Chapter One – UNDERSTANDING TROTSKYISM

Introduction

Marxism has been proclaimed as the science of society and the articulation of the perspective of an alternative that promotes the realisation of communism. However for many of the years of its existence it has also been the ideology of the Soviet bureaucracy and the apology for its domination. Marxism has had a true character as the promise of the emancipation of the working class and it has been falsified as the ideological justification of the actions of the bureaucratic stratum. It could also be argued that Marxism was the theoretical justification of the doctrine of Social Democracy which promised a different conception of socialist transition and contrasted the approach of democracy with the flaws of revolution and repression. Furthermore Marxism has been the methodological basis for the justification of historical pessimism by the Frankfurt school and the recent reduction of Marxism to various themes of Analytical philosophy. The approach of Marxism has also been utilised to justify the doctrines of Leninism, Trotskyism, Stalinism, Maoism and Titoism. Various authors have written books about what Marx really meant and yet the mystery of Marxism remains.

This complex situation should not have developed. Marxism was for the strategy of revolution in the developed capitalist countries and the aim was communism. But support for Marxism also developed in the less advanced capitalist countries and inspired the Russian revolution of 1905. This meant Marxism could only retain credibility if Marxists responded to this situation in a creative and flexible manner. Dogmatic Marxists like Plekhanov continued to argue that the bourgeoisie should be hegemonic in the bourgeois revolution but activity conformed to a different pattern. The reality was working class leadership of the revolutionary process in a less advanced capitalist country. Marxists had to adapt to the situation or else become anachronistic. Hence the imperatives of practice dictated the character and content of theory. In other words the imperatives of the class struggle resulted in the apparent modification of Marxism. The very utilisation of Marxism as a methodology of the study of society, strategy and revolutionary aims indicated that it was capable of innovation. However the question was what was the limit to this process of modification?

The criteria we will utilise in order to define Marxism is influenced by the views of Hal Draper. (1) He argued that Marxism is ultimately a doctrine of the self-emancipation of the working class. In this context the role of the party should be to promote the ability of the working class to change society rather than the class being the instrument of the aims of a party. Consequently strategy is the expression of how it is possible to develop a class conscious mass movement with aims concerning the realising of a new society. However the interpretation of Marxism as a science by various interpreters resulted in the view that class was the instrument of Marxism rather than Marxism being the instrument of the class. This approach was reinforced by the limitations of those who accommodated to the class struggle in an uncritical manner. Marxism was also undermined by those that attempted to dilute its principles and justify a variation of the view that the mass movement was primary. Bernstein argued the very development of capitalism had established that reforms could replace revolution as the major strategic aim. The emphasis on the class struggle had become a dogma and the process of change was evolutionary rather than revolutionary. He was opposed by Luxemburg but the actual practice of German Social Democracy seemed to uphold his standpoint. It could be argued that more social gains were obtained by the method of reform rather than revolution. Only the rupture represented by war undermined the apparent validity of his standpoint. The war showed that the contradictions of capitalism had not been surpassed by economic progress and that the only principled approach was that of revolutionary opposition to the war. But the majority of Social Democrats supported the war and attempted to define Marxism in terms of the interests of the German nation state. Reformism was shown in practice to represent servile support for the particular nation state and opposition to the development of international proletarian revolution. It could be argued that authentic Marxism was only expressed by those that opposed the First World War and supported the alternative of the intensification of the class struggle.

But there was an immediate problem. Was authentic Marxism represented by those that argued for peace as the alternative to war or for revolutionary defeatism and the transformation of the war into civil war? The point was that the potential forces of authentic Marxism had become immediately fragmented because of differences about tactics. Both the proponents of peace and revolutionary defeatism could be said to be principled opponents of war but their unity around the Zimmerwald Manifesto was only temporary, and its perspective of a European Socialist state could not unite them in common struggle. This division was historic because Kautsky, the major proponent of peace, was to become the most important critic of Lenin and the October revolution. Lenin, the supporter of revolutionary defeatism, was to become the leader of the October revolution in Russia. Kautsky argued that revolution in Russia would be undermined by unfavourable objective and material conditions and by the development of party dictatorship. The apparent rejection of the approach of Marx by the Bolsheviks was considered too be the basis of their unprincipled character. Kautsky considered that flexibility in theory was identical with politics that could not advance the cause of the working class in the class struggle. Correct strategy meant adhering to what Kautsky considered to be the essence of Marxism. The Bolsheviks argued that this was dogma and instead their approach was defined by the revolutionary character of the imperialist epoch of capitalism. However defeats in the class struggle undermined this perspective and promoted the eventual emergence of a form of Bolshevik opportunism that was called Stalinism.

In other words Kautsky’s prediction of the degeneration of the Soviet regime seemed to be accurate because the Bolsheviks never established a principled relation to the working class and established Soviet democracy and the domination of the trade unions within the relations of production. Instead the aim of popular democracy and workers control remained parts of the programme that were never realised. This meant the development of a process that resulted in the formation of a party state based on the domination of the bureaucracy and the emergence of Stalinism as its expression. But Kautsky adapted to the influence of Social Democracy and did not offer a revolutionary alternative. From approximately 1923 both wings of revolutionary Marxism were in crisis and unable to promote principled conclusions about the international class struggle. The limitations of the existing forms of Marxism meant that it was difficult to establish what was principled Marxism? This meant the organisational expression of Marxism was not represented by Kautkyism or Bolshevism, even if individual adherents to these trends could still produce creative works. The point is that the generation of principled Marxism could not necessarily result from the renewal of these trends and instead they would have to be subject to critique and reflection.

At this point an important paradox develops. The representatives of the potential forces of Marxism are effectively enclosed within the competing trends of Kautskyism and Bolshevism. Kautsky calls for a revolution to overthrow the October regime but he is unable to articulate principled tactics for the situation in Germany, and Trotsky calls for the renewal of Leninism but he is unable to articulate the problems of the early Soviet regime. These limitations mean that both Kautsky and Trotsky are unable to articulate a convincing conception of international revolution. Trotsky can outline the errors of the Stalin-Bukharin regime within the Comintern but this critique is outlined in terms of an approach that cannot articulate what is meant by principled Marxism. The point is not that Trotsky is unable to act as the perceptive critic of Stalinism and he is an important alternative strategist of proletarian revolution. But it is questionable whether Trotsky is able to articulate the relationship between the party and class in the manner of Marx. Does Trotsky outline the connection of party to class in terms of the capacity of the ability of the working class to bring about its own self-emancipation? The answer to this question will indicate whether Trotsky is acting as a Marxist or as a person unintentionally influenced by the degeneration of Marxism and its regression into the theoretical justification of either Social Democracy or Stalinism. Can Trotsky uphold a principled Marxism that consistently adheres to the view that the working class is the major agency of the transformation of society? Or does Trotsky accept the Stalinist view that socialism is the expression of the dynamism of the party acting on behalf of the class? These questions will be addressed in relation to a study of Trotsky’s famous Transitional Programme.

THE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMME OF TROTSKYISM

This programme was a summary of the struggle against Stalinism and was a guide to action for the newly formed Fourth International. Trotsky has been criticised for economic catastrophism and overestimating the situation of decline and the inability of capitalism to recover from this situation. What is often ignored is the conclusion that he makes from this assessment. He contends: “Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. It is now the turn of the proletariat, i.e. chiefly of its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of leadership is reduced to a crisis of the revolutionary leadership.” (2) This is an ambiguous comment. What is meant by leadership and its relation to the possibilities for social transformation? Is Trotsky suggesting that the party is the instrument of history, or is he making the point that without a revolutionary party the process of change is more difficult? Hence how can we conceive his understanding of the relation between party and class? Trotskyist orthodoxy would suggest that he is calling for the development of organs of mass struggle with revolutionary leadership. But his analysis of the class struggle represents a description of the role of parties and this suggests the action of parties will be decisive in relation to the ultimate outcome. Formally he insists that the laws of history are dominant and this implies the necessity of the victory of the working class. However what is active, is the role of political organisations and the role of the bureaucracy. He does not outline how and why the laws of history will overcome the activity of the bureaucratic organisation. Only one thing will be concretely stronger than bureaucracy and that is the revolutionary role of the Fourth International. Consequently, historical laws are expressed by the increasing support of the masses for the Fourth International: “As time goes on, their desperate efforts to hold back the wheels of history will demonstrate more clearly to the masses that the crisis of the proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind’s culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International.” (3)

The argument being made is that the limitations of the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy go against the laws of history. But the relation between the working class and the laws of history is not made explicit. Why should a situation of increasing economic crisis and stagnation favour the working class? The assumption being made by Trotsky is that the balance of class forces is favouring the working class and yet the reality is being defined by the victories of reaction and the increased prospect of war. In other words he is inverting the real relations between the classes in order to arrive at a favourable conclusion and yet he still cannot outline how the working class will be the active force in history. Instead the outcome he has established is that the situation is ready for the mass growth of the Fourth International. However it could be argued that the programme of action based on transitional demands answers the questions that have been raised. The perspective is that of developing support for transitional demands that relate the aspirations of the present to the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society by the working class. Hence this programme of action indicates the revolutionary role and activity of the working class: “The old “minimal program” is superseded by the transitional program, the task of which lies in the systematic mobilization of the masses for the proletarian revolution.” (4) But the crucial point is the extent to which the working class is able to express its creativity within the process of struggle. What is the relation between the party and class in this process of development of struggle to realise transitional demands and bring about the overthrow of capitalism? Formally the active role is the working class because without its support the development of the struggle for transitional demands cannot occur. But it is entirely possible for parties to attempt to overcome the difficulties of this struggle by conceiving of this process as being expressed by the active role of parties. Trotsky would argue that this is not what he is suggesting and instead his approach is based on the active involvement of the working class. But the historical experience of the struggle for the transitional programme has led to bureaucratic distortions. This is because the precise relation of the party and class is not outlined and instead it could be inferred that the party is the class. This point is reinforced by the possibility that the transitional programme is a blueprint of revolution and so suggests a controlled process that is always under the supervision of the party. The suggestion is that the role of the party and the mobilisation of the working class are identical.

