A CRITIQUE OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE UNITED SECRETARIAT OF THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

This critique is an evaluation of the perspectives documents submitted for the 17th world congress of the USFI. The first document is entitled: 'Capitalist globalization, imperialisms, geopolitical crisis and its implications'(1) It is argued that neo-liberalism or globalisation is a recent phenomenon, and was promoted by the decline of the USSR and the creation of a single world economy. But in an inconsistent manner it is also suggested that globalisation co-exists with inter-imperialist rivalries and the generation of new and important economic powers. This standpoint does not explain what is most important either globalisation or inter-imperialist tensions. Instead in an ambiguous manner both are said to be part of a contradictory whole. This eclectic view ignores the continued hegemony of a world economy dominated by the USA, and which is based on the promotion of globalisation, or the expansion of a world market in terms of trade and the domination of multinational companies whose activities transcend national limitations. In this manner it is necessary to be adamant that the promotion of inter-imperialist rivalry is a secondary aspect when compared to what unites the national forms of capitalism in terms of the requirements of the expansion of world trade. This aspect is based on the fact that an important role of the USA is to maintain the integrity and cohesion of the world economy. It would be an expression of serious regression if this situation was replaced by inter-imperialist rivalries. This is not to suggest that such tensions are not a secondary aspect of the international situation, but basically the various national forms of capitalism still have primary reasons to ensure that the world economy continues to be connected by the role of trade and investment. In comparison to this coherent view the USFI has to decide which is primary: the importance of globalisation or inter-imperialist rivalry.

The document makes the following political comment: “In several countries and regions, the universal violence of neoliberal diktats has led to the decomposition of the social fabric, to acute regime crises, and indeed to popular uprisings, but also to dangerous counterrevolutionary developments.”(2) This comment requires clarification, because if it was over-generalised it could imply that the working class was no longer coherent or powerful enough to be able to challenge the aims of the representatives of capitalism to resolve the crisis at their expense. In other words even if we accept that the imposition of the aims of austerity, a policy to resolve the crisis by undermining the material interests of the working class, has often been successful, this development does not mean that it is not possible to collectively oppose this policy in an effective manner. Hence it is necessary for the authors of the document to clarify what they mean by the 'decomposition of the social fabric'. Taken to its most literal and extreme form this situation could imply that the working class was no longer a collective class force and so unable to uphold its interests in a collective and cooperative manner. Instead the document seems to be indecisive and vaguely implies that both opposition and demoralisation has resulted from the imposition of neo-liberal policy. This ambiguity needs to be overcome, and instead it would be welcome if the possibility for working class opposition to the aims of capital is elaborated in the documents of the USFI. If this task is not done, the various formulations about social decomposition could become a formula in order to accept passive and defeatist type perspectives. It is one thing to reject over-optimistic evaluations of the situation which can only contemplate the resistance of the working class. But it is also another thing, in the name of sociological realism, to effectively reject the possibility of the opposition of labour to the aims of capital. Such pessimism can only result in cautious and moderate politics which rejects a revolutionary approach. Without being complacent the test of a principled perspective is that it should attempt to promote the potential for the working class to overcome the effective restrictions imposed on its militancy by crisis and the policy of austerity. Indeed if we could not establish such an understanding our very integrity as revolutionary Marxists would be called into question. Thus whilst we have to recognise and understand the significance of defeats in the class struggle, it is also vital that the possibilities for the generation of militant action should be acknowledged. What would be a balanced approach would be to accept that whilst the ruling class has generally been able to impose its aim of austerity onto an often submissive working class, this situation has also led to resentment and discontent. This means that the possibilities for a fightback are present, even if they are not yet realised. However, the comment of the document on the situation of the class struggle implies in a contradictory manner that social decomposition has occurred along with popular uprisings and counterrevolutions. This assessment does not make sense. It implies that all types of eventualities are happening. What would make more credible would be to accept that in general the working class has not yet been able to successfully undermine the austerity policy of the ruling class. The task of Marxists is to promote a strategy that would promote the possibility to develop effective class struggle against the imposed objectives of the forces of capital.

