CHALLENGES FOR TROTSKYISM PART THREE

DOES ERNEST MANDEL DEFEND THE REVOLUTIONARY HERITAGE OF TROTSKY?

In his article: 'Reasons for Founding the Fourth International', Mandel does not carry out a defence of the leadership of this organisation since the time of Trotsky. Instead his major emphasis is on the importance of the development of the FI. He outlines how capitalism has been a decaying economic system since 1914, and this situation has led to crisis and war. This situation can only be resolved by proletarian revolution on the basis of the highest levels of class consciousness, and this revolutionary perspective was confirmed with the realisation of the Soviet regime in Russia. But this revolutionary regime regressed because of unfavourable material conditions and led to the reactionary and bureaucratic regime of Stalinism. Hence it became necessary to construct revolutionary parties to oppose the opportunism of Social Democracy and Stalinism. The International development of the productive forces has meant that socialism in one country is not possible, and instead the only principled perspective is one of international revolution. The result is the necessity to develop a new principled international revolutionary party: “Without the international organisation of the proletariat, the co-ordination and indeed the understanding of the international process of class struggle, the revolution will be more difficult, the defeats more heavy, the victories more costly and more immediately put into question.”(1) Hence in a precise manner he has outlined the major reasons for international organisation, which is that capitalism is a world system and so it requires a party that transcends national boundaries in order to promote the aim of world socialist revolution if the present economic system is to be overcome.

This point is made convincingly since it can be argued that the major reason that the forces of reformism and Stalinism have acted to defend capitalism is because they have accommodated to a conception of national interests which is defined by the interests of the given capitalist class. However, it can also be argued that the Fourth International has underestimated the importance of nationalism and its influence within the working class and has never developed in a systematic manner the reasons why it is internationalist beyond the rudimentary adherence to the conception of international revolution. Furthermore, it has been unable to recognise that political differences within its own ranks have often been because of issues of national prestige. For example the view that America was the centre of world revolution tended to justify the national bias of the American SWP. Indeed it could be argued that the history of the various fragmented forces of the FI has been expressed in terms of national tensions and competition to be the major political force. Hence it could be suggested that a genuine international organisation based on democratic principles has not been created. Instead we have a collection of groups organised around particular national centres. The effect of this national organisational fragmentation must have had an undermining effect on the ability to construct genuine international perspectives.

It is also necessary to recognise that only a in a few situations has the forces of the FI been able to construct genuine mass parties. The reasons for this situation have never been fully analysed. Part of the reason is that Trotskyist groups have never been based on authentic expressions of inner party democracy, and so any differences concerning issues of policy have tended to result in splits and the formation of new groups. These new organisations also have the tendency to split and so become new miniature sects. This situation is often because of the role of charismatic leaders who have not tolerated internal dissent. Hence the dissenters have only been able to freely express their opinions by setting up new organisations. In this context the prospect of unifying the diverse forces of Trotskyism has been rare, and it could be argued that the major unification which did occur in the early 1960's between the organisation led by Mandel and the US SWP was of an opportunist character. Gradually over a period of time, the various organisations have only been able to perpetuate themselves by adopting policies that artificially promote their own existence, and the central issue of how to establish organisational and political relations with the working class is no longer addressed. For example, the British SWP and Socialist Party adopted a position of withdrawal from the European Union, and so seemed indifferent to the national chauvinism that this standpoint represented within the working class. Hence in an unintentional manner, these organisations have adopted to the popular nationalism that is prevalent within sections of the working class. This approach makes a mockery of the professed internationalism of these groups. However, such a development is logical because it reflects the domination of their respective international organisations by the SWP and SP. The national fragmentation of the supposed forces of a potential international party was bound at a certain point to be reflected in the compromise of the principles of internationalism. Hence it is questionable whether any organisation, except the major United Secretariat can be considered to be truly international. However, this does not mean that the USFI is principled because it is also compromised by its own history of adaptation to reformism and Stalinism. Hence it could be suggested that the attempt to create a genuine world party of socialism has proved to be an historic failure.

