contradiction between the Soviet Union and the capitalist world.”(16) The suggestion is that the USSR represents a different economic and political system that is not compatible with the interests and development of world capitalism. What this promotes is the prospect of the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism and the end of partial stabilisation. But the programme also outlines how inter-imperialist rivalries are also developing such as that between the USA and UK, and Germany is becoming a serious imperialist force. In the Pacific tensions have arisen between the USA and Japan. The struggle for access to raw materials, and tensions over the redistribution of markets, is creating the conditions for a new world war. Furthermore the oppressive conditions of imperialist domination are resulting in revolutionary ferment in the colonies and the offensive against the living standards of the working class is generating increasingly militant class struggle. The outcome of this situation will be increased influence for communist parties and a new revolutionary crisis: “Thus the edifice of world imperialism is being undermined from a number of directions, and the partial stabilization of capitalism shaken, by the contradictions and conflicts among the imperialist powers, the rising of the colonial millions, the struggle of the revolutionary proletariat in the mother countries, and finally by the leading force of the world revolutionary movement, the proletarian dictatorship in the Soviet Union. The international revolution is advancing.”(17)

It is interesting that even these combinations of factors do not mean the end of the stabilisation of capitalism. Instead what results is the undermining of the condition of stabilisation and the generation of the prospects for a revolutionary crisis. This caution is justified because the question of the definitive unfolding of the contradictions of these factors is in the future such as the prospect of colonial revolution and world war. Furthermore the development of struggle against stabilisation is only just beginning and the prospects for its revolutionary progress cannot be established in the present. It is important to note that the demise of capitalist stabilisation is no longer primarily connected to internal economic aspects such as the continuation of the decline of capitalism and economic crisis. There is no prediction of depression and stagnation. In this sense the emphasis on economic determinism has been replaced by political factors such as the influence of the USSR and the radicalisation of the Western Working class. Consequently it is not surprising that the conception of the end of capitalist stabilisation is considered in external terms such as the development of world war: “Against this revolution imperialism is mobilizing all its forces: expeditions against the colonies, a new world war, and the campaign against the Soviet Union are now on imperialism’s order of the day. This is bound to release all the forces of the international revolution, leading inexorably to the downfall of capitalism.”(18)

In other words the approach of voluntarism has effectively diminished the importance of economic determinism. The prospects for the end of capitalist stabilisation are no longer based on significant economic reasons and instead this situation will be brought about by world war between the forces of capitalism and socialism. Hence the most important aspect of historical agency in terms of transforming the situation of the partial stabilisation of capitalism and generating a revolutionary crisis is the role of the USSR. The importance of the decline of capitalism is being replaced by the world historical importance of the USSR. It is interesting that even the class struggle within the Western countries is also of secondary importance. Instead the very content of the class struggle takes the increasingly dynamic form of the USSR versus the capitalist bloc. This is why it is the agency of the USSR that will be the most crucial in being able to end the period of capitalist stabilisation. Therefore the result of this perspective is that the programme justifies the approach of voluntarism. For what is being effectively argued is that the intervention of the USSR on a world scale will bring about the end of the period of capitalist stabilisation and inaugurate a new revolutionary period of crisis. Apparent confidence in economic factors for generating the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism become secondary and are replaced by this emphasis on a voluntarist and idealist standpoint.

Eugen Varga also wrote an analysis on the decline of capitalism in this period. It would be useful to compare his approach and consider whether he ultimately supported the voluntarism of the programme. (19) He argues that the process of the stabilisation of capitalism represents the interaction of political and economic factors. The mass movement of the working class in the immediate post-war period led to concessions and a retreat by the ruling class and the promotion of the role of Social Democracy. The result of this situation was the creation of an economic stabilisation in which the productive forces advanced and there was an increase in trade. But this partial recovery does not undermine the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism and the prospect of a catastrophe. (20) Hence the emphasis of Varga is on the economic reasons for the possibility of the demise of stabilisation. He outlines the view of Marx that the development of capitalism is impossible without the promotion of crisis and because of this reason the temporary stability of capitalism will be replaced by new periods of the onset of slump and depression. Hence the ability of the forces of monopoly capital to plan production will be replaced by periods of over-production and the inability of the working class to resolve the situation of limited consumption because of a continual decrease in the value of labour in relation to the value of the yearly products of the economic system. But this economic understanding of the temporary character of stabilisation is uneasily reconciled with the contrasting perspective that the victory of socialism in the USSR is the most important aspect of the decline of world capitalism: “The overthrow of the capitalist system and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat within the Soviet Union signifies the beginning of the period of the decline of capitalism, the first ten years of which have already passed, of the historic period of the transition from capitalism to socialism through a series of successful and unsuccessful revolutions.”(21)

However in comparison to his systematic outline of the process of the decline of capitalism via the temporary period of the stabilisation of the system, Varga does not satisfactorily outline the causal relationship of the USSR to the process of crisis. Instead in a dogmatic manner he suggests that the importance of the USSR has limited the markets of capitalism which implies restrictions to expansion and he also makes the assumption that the enhanced class consciousness of the world proletariat because of the Russian revolution is an indication that capitalism is a transitory system. This view ignores the fact that radicalisation of consciousness is not sufficient and the question of the success of the revolutionary process is connected vitally to the importance of strategy. Only with a strategy that can overcome the resistance of the bourgeoisie will it be possible to make progress towards the success of world revolution. For example Varga refers to the increasing replacement of Parliamentary democracy with the system of fascism in this period of increasingly unstable capitalism but he fails to mention how the working class should oppose this threat of fascism. Instead the assumption is that the prospect of proletarian revolution is becoming increasingly favourable. Modifying his emphasis on the internal contradictions of crisis, Varga resorts eclectically to the significance of external contradictions in order to justify the perspective of world revolution. He outlines how the sharpening of inter-imperialist contradictions, the tensions in the colonies, and the tendency for imperialist opposition to the USSR, are generating the prospect of either war against the USSR, or the development of inter-imperialist war. He also suggests that the decline of capitalism is linked to ideological crisis and an increasing inability to effectively defend capitalism against socialism.

However this conception of external contradictions is not convincing. The USSR is still portrayed as a single country and not as the leader of the socialist bloc. Hence the class struggle is not defined in terms of the opposition between the socialist bloc and the capitalist bloc. Thus the USSR is understood more objectively as the inspiration for world revolution and not as the causal mechanism of the international revolutionary process. Consequently the relationship of the USSR to the decline of capitalism is emphasised in terms of the ideological influence of the USSR on the workers of the world in terms of enhancing revolutionary consciousness. It is suggested that the USSR can undermine the expansion of capitalism but this point is secondary when compared to the significance of ideology. Primarily the prospect of world revolution is because of the temporary character of capitalist stabilisation and the effect of this limitation on the intensification of inter-imperialist contradictions and the prospects of world war. It is not so much the ability of the USSR to structurally influence the world revolutionary process that is ultimately of primary importance what is more significant is the tendency of capitalism to go from a situation of stability to one of crisis.

Varga emphasises his approach when he argues that despite the temporary stabilisation of capitalism mass unemployment is a regular feature of the economic situation because of the rise in the organic composition of capital and the fall in the value of labour because of the technical rationalisation of production. He contends that this development will lead to the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. (22) This means unemployment has risen despite the increase in production. Varga also refers to the introduction of new technical and production methods that have resulted in the generation of relative surplus value or the increased exploitation of labour by decreasing its value. The result has been both increased exploitation and productivity. It is possible to create more surplus value by employing fewer workers which represents a higher organic composition of capital and in the long term the decline of the rate of profit. Varga outlines how this process promotes the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalry: “Capital included in monopolies is realising a higher rate of profit at the expense of capital not monopolised and of the independent producers. Because of this, and because of the decrease in the total wages of the working class as a result of rationalisation, there is a narrowing down of the home market and, in spite of monopolies, a more acute struggle for markets which must necessarily lead to war and to a further re-division of the world.”(23)

This concentration on the internal contradictions of capitalism, via a systematic and consistent application of the method of political economy, is able to provide a more convincing understanding of the transformation of the period of stabilisation of capitalism into crisis than the programme’s illusory emphasis on the world-historical significance of the role of the USSR. Varga is able to indicate that the very intensification of exploitation of labour in the period of stabilisation create tendencies for decline in terms of the imperatives of the falling rate of profit and the decreased levels of consumption of the working class. The tendencies for competitive expansion into external markets are created by this contradictory situation and the result is growing inter-imperialist rivalry with the prospect of war. The role of the USSR in the process of the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism is only secondary to this process, and instead the premises of political economy can explain what is happening without reference to a supposed struggle between a socialist bloc and capitalist bloc. Varga also outlines how the condition of the stabilisation of capitalism has been based on the development of the productive forces such as the contemporary application of steam power. There has been the genuine development of mass production techniques in many industries and the continued improvement in means of communication. But the result has been the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism. This is because technical progress means that fewer workers need to be employed in order to ensure high levels of productivity. Furthermore the constant technical development results in machinery becoming antiquated more quickly. Technical advance facilitates the formation of monopolies and the concentration of capital. The outcome of this situation is the rising organic composition of capital and the increasing contradiction between social production and the private ownership of the means of production. Technical advance promotes the dominance of the imperialist countries and can increase competition for markets. But primarily the major contradiction is: “The contradiction between production capacity and the possibilities of realisation is growing sharper. The decrease in variable capital, i.e. in the share of the total product falling to the working class, means the narrowing down of the home market and gives rise to the necessity for a more bitter conflict for markets outside the “national” markets.”(24)

The important point is that the methodology utilised by Varga may not be entirely accurate or convincing but he is able to explain the internal reasons why the condition of the partial stabilisation of capitalism may be transformed into its opposite. Remember that the programme was not able to provide similar reasons without resorting to the justification of external premises such as the importance of the historical role of the USSR. In contrast Varga is explaining that the very development of the productive forces that has taken place under the conditions of the partial stabilisation of capitalism is also creating the possibilities for the renewal of crisis in terms of the prospect of over-production and under-consumption and the promotion of the tendency for the falling rate of profit. He is also indicating that the very growth of monopoly represents contradictory tendencies in terms of the expressions of decay, parasitism and anachronism, but the advance of social production is an indication that the material pre-requisites for socialism are also making progress. He suggests that the struggle for the external markets has already intensified because of the restrictions on the level of wages resulting in under-consumption. This situation is also being expressed in the intensification of the attempt by the imperialist powers to re-divide the world in their favour. For example this is what is happening in relation to the imperialist rivalry over the market of China. The result of this situation will be a serious economic and political crisis: “The contradiction between production and the possibilities of realising goods on the market is growing greater. It will come to a head in a grave crisis, which will necessarily be but the prelude to a new war for the re-division of the world.”(25)

Consequently the very basis of the success of the period of the stabilisation of capitalism, which is the ability to develop the productive forces, is being transformed into its opposite with the result that new forms of economic and political crisis will emerge. The contradictory problem is that the expansion of capitalism is coming up against the limitations of markets, both the home market and the external market. The home market is limited by the relative low level of wages in comparison to productivity and so the situation being generated represents a crisis of over-production and under-consumption. To some extent this crisis can be mitigated by exports abroad but this possibility is being undermined by the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalry for markets. It could be argued that the 1929 Wall Street crash was a financial crisis that had little relation to this analysis of Varga. However it is also possible to suggest that the prolonged character of the resulting depression was connected to the low level of wages and mass unemployment and the collapse of world trade and the formation of protective trading areas. The 1930’s was also a period of the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalries that ultimately led to world war. The point is that whilst Varga could not accurately predict the reasons for the Wall Street Crash he was able to outline a credible understanding of why the process of the partial stabilisation of capitalism would become an expression of crisis and the continuation of the decay of capitalism. However Varga is also able to explain why the role of monopolies delay’s the onset of crisis. They are important forces for the continuation of the stabilisation of capitalism. This is because they are able to plan production because of their dominance within a given industry and can limit output to a level that ensures profitability despite the generation of unemployment of surplus workers. The monopoly is also able to utilise its economic strength in order to undermine the realisation of the demands of the workers. Therefore the monopolies cannot abolish the tendencies for crisis caused by the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of distribution but they can offset the burden of the situation onto the working class. Hence the monopolies can extend the period of stabilisation by their ability to promote an offensive against the material interests of the workers. (26)