The document indicates that the USA represents the leading super power, and that the various countries in Europe have not established an integrated imperialist power. China has become the second world power, and Russia is an increasingly imposing its interests in other countries. The comments about the USA could be controversial. It suggests: “The USA obviously remains NO 1; it is the only one that can claim to be powerful in almost all areas, but it nevertheless is registering a relative decline in economic terms and is experiencing limits to its global power.”(3) This point could be considered to be generally accurate, but it is still necessary to emphasise that the USA remains the overwhelmingly most important military power. This provides the basis to also ensure that the world economy is organised in terms of its interests. In this context, China is a rival to the USA but it also organises its economy in order to promote interconnections with America. Hence the America First policy of Trump is unrealistic. Instead he has to develop a foreign policy based on the interests and influence of the USA within the world order. The other countries within the international economic and political system have to accept this situation. Hence any decline of the USA is a relative issue; it continues to have overall supremacy and domination of the world economy and international relations. Indeed the document confirms this point when it outlines how there is a common Atlantic bloc around the axis of the USA and EU, which also includes the role of Australia, New Zealand and Japan. NATO is under the control of the USA. Hence it is inconsistent of the document to imply that this hegemonic bloc is somehow effectively opposed by the imperialist rivalry of China and Russia. The latter is economically underdeveloped and ultimately cannot challenge the domination of this hegemonic bloc, whilst China effectively wants to become a more integrated part of the bloc established by the USA. This process is advanced in terms of China's crucial relationship to the American economy. China is also increasingly agreeing with the USA on what might have once been contested foreign policy issues.

However, the document is right to suggest that the interests of global capital are often undermining the ability of national states to control its activity. It outlines accurately how the debt crisis, as in Greece, can undermine the possibility of this country to overcome the limitations of the neo-liberal order. But we also have to suggest that this development was because the populist Greek Government of Syriza had no intention of appealing for working class support against the imposition of a financial plan of the various international agencies. Hence it is problematical to passively suggest that the global system: 'blocks a national government implementing alternative policies to get out of the social crisis.'(4) What is not mentioned is that the acceptance of a given administration of the imperatives of institutions like the EU or IMF is because they also accommodate to the restrictions imposed by the world economic order. We should expect that a genuinely revolutionary government would act in a different manner, and so would nationalise the banks rather than impose the restrictive financial plans of these global institutions.

It would also seem to be premature for the document to imply that the military power of the USA has declined since the recent economic crisis. The point is that intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq has proved to be militarily and politically problematical. Hence the USA, including the Trump administration, is against any rash new interventions. Instead the American governments of the recent period intend to uphold their hegemony via its influence in the UN and by consultations with other governments. The era of military intervention of the Bush presidency is over for the foreseeable future. Instead the aim of Trump is to try and regenerate the internal economic power of the USA in order to promote its continued domination. This is the true meaning of the 'America first' approach. Hence it is wrong to suggest that the victory of Trump was not necessarily in accordance with the interests of the American bourgeoisie because of his right populist character. Instead the aim of Trump for a new process of industrialisation could be said to be relevant and not isolationist, and is an expression of the aim to regenerate the competitive character of the USA in the present period.

However, the document is more accurate when it refers to the rise of various regional powers, and the general political instability brought about by the recent economic crisis. It also outlines how the development of globalisation has meant that the ability of the world economic and financial institutions to impose limits on the role of national governments has been enhanced in the present period. This situation has meant: “An endless spiral of destruction of social rights. The traditional imperialist bourgeoisie has taken the measure of the weakening.... of the labour movement in the so-called centre. In the name of “competitiveness” on the world market, they are taking the opportunity to conduct a systematic ongoing offensive with the goal of destroying the collective rights that have been won, particularly during the period that followed the Second World War.”(5) This process has gone alongside the undermining of public services. But this essentially accurate understanding of the policy of austerity is not connected with any awareness of how to oppose this development. We can accept that capital has generally been able to undermine the remnants of the welfare state, and to erode the collective rights of labour, but this is not the only aspect of this situation. What we also have to acknowledge is that such developments result in unrest. There is the possibility of opposition, but the problem is that the influence of Marxism is small and so it is not able to create popularity for the aim of militant struggle against the attacks on the working class. The document of the USFI seems to imply that this situation cannot be overcome, because it implies that the ability of capital to undermine public services and to erode social rights seems to be effectively unchallenged. Intensification of the economic power of global capital is described as it if were an unstoppable process in which the dogma of neoliberalism is undermining the social fabric, and so the following pessimistic conclusion is made: “The fact that in a Western country like Greece, much of the population is deprived of access to health care and services, says a great deal about the uncompromising line of the European bourgeoisie.”(8)

Once again the acceptance of a form of economic determinism is utilised in order to make opportunist political conclusions. The imposition of an onerous economic settlement was by no means inevitable in Greece. It was the result of the inability of the Syriza government to offer a determined and intransigent opposition to the imposition of a settlement by the EU and IMF. Working people were receptive to the possibility of militant action in order to reject any settlement, but the government could not accept this possibility because it was based on the aim of achieving what was possible within the limitations of the existing global institutions. There was a crucial need to develop an influential Marxist party which could have proposed an alternative strategy, but unfortunately this did not develop. In contrast, the USFI document seems to excuse the actions of Syriza because it could also not envisage the development of any revolutionary alternative. Instead its effective view that global capitalism is powerful, which is true, is also utilised in order to justify political passivity. Hence the document in a passive manner outlines 'what is' in terms of the economic situation, but this understanding is not connected to 'what could be'. The fault of many Marxists is over-optimism, but in terms of this USFI document it seems to be the opposing limitation of pessimism.