But historical experience suggests a different perspective. If the anger of the working class is sufficiently motivated the result will be a spontaneous development that is expressed in the formation of mass organs of struggle. The task of a party will be to try and orientate these mass organs to support strategic demands connected to revolution and political power. In other words the process of struggle is not a steady culmination of support for transitional demands and an orderly intensification of the class struggle. Instead a long period of ebb and retreat can be replaced by an instant period of offensive struggle and the task can become the transformation of this mass struggle into the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. This does not mean that transitional demands are irrelevant but it does mean it is not possible to raise them in a schematic and pre-determined manner of increasing importance. The crucial questions that will be raised by this type of class struggle will concern whether the working class is ready and capable to develop its economic and political power and to what extent it has an adequate strategy for the transformation of capitalism. In other words the situation is not amenable to the implementation of the transitional programme because of the very abrupt and changeable character of the class struggle. The only way that the transitional programme could be implemented is on the basis of the active guidance of the party, or a party led revolution.

The ‘normal’ period of the class struggle represents a situation that is not receptive to transitional demands and the upsurge of the class struggle is too volatile for their acceptance. The point is that the class struggle does not correspond to an orderly pre-determined schema, and instead demands are created that represent the logic of the struggle as it develops. This does not mean that we can never plan demands in advance of developments, but that we should be sensitive to actual developments and our actual ‘transitional demands’ should lack dogma and the appeal to past programmes. What we can be aware of is that the very development of the struggle will increasingly undermine the alienated power of capital over labour and this situation should be articulated and the advance of class struggle will raise the issue of which class rules society. Hence the transitional demands that have the most relevance will be those that are the more revolutionary and explicit about the economic and political relations between the classes. In contrast, Trotsky outlines his list of demands in a neat hierarchical order. The above is not an argument against the importance and relevance of transitional demands, but is instead criticism concerning Trotsky’s apparent neglect of the issue of how these demands relate to the development of the class struggle. Trotsky assumes that the working class has become politicised because of crisis and the reactionary role of the traditional organisations of the working class. But this assumption is based on an understanding of a particular historical situation that is unique and has not been repeated. The present situation is based on the apparent discrepancy between the mass movement and Marxism. Hence the question is how do we develop the possibility in which the working class becomes receptive to Marxism? The answer of Trotsky is that transitional demands represent a schema that can be imposed on reality. This approach is idealist because the problem is that the working class will be indifferent towards transitional demands at its present level of class consciousness. Consequently the urgent issue is how to develop class consciousness in order for the working class to relate to the importance of transitional demands? Trotsky assumed that the working class had been politicised by the experience of the inter-war period, but we cannot make these assumptions in relation to the present.

We can develop many reasons why the working class is reluctant to mobilise in defence of its class interests. Possibly the most important is that the economic restructuring in the recent period has increased the sense of dependency of labour on capital. Marxism has to develop politics that can challenge this common sense interpretation about the apparent intensification of the domination of capital over labour. In this context transitional demands like the sliding scale of wages are not relevant. They are demands that relate to favourable conditions in the class struggle when labour is in a position to impose the highest level of wages. But globalisation and the offensive of capital indicate that the sliding scale of wages belongs to a period of boom and it represents an economic demand that does not necessarily unite the working class in a situation of increasing class consciousness. What did unite the working class were the strikes that created a sense of class cohesion. But the Transitional Programme has little to say about strikes. The working class in the process of struggle is not articulated in the Programme, and instead the class struggle is reduced to the prospect of support for the various demands: “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 practical successes may be, the workers will come to understand the necessity of liquidating capitalist slavery.” (4)

Trotsky is arguing that the central issue is that of upholding the morale of the working class and protecting it from decline: “The question is one of guarding the proletariat from decay, demoralization and ruin.” (5) But how does the working class generate its sense of cohesion, confidence and unity? His answer is supplied by the importance of growing support for transitional demands. But this is chicken before the egg. If the working class is demoralised by the defeats inflicted by the ruling class and the role of the mass organisations how can support for transitional demands be generated? In 1936 the issue of defence of the Spanish Republic led to a revolutionary consciousness within the working class and peasantry, and the formation of a Popular Front government in France led to occupations of the factories by the working class. These developments expressed the historical confidence that the working class could transform the situation by its mass activity. The actual demand that corresponded to the requirements of the events was for the overthrow of capitalism. However the actions of Stalinism and sections of the ruling class transformed an offensive situation into a defensive one. How could class confidence and class cohesion be promoted under these conditions? The point is that transitional demands are not sufficient and instead they have to be connected to the capacity of the working class to oppose the actions of the ruling class and reactionary forces like the Stalinists. This means the mass movement has to be connected to Marxism. To Trotsky, transitional demands are the form that represents the connection between Marxism and the mass movement. But the various transitional demands do not address the problem of the decay of the working class movement because of defeats in a convincing manner. Instead they are a substitute for an answer. Primarily they do not advance a strategy of victory that is as convincing as All Power to the Soviets. This is not to suggest the various transitional demands are unimportant, but they do not have answers to the problem of the domination of the working class movement by reactionary forces like Social Democracy and Stalinism.

However Trotsky’s approach is idealist in two important senses. Firstly, it is suggested that the adoption of transitional demands by the workers will resolve the problem of reactionary social forces like the Stalinists. But support for the transitional demands does not explain how one form of hegemony can be replaced by another. How can the approach of a marginalised Marxism become the dominant political trend? Secondly, in a moralistic manner Trotsky suggests dogmatically that capitalism should be replaced if transitional demands are not implemented. But the point is capitalism will not be replaced if transitional demands are not realised. On the contrary capitalism will remain and the working class will be weaker because of defeats. Hence Trotsky has not answered some important additional questions. Firstly, how can the upsurge of spontaneous revolutionary consciousness become consolidated in terms of definite political objectives, and primarily the aim of overthrowing capitalism? Secondly, how can the demoralisation of the working class be avoided in situations in which revolutionary possibilities were not realised. Trotsky’s transitional demands do not answer these questions because they are based on the conception of an idealised class struggle that fails to address the problems of the actual situation. Trotsky is aware that the working class is prepared to oppose capitalism but he does not address the contradiction between the mass movement and the isolation of principled Marxism. Instead he assumes that increasing support for transitional demands will resolve this situation. But what will motivate the working class to support transitional demands?

The ultimate problem is that the actual process of class struggle does not correspond to the orderly schema of increasing support for transitional demands. The actuality is that real developments of the mass struggle can go beyond the self-imposed limits of the transitional demands, or else the situation can be characterised by retreat and defeat. Furthermore long periods of ebbs and tranquillity are possible. Marxism has to adjust to these situations by trying to develop a world view that can realise a response within the working class. The more convincing are the arguments for communism the greater is the prospect of developing a mass movement that is related to Marxism. However the transitional programme as a predominantly guide to action does not achieve this task and instead outlines a map for the class struggle. The problem is that we do not need one map and instead require several maps for different situations. We also need to locate the class struggle within a changing process of capitalist development. This will mean that the challenges are different and strategy has to be modified in a corresponding manner. But the central problem with the Transitional Programme is that it cannot describe the class struggle accurately because it is not possible that any process of contradiction and conflict can be quantitatively resolved by the neat realisation of demands. For example the programme outlines the importance of militant trade unions and factory committees, and these forms are located within the advance of struggle until it becomes revolutionary. But this conception was not accurate for explaining the situation in the 1930’s. The last major instance of class struggle based on the importance of the trade unions was the British general strike. Defeat of this action meant that trade union activity faded into the background. In contrast political events dominated the class struggle like the rise of fascism in Germany and the Spanish revolution to defend democracy. Primarily what became required was a working class alternative to Popular Frontism and its justification of class collaboration. It was necessary to develop the arguments that upheld the political independence of the working class and its alternative to subordination to bourgeois democracy.

Hence the task of revolution was to go beyond the limitations of a defence of bourgeois democracy to the generation of the prospect of proletarian power. In this context discussion of the importance of the trade unions could be welcome but it was not strategically significant in a contemporary context. What the working class needed was powerful arguments as to why the defence of bourgeois democracy was not the primary task. Was it possible to defeat fascism in a different manner? The point was that Popular Frontism was hegemonic in this period despite working class discontent with the continuation of capitalism. Trotsky did not grasp that the central issue for the working class was not the economic situation of crisis and the importance of economic struggle but was instead about how to defeat fascism and the threat of counterrevolution. The very credibility of Stalinism was based on the role of the Popular Front and the success of the French government in the late 1930’s seemed to be the vindication of this standpoint. Consequently the Transitional Programme seemed to saying don’t be diverted by the Popular Front and instead return to the issue of the economic crisis. The suggestion was we have a programme to tackle the crisis. But the concerns of the working class were actually more astute and incisive because world war would be the outcome of the success of fascism. The very future of world politics would depend on the defeat of fascism. In other words the question of how to develop class consciousness would depend on the credibility of a programme that would be primarily about establishing an alternative to Popular Frontism in relation to the task of opposing Fascism. However the apparent neglect of this task indicated that Trotsky had developed a programme that he thought was important and ignored the construction of a programme that the working class believed was crucial.

Trotsky argued that the economic crisis was the cause of political barbarism and the generation of counterrevolutionary trends like Fascism. This was true but the conclusion was not that the primary task was the creation of an economically biased programme. Instead the aim was to develop a political programme that would advance the cause of how to defeat fascism. This was the form in which the perspective of proletarian revolution could be advanced. The task was to try and convince those workers that agreed with the Stalinist approach towards opposing fascism that this was not effective and that the united front should be opposed to the Popular Front. However by emphasising an economic orientated programme it seemed that the task of opposing Fascism was being downgraded and that the central task was a direct overthrow of capitalism via the revival of the organs of mass struggle such as trade unions and factory committees. Hence the working class seemed to understand better than Trotsky (but tragically Trotsky understood better than anyone else the problem of Fascism) the importance of the task of defeating fascism. In order to relate to these concerns what was required was a political programme about how to defeat fascism, and the aspects of an economic programme related to the crisis was secondary in immediate terms. Elaborating this type of programme would also enable Trotsky to provide more credible answers about how class consciousness could be advanced in the present period. Consequently providing a programme to facilitate the defeat of fascism would be the most concrete basis to advance the class struggle and the development of class consciousness. Only in this context would the transitional programme become more relevant and correspond to the tasks of the class struggle that would arise after the defeat of fascism.