But possibly the most important aspect of stabilisation is the role of state intervention in the economy, or state capitalism, in order to try and resolve the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production. This intervention is in order to uphold the interests of the capitalist class as a whole by making concessions to the workers, and its activity takes the form of regulation in which private property still remains or is defined by the role of nationalisation. The tendency to develop state capitalism is in order to ensure the stability of the economy and to advance the possibility of gaining markets. Unlike the Social Democratic view state capitalism does not favour the working class and is an expression of the attempt to resolve the contradictions of the system in favour of capitalism. (27) This analysis represents another explanation of the partial stabilisation of capitalism. The activity of the state is compatible with the progress of the productive forces in that it can undertake massive projects that individual capitalists are reluctant to carry out such as nationalisation of public utilities. It can also act to stabilise the economy in terms of financial policy. But its role is still limited because private capitalists can undermine state capitalism by arguing in favour of the limiting of the importance of the state. This is why it is primarily of importance in Germany and the UK whilst its significance has decreased in other countries like the USA. Consequently the Social Democratic view that state capitalism is the method to ensure the evolution of capitalism into socialism is an illusion. State capitalism cannot overcome the tendencies of decline of capitalism and instead can only intensify these features in terms of the increased socialisation of production in the interests of private capital. Ultimately state capitalism cannot offset the reasons that partial stabilisation will be replaced by the condition of crisis. It can only postpone this possibility to the extent that state intervention can to some extent offset the limitations of the role of private ownership of the means of production.

In the last analysis Varga also relies on external reasoning for explaining the development of crisis and the prospects of proletarian revolution. He outlines how in the post-war period there are four major imperialist powers, the USA, UK, France and Japan. But Germany still has imperialist aspirations despite the restrictions of reparations payments. He argues that rivalry between the four major imperialist powers will ultimately result in an inter-imperialist war that could have features of a war against the USSR. In this situation the role of the USSR will be to bring about the victory of any attempt at revolution. In an inconsistent manner he suggests that despite the rivalry between the various imperialist powers they will attempt to create war against the USSR in order to undermine the development of world revolution: “That is why the bourgeoisie is anxious to defeat the dictatorship of the proletariat in the USSR before the fight begins amongst themselves, in order to deprive the revolutionary workers of the world of their organised centre of power.”(28) In other words the prospect of transforming crisis into revolutionary practice depends on the development of imperialist war against the USSR or the possibility of the militaristic outcome of inter-imperialist rivalry. This perspective also seems to depend on the importance of the world historical role of the USSR. However this aspect is only the culmination of the unfolding of the contradictions that transform the partial stabilisation of capitalism into crisis or the intensification of the global struggle for markets with the increasing prospect of inter-imperialist war. The point is that without the contradictions of the stabilisation of capitalism they would not become the expression of an economic crisis that is ultimately defined by global war and the prospect of world revolution. In this context the contradictions of the period of the stabilisation of capitalism are the causes of the prospect of crisis and world revolution. The role of the USSR is secondary in this process and is the ultimate expression of the development of world revolution after the unfolding of the contradictions of the period of the stabilisation of capitalism. This objective approach is an alternative to the voluntarism and subjectivism of the 1928 programme. (But obviously Varga would not admit, and Bukharin would also not admit, they had important methodological differences with the 1928 programme)

Varga still has to indicate that the very existence of the USSR is an expression of the decline of capitalism despite the period of the stabilisation of capitalism. But his emphasis is on the situation of mass unemployment, and the restrictions of the role of the monopolies, together with the contradictions of the market and the opposition between social production and private appropriation. In contrast the Social Democrats argue that it is possible to avoid the prospect of the collapse of capitalism because of the planned intervention of the State, and the influence of factory democracy can take the place of the role of civil war and revolutionary struggle. Therefore: “Since capitalism still has a long lease of life, since it should not be destroyed but is to evolve into socialism, rationalisation must be supported.”(29) Hence the perspective of Social Democracy is that of State Capitalism which promotes higher wages for the workers and so resolves the problem of limited demand. Unfortunately Varga does not go onto engage with the approach of Social Democracy and instead he suggests that the theory of state capitalism has an ideological role that promotes working class support for the Social Democrats: “But the reformists are not particularly concerned as to whether their theories are true or false. For them, as capitalist agents in the working class, it is enough that large sections of the workers believe in the correctness of their theories.”(30) But he does accept that the period of capitalist stabilisation can result in increased support for Social Democracy. The very fact that revolutionary struggle is not possible in this period of stabilisation also promotes the interests of Social Democracy. However Varga does not outline what would politically transform this situation which would be the promotion of an action programme that concentrated on the defensive character of struggles and attempted to advance the prospect of the defensive activity becoming offensive. But he does not address these strategic issues and instead relies on the catastrophic logic that the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism will result in a crisis and the onset of revolutionary struggle. Despite the limitations of this approach it is still superior to the concessions to voluntarism of the approach of the 1928 programme. The person who addresses strategic issues most perceptively in this period is Gramsci. Trotsky develops a powerful critique of the limitations of the CI’s standpoint on China but he fails to address strategic issues consistently in his criticism of the 1928 programme. In this context he does not actually establish an alternative programme that is superior to that of 1928. This is confirmed by the importance of the following section on the question of what is communism.

COMMUNISM

The 1928 programme has a detailed section on the type of society that is the aim of the struggle of the working class and the CI. The type of society that is task of the CI is defined as communism. This is a classless society that is without exploitation and is based on the realisation of the creative ability of humanity being able to decide its own future. Communism is the result of the collective strength of the people of the world and is the alternative to class struggle and war: “Once having abolished private property in the means of production and made them public property, world communism will replace the spontaneous forces of the world market, the planless sway of competition, the blind operation of social production, by the socially planned regulation of production in accordance with the rapidly growing needs of society.”(31) This understanding of communism is an eloquent expression of the standpoint that the aim of the struggle against capitalism is the creation of a higher form of society. Communism is the hope of society for the formation of an alternative to capitalism and all its limitations and problems. But this definition is one-sided in that its emphasis is on the replacement of the market and private ownership with the role of the social plan and public ownership. What is omitted from this definition is the vital importance of economic democracy and the ability of labour to define its own future without alienation and exploitation. There is no mention of the importance of the transformation of the relations of production so that the domination of capital is replaced by the creative ability of labour to develop the economy in order to realise social needs. Instead it is assumed that the plan under public ownership will be sufficient in order to overcome the inability of capitalism to realise material prosperity and genuine equality. Hence the assumption is that the planners will have the truly creative role – under the supervision of the Communist Party – in relation to the development of an economy that is able to meet the needs of society. The assumption is that order and harmony, in relation to the development of the productive forces, introduced by the plan will be able to overcome the waste and anarchy of the process of capitalist development. Hence this situation will be in the interests of the producers and consumers. In other words it is assumed that the inherent rationality of the plan can overcome the limitations of capitalist economic activity and instead generate an economy that can meet the needs of the people. But as long as the role of the planners is a substitute for principled economic democracy it is always possible that the result will be the creation of an economy that benefits the elite rather than the majority of the working population. It is possible that the priorities of the planners will represent the interests of the party-state rather than express the genuine desire to realise social needs. What is not being accepted is that the only effective basis to create a society based on social need is one that is based on the leading role of the producers and consumers.

The programme claims the following: “The abolition of private property, the withering away of classes will put an end to the exploitation of man by man. To work will no longer mean to work for the class enemy. From being nothing more than making a living, it will become the first necessity of life. Poverty will vanish, economic inequality among men will vanish, along with the poverty of the oppressed classes and the wretchedness of material life in general; the hierarchy of the division of labour will disappear and with it the antagonism between mental and manual labour; lastly, all traces of social inequality between the sexes will disappear.”(32) But this conception of the merits of communism could represent an assumption that does not allow for the fact that the end of private property does not in and of itself lead to the demise of exploitation and the promotion of a classless society. Instead the effective end of private property could worsen the social conditions of sections of the peasantry, and the very act of dissolving the influence of private property could result in the centralisation of state power that actually undermines the possibility to undermine economic inequality. This argument is not mean to suggest that an aim of the post-capitalist society is not to end the dominant influence of private property but this aim should be realised in a cautious and pragmatic manner. It should not be assumed that the erosion of the power of private property will immediately and automatically result in the decrease of poverty and economic inequality. Instead the extension of social ownership should be made compatible with the interests of the workers and peasants. This prospect will be enhanced if the workers and peasants economic activity occurs in the context of genuine democracy. People should be consulted about measures of nationalisation rather than this being a measure introduced by the state planners without the proper agreement of the workers and peasants. It is also assumed by the programme that the extension of nationalisation will occur in the context of the demise of the coercive state. But the very experience of the USSR was to indicate how the introduction of forced collectivisation from above could only occur as a measure of a coercive state. Without the accountability of the state to the working population unwanted measures of nationalisation are introduced and this can only occur if the state is a coercive power that imposes its will onto society. It is also necessary to suggest that the state cannot implement social and sexual emancipation as a measure dictated by its coercive power and instead the very creative action of women and the working class in general is necessary if the limitations of patriarchy are to be overcome.

The programme seems to be perceptive in maintaining that the communist society will be based on the highest levels of technology and productivity. It is also principled in suggesting that the realisation of social needs will be the effective regulator of the economy. But it is also a technocratic illusion to suggest that the increase in productivity will be the result of scientific work and planning that omits and effectively rejects the role of economic democracy. The ability to develop creative talents that can enhance the economic progress of communism is not possible without the transformation of the relations of production and the decision making process being defined by the role of the producers. Hence it is almost an illusion to refer to the role of science in benefitting the economy without also mentioning the necessary addition of the ability of the forces of labour to utilise science via the application of the methods of democratic decision making. The programme does refer to the aim of communism being a leisure society because of its ability to meet social needs. It is based on the principles of transparency - but still no reference to the relationship of democracy to this principle. The programme also refers to a socialist society that is the lower stage of communism. It argues quite pragmatically that it is not yet possible to realise all social needs because of a lower level of the productive forces and the rewards of labour will be based on performance. This means inequality will still be part of society such as the division between manual and mental labour. However what is still omitted from this description of socialism is the important significance of economic democracy. It is precisely because of the scarcity of resources and the prospect of privileges developing in this situation that it is crucial that the decision making process within the economy is based on the democratic actions of the producers. This is the only manner in which economic priorities can be decided without bias and on the basis of the interests of working people rather than in deference to a party and state elite. Instead the major problem of socialism is defined as the ‘survivals of the old society’ being able to influence the direction of the economy. But this problem is actually secondary when compared to the ability of the party and state elite being able to dictate economic priorities. The problem of bureaucratic socialism is omitted from the programme because to some extent the programme is being written by people with these elitist motivations!