Thus the following conclusion seems to be problematical: “The particularity of globalized capitalism is that it seems to accommodate itself to crisis as a permanent state of affairs: crisis become consubstantial with the normal functioning of the new global system of domination. If this is really the case, we must profoundly change our view of “crisis” as a particular moment between long periods of “normality” - and we have not finished measuring, and suffering, the consequences of this.”(7) It used to be the one-sided and catastrophist view that economic crisis resulted in political upheaval, but in an opposite but still one-sided approach it is now being argued that the permanent continuation of crisis is the basis to undermine any effective opposition to the system. The very continual character of crisis means that the working class is too weak and disorganised to bring about effective actions against the system. If this is what is being argued, and we must presume that it is, the implication is very serious. What is being suggested is that capitalism in its globalised form is too powerful to be seriously challenged by the agency of labour. This assumption implies that revolutionary opposition is futile. Obviously, the writers of this document will presumably protest and imply that this defeatism is not their approach. But if that is their view then they should outline what is the alternative, or more precisely how can the working class oppose the problem of what seems to be a permanent condition of crisis? Instead it would seem from any justifiable reading of the text that the working class are victims of capitalism in a situation of continual crisis. If this is the assumption being made then the role of a revolutionary programme, and an action policy of transitional demands, would seem to represent an exercise in futility!

The USFI document notes the contemporary ascendency of the new imperialist powers of China and Russia, together with many new regional powers and concludes that: “The competition between capitalist powers is reviving, with the affirmation of China in East Asia and farther afield, but also of Russia in Eastern Europe and in the Middle |East. These are really conflicts between capitalist powers, therefore qualitatively different from those of the previous period.”(8) This view is an expression of the uncertainty in the document: is the process of globalisation more important than that of inter-imperialist rivalry? On the one hand it has outlined the importance of global institutions and the role of international financial activity, a universal policy of debt management, and the imposition of orthodox economic policies onto nation states. On the other hand the description of tensions and rivalries between different imperialist powers is outlined, with the USA attempting to maintain its dominant position. This tension could be resolved if it was established what whilst the dynamics of globalisation are primary, there are still present the importance of inter-imperialist rivalries as a secondary aspect. The ability to presently resolve these tensions is because of the primary significance of globalisation.

It is also asserted that there is a crisis of legitimacy of the ruling class, as expressed in the election of Trump. This is an inaccurate view. Hilary Clinton was not the preferred candidate of the US ruling class because she relied on some of her support from the left radical camp of Bernie Sanders. Her election could have led to an impetus for the imposition of a welfare state. This possibility had to be avoided, and so Trump with his free market agenda was the preferred candidate of the ruling class. Hence his election avoided the possibility of radicalisation that would have followed the election of Clinton who would have been under pressure to adopt a progressive agenda. In contrast, Trump had plans for the industrial regeneration of the USA, such as a programme of public works, which he effectively took from the platform of Sanders! Thus Trump was the traditional free market conservative of recent Republican vintage. His election meant the system was saved from any immediate political upsets. H could concentrate on imposing policies in order to maintain the dominant position of the USA within the world economy. Thus to define him as a right populist is possibly inaccurate. He is a conventional, if eccentric, conservative candidate.

The document outlines the influence of reactionary forces, and suggests that this is an expression of the crisis of bourgeois democracy. But apart from suggesting the necessity of solidarity with oppressed groups that are often opposed by these reactionary forces, there is no strategy of how to generate struggle in opposition to this growing authoritarianism. Instead in a vague manner it is contended: “The democratic imperative - “real democracy now!” - this acquires a more subversive dimension that is more immediate than was often the case in the past, making it possible to give it an alternative popular content.”(9) This aim is made precise in terms of support for the global justice movement. But there is no indication about how this situation would connect with the class struggle. Instead it is indicated in pessimistic terms that: “However the lasting defeats of the workers movement and of neo liberal hegemony, the loss of credibility of the socialist alternative, counteract these positive trends. It is difficult to situate within a longer term perspective the – sometimes considerable – success of protest movements.”(10) This apparently pessimistic view must be contested. It is one thing to outline how the working class has been defeated by the imposition of austerity, but it is another issue entirely to imply that it has been historically overcome. Instead it is the role of Marxists to promote the possibility of the development of struggle against capitalism and to therefore attempt to connect any specific industrial conflicts with the prospect of generalised opposition to the system. Instead the perspectives document not only considers that the development of the militant role of labour is problematical but it also outlines how the protest movement is undermined by conflicting identities and the controversial issue of religion. Hence this view would imply that the possibility to develop united opposition to the aims of capital is problematical and could be undermined by divisions and rivalry within the forces of the exploited and oppressed. The following conclusion is made: “The neo-liberal order can only be imposed if it succeeds in destroying the old solidarities and stifling the emergence of new solidarities. As necessary as these are, we cannot consider that solidarity will develop “naturally” in response to the crisis, nor internationalism faced with globalized capital. A concerted and systematic effort must be made in this domain.”(11)