However does the above analysis mean that we should reject the title of the Fourth International, as Workers Power (Red Flag) argue. They contend that the opportunist degeneration of all tendencies of the Fourth International occurred between 1948 and 1951, and so it is necessary to claim the only principled option is to form a new Fifth International. However this view is flawed because it can be argued that the original Fourth International was formed on a principled basis. Thus the most consistent course of action would be to promote the development of an international organisation that continued and developed its pioneering theoretical and political work. In this manner we would be calling for the reconstruction, or refounding of the Fourth International, rather than suggesting that the reasons for the formation of the Fourth International had become invalid, which is implied by the demand for a new Fifth International. The Fourth International was formed in 1938 because the Third International had definitively betrayed the working class. This situation has not been repeated generally since 1938. Instead the forces of the Fourth International have had a constant period of crisis, and the basis to resolve this crisis is to try and re-create the FI on the basis of a new revolutionary programme, which is based on the historical experience of the working class since 1938.

Why do we need a new programme? The answer to this question is that the situation has profoundly changed since 1938. The character of inter-imperialist rivalry has been transformed by the development of globalisation under the domination of American capitalism. In this context inter-imperialist rivalry has become secondary and is not likely to result in new wars. Instead war is caused by the tensions of the relations between the imperialist powers and the subordinated and neo-colonial countries. Furthermore, the social structures of the major capitalist countries has profoundly altered, with increasing importance for the role of white collar strata, and the numerical size of the forces of traditional labour has often been decreased. Since the early 1980's there has been an offensive of capital against labour in order to resolve the problems of the economic system at the expense of the working class. This situation has posed important issues for the class struggle, and raised questions about the ability of the working class to defend its interests. The demise of Stalinism has also created a new situation and the issue of how to uphold the interests of the working class in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has become acute. Poverty in the Third World, in contrasting terms, raises issues about the possibility of proletarian revolution in newly industrialising countries. Overall the apparent renewed strength of capital on a world scale creates difficulties concerning the perspective of international revolution. In addition we have issues of ecology, the role of new social movements, and new questions about the validity of the revolutionary party. How to oppose war in complex situations is also a challenge. Thus we basically need a programme that is able to summarise the significance of the situation since 1938. In contrast to this theoretical challenge, the contending forces of the supposed FI have been content to suggest that it is instead satisfactory to continue to advocate an essentially unchanged Transitional Programme. At most we need to re-elaborate this programme, as Workers Power did in 1989. This standpoint is inadequate for the reasons given.

The starting point of Mandel is that a defence of the Transitional Programme is adequate and sufficient. However, he accepts the necessity to reply to criticism of this work. He admits that the perspectives of Trotsky concerning proletarian revolution in the aftermath of world war, and the weakening of Stalinism, did not occur. The result of this development was crisis within the Fourth International. He concludes that: “Only those organisations with a program and activities corresponding to the historical needs of the proletariat, as expressed in many struggles for decades if not generations are built on firm foundations.”(2) The problem with this formulation is that it implies that there is a definitive programme, presumably the Transitional programme, which in an unchanging manner represents the historical interests of the working class. This assumption has proved to be dogmatic because the very changes within capitalism and the world situation have constantly indicated the necessity of programmatic elaboration. The point is that it is the attempt to relate principles to an understanding of empirical reality which is the most reliable indicator that a Marxist party can adapt to new circumstances in a non-dogmatic manner. The problem with the post-war Fourth International was that it tried to understand the new situation in terms of political perspectives that had been developed in the 1930's. This means that the works of Trotsky could no longer be an immaculate guide for understanding these new events. Instead the Fourth International should have developed a theoretical approach that could recognise that capitalism was being stabilised in world terms, and that the cold war was an expression of the most important aspect of international relations. What it was not possible to recognise in the 1930's, when the Transitional Programme was written, was that capitalism could overcome its aspect of decay and decline, which had promoted proletarian opposition to the system, in terms of the emergence of the hegemony of the USA. None of the tendencies of the Fourth International, including the Workers Party and CLR James's group, fully appreciated this development. The result of this situation was that there was a defence of dogmatism as against an understanding of empirical reality that could have provided the basis to re-orient the forces of Trotskyism in this new situation of the ascendency of the USA and its ability to stabilise world capitalism.