The period between capitalism and communism is described in the programme as the transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is describe as expressing a protracted period of struggle, defeats and victories, civil wars and the development of colonial revolts that become part of the world revolutionary process. The socialist system and capitalism co-exist in a situation of both peaceful co-existence and armed conflict until the world system of socialist states is formed. This perspective would not be acceptable in the present era. The prospect that the realisation of socialism would be based on systematic violence and civil war is not acceptable to people who still have memory of the horrors of two world wars and various other types of war. In other words the consciousness of the working class is different today when compared to the revolutionary radicalisation of the working class of the 1920’s who understood that the contradictions of the capitalist system might promote the prospect of war. It was also recognised in the past that the struggle for socialism would generate the coercive opposition of the state that could result in civil war. If the working class did not recognise the repressive role of the state and prepare for its revolutionary overthrow it would be defeated as in relation to the Germany of 1933. Hence the programme was true for its time; it was based on the understanding that the tendency towards war was the basis to resolve the problems of capitalism in favour of the ruling class and so the working class has to prepare for violent conflict if was to overcome the resistance of the bourgeoisie. But in the present situation the horror of war means that the working class is less prepared to utilise violence in order to achieve its class objectives. This is why tactics such as the general strike become more important than the role of insurrection that could promote violence. We should not rule out the possibility of insurrection because of these limitations but instead emphasise the importance of the aspects of the class struggle that achieve objectives in the most peaceful manner possible. We should also be aware that the bourgeois state is still committed to the violent defence of its system and so we should prepare for this eventuality. However this is not the primary concern of the revolutionary forces which is instead concerned to develop a mass movement that can bring about the effective overthrow of capitalism. Our concern with the role of peaceful methods is not because we are trying to conciliate the ruling class and is instead because Marxism is trying to develop a rapport with the ideas and aspirations of the working class.

We would also suggest that the aim of the revolutionary struggle is no longer the dictatorship of the proletariat. Historical experience has indicated that the various regimes that have defined themselves in this manner actually become dictatorships of the party elite and actually justify the domination of the party and state over the working class. What would actually define revolutionary regimes more accurately would be if they described themselves as socialist democracies. This would mean that their intention was to promote economic and political democracy that would represent the genuine hegemony of the working class within society. This description would also express a commitment to the realisation of communism or the classless society. In other words the problematical conception of dictatorship would be rejected and instead the aim of a commune state and the realisation of popular democracy would be a more important aim and definition of society. This understanding would be connected to the view that the aim of socialism would be the primary aim of society and that this achievement would be connected to the striving for communism. In contrast the term dictatorship does imply the possible justification of state repression, or a coercive state that undermines the possibility of the development of popular forms of administration and economy.

Contrary to the comments in the programme the history of colonial revolt has not led to these movements becoming part of the struggle for world socialist revolution. Instead the anti-colonial unrest is part of the expression of trying to promote the formation of independent countries that are able to realise economic and political development without the domination of the imperialist countries. However the approach of the CI is based on the conception of the effective merging of the anti-imperialist and socialist struggle which effectively denies the importance of proletarian leadership of the movements in the oppressed countries. The point is that historical experience indicated that the ability of the working class to lead the anti-imperialist movement can only be the result of defeating the influence of the national bourgeoisie. This was the very lesson of China in the 1920’s that the CI refused to learn adequately. It also supported a rigid perspective of the development of world revolution based on the so-called law of uneven development: “Uneveness of economic and political development is an absolute law of capitalism and is even more marked in the imperialist epoch. Hence the international proletarian revolution cannot be conceived as a single act taking place everywhere simultaneously. The victory of socialism is therefore possible at first only in a few capitalist countries, or even in one, but every such victory enlarges the basis of world revolution and makes the general capitalist crisis still more acute. In this way the capitalist system approaches its final breakdown.”(33) This standpoint is dogmatic because we cannot predict in advance the actual character of the world revolutionary process. It is rigid reasoning to affirm in advance of empirical events that the world revolution will take the form of singular actions and national revolutions. It is entirely possible that events may occur such as the First and Second World War that created the prospect of international revolution. The ideological reasoning justifying this rigid defence of uneven development was because of the standpoint of socialism in one country. However it was also admitted that the aim of national proletarian revolutions was to increase the size and influence of the world socialist bloc. The formation of a union of socialist states would bring about the prospect of success in the class struggle. Hence it was accepted that the primary intention of the national revolution was to generate the continuation of the international revolution and the expansion of the world socialist system: “Only with the complete victory of the proletariat throughout the world and the consolidation of its power will the prolonged epoch of the intensive construction of a socialist world economy open.”(34)

In other words it is being admitted that despite the implicit acceptance of the doctrine of socialism in one country the effective construction of socialism will only begin with the victory of world revolution. This standpoint is not very different to that of Trotsky. In order to emphasise this point it is argued that the social character of bourgeois revolutions is effectively a collection of national events whilst the inter-dependence of the capitalist world economy means that the world proletarian revolution is essentially international and should occur over an epoch that is shorter than the period of bourgeois revolution. Hence the isolated nature of proletarian regimes should not last very long and instead the dynamics of the process of revolution should in a relatively short period generate the formation of a world socialist bloc. This means the character of the world revolutionary process will take the form of the conflict between the world union of socialist states and the capitalist system.

The revolution itself is defined in terms of the conquest of power by the working class and its aim is to abolish exploitation by expropriation of the bourgeoisie. But this standpoint is not outlined in relation to the role of democracy and so we could conclude that what is being justified is the party dictatorship. This would be a hasty conclusion. Instead the programme contends: “In the course of the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship and the subsequent refashioning of society, the basis for that dictatorship is created by the alliance of the workers and peasants, under the intellectual and political hegemony of the working class, in opposition to the bloc of landowners and capitalists.”(35) This formulation indicates the influence of Bukharin. The very ability of the revolutionary regime to function is based on the importance of consent and the related union of the workers and peasants. Only if the working class obtains the support of the majority of the peasantry will it be able to establish a regime that is democratic, legitimate and able to promote the building of socialism. Hence this comment implies that forced collectivisation and the related undermining of the worker and peasant alliance will result in distortions that do undermine the advance of socialism. The working class cannot rule by itself and instead requires the support of the peasantry in order to know that it is carrying out the correct policies that uphold the aim of the advance of socialism. It is true that the programme also mentions the necessity for the repression of the influence of the former exploiting classes but this is mentioned in the context of ‘the organization of socialist construction…… and the gradual elimination of class divisions.’(36) Thus what is important to the programme is the question of how to develop the capacity to promote the progress of the process of transition to socialism on the basis of increased efficiency, diminishing inequality, and the effective expression of consent in terms of the success of the workers and peasant alliance. However this process of national transition to socialism is secondary to the international process of change: “The dictatorship of the world proletariat is thus the most essential and decisive pre-requisite for the transition from capitalism to socialist world economy.”(37) The establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat can occur in single countries but the consolidation and effective success of the system requires the global extension and development of world socialism. This understanding is very close to that of Trotsky.

The programme is still committed to violent revolution which may have been the only credible political perspective in the 1920’s. But we have to suggest its contemporary modification in relation to the desire for peace that has been the result of continuous years of war and violence. The crucial point is what strategy would be the most effective alternative to the perspective of violent revolution? Unfortunately the Marxist Left has not rejected in theory the conception of violent revolution (we also cannot reject violence in some unavoidable circumstances) but in practice also adheres to the views of working people. This contradiction could be resolved if we developed a strategy that was an advance upon the traditional justification of violent revolution.

The programme also upholds the role of the Soviet state as the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat: “This is precisely the form of State power which originating directly in the broadest mass movement of the working people, ensures the maximum activity of the masses and so offers the surest pledge of their final victory. The Soviet state, as the highest form of democracy, the embodiment of proletarian democracy, is the very opposite of bourgeois democracy, which is a masked form of bourgeois dictatorship.”(38) This comment has truth at the level of both theory and practice. The working class in Russia were able to carry out a democratic revolution because of the role and authority of the Soviets, and the possibilities for the construction of a democratic state was made feasible because of the influence of the Soviets. But it is questionable whether this intention was successfully carried out and instead the regime became the expression of the domination of the party elite. Thus the Programme expressed the contradiction between the theory of the regime, which was based on the continued adherence to the importance of Soviet democracy, and the reality of the domination of the party state. What was progressive about the contradictions and tensions of the programme concerning the question of the Soviets was that it actually outlined what should be carried out if the principles of Soviet democracy were being consistently realised: “As the all-embracing expression of the unity and organization of the masses under proletarian leadership, the Soviets in fact mobilize the broadest strata of workers, peasants and labouring people for the struggle and for socialist construction, and draw them into the practical administration of the state.”(39) The point is that whilst the principles of Soviet democracy are not being realised they are still important for justifying the actions of the Party. This means that the party cannot exercise complete power over society and instead its domination is limited by the influence of the legacy of the ideology of the revolution. Hence the claim can still be made with confidence that Soviet democracy is superior to bourgeois democracy which is a deception that upholds the rule of the capitalist class. Soviet democracy has not yet become a complete farce and instead powerful arguments can still be made that it represents the interests of the working people. However the actions of Stalin between 1929-38 definitely undermine the claims made in the Programme about Soviet democracy. The result is the definitive demise of the Soviet state.

The programme outlines how nationalisation of the large industries has occurred. It is also suggested that: “The organization of workers management of industry; the creation of state management organs with strong trade union participation; factory councils to be guaranteed their appropriate functions.”(40) This formulation is not convincing because of the previous emphasis in the programme on the role of state centralised planning for defining economic priorities. There is considerable empirical material to suggest the trade unions acted in accordance with the dictates of the party. The trade unions did nothing to mitigate the hardships of the forced industrialisation of the 1930’s. But the very reference to workers management in the programme is an indication of the influence of the legacy of the period 1917-18. The section on agriculture mentions that whilst the land of large landowners is to be organised by state farms parts of the confiscated land is to be given to the poor peasants and middle peasants. The emphasis is on the formation of co-operatives in order to promote the technical development of peasant farming. The suggestion is that the development of collectivisation will require the consent of the peasants. Thus the recognition that the majority of the peasants do not yet favour collectivisation is an important reason why co-operatives will be encouraged in order to promote transitional measures towards socialism. Thus it is not surprising that the programme does not support the complete nationalisation of land because the peasants still support private property. Consequently nationalisation should not be extended to small and medium sized businesses. The programme is quite explicit that the material basis to abolish capitalism efficiently in small and medium based peasants units is not present: “These small units (particularly the peasant farms) will be drawn into the general socialist organization of production and distribution only gradually, and with comprehensive and systematic support from the proletarian state for every form of their collectivisation. Any attempt to destroy their economic operations by violence, and any compulsory collectivization would only yield negative results.”(41)

It was this part of the programme that was decisively rejected by the actions of Stalin in 1929-30. The forced collectivisation of agriculture in the most repressive manner undermined the commitment of the programme to the construction of socialism on the basis of the principles of consent. The programme was based on the alliance of the workers and peasants which meant the rejection of the nationalisation of the land of the small and medium peasants. It also meant that care should be taken in relation to the prospect of the nationalisation of the land of the kulaks. This understanding was decisively rejected by the voluntarist actions of Stalin who effectively reduced the peasants to serfs and introduced collective farms by means of state repression rather than by the utilisation of the principles of consent. According to the programme the actions of Stalin undermined the prospects for the development of socialism which in a generalised manner would have to accept the importance of the interests of small peasant farmers and the role of market relations: “Therefore, the greater the specific weight of scattered small peasant labour in the economy of a country, the more widespread are market relations, the smaller the importance of direct planned management, and the more will the general plan have to depend on estimates of spontaneous economic relations.”(42) Only in countries of the highest levels of socialised production will it be possible to do without the influence of the market and the continuation of important sectors of private production. In other words the programme recognised that the construction of socialism required the application of the policy of compromise because of the continued importance of the role of small scale production and the influence of the market. It was not possible to introduce socialism by means of state coercion and instead it was necessary to encourage transitional measures that by means of example and incentive could promote the development of socialism. Only by means of consent could socialism make definitive progress. This consistent and principled perspective was undermined seriously by the methods of Stalinism who rejected the role of the peasants as partners of the working class in the building of socialism and instead reduced them to the status of abject serfs. It is questionable whether this repressive process undermined the role of the market which became part of the illegal secondary economy. What actually happened was the consolidation of the power of the state bureaucracy in order to dominate society. In contrast the programme outlined a serious policy for the construction of genuine socialism.