The perspectives document would be more balanced if it outlined the empirical fact that the international working class has often been defeated by the imposition of austerity despite obvious discontent. But it is then problematical for any Marxist to then imply that the very possibility of resistance to the neo-liberal order is seriously questioned by this situation. Instead, without becoming over-optimistic, we would outline how the mood for opposition is being developed in this situation of austerity. To some extent this mood is being promoted by the very influence of the various protest movements on issues of sexism and racism. But most importantly, it should be mentioned that Marxists do not accommodate to this unfavourable balance of class forces, but instead outline how the present situation could be changed in terms of the development of the resistance of the forces of labour. In other words it would be impressionistic to imply that the very possibility of effective opposition to the system is almost impossible. Such defeatist claims have been made in the past, and they were all refuted by the determined and militant action of sections of the working class. Our approach should be to develop a strategy that would promote the possibility of action against austerity in the future. The mood is certainly in favour of this militant action, but also this possibility is presently undermined by a mood of resignation, and it is this mood which the perspectives document adapts to. The role of Marxists is to suggest that opposition by the forces of labour, and by the various protest movements is possible, and this should be encouraged by the promotion of a strategy for the development of a militant mass movement. This does not mean that we make the opposite error of claiming that effective action is inevitable and that it will be successful. Instead we should develop an approach that attempts to enhance the development of class consciousness, in that manner the prospects of militant struggle would be more likely to occur. Furthermore, the document does not outline the reactionary role of the trade union bureaucracy and of reformist organisations in undermining the possibility of action against austerity. In contrast, to the claim by the perspectives that the forces of labour are too historically weak, and so unable to oppose the aims of neo-liberalism, we would instead suggest that it has been the opportunist leadership of the working class that has primarily undermined the possibility of resistance to the aims of capital in the present period. But the document seems to ignore the importance of the reactionary influence of reformism. Hence in contrast to the apparently passive defeatism of the perspectives document we would maintain that opposition to the aims of capital is possible, even whilst being difficult to develop and sustain, and that the influence of revolutionary Marxism can grow in this situation. The point being made is that the working class is confronted with the choice between increasing exploitation or the necessity of opposition. We believe that it is possible and feasible that the latter choice can be made, even if it means defying the limitations imposed by the trade union bureaucracy.

The perspectives document has an impressive discussion of the ecological situation, and then outlines how war is an increasing and regular aspect of international relations. In a vague manner a call for solidarity with those repressed in this situation is outlined, but the related and obvious call for peace is not made. It is vital that one of the arguments we make in favour of socialism is that it is a system that can promote the possibility of peace because it attempts to resolve the various differences and tensions that result in war. Socialism is the only system that does not benefit from war and repression, and so the various tensions caused by conflicting identities can be overcome in a progressive manner in terms of promoting autonomy and the interests of all the different groups within society. But the perspectives document cannot make this point because the aim of socialism is not outlined in the document. Instead it has an understanding of all the various reactionary developments within capitalism, but it is unable to make any reference to how they can be resolved in a progressive manner. In a vague manner it suggests the importance of 'class independence against imperialism', but it is not enough for a Marxist to elaborate what we are against, we also have to be constructive and suggest what we are in favour of, or as the basis of resolving the various political conflicts that occur within capitalism.(12)

The document is at its strongest when it is describing aspects of empirical reality. It elaborates on the supreme and unequal economic and military power of the USA, but also outlines how its recent military interventions have often been unsuccessful. However, it is wrong to contend that the election of Trump and 'his unilateral declarations' implies an undermining of the international responsibilities of the USA. (13) Instead Trump is attempting to reassert the domination of the USA. He is implying that past American presidential administrations have been too lax in their relations with other countries, and he is attempting to consolidate and enhance the supremacy of the USA. Thus he is more prepared than Obama to instruct China in relation to the role of foreign affairs, and to impose the economic interests of Boeing in relation to its competition with rival aircraft producing countries. But this does not mean that he is undermining globalisation. Instead this is still the objective context in which American power is promoted. To end the process of globalisation would be to undermine the influence of the USA. Instead he is complaining that other countries do not meet their military and diplomatic obligations and that the USA is making too many sacrifices in this regard. Hence he wants to change the situation in which the USA upholds the world order in political and financial terms. He is actually calling for more united responses to problems by the major countries. So he is for modifying globalisation and not for its demise. Indeed such an aim would be retrograde and impractical to achieve.