Trotsky could contend that the elaboration of a programme primarily about the struggle against fascism was a not the major task which was the development of an understanding of the economic crisis and the perspective of world revolution. Furthermore an emphasis on opposition to fascism could be considered to be a response that over-exaggerated the importance of political factors to the exclusion of the role of the economic. It could also be argued that the perspective of tackling the threat of fascism before all other questions results in a stageist conception of rigidly defining revolution in terms of different and sequential historical periods. The immediacy of the proletarian revolution is repudiated and instead the perspective of the anti-fascist revolution is given prominence. These objections may all be valid if it was not for the fact that the working class itself recognised that its interests dictated the immediate defeat of fascism and the defence of gains against the threat posed by fascist counterrevolution. In its aspirations and spontaneous recognition of what would advance its interests the working class understood that the defeat of fascism would be the most important aspect in the development of class consciousness. The major thing demoralising the working class was fascism and so its defeat would be what would enhance class cohesion and historic confidence in the future. This is why a programme of action had to be orientated to the task of the defeat of fascist counterrevolution and opposition to the threat of inter-imperialist war.

Indeed it could be argued that the economic situation was starting to improve, and so the elaboration of a programme based on the seriousness of the economic situation was already becoming outmoded. But the threat of fascist counterrevolution generated by the period of serious economic crisis was still present, and the major task was how to advance the proletarian revolution by overcoming the challenge of fascism. Success in these terms would be the major aspect of the development of the proletarian revolution because of the immense progress in class consciousness and the related capacity to challenge the power of capital. Only in this context would transitional demands become potentially relevant at this higher level of the class struggle. In contrast, Trotsky posed the development of the class struggle to the point of revolution in a manner abstracted from the threat of fascism. He argues that only after the advance of the class struggle to the point of victory does fascism become a factor: “Dual power in its turn is the culminating point of the transitional period. Two regimes, the bourgeois and the proletarian are irreconcilably opposed to each other. Conflict between them is inevitable. The fate of society depends on the outcome. Should the revolution be defeated, the fascist dictatorship of the bourgeoisie will follow. In the case of victory, the power of the soviets, that is the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist reconstruction of society will arise.”(7) But historical experience had shown, and Trotsky’s own writings outlined, that fascist counterrevolution was in order to undermine the development of class struggle to the point at which political power was posed. In Italy, Germany and Spain, fascism had developed whilst the working class was still immature and unsure of the perspective it should support. Only in Spain had fascist rebellion resulted in a revolutionary upsurge that posed the prospect of political power for the working class. In the other situations the working class was still only making tentative steps against capitalism and the role of fascism was to undermine any further development of the class struggle. Hence the issue of the smashing of fascism was posed before the prospect of revolution. But in the transitional programme Trotsky considered the threat of fascism as the aftermath of revolutionary events, and therefore minimised its significance for the class struggle. Events in France, Italy and Germany had indicated that the spectre of fascist counterrevolution had emerged prior to the prospect of proletarian revolution. Hence it could be argued that defeat of the fascist threat was indispensable to the prospect of the further progress of the proletarian revolution. The point is that victory for fascism would undermine for an historical period the prospect of victory for the working class in the class struggle and so the elaboration of a programme to defeat fascism was the primary task of the working class in the 1930’s.

Trotsky argues that we cannot expect the opportunist parties that capitulated to fascism in Germany to lead a principled struggle against fascism. He also insists that a democratic revolution is the basis for the overthrow of fascism which is dependent on its relation to finance capital for its political power. The revolution in Italy and Germany will be proletarian and so transitional demands will be the basis of the mobilisation of the working people of the fascist countries against the ruling elite. Consequently: “A merciless exposure of the theory and practice of the People’s Front is therefore the first condition for a revolutionary struggle against fascism.”(8) This is true but the point is that this task cannot be effectively carried out by the Fourth International by the attempt to deny its historical significance. Fascism had become in the 1930’s the major instrument of counterrevolution and the method by which all social progress is being undermined.

Thus what is required is the development of a programme of action to oppose fascist counterrevolution and which could advance a perspective that could inspire the working class to smash fascism. This prospect is not developed if an ideal conception of revolution is contrasted to what is happening. The events of reality indicate that the major aim of the working class is to oppose the progress of fascism. Only success in this context can make the proletarian revolution acquire meaning and relevance. Hence what is called for is the merging of the anti-fascist revolution and the proletarian revolution. Instead Trotsky rejects the democratic revolution in the name of the proletarian revolution: “But the formulas of democracy (freedom of press, the right to unionize, etc) mean for us only incidental or episodic slogans in the independent movement of the proletariat and not a democratic noose fastened to the neck of the proletariat by the bourgeosie’s agents.(Spain)”(9) However the problem with this comment is that he is assessing the question of the relation between the democratic revolution and the proletarian revolution from the viewpoint and perspective of Stalinism rather than the working class. The workers will welcome the development of democracy as an aspect of the struggle against fascism and the basis to undermine the fascist regime. In contrast, Stalinism will attempt to utilise democracy as the means to oppose proletarian revolution. Trotsky recognises this opportunist approach but he makes the mistake of trying to minimise the importance of democracy in the name of the ideal proletarian revolution. He does not recognise that to the working class democracy is central to the revolutionary process because it represents how fascism can be either opposed or overthrown. Consequently opposing Stalinism does not mean rejecting the importance of democracy but instead is about connecting democracy to the development of the proletarian revolution. Stalinism tries to utilise democratic slogans in order to oppose proletarian revolution but its actual aims are anti-democratic and are about sustaining the power of an unaccountable elite. The Fourth International cannot oppose this opportunism by rejecting the role of democracy but instead it should champion democracy in order to challenge fascism and advance the progress of proletarian revolution.

In his writings on Fascism in Germany Trotsky recognised the importance of democracy to the working class. But the pressures of popular frontism have made him deny this understanding and reject bourgeois democracy as merely the expression of the ideological illusions of Stalinism. However the working class aspires to maintain and develop democracy in the struggle against fascism, and Stalinism attempts to exploit this aspiration for its own ends. The aim of Trotskyism should have been to develop a programme of action that combines democracy with proletarian revolution as the alternative to Stalinism. This is because the alternative of an idealised proletarian revolution contrasted to the role of democracy attracts few adherents.

 Objections to the above critique could be raised and claims could be made that what is being argued is a concession to the Stalinist theory of stageism. In reply the acceptance of a democratic phase of revolution does not amount to stageism because what is being advocated is not a self-limiting process of revolution and accommodation to what is acceptable to the national bourgeoisie. Instead the emphasis on democracy is based on the aspirations of the working class and the recognition that democratic revolution is the basis of mass mobilisation against fascism and the preparation for the possibility to go beyond these limits to support for the very task of political power. In contrast, the Stalinists were prepared to undermine the mass movement against fascism if it meant that capitalism remained dominant. Hence the major problem is not stageism or the recognition of the possibility of distinct stages in the revolutionary process. What is problematical is the perspective of the subordination of the working class to the national bourgeoisie in the context of the anti-fascist revolution. The principled conception of the democratic revolution against fascism is not restricted to what is acceptable to the national bourgeoisie and Stalinism, and instead has a potential dynamic of further progress to the point of the overthrow of capitalism. This is what potentially happened in Italy at the end of the Second World War. The anti-fascist revolution acquired a dynamic of making progress towards the possibility of the revolutionary transformation of society. Only the role of the Stalinists undermined this prospect. This situation indicated that the class collaborationist approach was not the perspective of democratic revolution itself, and instead it was the role and strategy of Stalinism which conceived of democratic revolution in terms of the subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie. In Germany the process of democratic revolution never developed and instead a type of limited bourgeois democracy was imposed by imperialist intervention in the West, and the USSR controlled the East. This development actually indicated that the forces of imperialism feared a democratic revolution after the overthrow of fascism and so acted to undermine the development of popular working class mass organisations.

What happened in the aftermath of the demise of fascism was not the vindication of the strategy of the Transitional Programme. This was because what concerned the masses was the prospect of the character of democracy that would replace fascism. The programme of the Fourth International should have been for popular democracy as the basis to organise to develop the prospects for the overthrow of capitalism. In contrast the idealised programme of economic demands outlined in the Transitional Programme did not represent the viable basis of a programme for the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class in the context where the primary political questions related to the future of society after the war. The major issue was could working people influence the type of democracy that would form the political basis of society. This meant the rejection of the imposition of a form of limited democracy by elites but it also meant the rejection of Soviet military domination. What was required was a programme that could start with recognition of the domination of imperialism in Western Europe and Stalinism in Eastern Europe and which could relate to the sentiment that the aftermath of the war required social progress and democracy. In this context the location of the transitional demands could be situated. Hence the Transitional Programme would not be a programme based on the perspective of the prospect of immediate political power of the working class but would be about how to develop the strength of the working class in the conditions of the stabilisation of the economic and political power of capitalism under the hegemony of the USA in the period of the cold war. (This task will be attempted shortly)