The programme outlined a consistent approach regarding the question of the transition to socialism and communism. It argued that the domination of large scale industry and finance by the proletarian state, combined with the importance of transitional forms like the cooperatives in order to encourage the peasantry to support the aims of the socialist economy, meant that the market becomes an important mechanism for the realisation of socialism: “The outwardly capitalist forms and methods of economic activity associated with market relations (price calculations, money wages, purchase and sale, credit and banks) will serve as levers of socialist change in so far as they encourage to an increasing extent the development of enterprises of a consistently socialist type, i.e. in so far as they serve the socialist sector of the economy.”(43) The point being made is that at a certain level of the productive forces the role of the market is unavoidable. Therefore the policy to be adopted is not to try and administratively suppress the operation of the market, and instead it is necessary to develop policies that ensure the market acts in a manner that promotes transition to socialism. This means paying workers high wages in order that they generate high levels of productivity and utilising market forms such as co-operatives that have aspects that are transitional to socialism. Hence in a dialectical manner the market is used in order to promote the transcendence of the market. The only alternative to this approach is to utilise state coercion in order to repress forms of market activity. This is a very inefficient form of economic policy that actually results in the market being utilised against the interests of socialism. However the Soviet state can use market mechanisms in the interests of socialism if the process is based on consent, the consolidation of the worker-peasant alliance and recognition of what is possible in relation to the level of development of the productive forces: “Thus, provided the Soviet state pursues the correct policy, market relations in a proletarian dictatorship carry within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. In helping to squeeze out private capital and transform peasant economy, in contributing to the centralization and concentration of the means of production in the hands of the proletarian state, they promote the process of eliminating market relations altogether.”(44)

What is omitted from this conception of the transition to socialism is an understanding of how the character of the relations of production can overcome the tendency to generate value and alienated labour in a situation which is combined with the utilisation of market relations? The bureaucratic answer of forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation is only the justification of increased state power at the expense of the interests of the workers and peasants. Instead of this dogmatism it is necessary to advocate workers control of the means of production or the expansion of economic democracy. This development could co-exist with the extension of peasant co-operatives which is effectively the role of economic democracy within the peasant economy. In this context the generation of economic democracy is the very basis to both limit and promote the role of the market. In contrast state centralisation is an inefficient method to control the role of the market within the economy. Primarily it is the transformation of the commodity status of labour that enables the market to assume a dialectical character of facilitating its own demise. This point was not recognised by the programme because of the dogmatic belief that the socialist economy was based on the strict centralisation generated by the planning process and nationalisation. However despite these limitations the programme rejects any utilisation of economic methods of coercion such as war communism except in emergency periods such as the invasion of the country by counterrevolutionary forces.

The programme, despite its conciliatory conception of the transition to socialism via the role of the market, also contends that the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat is one of class struggle against internal and external counterrevolution and in order to promote socialism against reactionary opposition. But it is argued that is possible to gain the support of the technical intelligentsia for the aims of the new society, and the hegemonic role of the working class within society is based on the alliance of the proletariat and various non-proletarian strata such as sections of the peasantry. The middle peasantry are increasingly won to the aims of socialism and neutralisation of this stratum is no longer sufficient. (45) This point outlines how the class struggle within the transition period that occurs before the realisation of socialism and communism can be conducted with the minimum of coercion and state repression. Instead of an emphasis on the coercive role of the state that ensures its domination by the utilisation of violence and force the point being made by the programme is that the reactionary forces and supporters of capitalism are isolated by the development of an alliance between the working class and the widest layers of the non-proletarian strata such as the technical intelligentsia, urban petty-bourgeoisie and the middle and poor peasants. Hence the very conception of dictatorship is being modified and conceived as a regime of consent that is based on Soviet democracy. The revolutionary regime as an alliance means that popular support for socialism is being developed and this explains the role of the market and the gradual character of the transition to socialism and communism. In this context the agricultural co-operatives are defined as organisations that promote the active participation of the peasantry in the aim of realising socialism. Therefore the very process of the possibility of attaining socialism is defined in terms of participation and consent. This does not mean relaxation in the conducting of the class struggle but it does mean that the proletariat tries to obtain support from other classes for the tasks of constructing socialism.

It is also argued that the trade unions have a crucial role in the management of production and in opposing bureaucratic distortions of the state. The trade unions ensure that the state does not become isolated from the working people: “The unions become an organization directly linked with all parts of the state apparatus, influencing all branches of its work, safeguarding the long-term as well as the day-to-day interests of the working class and combating bureaucratic distortions in the organs of the Soviet state.”(46) What is not explained is the actual functioning of the trade unions within the economy and state. Unfortunately this conception of the role of the trade unions is more formal than actual. But at least the intention to realise trade union democracy within the economy and state is being advocated. This viewpoint is another legacy of the radical period of the Russian revolution. But this commitment to Soviet democracy and participation in the process of constructing socialism is qualified to the extent that it is considered in terms of the dominant role of the party: “Only the devoted support of all mass organizations for the Soviet government, the unshakeable unity of class will, and the leadership of the party enable the proletariat to fulfil its tasks as organizer of the new society.”(47) Therefore despite the support for a participatory process of developing socialism this understanding is qualified by the recognition that the dominant role of the party cannot be challenged. Only on the basis of the role of the party vanguard is it possible to build socialism. This suggests that aspects like trade union democracy can only function in relation to party domination of the trade unions. In this sense trade union independence from the state is undermined. The very character of socialism is defined by the bureaucratic influence of the party state. Hence there is tension between a participatory and elitist conception of the development of socialism within the Programme.

The programme is also committed to the tasks of developing Cultural Revolution. It perceptively recognises that the higher level of culture that is developed, via improvements in education and scientific training, the greater is the chance that the bureaucratic degeneration of the state and society can be avoided. The Cultural Revolution is indispensable to the task of socialist construction but this development of culture is also connected to opposition to religion. This aim has become historically antiquated and it has become recognised that campaigns against religion are counter-productive. Instead it is necessary to both promote science and culture and to acknowledge that the question of religious belief is a matter of individual choice. State and religion should be separated but there should be no conscious policy to conduct ideological campaigns against religion. Instead it would be an aspect of the Cultural Revolution to develop knowledge that enabled people to make voluntary choices about religious belief. In contrast society would be indicating its continued backwardness if atheism was a matter of imposed belief. We should acknowledge the example of advanced bourgeois society where the issue of religious belief is part of the pluralist competition of different belief systems. Hence the very question of Cultural Revolution should be about the ability of individuals to make choices that are based on knowledge and enlightenment and not about the influences of state or family.

The WORLD REVOLUTION

The most important issue tackled by the 1928 programme is that of world revolution. It is this question that indicates most firmly whether the programme is principled or makes serious opportunist errors. However we initially have to recognise that the programme is committed to a world revolutionary perspective. What we have to determine is whether this interpretation of the world revolution is principled in terms of the strategic conclusions that are being advocated. For example does the programme justify accommodation to the national bourgeoisie in the oppressed nations? However we also have to discuss whether the programme is more complex and sophisticated when compared to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. The programme comments: “The unequal development of capitalism, accentuated in the epoch of imperialism, has give rise to a great variety of types of capitalism with differing degrees of maturity in different countries, and to a great variety of the revolutionary process peculiar to each. It follows with historical inevitability that the proletariat will seize power in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of rapidity, and that in a number of countries it will be necessary to pass through a transitional stage to the proletarian dictatorship. It follows further from this that the construction of socialism will assume different forms in different countries.”(48) This conception is a welcome recognition of the possibility that the world revolutionary process will have complex and specific features because of the differing levels of economic and political development in individual countries. This means that close attention to strategy and tactics in different countries is demanded if the prospect of the success of revolution is to be realised. However this recognition of the specific character of perspectives could also become the rationalisation of opportunist limitations that undermine the principled character of strategy. This point is indicated when the overall emphasis is on the bourgeois democratic revolution as the prelude to proletarian revolution within the role of national liberation revolutions. In other words proletarian revolutions belong to the minority of countries that have reached a given level of social development and the majority of the world is considered not yet ready for the highest form of class struggle and revolutionary transformation.

Only in a few countries with the highest level of the productive forces (USA, UK and Germany) is the situation maturing for the direct transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat and the short-term realisation of socialism based on nationalisation of large concerns and the formation of collective farms. There are also many countries of medium capitalist development (Spain, Portugal and the Balkans) where feudal survivals mean that the bourgeois democratic revolution has to be completed, via the formation of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, before the socialist revolution is possible. In some countries direct socialist revolution could be realistic, but in all these countries socialist construction will be gradual because of the importance of obtaining the cooperation of the peasantry. In the colonial countries the priority is about overcoming feudal and imperialist domination and realising national independence: “Here the transition to proletarian dictatorship is a rule possible only through a series of preparatory stages, only as the outcome of an entire period of transformation of the bourgeois democratic revolution into the socialist revolution. In most of these countries the successful construction of socialism is possible only with the direct help of the countries where the proletarian dictatorship is already established.”(49) The countries that are considered to be the most backward such as pre feudal societies in Africa have the task of national liberation. Support for the construction of socialism will come from the socialist countries.

This ontology of the complexity of world revolution seems to be superior to Trotsky’s apparently reductionist schema of permanent revolution. For example Trotsky has no recognition of the importance of medium capitalist countries and instead seems to advocate proletarian revolution for all the various different situations. In this sense the 1928 programme seems to be superior and able to outline a more nuanced and subtle conception of the process of world revolution that is able to allow for the importance of specific features of social development and the necessity of precise strategy and tactics for the overthrow of imperialism and capitalism. But it could also be argued that the emphasis on bourgeois democratic revolution and anti-imperialism revolution is an opportunist dilution of the only principled form of revolution which is the proletarian. In the oppressed nations the national bourgeoisie has proved to be an unreliable ally of the workers and peasants and so the result has been the defeat of the mass movement as in China. Therefore whilst Trotsky’s approach may seem to be dogmatic and simplistic its definite intransigence means that the problems created by the hegemony of the national bourgeoisie in the anti-imperialist united front can be overcome by the perspective of working class leadership of the national struggle. In a similar manner whilst Trotsky is dogmatic to effectively deny the importance of medium capitalist countries his perspective of proletarian leadership is more applicable. This is because the conception of stages in the revolutionary process has been shown to be illusory and results in the defeat of the working class. This is why the stage of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry for the medium capitalist countries is a strategic error when compared to the perspective of the direct struggle for proletarian power. The programme does argue that the support of the USSR and the international working class could mean that the colonies realise socialist development in the anti-imperialist struggle. But the actual details of this process are not outlined. Does this mean that the working class and peasantry will be supported by the USSR and the international proletariat in ending the hegemony of the national bourgeoisie in the anti-imperialist struggle? The programme does not seem to directly answer this question and instead appears content with general expressions of solidarity for anti-imperialism and national liberation.