The document makes the principled point that opposition to American imperialism can in no sense imply critical support for the apparently oppositional powers of China or Russia. They argue that since the demise of the supposedly degenerated workers states there is no camp that should be defended. But what is the alternative in an international situation of war and repression? It is suggested that: “This modern barbarism must be met with a widening of international fields of action. Militant left currents and social movements must ensure the development of solidarity “from people to people” and from “social movement to social movement” with the victims of the humanitarian crisis.”(14) This comment is supportable, but it has limitations. Primarily, what should be the aims of solidarity movements? We would suggest that the aims of peace, socialism and justice should be the perspectives of any principled solidarity movement. It is not sufficient to know what we are against, but instead we have to advocate an alternative. We should agitate for the recognition that the only alternative to war and repression is the creation of an international socialist system. Instead of this perspective the document is silent about this standpoint. It knows what it is against, but cannot elaborate what it is in favour of.

The perspectives document can outline reasons for the economic crisis, and 'the destruction of the social fabric'.(15) It can establish the seriousness of the ecological crisis and the forms of international political stability, but its alternative of 'socialism or barbarism' is not in any sense elaborated in a satisfactory manner. We have to hope that the other documents of the USFI rectify this issue and limitation. The second document for the forthcoming world congress is entitled “Towards A Text on Role and Tasks of the Fourth International” (16) In the introduction to this document it is contended that: “Our understanding of the role and tasks of the Fourth International at a national level is that we want to build parties that are useful in the class struggle. That is to say parties that can assemble the forces and decide on actions that have an effect and advance the class struggle on the basis of a class struggle approach and programme, the ultimate goal of such a party being obviously to get rid of the existing (capitalist) system, in whatever general forms this may be expressed. This perspective commits the party to being an integral ad loyal part of building these new parties, not simply aiming to recruit or waiting to denounce eventual betrayals.”(17) This approach seems to be satisfactory but it is lacking in some important aspects. Firstly, it does not connect the aim of opposing capitalism with the goal of socialism and the development of a society that will be the emancipatory alternative to what exists at the present. Such an omission seems to be a concession to those activist forces that seem to be against capitalism and yet are reluctant to outline what they consider to be an alternative to this system. Secondly, the class struggle approach is not connected with the internationalist approach of striving for world revolution as the only principled strategy which can bring about the effective end of global capitalism. Thirdly, the comment does not establish whether a transitional approach, and connected demands, is still the appropriate strategy for the class struggle. Instead it could be implied that the class struggle requires a new activist type perspective.

These omissions need to be rectified if the perspectives document is to be truly principled. Instead the emphasis of the document is on the building of new parties which are not a replica of the vanguard Marxist organisations of the past. They emphasise the possibility of the unity of all the anti-capitalist forces in either new parties or united fronts. The aim of these combinations will be unity against neo-liberalism, and the promotion of an anti-capitalist, internationalist, ecologist and feminist left basis of a new party. The document admits that past expectations about the Brazilian PT party was undermined by its support for neoliberal administration, and various attempts in the past to build broad anti-capitalist formations have often been unsuccessful in many different countries. They conclude that it is necessary to integrate the various organisations of the USFI in a deeper manner in the new activist formations that have emerged and to promote the building of militant trade unions, and to recognise the importance of elections for the process of radicalisation, to be part of international solidarity campaigns, and to improve support and involvement in the struggles of the oppressed groups. The conclusion is that: “We actively seek to build organisations with forces and individuals who do not share our whole historical programme, although within the perspective of creating a political force based on the essential elements of it.”(18)