We need to firstly go back in time and elaborate how the onset of the Second World War changed the tasks of Fourth International to that of opposing war. Did the Transitional Programme represent a principled basis to oppose war and advance the struggle for international revolution? It is important to recognise the problem of the neglect of the perspective of democratic revolution against fascism and in this context the section of the programme on war in the Transitional Programme minimises the importance of the struggle against fascism that will be an aspect of the Second World War. In generalised terms the Programme argues: “Imperialist war is the continuation and sharpening of the predatory politics of the bourgeoisie. The struggle of the proletariat against war is the continuation and sharpening of its class struggle. The beginning of the war alters the situation and partially the means of struggle between the classes, but not the aim and basic course.”(10) Hence the conclusion is that the war will be an inter-imperialist conflict similar to the character of the First World War: “The imperialist bourgeoisie dominates the world. In its basic character the approaching war will therefore be an imperialist war. The fundamental content of the politics of the international proletariat will be a struggle against imperialism and its war. In this struggle the basic principle is “the chief enemy is in your own country,” or the defeat of your own (imperialist) government is the lesser evil.”(11) The programme calls for support of the oppressed nations and the USSR in conflict with imperialism but it provides no guidance about the problem of invasion and the threat of fascist expansion and conquest. Instead the only perspective is that the imperialist war will vindicate the Transitional Programme and the role of the Fourth International: “The discontent of the masses and their revolt will grow by leaps and bounds. The sections of the Fourth International will be found at the head of the revolutionary tide. The programme of transitional demands will gain burning actuality. The problem of the conquest of power by the proletariat will loom in its full stature.”(12)

Consequently the section of the Transitional Programme on the issue of war is abstract because it effectively ignores the important of the central issue which is the role of fascism and its relation to the aggression of imperialism. The programme has outlined in a principled manner that the war will be imperialist and therefore the task of revolutionary opposition to the war should not be compromised but this is outlined in antiquated terms that could relate to the First World War and so ignores the special and concrete circumstances of the Second World War. Trotsky seems to suggest that an emphasis on the importance of anti-Fascism represents a dilution of the principles of proletarian internationalism, and therefore he cannot relate the question of the struggle against fascism to the struggle against Imperialism. He does not seem to realise that the potential struggle against the fascist occupation of Europe may be the most important aspect of bringing the war to a principled conclusion and that this development would advance the struggle of the working class against imperialism and capitalism. In other words he does not recognise that what will begin as an inter-imperialist war based on geo-political tensions could end with the development of a people’s war against fascism and imperialism. This point is important because the Trotskyists always had an ambiguous attitude towards the various Resistance movements, and this could be the result of the dogmatic approach of the Transitional Programme. Ernest Mandel has written a book justifying the role of anti-fascism, but the point is that this approach did not guide the actions of the Fourth International.(13) Instead the Fourth International acted in ad hoc manner because of the dogmatic standpoint of the Transitional Programme and it was unable to integrate anti-fascism into an anti-imperialist approach and the struggle for democracy.

The point being made is that the outcome of the Second World War could not be the same as World One. The First World War was a terrible stalemate between the various imperialist powers and the issue of popular war of resistance was not generated. In contrast the Second World War led to the fascist occupation of Europe, and so one of the central issues became that of national emancipation, democracy and the overthrow of fascist occupation. The focus of popular resistance was generally the restoration of democracy and not proletarian revolution. Hence the question for the Fourth International was how to connect the struggle for democracy and the end of fascist rule with the proletarian revolution. In Italy, Yugoslavia and other countries this relationship was established, but the approach of the Fourth International was no guidance because of its dogmatic emphasis on a virtual repeat of the character of the First World War. Instead it effectively differentiated between a reality that did not correspond to theory with an idealised conception of international proletarian revolution. This idealisation was not because proletarian revolution was not possible but rather because the programme did not recognise that the major impulse to the prospect of proletarian revolution was the struggle against fascism. Hence the programme was also unable to explain that one of the most important reasons for national oppression was the prospect of fascist occupation. This was because the programme was orientated to a great power struggle between imperialist rivals and so ignored the prospect of the promotion of popular wars of national liberation and for democracy and even proletarian revolution. In other words the Programme was not a guide to action and instead was anachronistic before war had begun.

It would be unfair to suggest that the Programme written in 1938 could have anticipated all aspects of the war that begun in 1939. But it was entirely reasonable to anticipate the fascist occupation of much of Europe, and Trotsky was aware of this prospect. However this awareness was not made into an aspect of the programme. The point is that the war could never be primarily inter-imperialist and would always involve the aspect of anti-fascist struggle against occupation. What could not be anticipated was the expansion of the USSR as part of its defence against German imperialism. But the Fourth International became effectively uncritical supporters of this development in the name of the defence of the USSR.(14) Hence the guidance of the programme was often ignored because of the importance of actual historical developments. The Programme emphasised that the Stalinist bureaucracy was becoming more counterrevolutionary, but this was glossed over by the Fourth International. However the major problem was that the Transitional Programme did not represent a guide to action of the class struggle. The international situation in the period 1943-45 did not correspond to the prediction of proletarian revolution and instead the continuation of inter-imperialist war was combined with people’s wars against fascism and for democracy. This situation could and did promote the prospect of proletarian revolution, but virtually nobody supported the perspective of the Transitional Programme. This meant the Fourth International was unable to influence events despite promising developments in Italy, France and Greece. Stalinism was able to retain hegemony because of its prominence in the anti-Fascist war.

But the Transitional Programme could become a guide to action in the post-war period because its approach corresponded to the reality of the class struggle. The central issues were no longer the struggle against fascism and war, and instead were about how to develop the working class as a social force that could oppose effectively the imposition of alienation and exploitation. It was possible in the period of the boom to promote the working class as a social force that could oppose the imperatives of capital and the Transitional Programme became a guide to action in this regard. This meant the criteria of class consciousness was no longer decided by the political questions of the ability to oppose fascism and war instead it was provided by the Transitional Programme itself. Support for transitional demands indicated to what extent the working class perceived that it had a historical future that was not determined by the imperatives of capital. However there was a strategic problem. If the working class could advance its social position in relation to capital by support for given transitional demands would this mean that this situation could be undermined by making a leap from the task of realising demands under capitalism to conscious acceptance of the struggle for political power of the working class. Differing views on this question led to splits but it was actually a problem located within the Programme itself, as will be shortly indicated.(15)

The section on demands opens with analysis of the call for a sliding scale of wages. This demand was of crucial importance in the period of rapid inflation and related to how an increasingly militant working class could maintain its standard of living. However what makes this type of demand very important is that it is related to an analysis of the role of the trade unions. The development of the trade unions is the most effective class instrument for the realisation of demands like the sliding scale of wages. Hence the struggle to develop militant trade unions with a revolutionary leadership at the shop steward and national level is of crucial importance: “If it be criminal to turn’s one back on mass organizations for the sake of fostering sectarian fictions, it is no less so to passively tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised conservative (“progressive”) bureaucratic cliques. Trade Unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution.”(16) This comment indicates how the Transitional Programme could not be a programme for its present and instead had to be for the future. In the present when it was written the trade unions could not be effective defensive organisations of the working class because of the problem of the effects of economic crisis and instead they tried to collaborate with governments in order to uphold the interests of the bureaucratic leadership and the members. This also meant the possibility of the trade unions going on the offensive against the interests of capital was inconceivable, and so the conception of the trade unions as a strategic expression of the method of revolution was ludicrous. Yet Trotsky adopted this perspective possibly because he was over influenced by the example of the militancy of the American Unions in the mid 1930’s. But his approach became credible in the boom years when the activity of militant unions became a regular part of the class struggle and left-wing leaders became elected at local and national level. In this period the challenge was to develop this expression of the class struggle into a conscious aspiration for political power. The Transitional Programme could act as an important guide for resolving this challenge concerning theory and practice. Trotsky is aware of a paradox. The trade union is the most important organisation of the class struggle and yet it is still inadequate for the purpose of promoting the class interests of the workers. Hence the trade union has to be transformed into a higher type of organisation if an organisation appropriate to the intensification of the class struggle is to be developed. The experience of the class struggle has already revealed what this organisation could be. It is the factory committee, or the evolution of the trade union into a more principled and militant type of organisation. This organ has developed in the mass struggles in France and the USA, and it represents the capacity for the actions of the workers to transform the trade unions into fighting organs that can raise the class struggle to new higher levels. This means the appearance of the factory committees represents the prospect of realising workers control and is the expression of the advance of the political situation into a pre-revolutionary challenge to the power of capital: “from the moment that the committee makes its appearance, a de facto dual power is established in the factory. By its very essence it represents the transitional state, because it includes in itself two irreconcilable regimes: the capitalist and the proletarian. The fundamental significance of the factory committees is precisely contained in the fact that they open the doors if not to a direct revolutionary, then to a pre-revolutionary period – between the bourgeois and proletarian regimes” (17)

In the typical periods of the class struggle the type of mass organisation of the working class that is dominant is the trade union. This both upholds the defensive interests of the working class and is a problem in relation to the prospect of developing higher forms of struggle. Consequently if the trade union is to evolve into a factory committee because of the dynamic of the intensification of the class struggle the prospect will be created for the development of organs that can realise workers control in the process of production and strive to realise political power. The point is that the trade unions have to evolve into different organs of struggle if they are to go from a concentration on defensive tasks to the assumption of an offensive posture that is about the struggle for workers control within the relations of production and its connection to the aspiration for the overthrow of the political power of capital. The paradox of this strategy is that it would be futile to try and by-pass the role of the trade unions and create factory committees in an independent manner. It is the trade unions that have the potential features of the factory committees but they are repressed and restricted by the bureaucratic control of the unions by a reactionary leadership. This means the struggle to overthrow this bureaucratic leadership is part of the process to create factory committees that can be more responsive to the interests of the members of the unions. It would also be a sectarian error to try and create independent unions with few members because they cannot generate the prospect of the formation of factory committees. Instead militant struggles by the existing unions will promote the economic and political conditions to develop unions. These factory committees because of their militant character will be in a position to challenge the domination of management within the relations of production.