Mandel admits that the Fourth International was founded on the perspective that since 1914 capitalism had entered into decline. This situation led to crisis, wars, depressions and unrest in international terms. He concludes: “The periodically explosive nature of the contradictions between the productive forces and the capitalist relations of production is also expressed through periodic rebellions of the human force, i.e., outbreaks of working class struggles which paralyse the functioning of the capitalist system and objectively put socialist revolution on the agenda. These types of struggles are much more than the normal attempts of workers to fight for their immediate interests. They represent an instinctive attempt by the proletariat to reorganise society upon a new social basis.”(3) The problem with this perspective is that it applies strictly to the period between 1917 and 1939. The period since then has been one of the imposition of the domination of Stalinism, the stabilisation of capitalism in the West, and the prospect of proletarian upsurges against capitalism has become more exceptional. Since the 1980's we have had the offensive of capital against labour in order to undermine the gains of the welfare state, and the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe. Hence the most important tasks of the Fourth International have proved to be more complicated than replacing the influence and role of Social Democracy and Stalinism. The tasks of history cannot be reduced to the primary one of resolving the crisis of leadership of the working class. Instead it is necessary to recognise that the forces of capital had proved to be able to uphold their domination of society despite periodic attempts of the working class to challenge this situation. This ability of capital to undermine the significance of labour has been facilitated by the influence of nationalism, reformism and the general acceptance by people that the present system cannot be challenged. There is a general ideological hegemony of the representatives of the present capitalist system. This complex situation has only been tackled by individuals outside of the organisation of Trotskyism.

Mandel does at least begin to tackle some of the issues involved in why it is necessary to understand the ability of capitalism to continue as a social system. Hence he outlines how: “The main objection made against the theoretical analysis justifying the Fourth International – the objective necessity for the world socialist revolution to resolve humanity's crisis – is that it supposedly underestimates the capitalist system's adaptive capacities (and therefore at least of its at least partial capacities for future progress”(4) He contends in reply to this point that capitalism has also been a system of barbaric world wars, and terrible poverty in the Third World, and that society could benefit immensely if science was utilised for the benefit of society in general rather than the interests of private profit. He also outlines how the boom period of the 1940's to 1960's has been replaced by the depression of the present. He argues that even the critics of Trotskyism cannot deny the serious character of the present situation and that it is creating the conditions for challenges to the system. This point has some truth, but it does not tackle the point that it is still very complex to try and undermine and overthrow the capitalist system. The recent development of austerity, and increasing undermining of the material interests of the working class, does not necessarily promote united action to try and overthrow the system. This is because in ideological terms people cannot envisage any alternative to the continuation of capitalism. Consequently, the development of increasing crisis within capitalism in the present situation has not necessarily favoured the opponents of capitalism. This is because class consciousness has not been promoted in a situation of the recent decline of the system. Hence the actual Trotskyist approach, which has been most seriously questioned, is the view that a worsening economic situation will result in mass struggles and opposition to the system. Instead demoralisation and the undermining of class cohesiveness can mean that the development of struggles based on the role of solidarity is difficult to generate.

Mandel rightly contends that the working class is the major social agency for the overthrow of capitalism. He outlines how the role of new social movements does not undermine this perspective, but instead they should become the allies of the proletariat in creating an alliance for bringing about social change. He then asks the crucial question: “Other critics reply that if the proletariat is the only potentially revolutionary subject capable of overthrowing international capitalism then the world socialist revolution becomes a utopian project, since the proletariat has shown itself to be incapable of carrying out any such revolution in any sort of advanced industrial country.”(5) He argues in reply to this point that the working class has historically been able to carry out mass struggles that have result in the possibility of the overthrow of capitalism or socialism. This point seems sufficient in order to explain the role of class struggle between 1945 and 1980. But the offensive of capital against the social gains of labour since 1980, the situation has been characterised by serious defeats that do raise questions about whether the working class still retains sufficient cohesiveness in order to challenge the system. Hence it is not simply sufficient to simply assert that the working class has revolutionary potential. Instead was have to carry out work, as Meszaros does, in order to argue that labour can still oppose the domination of capital.