The overwhelming emphasis of this perspective is organisational. The only concern is about how to relate in a more effective manner with the other forces receptive to left wing ideas in the present period. The assumption is that a revolutionary programme will be diluted and made acceptable to the views of these forces. There is no mention of how to relate to emerging mass movements in terms of the advocacy of a revolutionary approach and programme and concessions made to organisations like the Brazilian PT and Syriza in Greece are not discussed. Thus there is no genuine balance sheet of the experiences of the USFI in various anti-capitalist organisations; instead the often disappointing performance of such groups is mentioned without reasons given for their demise, neither is the contrasting increasing popularity of Corbyn led Labour party in the UK explained. In other words, we do not have a sense that the USFI actually know how to combine organisational flexibility with adherence to revolutionary principles. Instead they have obviously made important ideological concessions in order to be part of broad anti-capitalist coalitions. This regression indicates their right centrist character and reluctance to become involved in mass movements in terms of an intransigent advocacy of revolutionary Marxism. Indeed it is admitted that compromises about programme have to be made in order to realise forms of anti-capitalist unity, but the important question remains as to whether they do they actually struggle to defend their programme. The right wing actions of the Resistance group in the UK would imply that the answer to this question is negative. Instead the activist approach of the USFI would seem to be on the verge of supporting 'left' reformism in order to make themselves relevant.

None of the above criticism is meant as a rejection of the importance of organisational flexibility in terms of the possibility of political activity within anti-capitalist formations. But the crucial point is that this should not mean dilution of our programme and modification of its aims. Instead we should promote what is a principled standpoint of revolutionary Marxism. Hence we do not consider that the new and changing situation means that in some sense the approach of Marxism has been refuted, or in need of dilution. Instead we have to recognise that the importance of new challenges means that it is vital that we continue to improve and uphold our strategy and in this manner defend the integrity of our standpoint. Instead the USFI has a history of considering the requirements of the class struggle at each particular historical juncture as justification of the compromise of a revolutionary standpoint. In this context they have even seriously questioned the ability of the working class to oppose capitalism in an effective manner. The result of this pessimism is accommodation to the role of the anti-capitalist movements.

The third document submitted by the USF International Committee for its forthcoming world congress is entitled 'Social Upheavals, Fightbacks and Alternatives'(19) Formally, this document implies that the present situation has contributed to the continued radicalisation of the global justice campaign, and the significance of the lesbian, gay and transgendered movement, and there has also been the recent upsurge of struggles against racism. But they conclude, in what seems to be a principled comment, that: “Refusing the consequences of capitalist policies does not automatically provoke an anti-capitalist consciousness. The social identity of workers does not create a class identity as such. What is the capacity to include these struggles in a strategic political programme of radical challenge to capitalist society, the oppressions it has created or reconstructed?”(20) The problem is that there is nothing to suggest that the political programme being mentioned as necessary by the USFI is actually being elaborated. Instead we have a collection of documents which are good on describing what is happening, but which also seem to be unable to outline a strategy for changing society. This criticism does not mean that the role of a programme is 'everything' but it does provide the basis of political orientation and guidance to the tasks generated by class struggle. Instead of this recognition we have a passive approach that tends to imply that capitalism is almost impossible to oppose.

The document describes the global development of the working class, but also notes that is often of insecure work, and there has been the rise of the precariat who lack stable jobs. It notes the ability of capitalists to intensify regimes of exploitation and the crises has led to increasing attempts to undermine the conditions and pay of workers. It is concluded that: “All these changes weaken the capacity for lasting collective organization and structuring collective resistance within companies. At the same time, they stimulate the need to fight back and the dynamics of self-organization. This also calls for the development of local self-organizations able to regroup isolated or temporary workers above and beyond the workplace level.”(21) This point seems to have empirical truth, but it provide no tactics for opposing this development of intensified exploitation. The approach of Marxists should be to popularise the importance of workers control. We should outline how it is not sufficient to act to improve the situation of the working class merely by defensive actions. Instead we can only undermine the employers’ offensive by promoting and realising the aims of workers control. Instead of this perspective in a passive manner, the document outlines the features of the class struggle but has no strategy for beginning a movement to oppose this situation of capitalist exploitation

The programme also outlines the declining situation of the world peasantry without outlining any measures to oppose this development in terms of genuine land reform, co-operative production and the promotion of the worker-peasant alliance. It is suggested, quite rightly, that support for migrants is vital and describes the importance of the ecological crisis. It does suggest that the trade unions should improve their ability to oppose situations of discrimination and the necessity to organise the precariat. But instead of a definite perspective of workers control it is argued that: 'the pressing need to create, out of the struggle for rights, a class identity providing resistance movements the programmes necessary to challenge the capitalist structures of society and to carry through a project of overthrowing this system.”(22) This aim is vague and does not express any definite policies or objectives. Instead in a vague and non-committal manner it is finally admitted that the militant actions of workers could mean: “These experiences, albeit limited, put forth the question of control, of workers taking back the means of production, and also the choice of production linked to social needs.”(23) The problem with this view is that it is describing various events rather than expressing a strategic aim. The perspectives do not outline that realisation of workers control would mean the enhancement of the ability to overthrow capitalism and establish a workers government. Instead this situation is considered in primarily defensive and empirical terms. What is considered to be the effective limitation of the present situation is the ability of capital to impose austerity onto the working class. Hence: “The situation is difficult for the traditional labour movement on which national policies of consensus or compromise with austerity policies weigh heavily.”(24) It is admitted that anger about this austerity has intensified, but it is also implied that this may take reactionary forms.