The strategy that is supported by the programme for the colonial countries is the establishment of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The aims of this government will include national independence, land reform, the eight hour day and nationalisation of large concerns. Where the working class is leader of the anti-imperialist movement the success of this stage will result in the struggle for proletarian power. In countries without a sizeable working class the aim should be to establish a popular peasant regime. However periods of capitalist development can be by-passed if the ex-colonial countries unite with the existing countries of socialist construction and become part of the world socialist bloc – the village that unites with industry: “Once centres of socialism exist, in the form of socialist Soviet republics with steadily growing economic power, the colonies which have broken away from imperialism draw nearer, economically, to the industrial centres of world socialism and gradually unite with them.”(50) What is not explained by this perspective is whether the class struggle intensifies in the immediate period before the realisation of the unification between the former colonial countries and the socialist bloc? It could be argued that the very prospect of unification in socialist terms will result in class polarisation in the newly independent countries with the result that the primary task is seizure of political power by the working class. The national bourgeoisie will be opposed to their country becoming part of the process of socialist construction. Therefore this prospect of becoming part of the socialist bloc does not postpone the perspective of permanent revolution instead this strategy has been confirmed. But despite these reservations the programme has outlined an important possibility concerning how the former colonial countries of low levels of economic development can realise socialism by becoming part of the socialist bloc. This aspect is underestimated by Trotsky because of his emphasis on the perspective of permanent revolution.

But the programme’s strategy is undermined by its dogmatic insistence on the role of stagism and the conception of a bourgeois democratic stage before socialist revolution. The result of adherence to the importance of this stage was acceptance of the domination of the national bourgeoisie in the anti-imperialist struggle. The various Communist parties of the oppressed countries constantly deferred the immediate necessity of class struggle in the name of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. Consequently class struggle became projected onto the international arena, and Soviet support became the means to advance the cause of socialism as in the relation between the USSR and Cuba. Class struggle on a national scale was distorted into a bureaucratic form in the international terms of struggles between states rather than classes.

The following comment is central to an understanding of the differences between the Left Opposition and the CPSU: “The most striking manifestation of the profound crisis of the capitalist system is the division of the world economy into capitalist countries and countries building socialism. Hence the internal consolidation of the proletarian dictatorship in the Soviet Union, the successes of socialist construction, the growing influence and authority of the Soviet Union among the proletarian masses and the oppressed colonial peoples signify the continuation, the strengthening and the spread of the international socialist revolution.”(51) Trotsky outlines the issue of world revolution in the either/or terms of support for the doctrine of socialism in one country and the related rejection of world revolution. The programme emphatically rejects this viewpoint. Instead it argues that the very success of the construction of socialism in the USSR is integral to the development of world revolution. The building of socialism in the USSR has led to the radicalisation of the international proletariat and intensified the crisis of world capitalism. In this sense the world historical role of the USSR is an expression of its role as the bulwark of world revolution. The USSR is the centre of world revolution because of its ability to develop socialism and therefore promote political influence within the international working class. The USSR is by its practical example of being able to build socialism able to send the message to the working class of the world that this success should be emulated by the overthrow of capitalism and the development of the socialist economy. In contrast Trotsky’s approach is considered by the CPSU to be based on pessimism about the ability of the workers and peasants of the USSR to build socialism. The result of his perspective is that the external pressures of the capitalist world economy will compromise the aim of supporting world revolution within the USSR because of isolation and the tendency for diplomacy with the bourgeoisie to replace serious consideration of the struggle to overthrow capitalism. This standpoint is resolutely refuted by the CPSU which maintains that the very success of the attempt to build socialism within the USSR will enhance its capacity to support and uphold world revolution.

The programme argues that the USSR has the material pre-requisites to build complete socialism, and this prospect is based on the connection between large scale agriculture and peasant farming. Furthermore the combination of industry and agriculture enables the economy to meet social needs and the strategic role of industry means the size of the socialised sector is constantly increasing in order to establish the priorities of production. Within agriculture the aims of socialism are established by progressive taxes, land nationalisation, restrictions on the hiring of labour, and the role of the co-operatives. But the level of the productive forces means that the situation is not yet ready for collectivisation of farm production. However the preparation for this development is occurring with the advance of large scale industry despite continued technical backwardness. The living standards of the workers and peasants continue to improve under the New Economic Policy. The expression of the validity of this approach is that working people participate in the process of the construction of socialism. Crucially the implied suggestion made by the programme is that if the task of the construction of socialism was undermined by a wrong policy the result would be not only the promotion of the inability to develop a socialist economy effectively but also the generation of problems in the support of the USSR for world revolution. This is effectively what happened in relation to the forced collectivisation of agriculture. The prosperity of agriculture was ended and the levels of production rapidly slumped. Hence the USSR became an economy based on autarkic methods of self-imposed isolation. The result was indifference about the development of the world revolution which was obscured by the ultra-leftism of the third period politics. The interests of the bureaucracy benefitted from the end of the construction of socialism, and instead the bureaucratic system that was created meant the end of the participation of the working class and peasantry in the development of the economy. Trotsky’s standpoint was justified by the introduction of the bureaucratic system although in the period of the NEP his predictions that socialism in one country meant rejection of world revolution was one sided if not entirely inaccurate.

The programme outlines its perspective of the unity of the world revolution and the task of the construction of socialism in the following terms: “As the country of proletarian dictatorship and socialist construction, of tremendous working class achievements, of the alliance of proletariat and peasantry, as the country of a new civilisation advancing under the banner of Marxism, the Soviet Union was bound to become the base of the international movement of all oppressed classes, the centre of the international revolution, the most significant factor in world history. In the Soviet Union, for the first time in history, the proletariat is fighting for its own fatherland. The Soviet Union is the most powerful centre of attraction for the colonial peoples fighting for their liberation.”(52) In other words there is a delicate balance between the USSR and world revolution. Only if the USSR is constructing socialism in the most principled manner based on participation, consent, and the union of the workers and peasants, will it be able to promote world revolution in the most dedicated manner. But if the process of the development of socialism is replaced by bureaucratic degeneration and the coercive implementation of economic policy this condition of distortions and unprincipled behaviour based on the domination of the party elite will be expressed by the formation of a state that rejects the aim of world revolution. Furthermore the formation of a bureaucratic state will eventually result in the alienation of the world working class from the USSR. Hence the USSR will only be able to implement its foreign policies by a combination of unprincipled diplomacy and the military export of revolution. The relationship between the world revolution and the USSR will have undergone a separation.

What Trotsky feared in 1928 actually happened with the implementation of coercive economic policies in 1929. Hence the implied suggestions of the Programme were not only meant to refute the views of Trotsky and the Left Opposition but they were also meant to warn Stalin and his faction of the consequences of any rejection of the most principled manner relating to the construction of socialism. If the USSR was no longer socialist because it had adopted policies of coercion, repression and imposition by means of state force, the result would be the effective rejection of world revolution. At present the USSR is an integral part of the world revolution because it is correctly building socialism via the worker and peasant alliance, or by the approach of consent. If this approach is to be betrayed the result would be the creation of a contradiction of interest between the USSR and the tasks of world revolution. This is what happened with the politics of the Third Period, Popular Frontism, and the diplomatic act of the Nazi-Soviet pact. Hence Stalinism was not the continuation of the politics of the 1928 programme it was instead the expression of the rejection of this programme and the adoption of an approach that upheld the self-preservation of the bureaucracy against the interests of world revolution.

In other words Stalinism – the counterrevolution that occurred and ended the influence of Bukharin - was the rejection of perspective of the 1928 programme: “Thus the Soviet Union is becoming a significant factor in the general capitalist crisis, not only because it has laid the foundations of a new socialist economic system and so dropped out of the capitalist world system, but also because it has a revolutionary part to play without parallel in history, the part of a driving force of the international proletarian revolution spurring the proletariat of all countries on to the conquest of power; it acts as a living example of the fact that the working class is capable not only of destroying capitalism but also of building socialism as well; as a Union of Soviet Republics it serves as a model of fraternal relations between all peoples of the earth, of the economic unity of the working peoples of all countries in the single world socialist economy which the proletariat of the world must establish after it has captures state power.”(53) Thus after 1929 the very ability of the USSR to act as an example to the world working class was ended by the reactionary and bureaucratic policies of Stalin. The demise of the revolutionary impulses of the USSR meant it was no longer part of the crisis of world capitalism and instead was part of its stabilisation because it could not express the impulses of world revolution. Hence the USSR after 1928 was no longer the vanguard of world revolution and an inspiration for the world working class to emulate. Instead the bureaucratic repression of the USSR meant it was something to be feared and the Stalinist leadership of the USSR was only able to maintain the loyalty of a section of the working class organised in the CI as a result of massive propaganda campaigns that misled people about the truth of the state repression. The USSR was not what the programme called a fraternal unity of peoples and instead was based on national repression and greater Russian chauvinism. Hence the USSR was no longer a model of the construction of socialism and the leader of world revolution and instead the only debate that was worth having concerned the actual social character of the bureaucratic system.

The programme does make some concessions to the doctrine of socialism in one country when it conceives of the economic independence of the USSR as the basis of the ability to carry out economic contacts with the capitalist countries. This could suggest that peaceful co-existence is the most important foreign policy approach but this standpoint is rejected by the programme in terms of the articulation of the tendency of imperialism to adopt an aggressive policy of encirclement towards the USSR and the related encouragement of the prospect of war against the USSR. This suggests that the prospect of foreign policy treaties and economic trade agreements are of secondary importance when contrasted with the antagonistic attitude of the imperialist countries towards the USSR. The programme also emphasises that the military pressure of imperialism will not result in the USSR rejecting its international responsibilities to support world revolution. In contrast it was these very pressures that led to the opportunist policy of Popular Frontism and the Nazi-Soviet pact during the regime of Stalin. The Soviet Union participated in world war two on the basis of its explicit rejection of the tasks of world revolution. Stalin envisaged an alliance with the USA and the UK as the diplomatic basis of the post-war situation. In contrast the programme outlines an explicit commitment to world revolution and the rejection of accommodation with any imperialist power. If the USSR is attacked by any combination of imperialist powers the programme calls for the explicit defence of the USSR by the proletariat acting to overthrow the aggressive government. Furthermore the programme indicates that the war of the imperialist powers with the USSR will be an opportunity to advance the progress of world revolution and to create a revolutionary crisis. Indeed it predicts that war of imperialism against the USSR will promote the very demise of capitalism within the advanced capitalist countries. This suggests that the USSR will act as generators of revolutionary war against imperialism. In contrast the aim of Stalin during the Second World War was to stabilise the hegemony of the allied democracies. It could be argued that this situation was unavoidable because of the German imperialist invasion of the USSR but the Stalin regime was actually glad of the opportunity to reject any formal allegiance with the aim of world revolution. His approach was based on realpolitik rather than the revolutionary perspectives outlined in the 1928 programme. This is why it was not surprising that he dissolved the CI in order to convince the Allies about the respectability of his objectives.

THE STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF THE CI PROGRAMME

The programme outlines how the major opponent of the CI is Social Democracy. This tendency is pro-imperialist and supports defence of the fatherland in imperialist wars. It also promotes the stabilisation of capitalism rather than proletarian revolution and industrial peace between workers and employers. In theoretical terms it rejects the Marxist understanding of capitalist crisis and decline and substitutes an evolutionary approach in place of the principled importance of the class struggle. The Fabian trend of Social Democracy defends state capitalism, and guild socialism preaches the abolition of the wages system and workers control of industry but this is combined with passivity and subjection to the bourgeoisie. Austro-Marxism is a left wing form of Social Democracy but it has radical phraseology whilst accommodating to capitalism. All the tendencies of Social Democracy are ‘agencies of the imperialist bourgeoisie in the working class camp’(54) In other words the failure of the period between 1923-27 to develop a united front between Social Democracy and the CI has resulted in the 1928 programme being very harsh about the various trends within the reformist camp. Critical comments are made about both the left wing and right wing tendencies of reformism, and the relationship between class collaboration and the role of Social Democracy is emphasised. Indeed both Anarchism and Syndicalism is also harshly criticised in the programme, and not even the Syndicalist perspective emphasising the importance of the general strike is given any praise.