The result of this situation is that dual power between the workers and management is established within the workplace. Presumably this situation must be generalised if the workers are to be able to effectively challenge the economic power of capital and stabilise the prospect of workers control of production. Isolation of the workers because of the inability to build factory committees that can challenge the economic power of management will result in the undermining of workers power within the workplace and the result will be the reassertion of the alienated power of capital within the relations of production. This is why mass strikes within a given industry must have the focus to become generalised and strive to extend the strength of the workers within a few places of production within the whole of economic activity. Trotsky makes the point that the increasing intensification of the class struggle has resulted in the spontaneous formation of factory committees because of the occupation of the workplaces. Hence the role of revolutionary strategy is to promote an approach that can maximise the potential of these spontaneous actions by calling for generalised action and the generation of a situation in which the workers can challenge the domination of capital within the workplace by establishing a situation of workers control. The point he is making is that if the formation of factory committees cannot bring about the situation of workers control throughout industry the result will have been a failure of the strategy. This failure will result in the reassertion of the power of capital over labour and the generation of a balance of class forces that is opposed to the interests of the workers. Trotsky is arguing that workers control is the major pre-condition of the success of revolutionary strategy and so the formation of factory committees is the most important organisational aspect of strategy. Without success in these aspects of the economic struggle the prospect of movement to higher forms of struggle will not be possible. This means that the formation of factory committees and the development of occupations is an indication that the class struggle is favourably developing according to the aspirations of the workers. The workers have been able to overcome the conservatism of routine and the problem of bureaucracy and instead have established a situation that is able to overcome the limitations that undermine the development of more militant forms of struggle and the promotion of the prospect of economic and political power.

What is the relation of this strategy to the role of Soviets and the revolutionary party? It is interesting that Trotsky is developing a strategy that is based on his conception of the relation of the class struggle to the situation in Europe and America. He is emphasising the importance of the economic because of the apparent increased social weight of the working class in the developed countries of Europe. In contrast the development of the mass struggle in Russia in 1905 and 1917 was based on the formation of Soviets and workers control was a secondary aspect of this situation. The Transitional Programme tries to reconcile what could be considered to be competing strategies and argues that the next logical step from the formation of factory committees is the creation of Soviets. But Soviets will only be formed when the issue of political power is raised: “Soviets can only arise at the time when the mass movement enters into an openly revolutionary stage. From the first moment of their appearance the soviets acting as a pivot around which millions of toilers are united in their struggle against the exploiters, become competitors and opponents of local authorities and then of the central government. If the factory committee creates a dual power in the factory, then the soviets initiate a period of dual power in the country.”(18)

This is an unsatisfactory resolution of two apparently competing strategies. In the Russian revolution the development of the Soviets began at the beginning of the struggle and their influence and power developed to the point that dual power was promoted in both 1905 and 1917. The scope and depth of the influence of the Soviets grew with each phase of the class struggle. However in Europe the importance of the Soviets in the period 1917-23 was because of the influence of the Russian revolution, and the Workers Councils or Soviets had a problem in establishing their legitimacy because of the alternative role of the organs of bourgeois democracy. In other words, the very strategic problem of the development of the class struggle in Europe was caused by the failure of the working class to establish authentic forms of mass struggle and militancy. In Italy the emphasis on workers control seemed to point towards a strategic answer if workers control could be connected to the strategic task of the realisation of political power. With the development of factory committees in the mid 1930’s the western working class seemed to have finally established its own organs of popular mass struggle. However the question of the relation of these organs to Soviets was still not resolved. Had the factory committees replaced the Soviets or was the role of Soviets still important? Trotsky is trying to provide an answer to these questions. But his reconciliation of the role of factory committees and Soviets is unsatisfactory because this is reconciliation in theory and not practice. There was no instance in reality of the factory committees existing alongside Soviets in harmony and with accepted differentiated functions. Trotsky is calling for a division of labour between the factory committees who represent the workers at the economic level and the Soviets that expresses the political representation of the working class. But the reality was that the Soviets were both an economic and political expression of the militancy of the working class and so were a rival to the factory committees. In practice the popularity of the Soviets meant they became the instruments of workers control in the workplace. This also meant that when factory committees developed and became popular in the 1930’s their functions and scope of influence was a rival to the role of the Soviets. This seemed to be acknowledged by Trotsky who accepted that the factory committees were the most strategically important aspect of the class struggle. But he then eclectically reconciles this view with the potentially competing perspective that the Soviets would ultimately represent the working class in the crucial questions of the seizure of power and be the ultimate expression of dual power.

The result of this attempt to reconcile competing perspectives is strategic confusion. Instead of this confusion he should have the confidence to advocate the superior importance of either the Soviets or factory committees. His approach would acquire clarity if he admitted that in some instances the Soviets would still be strategically superior and in other instances it would be the role of the factory committees. This standpoint does not create new forms of confusion because the very tempo and dynamics of the class struggle will indicate and establish what will be the most important organs of struggle. Furthermore the more that the influence of the Russian Revolution recedes in political and ideological influence the more likely it is that new and unique organs of struggle will develop in popularity. The point is that both Soviets and factory committees are located in a given historical time and it cannot be assumed that they will have a perpetual influence. Trotsky had recognised the importance of a mass organ of struggle that had developed in the 1930’s and it could be argued that this organ of struggle was still important in the post-war period. However it could be argued that the present period with its specific challenges poses the task of renewing an understanding of what will be the most appropriate organs of mass struggle. Dogmatically calling for the formation of Soviets or factory committees will not resolve this issue. Nor is the strategic tension in Trotsky’s approach satisfactory. Indeed it could be argued that what was primarily called for in the 1930’s when the transitional Programme was written was the formation of action committees in order to oppose the threat of fascist counterrevolution. It is the character of the tasks of the working class that should define how the question of appropriate organisation should be resolved. In this context Trotsky was calling for the formation of factory committees and Soviets in a period when the major task was opposing the threat of fascism. Hence the norms of struggle of an idealised proletarian revolution were not adequate guides to action in a period when defensive tasks were a priority. Instead it could be argued that the post-war period raised the importance of the role of the factory committees and workers control in a more appropriate sense.

The post-war boom enabled the formation of strong trade unions but they were limited by bureaucratic and rightwing leaderships. In this context economic strikes could be successful and the prospect was raised of the advance to a higher level of struggle because of the militancy of the unions. The situation called for the transformation of the unions into factory committees that could strive for workers control. However the general inability for this prospect to be realised was not because of the unrealistic character of this strategy, the situation was favourable to the advancement to the prospect for the transformation of the unions. Instead the problem was that the union members ultimately had illusions that the unions as they existed could realise the interests of the working class and the marginalised influence of Marxism that could not create sufficient support for the conception of the transformation of the Unions into factory committees. Consequently it could be argued that the primary problem was the level of the class consciousness of the majority of the workers combined with the lack of interaction between party and class. Hence even in favourable situations for the development of the class struggle the relation between party and class was shown to be important. It could be argued credibly that the failure to advance the interests of the working class in the class struggle was because of the inability of Marxism to influence the mass movement. What does Trotsky elaborate about the relation of party and class in the Transitional Programme?

He argues that the Fourth International is in the tradition of Bolshevism, it is against opportunism of a Social Democratic and Stalinist character and rejects all attempts to dilute the revolutionary character of Marxism. This principled approach means trying to tell the truth of the working class and to develop a programme that can be a guide to action in the class struggle: “To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as big ones; to base one’s program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour arrives – these are the rules of the Fourth International. It has to be shown that it could swim against the stream. The approaching historical wave will raise it on its crest.”(19) The primary problem with this comment is that the emphasis on historical confidence in the role of the Fourth International and the working class replaces the importance of truth and trying to understand reality in the most effective and explanatory manner. This point can be outlined in terms of the problems caused by the success of fascism and the related complexity of trying to advance the aim of proletarian revolution in these conditions of the progress of barbarism. The role of Social Democracy and Stalinism also creates additional difficulties for the advance of revolution and in comparison to the size of these mass organisations the Fourth International is tiny and marginalised. However despite what can be defined as an unfavourable political situation Trotsky can only describe the future in terms of success. It would be far more accurate and astute to describe the future in terms of being open-ended and related to the alternatives of socialism or barbarism, but Trotsky does not utilise this more profound approach towards the understanding of history. Instead he utilises the fact that the Fourth International as the most principled organisation of the working class as the criteria of success, and so he equates moral principles with the prospect of victory in the class struggle. But the very victory of fascism throughout Europe is an indication that events do not conform to morality, and instead what has proved decisive is the effectiveness of strategy. In this context fascism has proved superior in the ability to translate a world view into a formula for political victory because of its utilisation of the reactionary themes of nation and race against the standpoint of internationalism and class interest. Only the tiny Fourth International is able to adhere to the principles of Marxism in the context of the pressures of the success of reaction, both Fascist and Stalinist.

Trotsky does outline the importance of the relation of truth to the class struggle. The suggestion is that the closer a world view is to the truth the greater is the prospect to advance the class struggle of the working class against capitalism. However Trotsky has undermined this understanding because he glosses over the significance of important truths such as the problem of the victory of reaction in the class struggle. This means it is difficult to develop a programme that is a guide to action because his approach is based on the interpretation of reality in terms of ideological consolation rather than the recognition of serious truths about the class struggle. Hence he does not acknowledge that the working class is demoralised by the advance of fascism and so he does not accept that the primary task is to develop a programme of action that can undermine the further success of fascism. Instead he consoles himself that his idealised version of the development of proletarian revolution will attract the support of millions and so resolve the problem of fascist counterrevolution. In other words his historical confidence is an over-compensation for an inability to address the actual and most important problems of the class struggle in 1938. This means he does not attain historical truth in his programme and instead it represents an idealist wish fulfilment of what he would like to be the situation in the class struggle, namely a process of advance on the basis of increasing support for transitional demands. Furthermore the limitations in his theoretical approach mean that he cannot address the issues about how to develop class consciousness in the given situation of the advance of reaction. He cannot articulate that the most important aspect of the development of class consciousness would be the promotion of the ability of the working class to undermine the further progress of fascism. Instead he considers that this emphasis would represent an accommodation to the concerns of the Popular Front. This effective denial of the importance of fascism only allows the Popular Front to monopolise the concerns of the working class about Fascism. In contrast the Fourth International and its programme seem essentially indifferent to the major concerns of the working class.