However, in a vague manner it implies that there can be hope of opposition to the system in terms of the possibilities of unity of the various movements against oppression and social justice. But instead of elaborating a strategy of promoting change it is vaguely contended that: “The key issue in the coming years will not only be organizing adequately to counter the attacks sustained, but also the political capacity to build, alongside the social mobilizations, a political movement for emancipation and capable of frontally challenging capitalism.”(25) This standpoint is an accommodation to the view that various activist campaigns can be substituted for the role of the working class in the promotion of effective action to transform the present situation. In comparison to what seems to be described as a defeated working class, the activists are considered to be dynamic and discontented, even if still limited in their political views. The assumption is that a Trotskyist organisation should rely on these new social forces for the impetus of generating opposition to the system. In contrast, to this opportunist approach revolutionary Marxists should outline why we still consider that workers control of production remains a strategic aim of the process of successful class struggle. This development of militant action should be able to attract the solidarity of the anti-capitalist and social justice movement. Furthermore, we need to outline the reasons why the historical alternative to capitalism is socialism. These three official documents of the USFI have been full of praise for anti-capitalism, but silent on what should be the society we are trying to realise. But it is not principled and sufficient to know merely what we are against. Instead we have to establish what we are in favour of, which is socialism. Any propaganda of Marxism should outline in a popular manner what we mean by an alternative to capitalism. In this sense, Marxism is constructive and not merely against the limitations of the present. Instead we should connect our programme of class struggle with the aim of socialism.

Not surprisingly, the documents of the USFI have led to controversy within this organisation. We have to assess whether the criticism is both sufficient and principled. The first critical document is entitled: 'Let's Seize the Opportunities and build an International for revolution and communism'(26) It is argued that the policy of promoting broad parties instead of revolutionary organisations has been a failure. The Greek section refused to accommodate to Syriza and was criticised by the USFI leadership for its sectarianism. But this group was vindicated because of the acceptance of austerity by Syriza. Overall the policy of supporting the creation of broad parties led to the dissolving of revolutionary currents into reformist formations. This has meant the principle of class compromise has been upheld. The result has been the decline and disorientation of the USFI. The document summarises the reasons for this situation in the following manner: “It implicitly gave up on the relevance of revolution, seeing it as something to be accomplished in the distant future. In its view, the balance of class forces is so unfavourable that the task of the hour is to rebuild an elementary class consciousness based on the struggles of the oppressed in reaction to the ruling class onslaught. There is no need for a revolutionary compass, no need for an organized battle for a transitional program, and no need for a communist program. It is sufficient for them to regroup all those who are ready to resist, reformists and revolutionaries alike, to slowly accumulate experience and strength and to wait for better days. In order to accomplish that goal, the adequate tool is indeed the broad party.”(27) This criticism has much to recommend it, but we would caution and suggest that the answer to what is considered to be pessimism is not complacent optimism. The USFI majority are right to some extent to consider that the present situation of the continued offensive of capital against labour is unfavourable for the immediate development of class struggle. But the conclusions they make from this assessment is opportunist because they justify the dilution or even rejection of the role of a transitional programme and ignore the importance of promoting the ultimate aim of socialism and communism. Instead what is needed is to recognise that the present unfavourable balance of class forces should not result in the undermining of revolutionary integrity and principles. Instead the role of the intransigent Marxist standpoint is even more urgent to promote. The answer to the offensive of the ruling class is not to accommodate to pessimism, but nor should we ignore its importance. Instead it’s vital to develop a collection of demands which can promote the ability of the working class to go from the defensive to the offensive. Success is not guaranteed in this context, but at least it may be possible to develop the class consciousness of important sections of the working class.