It is also interesting that the ideology of the Kuomintang of China is opposed and considered reactionary after its progressive beginning as the standpoint of Sun-Yat-Sen. This viewpoint is an obvious reference to the repression of the working class in China by the Kuomintang. The defeat of the Chinese workers represents the most serious error of the Bukharin led CPSU and CI. However the conclusion that is drawn is sectarian in that the prospect for united front’s with social democracy and forces within the colonial revolution seem to be ruled out because of their reactionary limitations. Instead the programme comments: “Opposed to all those tendencies is proletarian communism. As the powerful ideology of the revolutionary working class of the world, it is distinguished from them, and above all from social democracy, in that it wages the revolutionary struggle for the proletarian dictatorship in complete harmony with the tenets of Marx and Engels, in theory and practice, and to this end employs all forms of proletarian mass action.”(55) This comment may seem to be true to the extent that it could be argued that Social Democracy in its most dominant trends does not conduct serious struggle against capitalism and the national bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations has a tendency to accommodate to the forces of imperialism. But in particular circumstances it is possible for sections of Social Democracy to become radicalised and for the national bourgeoisie in the colonial countries to engage in serious opposition to imperialism. The very importance of strategy is that it can generate an understanding of when united fronts between reformists and revolutionaries are both possible and principled.

For example the united front between the trade union bureaucracy of the TUC and the Soviet trade unionists was an audacious development before the general strike of 1926. But the treacherous behaviour of the TUC general council during the general strike, and its capitulation that led to the end of the strike, should have resulted in the end of the united front. The failure of the Soviet trade unionists to make this decisive move only provided unnecessary credibility for the TUC. Ending the united front by the TUC encouraged the view within the CI that the very united front tactic should not be utilised. But this viewpoint also meant that left-wing trends within Social Democracy such as guild socialism became discredited and dismissed as reactionary. However guild socialism was a serious attempt to oppose Parliamentary socialism with a revolutionary perspective and conception of society based on workers control and economic democracy. It was true that guild socialism was passive as the programme comments, but this limitation could have been overcome by the application of the united front tactic. The programme also dismisses the importance of Austro-Marxism but this was also a left-wing current that could have been enlisted in support of the united front if the CI was prepared to be flexible. The problem was that the CI never managed to create the correct balance between flexibility and adherence to principles. Instead it vacillated between accommodation to Social Democracy – and especially its left wing – or the absolute rejection of the united front and adherence to splendid isolation. The rigid ideological view that Social Democracy is part of the camp of imperialism contributed to the latter approach. What is ignored by this standpoint is the influence that Social Democracy has within the working class. This is the reason why the united front may become important. Furthermore defensive tasks may also generate the significance of the united front such as the necessity for united mass struggle against Fascism in Germany. Unfortunately the sectarian stance of the programme had become consolidated with the advent of the Third Period. This meant the effective rejection of the united front despite its obvious necessity in relation to Germany. The programme itself did not uphold the ultra leftism of the Third Period but it did provide the theoretical reasons for the rejection of the united front between 1930-33. In this sense the programme made one of its most serious errors at the level of theory.

The programme outlines the qualities of the party as the vanguard of the class and the expression of the general interests of the working class: “It is a revolutionary organization held together by iron discipline and the strictest revolutionary rules of democratic centralism; it achieves this position by the class consciousness of the proletarian vanguard, by its devotion to the revolution, by its capacity to maintain unbroken contact with the proletarian masses, and by the correctness of its political leadership, which is constantly verified and clarified by the experiences of the masses themselves.” (56) The programme does not specify what is meant by democratic centralism but it makes the crucial point that the possibility to be a revolutionary party is based on the close relationship between the party and class, and especially the contact between party and vanguard. Furthermore the ability of the party to develop a principled leadership is based on the fact that the experiences of the masses vindicate what has been decided in terms of policy. Presumably this conception implies that if the leadership was no longer accountable to the working class a situation would have occurred in which new leadership had become imperative. This does not mean that any situation in which the party and the class had become distant is sufficient reason for the formation of a new leadership. It is possible that the party may remain principled and the working class has become disorientated by opportunist influences. However the test of a good leadership would be its close relations with the working class.

If this criteria had been applied in Germany (1930-33) the party would have recognised that the working class was increasing sympathetic towards the prospect of the united front. But by this time the party was a complete puppet of the Stalin clique. The role of democratic centralism had been replaced by the significance of the relationship between the KPD and the CPSU. This meant the principles of the programme were completely disregarded and instead of the emphasis on the necessity of the close relationship between party and class what had become more important was the relationship between the party and the CPSU. If the party had listened to the class – as the programme argued – the formation of the united front in Germany would have been unchallengeable. Instead the party preferred the perspective of the prospect of proletarian power without recognition of the prior necessity to smash fascism via the role of the united front. The result was that passivity replaced militant action. If the principles of the programme had been taken seriously the party would have recognised the importance of the growing unity within the working class against fascism.

The programme mentions the importance of work in the trade unions: “One of the most important tasks of the preparatory period of the revolution is to work in the reactionary unions, to capture them skilfully, to gain the confidence of the broad masses organized in unions, to depose the reformist leaders and squeeze them out of their positions.”(57) This perspective seems to define the role of the unions in terms of the character of their leadership which is presently reformist but can be revolutionary. Hence what is lacking is a conception of the importance of rank and file activity for creating the conditions for the transformation of the unions and therefore making the unions responsive to the interests of their members. In other words what is not recognised by the programme is that the unions are about more than the question of their leadership and instead what is just as important is making the unions militant organs of working class struggle. Only when the unions are an expression of a mass movement of opposition to capitalism will they become revolutionary organisations. This process is connected to the overthrow of the domination of the trade union bureaucracy but it is also connected to the development of democracy within the unions and the creation of a situation in which the views of the rank and file become the basis of union activity. In contrast the programme seems to emphasise the importance of revolutionary leadership and makes no mention of the significance of the actions of the rank and file. Hence the perspective of the union leadership being responsive to the rank and file is not elaborated and so is not the basis of an action programme of the relation between militant unions to the struggle for socialism. Instead the programme tends to uphold the elitist view that the working class should follow the instructions of the party. This situation would apply to party leadership of the unions. Hence the actual participation of the working class in the revolutionary process is formally acknowledged but not explained or justified.

The opposition of the CI to imperialism is outlined in detail and the programme in a principled manner outlines how the communist parties of the imperialist countries should support the revolts of the oppressed nations. The CI should support the right of nations to secede from imperialist empires and uphold the right to wage revolutionary struggle in order to realise this demand. In the oppressed nations one of the central tasks of the communist parties is to support agrarian revolution and to uphold the principled perspective of striving to obtain working class leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle: “In these countries the main task is to organize the workers and peasants independently (in the communist class party of the proletariat, trade unions, peasant leagues, peasant committees, and when the situation is revolutionary, in Soviets), and emancipate them from the influence of the national bourgeoisie. Temporary concessions with the national bourgeoisie are permissible only if they do not hamper the revolutionary organization of the workers and peasants and if they serve the struggle against imperialism.”(58) This comment seems to suggest that the programme has learnt the lessons of the tragic defeat in China, and is rejecting the possibility of a repeat of the unprincipled compromise that led to the subordination of the Chinese Communist Party to the Kuomintang. Instead of acceptance of opportunism in the name of the anti-imperialist united front the question of agreement with the national bourgeoisie should not undermine the ability of the working class to organise openly, and therefore be able develop its relations with the peasants.

However the perceptive ability to learn the lessons from the Chinese experience is undermined to some extent by the continued adherence to the stagist conception of the proletarian and peasant dictatorship, which implies that the stage of bourgeois democracy must be realised before a socialist type revolution becomes possible. Nevertheless the programme emphatically rejects the political stance of the period 1926-27 that was justified in relation to China, and instead outlines the principles for the political independence of the proletariat. This means rejection of the pragmatic standpoint of accommodation to the interests of the national bourgeoisie in the name of the struggle against imperialism. Unfortunately this lesson of the programme is undermined by the Canton adventure of 1929 when the Stalin clique encouraged the formation of a Soviet in Canton in order to recover its prestige which was it tatters because of the defeat of the 1926-27 period.

The programme outlines in an erudite manner the tactical understanding needed in order to promote the prospect of revolution: “In determining its tactical line, every communist party must take into its calculations the given internal and external situation, the relation of class forces, the degree of stability and strength among the bourgeoisie, the level of militancy and preparedness among the proletariat, the attitude of the middle strata, etc. The party determines its slogans and methods of struggle in accordance with these conditions, starting from the need to mobilize and organize the masses as widely as possible at the highest possible level of that struggle.”(59) This tactical perspective is a rejection of the support for an elitist relationship between party and class that had been located in earlier parts of the programme. Instead of a situation in which the party instructs and the class follows the general tactical approach emphasises the importance of mass mobilisation of the working class. Only if the class struggle acquires high levels of mass activity and development of a mass movement of opposition to capitalism is it possible to conceive of the prospect of the overthrow of capitalism. If the working class is not responsive to the action demands of the party the possibility for the end of the system will not happen. Only high levels of mass struggle will bring about the demise of capitalism. In other words the question of the validity of the strategy of the party is tested in practice. A high level of response by the working class to the action programme of the party will result in effective mass activity that can transform the situation and realise the formation of a revolutionary regime. However if the working class does not consider these demands to be relevant to their needs the development of a mass movement will not occur. The result will be the continuation of capitalism. Hence the emphasis is on the level of effectiveness of the working class in a process of mass struggle. The dynamic interaction between party and class in terms of support for an action programme is crucial if the class struggle is to advance and the prospect for the overthrow of capitalism to become not just an intention but also an actuality.

Given the effective justification of an action programme it is not surprising that the 1928 programme is one of the first to advocate transitional demands reminiscent to the approach of the programme written by Trotsky for the formation of the Fourth International: “When a revolutionary situation is developing, the party advocates a series of transitional slogans and partial demands corresponding to the given circumstances; these must be subordinated to the principal revolutionary aim, which is the seizure of power and the overthrow of the bourgeois capitalist order. To neglect the every-day demands and every-day struggles of the proletariat is as mistaken as to restrict the party’s activities to them exclusively. The task of the party is to use these every-day needs of the working class as a starting point to lead the workers on to the revolutionary struggle for power.”(60) Using different terminology the 1928 Programme is a precedent for the standpoint of Trotsky in 1938. The central strategic conception is to connect the immediate aspirations of the working class with the ultimate strategic aim of the overthrow of capitalism. The task of strategy is to transcend the limitations of the present by generating support for demands that both address immediate needs and yet have a logic that indicates the necessity for proletarian revolution. However it is important to be careful about the application of transitional slogans because some may not correspond to the requirements of the given situation. Instead it is important to establish which demands correspond to the circumstances of the situation and in this manner try to attract support for them in order to further the struggle for socialism. It is also important to promote the correct mixture of transitional and partial slogans. The latter represent demands that are more limited than transitional demands but which are the prelude to generating demands that are revolutionary. Presumably partial slogans are effectively transitional in that they are the basis to advance to the more ambitious and revolutionary demands.

Trotsky’s Transitional Programme does not emphasise the importance of partial demands. Instead it argues: “Insofar as the old partial, “Minimal” demands of the masses clash with the destructive and degrading tendencies of decadent capitalism – and this occurs at each step – the Fourth International advances a system of transitional demands, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very foundations of the bourgeois regime. The old “minimal program” is superseded by the transitional program, the task of which lies in systematic mobilization of the masses for the proletarian revolution.”(61) This comment seems to be generally principled, and the basis for the promotion of demands in order to advance the class struggle, but what it does not allow for is the significance of the complexity of the class struggle. The working class may be on the defensive and so the role of partial slogans acquires importance. For example the offensive of capital since the 1980’s has made the slogan ‘defend the NHS’ or ‘defend the welfare state’ relevant. These are not revolutionary demands but if they are in any sense successfully realised they could become the basis for the promotion of more ambitious and transitional demands. In other words the question of what demands should be raised depends on the balance of class forces and the issue of whether the situation is defensive or offensive. Hence Trotsky is dogmatic to argue that the role of partial demands belongs to a minimal programme that has been superseded in importance. Instead it could be argued that a combination of partial and transitional demands does correspond to the interests and needs of the working class at a given moment in the class struggle.