The problem is that Mandel can only suggest that these complex issues can be solved by a revolutionary party that intervenes in order to promote transitional demands. These act to promote mass struggles and so become the basis to promote the very attempt to realise the political power of the working class. But the problem is not with this method, which still has practical validity, but instead with the fact that the working class is increasingly reluctant to even begin the process of struggle for its interests. This situation has been exacerbated by the role of reactionary trade union bureaucrats. The task is not only about opposing the influence of reformism as Mandel contends, but also of promoting a culture of struggle and resistance; for example, encouraging the public sector workers in the UK to take action in defence of their wage claims without first having to obtain the permission of the trade union leaders. This is because acceptance of the advice of the trade union leaders is undermining the possibility of militant action and instead unrest is expressed without it being realised in practical terms. Hence the role of Marxism is to act in propaganda terms in order to encourage the working class to act in accordance with its own initiative and to resolve grievances. Instead of this task the very activism of Marxist groups means that no effective propaganda in favour of the promotion of militant activity is being carried out within the working class.

The point being made is that Mandel is assuming that the working class in a different historical period will act in a similar manner to its militant role in the 1930's. This assumption cannot be made. Instead we have a different working class in the present, and with its own distinctive traditions. This means the task of developing the influence of Marxism is vital in relation to this present generation. Instead the effective pessimism of the present Marxist groups undermines the ability to realise this task. In contrast, Mandel is right to maintain that: “Given the enormous political experience of the bourgeoisie of the imperialist countries and the economic reserves available to them it seems ruled out that the proletariat can seize power without a level of class consciousness and a leadership that has been prepared years beforehand. So the anti-capitalist component in the activity of the workers movement is vital for the future. If there is no coherent anti-capitalist theory, no systematic anti-capitalist education and no anti-capitalist activity by revolutionary organisations, then no victorious proletarian revolution is possible in the imperialist countries and therefore there will be no solution to humanity's crisis, no future.”(6) This comment indicates that the major problem of the present period is that the ability of the supposed revolutionary organisations to provide effective arguments in favour of the class struggle is very mediocre. The neglect of the major theoretical tasks by the Marxist organisations has led to this situation and the result is that they have little influence within the working class. For example, the ability of the Corbyn led Labour Party to do brilliantly in the recent general election was because of spontaneous aspirations and had nothing to do with the role of Marxist groups. Consequently, the Marxist groups call for a perspective of struggle but are unable to provide convincing reasons as to why this should occur. They do not seem to realise that the task of trying to build a popular revolutionary party will occur over a long historical period of time, and so requires patient and thoughtful propaganda. Instead the very activism of the groups cannot build stable and effective revolutionary parties. This is because these organisations are developed in terms of a culture of low education and neglect of theory, and this means the membership can become quickly demoralised. The result of this situation is that such parties are unable to obtain influence within the working class. Instead people hope that a Corbyn led Labour party will bring about progressive change.

In order to uphold his perspective that the post-war situation at least partially justified Trotsky's view that revolutionary developments had occurred, Mandel has to imply that the developments in China and Cuba expressed the importance of non-Stalinist developments. He argues that a transformation of production relations occurred in China, Yugoslavia and Vietnam, and that whilst they were revolutions of a popular character led by parties of Stalinist origin, they resulted in the effective rejection of the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. He contends: “Clearly with their line of revolutionary overthrow of the ruling classes the Yugoslav, Chinese and Vietnamese CP's did not subordinate the interests of the revolution and the proletariat of their countries to those of the Soviet bureaucracy. It is also clear that neither did they subordinate these interests to those of some privileged Yugoslav, Chinese or Vietnamese bureaucracy that did not exist at that time. Consequently these parties ceased to be Stalinist parties from the moment they decided to take a line of working towards the revolutionary conquest of power at the head of a powerful mass movement.”(7) Also: “Furthermore, they were not only able to seize power because they had broken in theory and practice with Stalinism since they had refused to subordinate the revolutionary struggle to the interests, the injunctions and “theories” of the Kremlin, and they did this years before the seizure of power.”(8)