Thus it is not surprising that the Transitional Programme has no detailed elaboration of the importance of the united front for the struggle against fascism and as the basis to develop popular support for making advances in the class struggle. Instead Trotsky has sections on the importance of opposition to sectarianism and the perspective of the workers and farmers government. The section on sectarianism mentions the importance of the difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism but it does not elaborate this point in strategic and tactical terms. It also mentions the importance of work in the trade unions on the basis of the struggle for transitional demands, and for establishing connections with the other mass organisations of the working class, but this point is made in terms of a moral protest against the limitations of sectarianism. The emphasis on the contrast between sectarianism and principled Marxist politics is in order to indicate the limitations of the former and not to make strategic lessons for the present. Primarily no mention is made of the strategic necessity of united action against fascism, and instead the strategic mistakes of the sectarians are their rejection of the relation between transitional demands and the class struggle: “At their base lies a refusal to struggle for partial and transitional demands, i.e., for the elementary interests and needs of the working masses as they are today. Preparing for the revolution means to the sectarians, convincing themselves of the superiority of socialism.”(21) This means Trotsky commits a sectarian error, the glossing over of the importance of the struggle against fascism in order to prioritise the strategy of the realisation of transitional demands. He seems unable to acknowledge that the very ability to mobilise for the implementation of transitional demands is dependent on the prospect of success in the struggle against fascism. Transitional demands are not a priority of the moment, but instead this struggle belongs in the future. In other words the struggle to realise transitional demands requires a level of class consciousness that can only be brought about by the initial success of mass opposition to fascism. The point is that only the stabilisation of bourgeois democracy can create the balance of class forces that enables the struggle for transitional demands to occur. The working class will have immense difficulty striving to realise transitional demands if the unions have been smashed as independent organisations of the working class by the victory of fascism.

In other words, there are two major types of sectarianism. Firstly, the type identified by Trotsky because of its refusal to work with and within mass organisations of the working class and which contrast principles to the importance of practical work. Secondly, the flaws in Trotsky’s conception of class struggle – the leaping over the stage of anti-fascist work in favour of the striving for the transitional programme – result in an indifference to the immediate concerns of the working class. The result is the contrast between an idealised conception of revolution and the indifference to the actual practical tasks posed by the class struggle as it is and not how we would like it to be. It is possible to ideologically obscure this contradiction by developing a false view of the class struggle as conforming to our strategic concerns and so not developing a strategy in accordance with the concerns of the working class. The result of this ideological interpretation is isolation from the working class which is blamed on Stalinism and Social Democracy rather than the strategic limitations of our programme. Ultimately this problem can only be rectified when the programme and strategy starts to correspond to the actual development of the class struggle. This happened in the post-war period and led to the upsurge of support for Trotskyism.

It could be argued that whatever limitations there were in the strategy of the Fourth International a principled perspective was still upheld in terms of the conception of an orientation towards the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a workers state. The section of the Transitional Programme on the workers and farmers government rejects any prior democratic stage that would represent an avoidance of the struggle to realise the overthrow of the political power of capitalism. However the programme also maintains that the approach of the Bolsheviks was principled in calling upon the Mensheviks to utilise their influence within the Soviets to break with the bourgeoisie. In certain circumstances we call upon the mass organisations of the working class to utilise governmental power in order to promote the overthrow of capitalism. At the level of strategic principles Trotsky is utilising the experience of the October revolution in order to guide the practice of the working class and revolutionary party in situations where the overthrow of capitalism has become possible and yet the forces of Stalinism and Social Democracy remain the strongest. Trotsky makes the point that the central political task is to uphold the political independence of party and class and should not make concessions in order to apply left wing pressure on the forces of Social Democracy and Stalinism: “It is impossible in advance to foresee what will be the concrete stages of the revolutionary mobilization of the masses. The sections of the Fourth International should critically orient themselves at each new stage, and advance such slogans as will aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class character of those politics, destroy reformist and pacifist illusions, strengthen the connection of the vanguard with the masses, and prepare the revolutionary conquest of power.”(22)

These comments indicate that Trotsky was not advocating the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism, even if he accepted this possibility. The strategic task was the promotion of the most principled and revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class. This standpoint indicates the superiority of the Fourth International to the reformist limitations of both Social Democracy and Stalinism. The problem with this standpoint is that in the circumstances of 1938 the experiences of 1917 were not going to be repeated. Every impulse to the development of the class struggle in the mid 1930’s led to the threat of fascist reaction. If proletarian revolution was to be successful it would have to overcome the threat of fascism. In this context the issue was not support for illusions in a democratic stage prior to proletarian revolution but the advance of the class struggle could mean the continuation of bourgeois democracy as the alternative to the victory of fascism. This meant that bourgeois democracy was the most favourable terrain for the success of proletarian revolution, or what Gramsci defined as the strategy of position. Trotsky glossed over the importance of bourgeois democracy in terms of emphasising the strategic lessons of 1917. In contrast the Stalinists conceived of bourgeois democracy as the self-limitation of the class struggle. Thus it could be argued that Trotsky came to gloss over the importance of bourgeois democracy as an over-reaction to the opportunism of the Social Democrats and Stalinists. He was unable in the Transitional Programme to make any strategic conclusions about the proletarian revolution that went beyond the situation in 1917. This meant the experiences of the united front and the Action Programme for France were not incorporated.

In order to make his strategy of proletarian revolution more than a repetition of 1917 Trotsky had to absorb the importance of the struggle against fascism. The defeat of fascism was integral to the victory of proletarian revolution. Only in this context was it possible to make convincing strategic critiques of the unprincipled character of a democratic stage and the formula of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The point was that cross-class unity was not an alternative to the prospect of fascism because capitalism had become unstable and important sections of the national bourgeoisie were prepared to accept the possibility of fascism as the alternative to proletarian revolution. Hence popular frontism could only become attractive to the national bourgeoisie if it was based on the suppression of the prospect of proletarian revolution. This is why Stalinism acted like fascism to repress any potential for proletarian revolution in the situation of the crisis of capitalism and the rise of the forces of reaction. But the strategic alternative to the domination of popular frontism or fascism was not the idealised conception of proletarian revolution articulated by Trotsky. This was because this standpoint tried to ignore the importance of opposing fascism or the role of the popular front. In other words this abstract conception could not challenge the ideological domination of Popular Frontism, and instead what was presented was a timeless approach that glossed over the prevailing contradictions in the class struggle.

What should have been the starting point of Trotsky? Instead of justifying the most optimistic perspective of proletarian revolution he should have started with recognition of the importance of the retreats in the class struggle and the corresponding regression in class consciousness. This meant acknowledging that the very limitations of Popular Frontism had led sections of the working class to support Fascism and a related understanding that Popular Frontism could not go onto the offensive against fascism and instead was based primarily on the perspective of conciliation of the national bourgeoisie. Hence the working class did not have a perspective of action for organising against Fascism and for ending the period of retreats and defeats. Trotsky does call for the formation of armed workers militia: “Only armed workers detachments who feel the strength of the toilers behind them, can successfully prevail against the fascist bands.”(23) But the problem with this comment is that if refers to the hypothetical events of the development of the idealised proletarian revolution based on the culmination of a process of occupation, and so does not relate to the actual development of fascist counterrevolution. Hence his analysis is based on how fascists might react to the development of the idealised revolution and not based on how the working class should have reacted in Germany in relation to the rise of fascism. But we can utilise his comments to the question of the strategy of opposition to fascism. The generation of armed workers militia in Germany would have promoted the sense of the possibility of anti-fascist action and the prospect of going from the defensive to the offensive. Furthermore in the process of outlining what is necessary in the idealised process of proletarian revolution, Trotsky actually elaborates what would have been vital in order to defeat fascist counterrevolution as it actually occurred: “Only with the help of such systematic, persistent, indefatigable, courageous, agitational and organizational work, always on the basis of the experience of the masses themselves, is it possible to root out from their consciousness the traditions of submissiveness and passivity, to train detachments of heroic fighters capable of setting an example to all toilers; to inflict a series of tactical defeats upon the armed thugs of counterrevolution; to raise the self-confidence of the exploited and oppressed; to compromise fascism in the eyes of the petty bourgeoisie and pave the way for the conquest of power by the proletariat.”(24)

 Hence in trying to elaborate the principles of how to defeat the forces of reaction in the idealised revolution Trotsky is continually drawn to making lessons from the class struggle as it has developed and as it is developing in the present. He recognises that the central weakness of the role of the working class organisations in the past was the problem of passivity and the failure to confront the armed power of fascism. This problem was part of the inability to construct the united front to oppose fascist counterrevolution. Hence the creation of armed workers militia is vital if the united front is to be a reality and not a formality. In this context the central problem with the ideology of the Popular Front is that it abdicates having any active role in opposing fascism and instead leaves this task to the forces of the state apparatus. In Spain Stalinism has actually utilised its influence within the state in order to repress the development of a revolutionary and working class response to the threat of Fascism. Trotsky is arguing that we cannot rely on the bourgeois state in order to defeat fascism and instead the working class must organise its own armed response, and this development will be a reflection of the generation of political unity. However these points are not elaborated in the Transitional Programme because of the emphasis on a hypothetical class struggle and the location of the importance of opposing reaction within this idealised perspective. The point is not that physical repression of occupations and strikes has not occurred in reality, but these aspects are still secondary when compared to the importance of opposing the threat of fascist counterrevolution. The diversion of Trotsky’s attention from what is most important in the class struggle means that his development of a strategy to oppose fascism is only fragmentary and rudimentary in the Transitional Programme.