Indeed it could be argued that Trotsky contradicts and modifies his categorical rejection of the importance of partial demands with the following comment: “The Fourth International does not discard the program of the old “minimal” demands to the degree to which these have preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness. Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But it carries on this day to day work within the framework of the correct actual, that is, revolutionary perspectives.”(62) This is a more balanced understanding of the significance of partial demands. This comment does imply that during a non-revolutionary period of the typical daily work of the party partial demands assume considerable importance. In this sense the role of partial demands is as a prelude to the possibility to raise transitional demands in a more ambitious and comprehensive manner. Thus despite the formal rejection of the importance of partial demands Trotsky has also recognised their strategic importance and relation to the transitional programme for revolution.

Therefore both the 1928 programme and Trotsky’s Transitional Programme are united in their strategic emphasis on the importance of the aim of the overthrow of capitalism. The relationship between the partial demands and transitional demands is based on the common recognition within both programmes that the central task is the promotion of the possibility of the development of revolutionary type class struggle that would generate the prospect for the overthrow of capitalism. Hence the 1928 programme would not disagree with the following comment in Trotsky’s programme: “The strategic task of the Fourth International lies not in reforming capitalism but in its overthrow. Its political aim is the conquest of power by the proletariat for the purpose of expropriating the bourgeoisie. However, the achievement of this strategic task is unthinkable without the most considered attention to even small and partial, questions of tactic. All sections of the proletariat – all its layers, occupations and groups – should be drawn into the revolutionary movement. The present epoch is distinguished not because it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried on indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution.”(63) Hence both programmes argue that the ability to develop mass struggle against capitalism is connected to the relevance of the demands that are advocated. These demands could be limited and partial or more ambitious and transitional. What is important is that whichever demands are chosen as being significant for the class struggle at any given moment in time they should be able to promote the impulses for mass action against capitalism. Thus the demands are participatory and facilitate a popular and democratic mass movement of opposition to the existing system. Hence Trotsky’s definition of the CI as reformist does not accurately apply to the strategic perspectives of the 1928 programme and instead refers more precisely to the practice of the CI between 1935-38.

However there is an important tactical difference between the 1928 programme and the approach of Trotsky. This refers to what seems to be an explicit rejection by the 1928 programme of the application of the role of transitional demands in non-revolutionary periods: “When the revolutionary tide is not rising the communist parties, taking as their starting point the workers daily needs, must put forward partial slogans and demands and link them with the chief aim of the Communist International. They must not advocate transitional slogans which presuppose the existence of a revolutionary situation, and which, used at an inappropriate time, might become slogans in favour of merging with the system of capitalist organisations (e.g. the slogan of control of production) Partial demands and slogans are absolutely essential to correct tactics, while a series of transitional demands is inseparably linked to a revolutionary situation. To reject the use of partial demands and slogans ‘on principle’, is however, equally incompatible with communist principles, for such tactics virtually condemn the party to passivity and isolate it from the masses. Hence united front tactics, as a method of fighting successfully against capital, of mobilizing the masses on class lines, and of exposing and isolating the reformist leaders, are an essential part of the Communist International’s tactics throughout the entire pre-revolutionary period.”(64)

This standpoint seems to be based on the understanding that there is a rigid demarcation between pre-revolutionary and revolutionary periods. Hence the pre-revolutionary situation is effectively defensive and the aim is to mobilise the working class for limited struggles around trade union issues. This is why the united front within the unions is important, and concerns the ability to undermine Social Democratic influence and end its leadership of the unions. However this period is not about the development of the struggle for proletarian power. Instead it is about the creation of the pre-conditions for the establishment of a revolutionary situation. For reasons that are not really specified transitional demands cannot have a principled importance for developing the class struggle in this pre-revolutionary period and bringing about its transformation into direct opposition to capitalism. Instead it is the role of partial demands to bring about the transformation of the situation from a defensive one into an offensive against capitalism when transitional demands become relevant. This implies that the period of the temporary stabilisation of capitalism is defensive in relation to the character of class struggles and so requires the application of partial demands. But the onset of a period of crisis promotes the prospect of revolutionary struggle and so raises the issue of the importance of transitional demands. This standpoint divides the class struggle into two rigid stages – the defensive and offensive. What is problematic about this standpoint is that the 1928 programme dogmatically denies how the very success of defensive struggle can raise the necessity of raising more ambitious demands within what is still a pre-revolutionary situation. In this context both partial and transitional demands may have relevance in the pre-revolutionary stage.

However Trotsky has an unsatisfactory alternative to the approach of the CI which at least has the merit of strategic clarity. He outlines the generalised importance of transitional demands for all the various stages of the class struggle in the most ambiguous manner: “The question is one of guarding the proletariat from decay, demoralization, and ruin. The question is one of life or death of the only creative and progressive class, and by that token of the future of mankind. If capitalism is incapable of satisfying the demands inevitably arising from the calamities generated by itself, then let it perish. “Realizability” or “unrealizability” is in the given instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle. By means of this struggle, no matter what its immediate practical successes may be, the workers will best come to understand the necessity of liquidating capitalist slavery.”(65)

This standpoint is not based on a coherent conception of what is possible in the different stages of the class struggle. Instead he utilises an eclectic combination of moralism, historical necessity, and voluntarism, in order to defend the view that the transitional demands are relevant for all periods of the class struggle. Initially he suggests that what is at stake is the very future of humanity if transitional demands are not realised. The decline of capitalism means that only the realisation of transitional demands will overcome the stagnation of the system and the prospect of war. He then contends that if transitional demands cannot be realised then capitalism deserves to be overthrown. This voluntarist and moralistic view does not explain how capitalism can be overcome if transitional demands are not realised. What agency, and what programme, can be effective against capitalism if the working class and its transitional programme are not able to transform society? He then suggests in a more realistic manner that the question of the realisable character of demands depends upon the connection between the relationship of forces and the level of success in struggle. However he then goes onto undermine this understanding and contends that regardless of the outcome of struggles the working class will recognise the importance of overthrowing capitalism. In other words in contrast to the approach of the CI Trotsky’s perspective is one of confusion. He cannot explicitly outline the relevance of transitional demands at any particular stage of the class struggle. Instead in an erratic manner he seems to imply that defeats at any given moment of time can undermine the prospect of victory in the class struggle. He then summons the role of the Absolute Spirit to pronounce the end of capitalism! In contrast the CI is able to outline precisely when partial demands and transitional demands are relevant for the class struggle. However the emphasis on the importance of partial demands for the pre-revolutionary period did ultimately become the justification of the degeneration of the CI. This situation was indicated by the reasoning of the seventh party congress that justified the anti-fascist stage of the proletarian revolution. But this reactionary perspective was in opposition to the overall revolutionary standpoint of the 1928 programme.

In contrast to this period of political degeneration the 1928 programme outlines in detail its revolutionary approach: “When the revolutionary tide is rising, when the ruling classes are disorganized and the masses in a state of revolutionary ferment, when the middle strata are inclined to turn towards the proletariat and the masses display their readiness for battle and for sacrifice, it is the task of the proletarian party to lead the masses to a frontal assault on the bourgeois state. This can be achieved by propaganda in favour of transitional slogans on a rising scale (workers councils, workers control of production, peasant committees for the forcible confiscation of landowners’ estates, disarming of the bourgeoisie and arming of the proletariat etc) and by organizing mass actions, to which all branches of the party agitation and propaganda must be subordinated, including parliamentary activities, among such actions are strikes, strikes combined with demonstrations, strikes combined with armed demonstrations, and finally the general strike, combined with armed insurrection against the state power of the bourgeoisie. This highest form of struggle follows the rules of the art of war and presupposes a plan of campaign, offensive fighting operations, and boundless devotion and heroism on the part of the proletariat. An absolutely essential preliminary to actions of this kind is the organization of the broad masses in militant bodies, which by their very form (councils of workers, peasants and soldiers, etc) must embrace and set in motion the largest possible number of working people, and more intense revolutionary work in the army and Navy”.(66)

This brief outline of the relationship of transitional demands to the revolutionary process is an indication of how a mass movement can be mobilised in order to consciously strive for the overthrow of capitalism. In this context popular organs of power have the aim of the overthrow of the bourgeois state, via the importance of becoming an armed people, and having the perspective of a revolutionary general strike that becomes an insurrection. Hence the question of the radicalisation of the working class is closely connected both with its qualities as a class and its high level of support for transitional demands. This process also takes the organisational form of the creation of workers councils or Soviets. These take the initiative to carry out the revolutionary policy of the party. The point being made is that it is working class self activity that is indispensable for the success of the revolutionary process. Thus whilst the party has outlined the appropriate strategy in terms of the role of transitional demands it is the working class that has the active and creative task of carrying out the revolution. The organs of workers councils and Soviets act to mobilise the class in favour of the revolution, and which obtain the support of the army and Navy for this task. Hence the propaganda of the party in favour of revolution, via the role of transitional demands, is put into creative practice by the mass actions of the working class. The only aspect that is inadequate in this programme is the failure to outline in more specific detail what development will occur in relation to the realisation of the given transitional demands. In contrast the Transitional Programme of Trotsky does provide details about the possible consequences of the successful realisation of each given demand. But the 1928 programme is content with the generality that the utilisation of transitional demands can result in the establishing a mass movement dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism.

Consequently it could be argued that in methodological terms the 1928 programme is superior when compared to Trotsky’s in relation to elaboration of the general aspects of the revolutionary process. It is able to outline in historical detail the distinction between the pre-revolutionary period - the era of partial demands - from the revolutionary situation when transitional demands become applicable. The Transitional programme has only a vague notion of the historical periods of the class struggle, and so does not differentiate precisely between pre-revolutionary and revolutionary situations, but it is able to outline in more detail the character of the role of particular transitional demands. The problem of the 1928 programme is one of rigid stagism and an inability to recognise the possibility of rapid movement between the stages of the class struggle. But Trotsky’s programme has no real sense of periodisation within the class struggle and instead in a vague manner implies that the situation in the class struggle is always receptive to the realisation of transitional demands. Improvements could be made if the approach of the 1928 programme and the Transitional Programme were combined in a fruitful manner.