This view indicates the effective opportunism of the Mandel led Fourth International. The criticism of Mandel's view was that the Communist parties in China, Yugoslavia and Vietnam were subordinated to the Stalinists in the USSR, and carried out a bureaucratic process of the overthrow of capitalism. Hence the workers and peasants were not involved in the overthrow of capitalism, and instead what occurred was a rigidly bureaucratic process of social change. Hence in order to argue that anti-Stalinist revolution had to occur meant that the Mandel led Fourth International had to compromise its conception of what constituted genuine proletarian revolution. Thus we can suggest that it was with this opportunist understanding of the Chinese revolution that definitively established the centrist character of Mandel's politics. His standpoint accepted that what could be a genuine socialist revolution was connected to the rule of bureaucratic practices: “So we can legitimately speak of socialist revolutions bureaucratically manipulated and deformed from the start.”(9) Thus we have justified the conception of a genuine proletarian and yet bureaucratic revolution. Hence Cuba is also considered to be a genuine and healthy workers state despite the admitted lack of socialist democracy and the accepted dependence of this country on the importance of Soviet support. Thus Cuba is considered to have genuine proletarian leadership despite its bureaucratic limitations and reliance on what was the support of the USSR.

In other words, Mandel has undermined a principled understanding of what constitutes a workers state in terms of the importance of the administration of the state and economy by the working class, and as an expression of genuine socialist democracy. Instead he considers that a party-state can be a healthy workers state, or at least some form of progressive bureaucratic social formation. Hence he effectively supports the view that a new class is an expression of the imperatives of socialism. He justifies his standpoint by maintaining that: “It is not serious to assert that in no country of the world can a revolution ever triumph without a revolutionary Marxist leadership.”(10) But he is actually compromising a more important view. He is actually contending that a revolutionary party state can emerge that is able to at least adequately express the historic interests and activity of the working class. In this context he is equating a bureaucratic party state with being the expression and promotion of the interests of the working class. The active participation of the working class in the organisation and administration of their society is not necessarily sufficient in order to generate the possibility of advances towards socialism. He glosses over the opportunism of this standpoint by continuing to contend that mass revolutionary parties are necessary in order to overthrow capitalism.

Mandel attempted to gloss over this acceptance of opportunism by claiming that only the Fourth International is building a world party. He outlines how this aspect is connected to the following observation: “Either the international proletariat remains generally fragmented into national sectors, fighting separate battles and essentially limited, defensive ones, not breaking except in a few countries the framework of the bourgeois state and bourgeois society.”(11) This view is principled, but the problem is that the approach of the Mandel led section of the Fourth International has a compromised and semi-bureaucratic conception of socialism. It effectively upholds the view that an elite party state can be formed which expresses the interests and role of the working class. This standpoint can be considered to be problematical given that the Stalinism it critically supported has either alienated the working class or evolved into a capitalist regime. If the forces of the Mandel led Fourth International are to support more principled politics, it would have to accept that not only that it must uphold an intransigent opposition to reformism but that its understanding of socialism would have to reject any concession to the hegemony of a party state. Only the perspective of the self—emancipation of the working class is a truly principled approach for a genuine Marxist. But increasingly the history of what was the Mandel led Fourth International has been one of increasing accommodation to the forces of reformism. Hence it would seem that in order to create a principled international means rejecting the politics of that organisation.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Ernest Mandel: Reasons for the Fourth International, Chapter two p4

(2) ibid chapter one p2

(3) ibid chapter two p1-2

(4) ibid chapter three page 1

(5) ibid chapter four p4

(6) ibid chapter five p4

(7) ibid chapter seven p2

(8) ibid p2-3

(9) ibid p3

(10) ibid p5

(11) ibid Chapter 10 p5