Consequently Trotsky does not outline in systematic terms the limitations of the Popular Frontist opposition to fascism. He does not outline in a satisfactory manner that Stalinism actually prioritises its alliance with the national bourgeoisie as being more important than the successful crushing of fascism. Thus the Popular Front is a very unreliable method for opposing fascism, and so what is required is the strategic alternative of the united front. In the section on the role of leadership the Programme is aware of these points in an un-theorised form: “Under the banner of the October revolution, the conciliatory politics practiced by the People’s Front dooms the working class to impotence and clears the road for fascism.”(25) Trotsky’s own analysis seems to suggest that an alternative strategy is required that is more effective in opposing fascism. Instead in a crude manner he argues that: “Nothing short of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie can open a road out.”(26) The problem is that because of his dogmatism and idealism he considers that the major divide is between those that advocate the old minimum programme of reform in contrast to a revolutionary programme of transitional demands. This analysis may have some truth but the problem is that it does not relate to the central concern of the moment which is how to oppose the threat of fascism. The Peoples Front has acquired popularity because it promises that it can tackle the problem of fascism, but the result is an acute crisis within the working class because of the actual inability of the Peoples Front to realise its promises. Hence the working class are receptive to what would be a better strategy for the struggle against fascism. They would be prepared to support the Fourth International if it was able to offer a better and more principled strategy for the struggle against fascism. Instead of offering this superior strategy Trotsky calls for the overthrow of capitalism as the alternative to reformism. But this is not the central issue in 1938. Politics is not primarily based around the typical issues of the class struggle because of the very importance of fascism. To call for proletarian revolution is to ignore what have become the most significant aspects of the class struggle because this cannot develop in typical terms as long as the prospect is being generated of fascist counterrevolution. Trotsky the classic opponent of fascism in 1933 is trying to ignore the importance of this issue in 1938. Hence his programme is one of ideological consolation rather than historical truth.

The tragedy is that it is not beyond the Fourth International in 1938 to develop a realistic and principled programme to guide the struggle against fascism. This programme would be potentially superior to the limitations of the Popular Front. Instead Trotsky argues that the central questions of the class struggle are those of reform, revolution and the struggle to make transitional demands popular. He does not realise that only the defeat of fascism will make his strategy applicable. The point is not that he has written an incorrect programme but rather that he has written an irrelevant programme for his day. Trotsky asks the question, is it right to proclaim the formation of the Fourth International. He answers in the affirmation because of the opportunism of Social Democracy and Stalinism and the necessity of a revolutionary alternative: He comments: “The Fourth International, even today, is deservedly hated by the Stalinists, Social Democrats, bourgeois liberals and fascists. There is not and there cannot be a place for it in any of the People’s Fronts. It uncompromisingly gives battle to all political groupings tied to the apron strings of the bourgeoisie. Its task is the abolition of capitalism’s domination. Its aim – socialism. Its method – the proletarian revolution.”(27) This comment could be held to be generally principled but it is ultimately inadequate rhetoric in favour of revolution and against reformism because it does not define the concrete tasks and aims of the present. These words do not describe how to go from A to B, or how to accomplish the most important tasks of the given moment. In principle we are in favour of socialism and consider that proletarian revolution is the method for its realisation, but this is a question for the future. What is urgent in the present is the task of opposing fascism, and therefore it is moralism to argue that the Fourth International should not consider becoming part of the Peoples Front because of its opportunism. If necessary, and if possible, the Fourth International should have considered becoming part of Popular Fronts in order to argue for a more principled and consistent strategy for opposing fascism. This is not a rejection of its revolutionary principles and instead is a tactical expression of the attempt to accomplish tasks in the present. Only the defeat of fascism will make the revolutionary struggle for socialism both credible and possible.

The various limitations in the Transitional Programme threatened to make it a propaganda document that had little relevance for the present of 1938. It was able to articulate its principles such as revolution and socialism, but it could not effectively establish how these principles could be realised. The emphasis on transitional demands was a substitute for the task of firstly elaborating a strategy for the defeat of fascism in the period before war and during war. Only after the war when the economic and political conditions of the class struggle became normalised with the stabilisation of bourgeois democracy in the West could the transitional programme become the programme for the cold war period. The emphasis on workers control represented the basis for a principled perspective for workers who were members of increasingly militant unions. Transformation of the Unions is vital for the prospect of workers control. The effective change of the unions into factory committees will mean that the organisations of the working class will no longer be based on defensive accommodation to the interests of management and capital. Instead the workers in what are effectively new organisations will be able to agitate to obtain the plans for the industry and to develop their own attitudes and power of veto concerning plans for restructuring and rationalisation. However workers control would not be sufficient if it was merely the power to reject the plans of management. Instead the workers through the role of the factory committees should develop their own plans for the organisation of production. To be successful this process has to be generalised and become a plan for nationwide organisation of production: “The working out of even the most elementary economic plan - from the point of view of the exploited, not the exploiters – is impossible without workers control, that is without the eyes of the workers penetrating all the open and concealed mechanisms of capitalist economy….Thus workers control becomes a school for the planned economy. On the basis of the experience of control, the proletariat will prepare itself for the direct management of nationalized economy when the hour for the eventuality arises.”(28)

It is important to recognise that the perspective of proletarian revolution has been radically transformed by this approach emphasising the strategic importance of workers control. The emphasis is on the role of the economic organisation of the working class as the pre-requisite for the prospect of developing political power. The increased ability of the workers to go from the rejection of the aims of management to the development of their own capacity to organise and plan production is an expression of the promotion of class consciousness and the reflection of the maturing of the political conditions for the revolutionary transformation of society. The role of the party is relatively insignificant in this process and is instead an articulator of the aspiration for workers control. What is primary and dynamic in this process is the development of the ability of the working class to advance workers control. Hence the implied suggestion is that without progress being made in the development of workers control the political conditions for the revolutionary transformation of society will not mature. In this context the role of the revolutionary party is to advocate transitional demands that focus on workers control but what is crucial is the extent to which the working class itself is receptive to supporting these demands. A lack of support for workers control would suggest not that the working class was under the domination of bourgeois ideology but rather that the organisational and structural conditions within the relations of production did not yet favour the advance of the autonomy of the producers. Hence the most important ideological struggle is between the working class and the trade unions who are reluctant to support workers control and instead prefer to accommodate the aims of management for capital accumulation. The process of politics becomes internalised to what is happening in the factory and workplace. This means the more control the workers develop over the conditions of work the more the class struggle is intensifying and the greater is the prospect for the revolutionary transformation of society.

It could be argued that Trotsky’s approach is a radical departure from the standpoint of Lenin’s ‘What Is to Be Done’. Lenin effectively argued that an emphasis on the economic struggle would not enable the working class to break with the limitations of bourgeois ideology and trade union politics. But Trotsky is arguing that the very development of the economic struggle is the central aspect of the promotion of revolutionary class consciousness. Hence the advance of workers control is a crucial aspect of the maturing of the conditions for the prospect of political power and the revolutionary transformation of society. This is why Trotsky no longer poses the question of the expropriation of the largest industries and banks as the outcome of the role of the working class organised as a state. Instead the possibility of nationalisation is the outcome of the mobilisation of the working class, which has its highest point in the successful realisation of workers control. Thus workers control is the prelude to both nationalisation and the revolutionary transformation of society: (This point has also been made in the above quotation) “Only a general revolutionary upsurge of the proletariat can place the complete expropriation of the bourgeoisie on the order of the day. The task of transitional demands is to solve this problem.”(29)

In the Russian revolution workers control was a relatively neglected aspect and the emphasis was on the role of the Soviets. But in this revised perspective the social importance of the working class in the West has been recognised in terms of this economic approach towards the prospect of revolutionary transformation. The balance of class forces will be defined by the extent to which workers control has made progress, and the related ability of the working class to transform the unions into more militant factory committees that have more ambitious aims. The role of the party is to stimulate this process of struggle through its articulation of transitional demands, but the suggestion is that if the revolution cannot be advanced by the progress of workers control, or the self emancipation of the working class, it will not occur. The conception of a party led revolution is emphatically rejected by Trotsky in this syndicalist conception of social transformation. The working class is definitely considered the agent of revolution and the creator and promoter of its own class consciousness through its own militant actions. This means the role of the party is to advance the process of consciousness through the popularisation of its own demands, but the party can only assist the working class to become the agency of its own revolutionary process. A revolution made by the party would be a contradiction in terms and would be an absurdity because the central aspect of the advance of revolution is defined by the progress made by workers control of production.

It can be argued that the events of the recent period have corresponded to the principles of this perspective. The ability of capital to go onto the offensive in the 1980s was because of the defeat of militant union action and the inability of workers to transform the unions into factory committees that had the aim of realising workers control of production. Capital went onto the offensive in order to end all the gains that the unions had made, but the limitations of the Unions was also caused by their tendency to compromise with the aims of management and to support a defensive strategy rather than an offensive strategy of workers control. The problem was that working class consciousness did not succeed in consistently upholding the principle of workers control of production.(30)Furthermore, historical experience has indicated that the significance of globalisation and the latest forms of capitalist development has undermined the prospects for the advance of economic forms of struggle based on the role of the trade unions. At present we lack political answers to the decline of the trade unions and the apparent period of the ascendency of the trade unions can be located within the period of the post-war boom. For example, Alan Thornett has written a book about his experiences in the Cowley car factory and he cannot provide any suggestions as to how militancy can be revived.(31) It could also be argued that the decline of class consciousness is connected to the present adverse situation of the trade unions. Also, the actual problem is strategic and ideological, the concentration on the issue of the revival of the trade unions has glossed over the possibly more important ideological questions about the regression of working class consciousness such as the demise of the USSR and the increased confidence of the ruling class.

Thus the economic and political developments of the last thirty years have questioned the strategic validity of the perspective outlined in the Transitional Programme concerning an orientation around the issue of workers control. The strong unions that were the basis of this approach no longer generally exist and instead the forces of labour have been on the retreat. However despite this strategic impasse there has also been the development of the crisis of capitalism, and so any serious Marxist would want to construct a programme that incorporated the importance of the present economic and political situation.(This task will be elaborated in more detail in Chapter three) What is of interest at the moment is the question of the relationship between the central perspective outlined by Trotsky in the Transitional Programme and the contemporary situation of the potential struggle against the austerity measures being imposed by the ruling class. It would be a serious error to believe that workers control is no longer appropriate and its significance has been replaced by other questions and perspectives. The changed situation from that of boom to one of crisis does not mean that the working class should adopt a defensive posture that is primarily concerned to uphold the gains of the past. Hence the central issue is not about maintaining public expenditure and the importance of the welfare state. These questions are important but what is crucial is for Marxists to indicate that capitalism as a system of crisis is increasingly unable to met material needs and so should be replaced by a superior historical alternative. In this context workers control is still relevant and valid as both an expression of class struggle to realise this end and as a transitional means to achieve the goal of the alternative of communism.