It could be argued that in periods of the offensive of capital when the working class is on the defensive the unfavourable balance of class forces would suggest that partial demands have the most strategic relevance. However it is also possible that particular transitional demands are still important because of their ability to promote the possibility for the transformation of defensive struggle into an offensive against capital. In this context it may be possible to develop support for a sliding scale of wages – the creation of a connection between wages and price increases – in order to generate militant action that would facilitate mobilisation around more ambitious demands such as workers control, occupations and the promotion of a general strike. Success on the wages issue would be a testing ground for being able to recognise that it is possible to develop support for the more revolutionary minded transitional demands. The problem with the approach of the 1928 programme is that it does not explain how the pre-revolutionary period of partial slogans becomes transformed into a revolutionary situation. Descriptions are given of both periods but the process of interaction and the ‘leap’ from the one to the other is not articulated. For example the pre-revolutionary period of defensive struggles is outlined in terms of the importance of the united front tactic within the unions and the struggle to develop revolutionary leadership of the unions. This task is said to be important for the winning of the masses to the banner of communism. The 1928 programme contends that the Communists must be the most principled defenders of the wages and conditions of the working class. But what is not explained is how this united front activity will realise the communist leadership of the unions and there is a lack of a cogent outline of the process of transition from this defensive struggle into offensive action against communism. What is not explained is how does the united front become the expression of a mass movement against capitalism? Indeed it could be argued that it is not possible to explain this development because of the rigid demarcation of the class struggle into distinct stages of the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary. It could be more accurate to suggest that the political situation can be fluid and expresses a mixture of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary aspects. This seems to be the stance of the Transitional Programme. However the 1928 programme does maintain: “Starting from these partial demands, the communist party must gradually heighten its slogans until they converge in the slogans of…..a workers and peasant’s government.”(67) This implies the possibility of a progressive escalation of the class struggle that is connected to an emphasis on partial slogans that become transformed into the application of transitional demands. It could be argued that this approach does allow for flexibility in relation to the development of the class struggle. The implication of this comment is that the activity of the working class is not divided into rigid stages and instead success in the realisation of partial demands can bring about movement into a higher form of class struggle when transitional demands become applicable.

However in relation to the struggle in the colonies there seems to be a different tactical orientation in that partial demands such as a shorter working day are always subordinated to more ambitious demand like political independence and the formation of a workers and peasants government. (68) What is not explained is whether the partial demands are secondary to what could be called transitional demands? Does this imply the situation in the colonies is revolutionary? Instead of answering these questions we have the brief outline of a situation that implies that partial demands are not adequate or principled for the aims of anti-imperialist struggle. Consequently what are required are more ambitious demands. This view could be a concession to the perspective of permanent revolution and the view that working class leadership is required for a principled resolution of the colonial question.

The programme concludes with the expression of the viewpoint that Social Democracy capitulates to the national interest whilst the CI upholds the international interests of the working class. The issue of the defence of the USSR is outlined in terms of the development of the world revolution: “The principal slogans of the Communist International in the fight against the war danger are: turn the imperialist war into a civil war, defeat of one’s ‘own’ imperialist government, defence of the Soviet Union and the Colonies, should imperialist war be made on them, with every possible means.”(69) This standpoint is compatible with that of the Transitional Programme that contends: “It will be the duty of the international proletariat to aid the oppressed countries in the war against the oppressors. The same duty applies in regards to aiding the USSR, or whatever other workers state might arise before the war or during the war.”(70) In other words the CI and USSR dramatically changed after the writing of the 1928 programme. They became instruments of reformism and rejected the revolutionary approach of the 1928 programme. The programme was not without its faults – which reflected the influence of Stalin on its creation – but the role of Bukharin and others was able to write a document that is revolutionary. This programme was important for the development of Trotsky’s Transitional Programme. The 1928 document is part of the history of the working class it deserves to be re-appraised and acknowledged as being integral to the programme of world revolution.

In conclusion we can suggest that the centrist aspects of the 1928 programme were based on its defence of the Stalinist bureaucracy and opposition to the revolutionary standpoint of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Bukharin was one of the main influences within the programme, and he has heavy responsibility for his effective support for Stalinism. However the influence of Bukharin also meant that the conception of the relationship between the role of the USSR and the process of world revolution was principled. The primary aim of the 1928 programme was to connect the task of world revolution to the construction of socialism in the USSR. Hence the character of the world revolution was not subordinated to the defence of the USSR, and instead the advance of the former was connected to the success of the latter. The very process of the principled construction of socialism in the USSR was the basis to understand an important element of the advance of world revolution. In this context Bukharin’s influence was apparent in relation to the elaboration of a conception of socialism and communism based on the role of the worker-peasant alliance. This development would be vital to the success of world revolution and the encouragement of the radicalisation of the international working class. An attractive understanding of what is meant by socialism and communism could only be of benefit in relation to the promotion of the support within the international working class for the overthrow of capitalism.

The strategic action approach of the 1928 programme must have influenced the development of the Trotskyist transitional programme. The strategy of the 1928 programme was in favour of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism in contrast to the anti-Fascist stagism of the perspectives of the Stalinist Seventh Comintern Congress. What primarily marred the 1928 programme was its adherence to economic catastrophism and the related view of the inevitable overthrow of capitalism. However the influence of strategy indicated that the programme did not support political passivity and instead had a dynamic conception of the revolutionary process. It upheld the principled view that the self-activity of the working class is the basis of the prospect for the overthrow of international capitalism. Stalin’s split with Bukharin represented the primary undermining of this revolutionary heritage of the 1928 programme.

The aftermath of the sixth Comintern Congress was the rejection of the importance of the programme that it had adopted. In 1929 the forced collectivisation of agriculture within the Soviet Union meant the rejection of the workers and peasant alliance as the basis of the construction of socialism, and instead the policy adopted was that of the imposition of ‘socialism’ from above. This process went together with the justification of the Third Period and the rejection of the importance of defensive struggle against capitalism and instead the justification of economic determinism as the basis for the policy of the CI. The dynamic strategy of the 1928 programme was replaced with economic catastrophism, and the relationship between the USSR and the world revolution became separated. The result of this approach was the tragedy in Germany and the realisation within the CI of the necessity to drastically change perspectives. But this did not mean a return to the revolutionary heritage of the 1928 programme, and instead the formal revolutionary approach of the Comintern was revised and diluted with the justification of the Popular Frontist perspective at the seventh Comintern Congress. (71) The aim of world revolution was effectively abandoned and replaced by an approach that was a militant form of reformism. This effective justification of reformism was in connection to the foreign policy interests of the USSR which aimed at constructing an alliance with bourgeois democracy against fascism. These same foreign policy objectives led to the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. Only the aggression of German imperialism led to the re-founding of the alliance of the USSR with the bourgeois democratic powers in 1941. The international class struggle had become entirely subordinated to the diplomatic objectives of the Soviet bureaucracy.

What significance is the 1928 programme for today? Firstly, it outlines a vitally important conception of what socialist society could be like. Socialism can be built on the basis of the role of alliances and the importance of consent and participation. It is also necessary to admit that the policies required to promote socialism must be pragmatic and modest and so include a role for the market and the acceptance of a diversity of opinion. Socialism cannot be built by administrative decree or as an imposition from above by the utilisation of state power. Instead it success must be the expression of a popular process of construction and based on the democratic will of society. Secondly, the programme outlines a strategy of world revolution that is the basis for our understanding of contemporary global society and the role of an action programme of change. In this context the 1928 programme acts as a vital supplement to the programme of the Fourth International. It can outline the role of partial demands and the differences between a pre-revolutionary and revolutionary situation. Thirdly, the 1928 programme can contribute to the development of a contemporary programme. This prospect is only possible if we revise our opinion of the 1928 programme and recognise its importance for the development of Marxist theory. The 1928 programme is not the apologia for Stalinism and is instead a flawed part of revolutionary Marxism.

The importance of the 1928 programme for the present can be briefly outlined in the following terms. Firstly the beginning sections of the new programme will outline an understanding of the economic and political situation. This will involve recognition of the differences with the period of classical imperialism. Since the cold war period the capitalist system has been based on the hegemony of the USA. The result is that it has been possible to resolve inter-imperialist contradictions in peaceful terms. Hence the view of the 1928 programme that revolution will be a possible outcome of inter-imperialist war will have to be revised. Instead the question of the possible development of revolution will have to be conceived in different terms that are able to recognise the importance of the changes within world capitalism. Secondly the new programme will have to follow the example of the 1928 programme and include a detailed exposition of what is meant by socialism and communism. It is not satisfactory to develop a programme that emphasises the issue of how to overthrow capitalism and yet is unable to elaborate what is meant by the aim of socialism. Instead the 1928 programme outlines a conception of socialism that is not antiquated and is instead a model for what we might mean by this future society. Contemporary socialism will still have to be constructed in terms of the relationship between industry and agriculture, and so will have to recognise the significance of the relationship between the urban working class and the rural classes. In this context the question of the role of the market will have to be addressed even if we arrive at conclusions that are different to that of the 1928 programme. Thirdly the new programme will have to address the issues involved in the struggle for world revolution and this will include the significance of strategy. However unlike the sometimes crude simplicity of Trotsky’s transitional programme this will include – following the example of the 1928 programme – discussion of the character of contemporary capitalist society and how this has an impact on strategy. For example what is the character of revolution in countries of medium capitalist development? This section will also discuss the relevance of Trotsky’s perspective of permanent revolution. Furthermore it will be necessary to discuss the tactics of defensive and offensive periods of the class struggle, and the relationship between partial and transitional demands. Lastly the programme will tackle issues not adequately tackled by previous programmes such as ecology, gender, sexuality and race.

It is also apparent that the violence generated by imperialism, national dictators and religious extremism has created a widespread yearning for peace. The result of the popular mood for peace is that it is unlikely that Marxism will become popular on the basis of the perspective of violent revolution. Therefore one of the tasks of the Marxist movement concerns conceiving of the possibility of the successful resolution of the class struggle in peaceful terms. This aim does not represent adaptation to capitalism and is instead an expression of the fact that the most dedicated opponents of capitalism are also the most principled supporters of peace. Consequently the implicit acceptance of violence in previous programmes has to be critically scrutinised, and the question of how we realise socialism has to be related to the importance of peaceful transition to a different society. In addition the recent period has indicated the importance of religion. Marxists have to accept that their traditional view of religion is no longer satisfactory and so has to be re-examined and made relevant for the contemporary era. This process does not mean favouring one religion over another, but what is important is avoiding cliché and dogma. Furthermore changes in the family have generated questions about the traditional Marxist view that the family should be abolished. In my opinion instead of supporting this aim of the Victorian period we should strive to advocate the most emancipatory form of the family for the contemporary era. In relation to all these additional theoretical tasks lessons can be made by making serious study of the 1928 programme.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Leon Trotsky: The Third International after Lenin, Pathfinder Press, New York

(2)Jane Degras, Editor: Documents of the Communist International Volume 2, 1923-28 p472

(3) ibid p472

(4) ibid p473

(5) ibid p473

(6) ibid p479

(7) ibid p480

(8) ibid p481

(9) ibid p481

(10ibid p482

(11) ibid p482

(12) ibid p484

(13) ibid p486

(14) ibid p485

(15) ibid p486

(16) ibid p486

(17) ibid p488

(18) ibid p488

(19)Eugen Varga: The Decline of Capitalism, Aakar Books, Delhi, 2012

(20) ibid p13

(21) ibid p18

(22) ibid p26-28

(23) ibid p42

(24) ibid p55

(25) ibid p69

(26) ibid p78-79

(27) ibid p89-91

(28) ibid p108

(29) ibid p115

(30) ibid p118

(31)Programme op cit p488

(32) ibid p489

(33) ibid p491

(34) ibid p491

(35) ibid p492

(36) ibid p492

(37) ibid p492

(38) ibid p492-493

(39) ibid p493

(40Ibid p495

(41) ibid p498

(42) ibid p499

(43) ibid p499-500

(44) ibid p500

(45) ibid p501

(46) ibid p502

(47) ibid p503

(48) ibid p505

(49) ibid p506

(50) ibid p508

(51) ibid p508

(52) ibid p511

(53) ibid p511-512

(54) ibid p517

(55) ibid p519

(56) ibid p520

(57) ibid p520

(58) ibid p522

(59) ibid p522

(60) ibid p522

(61)Leon Trotsky: The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution, Pathfinder Press, New York 1973 p115

(62) ibid p114-115

(63) ibid p114

(64) 1928 Programme op cit p523

(65) Trotsky op cit p116

(66)1928 programme op cit p522-523

(67) ibid p524

(68) ibid p525

(69) ibid p525

(70) Trotsky op cit p131-132