It could be argued that the working class is no longer able to sustain collective action and has been defeated in the class struggle. However this pessimism glosses over the continued importance of labour for the process of capital accumulation. We would suggest that workers control is an expression of the fact that the future society is not unobtainable and instead represents the logic of the mass movement. But it is a task of Marxism to agitate for this form of class struggle. The defeats of the working class in the recent period have discredited the approach of ambition in the class struggle and so the influence of the posture of defensive accommodation with capital has increased and the aim of workers control seems to be something that was important in the past but is no longer of significance. What the Transitional Programme outlined quite brilliantly was that the working class would only be able to overcome its reduction to an instrument of capital when it could challenge the decisions and plans of management. Until that situation is generated the forces of labour will be alienated and unable to overcome the effects of subordination and domination. Consequently the most difficult aspect of the process of the transformation of labour is the development of the consciousness of the capacity to express the aim of workers control. Without workers control the working class is a class that is collective and yet not dynamic, but with the perspective and activity of workers control the working class becomes a class for itself, or a class that is able to consciously define its destiny and attempt to realise the end of the domination of capital over labour. This is why the emphasis on workers control in the Transitional Programme has enduring quality, and has to be incorporated into any new programme for the contemporary situation.

The approach of this work has argued that a programme should have been elaborated for the struggle against fascism in the 1930’s. This programme would have to be modified for the period of inter-imperialist war. The advent of the cold war system would have created new economic and political conditions that required further revisions of the programme. This period of boom would have enabled an emphasis on the importance of workers control to be developed. However the offensive of capital in the 1980’s would have called for further adjustments to the programme and the articulation of the tasks of labour in a situation of defeats and retreats. Ultimately the programme has also to be modified in order to tackle the issue of the present economic crisis and the necessity of a working class response that can overcome the ideological limitations of the past. The various modifications of the programme relate to what are genuinely changing situations and the fact that the concerns of the past programmes have become increasingly anachronistic. However the aspect of emphasis on workers control would seem to be relevant to most of the changing forms of the class struggle. Hence it would seem important to incorporate the question of workers control within the changing context of the elaboration of new forms of the programme for changing economic and political conditions.

The Transitional Programme also tackled the issues of Stalinism and revolution in the less advanced countries. To what extent was the views expressed on these questions able to promote a principled orientation within the Fourth International? Trotsky outlined in powerful terms the historical limitations of the Soviet bureaucracy and the influence of impulses that promoted the prospect of the restoration of capitalism. His standpoint was astute in the long-term in that he was able to recognise the contradictory character of the USSR and that the generation of bureaucratic privilege would be at the expense of the nationalised character of the Soviet economy. The very character of the bureaucracy was facilitating the prospect of the restoration of capitalism. Hence his perspective was ultimately vindicated: “The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back into capitalism, or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way for socialism.”(32)

But what was an astute long-term prognosis was unable to establish the importance of other possibilities in the short-term. For example in his various writings he could only envisage that the involvement of the USSR in the inter-imperialist war would result in the victory of capitalist counterrevolution. However in the Transitional Programme he provides no cogent guidance concerning the prospects of the USSR in war on the section on Stalinism. But the assumption is that the corrupt bureaucracy cannot survive war and the outcome will be either the restoration of capitalism, the victory of fascism, or the success of political revolution. What is not anticipated is the prospect of the expansion of Stalinism and the promotion of the bureaucratic system throughout Eastern Europe. In the section of the programme on the Workers and Farmers Government Trotsky does allow for the possibility of the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism, but this is not connected to the analysis of Stalinism. Hence the impression is definitely created that the contradictions of Stalinism cannot generate a system that is powerful enough to defeat imperialist invasion and fascist counterrevolution. The crucial question that Trotsky does not address in the programme is what does the expansion of the USSR mean in terms of social and historical significance?

In other words the programme provides no real guidance for the Fourth International concerning the character of Stalinism in the post-war period because it does not allow for the prospect of its continuation beyond the period of the Second World War. However the Fourth International in an ad hoc manner combine the programmatic conception of the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism with the social characterisation of the USSR as a degenerated workers state in order to argue that ultimately (by 1949) deformed workers states had been produced in Eastern Europe. They do not discuss seriously whether the exploitation of Eastern Europe by the USSR is part of the consolidation of the domination of a new ruling class. Hence the fact that the implicit perspectives of the Transitional Programme are falsified by the outcome of the Second World War does not result in the Fourth International challenging any of the analysis of the Programme. Dogma is defining their political positions. The result is the view that the counterrevolutionary overthrow of capitalism brings about the formation of a type of workers state, and so the conception of a distorted proletarian revolution is justified. This type of opportunism occurs because the Fourth International did not recognise the importance of elaborating new views about Stalinism because of the importance of its ability to survive imperialist war. Importantly it is necessary to recognise the problems with the dilution of the view that proletarian revolution cannot be bureaucratic. What was merely a tentative hypothesis in the Transitional Programme is made into a historical law of social formation, and the creation of deformed workers states is outlined as being part of the process of transition from capitalism to socialism. This opportunism could have been avoided if it was admitted that Trotsky’s views on the USSR had to be modified in order to reaffirm in a principled manner what is meant by proletarian revolution and how it differs from all other forms of social transformation. In this context it would be possible to differentiate the conception of the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism from the revolutionary role of the working class via the progressive imperatives of the nationalised economy.

The section on the oppressed nations calls for the perspective of permanent revolution. This represents the combination of democratic demands and transitional demands on the basis of proletarian leadership of the national liberation struggle: “In like manner are defined the political strivings of the proletariat of the backward countries: the struggle for the most elementary achievements of national independence and bourgeois democracy is combined with the socialist struggle against world imperialism.”(33) This approach was confirmed in the negative manner that the failure to develop proletarian leadership of the national liberation struggle meant that anti-imperialism could not realise genuine social emancipation. Formal independence was combined with the continuing economic domination of monopoly capital. The perspective of anti-imperialism has been compromised by the fact that it often becomes the basis of accommodation of the national bourgeoisie with the forces of the powerful transnational corporations. This has meant the continuation of capitalism in new forms and the generation of poverty and inequality.

However what is not sufficiently emphasised in the Programme is that the strategy of permanent revolution can only succeed if its result in the promotion of international revolution. Consequently it could be conceived that permanent revolution is a national strategy and this impression is misleading because Trotsky’s detailed formulations related the role of the national to the international. The point is that the class compromise approach of Stalinism is connected to its rejection of the relation of national liberation to international proletarian revolution, which is why any Stalinist led national liberation struggle cannot be genuinely an expression of permanent revolution. This omission on Trotsky’s part is not deliberate because he is aware that the process of permanent revolution requires international development for its completion and consolidation. But this omission could have encouraged adherents within the Fourth International to dilute the conception of permanent revolution and to reduce it to anti-imperialism and related national approaches. Contrary to this process of opportunist dilution Trotsky understood in other works that because only the proletariat is the genuine international class the leadership of the proletariat in the national liberation struggle will mean the development of international dimensions within the revolutionary process. But in the Transitional Programme selective reading of the text could suggest that permanent revolution is national and the role of the international is defined by opposition to world imperialism.

It has also been argued that Trotsky’s approach can be criticised for its failure to recognise the importance of the peasantry. However in the Transitional Programme he explicitly calls for the formation of the workers and small farmer’s alliance, and outlines the details of this relationship. He makes important lessons from the experience of the Soviet Union and calls for a voluntary process of collectivisation: “The programme for the nationalization of land and collectivization of agriculture should be so drawn that from its very basis it should exclude the possibility of expropriation of the small farmers and their compulsory collectivization….In order to rehabilitate the programme of socialism in the eyes of the farmer, it is necessary to expose mercilessly the Stalinist methods of collectivization, which are dictated not by the interests of the farmers or workers but by the interests of the bureaucracy.”(34) In other words Trotsky’s commitment to the worker-peasant alliance could and should have been the basis of the theoretical concern of the Fourth International with its details and analysis of the class structure of the countryside. There was no reason why the works of Bukharin on this question could not have facilitated creativity and strategic enrichment. The point is that Trotsky was outlining a principle of strategy and revolution. It is the task of others to ensure that this strategic concern is expressed in serious work. However it could be argued that it has not been Trotskyists who have elaborated in the greatest detail the importance of the peasantry for the revolutionary process.

The development of globalisation has created the most important challenge for the continuing validity of the strategy of permanent revolution. This is because the question of what is meant by an oppressed nation and the perspective of national liberation has been transformed by globalisation. It is some of the former oppressed nations that have been the most dynamic expression of capitalist development and often urbanised societies have been created because of the changes in the international division of labour. Hence the question is what does this mean for the perspective of permanent revolution, and should this perspective be replaced by another? Only serious theoretical work will provide the answer to these questions. What we know is that there has been a crisis of traditional anti-imperialism and the increasing failure of autarkic state capitalist regimes. The peasantry is declining in size and importance but the significance of the worker-peasant alliance still seems politically necessary. Whatever conclusions we make it is important that modifications to the programme on the question of strategy for the third world be developed in order to explain the changes that have occurred. The alternative is to justify dogma that can ultimately defend opportunism. Hence we should not consider that dogma is an alternative to opportunism, and instead we should attempt to connect change within a contemporary conception of revolution.

In conclusion we can argue that the Transitional Programme should have been elaborated not once but a number of times. Indeed the central aspect of the Transitional Programme only became relevant in the post-war period and that the initial programme should have been the elaboration of a programme of opposition to fascism. The Second World War, the Cold war and globalisation has shown the necessity of programmatic elaboration. The next chapter will attempt to analyse a more recent attempt to construct a Trotskyist programme for the contemporary period.

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