For example, the critics of the USFI were right to support the principled approach of the Greek section which called for the abolition of the debt, nationalisation of the banks and bringing the economy under workers control. This policy may not have attracted much support but it represented a principled and coherent alternative to the opportunist limitations of Syriza. Such an approach would have educated at least a minority of workers in what could have been a revolutionary alternative to the reformist limitations of Syriza. The crucial lesson of that situation is that reformism cannot resolve the crisis of capitalism in a manner that benefits the working class. In contrast to the principled role of the unofficial Greek section, the USFI was disorientated by its position about Syriza and so was not able to advocate principled politics. The USFI has resorted to expelling dissident national groupings. It is in disarray. But this criticism has to go alongside the development of a principled and credible alternative. However, the opposition document asserts that the capitalist system is in crisis because of the fall in the rate of profit. This is considered to be the basis of undermining the interests of the workers. This point has some truth, but it is important to also recognise that this situation will not in some rigid objective manner promote the possibility of opposition to the system. Thus the following perspective is problematical: “The balance of class forces is very unfavourable to us. But mass resistance shakes every continent. The crisis of the system feeds a chronic political instability.”(28) Such a view implies all things to all people. It presents a contradictory view of the present situation. It would be more accurate to suggest that the ruling class offensive is presently successful, but that the connected unrest is not resolved. However, it would be an exaggeration to imply that generalised resistance is occurring. We have to be honest and accept that the fightback against capital's offensive has not yet been realised. To suggest that mobilisations of opposition to the system are occurring is an over-optimistic evaluation of the situation. Instead it is the task of Marxism to promote policies that can generate an enhanced sense of class consciousness. Only in this context will serious opposition to the system start to occur. Instead the Opposition document is exaggerating the significance of the dissent with the labour laws in France, and also falsely equating the success of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK with increased interest in socialism. Instead it would be more accurate to indicate that expressions of discontent with capitalism are a manifestation of vague opposition to the system but without representing explicit support for socialism. Hence it would be a one-sided error to over-emphasise the present possibilities of discontent within society.

But the document is right to suggest that the increasing importance of the precariat does not undermine the strategic importance of the working class. It outlines how there is a trend towards increasing proletarianisation in global terms, and this has led to new forms of trade union organisation in many countries. Thus the central economic and political role of the working class is still relevant. This means that the aim of promoting class consciousness is still a central task of any principled revolutionary party. However the role of education is underestimated in relation to this aim. Instead it is suggested that: “The most effective way to do so is still by the struggle of the working class interest against that of the bourgeoisie. Rallies, demonstrations, occupations, assemblies, strikes, these are still the best tools for raising the consciousness of the oppressed.”(29) This point is valid, but it seems to ignore the crucial role of education and theory. Instead in an activist manner it is maintained that: “The strategic hypothesis we advance to end capitalism and patriarchy is a non-stop series of mobilisations that make the working class aware of the necessity of taking power for real social power.”(30) This view ignores the relationship of theory and practice. We can only generate increasingly ambitious action against capitalism if it is connected to the increasing influence of Marxist theory. In this context the struggle for workers control of production is not necessarily the outcome of a spontaneous dynamic but is instead the ultimate result of the theoretical influence of this aim, which is based on the promotion of the Marxist programme. The development of the culture for Marxism is vital if increasingly intransigent mass actions against capitalism are to occur. In contrast in a spontaneist manner the Opposition document contends that: “It is by means of conflict that workers create automatic responses and mechanisms to resist the bourgeoisie's policies.”(31) To some extent this view can be true, but what would make the working class increasingly ambitious would be based on its relationship to the influence of Marxism. This does not mean that the Marxists should instruct workers in what to do, but rather the very issue of developing mass actions is connected to the generation of confidence provided by the influence of the Marxist perspective.

The document rightly suggests that the transitional method of connecting immediate issues with the aim of establishing a new society is still valid. It calls for bank nationalisation and workers control. However it could have elaborated the importance of workers control in terms of it being the most important transitional demand. The point could have been made that if the attempt to realise workers control is successful then this means the economic power of capital is being seriously undermined, and that transition to socialism could occur. This is why our emphasis should be on the importance of workers control, and why it is essential if the power of capital is to be replaced with that of the working class. The document does make the point that the aim of the class struggle is the formation of a workers government, but the character of what will be a workers state is not outlined, and nor is the issue of what is meant by socialism. It is vital to recognise that working people are unlikely to be motivated to struggle for transitional demands unless they have some sense of what is meant by socialism. The lack of a conception of socialism is a serious limitation of the standpoint of the Opposition within the USFI.

The document makes the principled demand of opposition to imperialist interventions but it accommodates to nationalism when it calls for the withdrawal of countries from the EU. But it makes the correct point that we should advocate the leadership of the struggle of the working class if the process of national liberation of oppressed nations is to be as democratic as possible. Crucially the document calls for principled regroupment of the groups claiming to be in the Fourth International tradition and so rejects the illusory view that a genuine revolutionary party can be built by an accumulation of the forces of any individual organisation. Hence we can conclude that despite the important differences we have with this document, it does make a serious contribution towards the principled task of reconstruction of the Fourth International. The political logic of this document is that it represents the necessity of a challenge to the opportunist leadership of the USFI. Genuine Marxists should support them in this possible development.

The second oppositional document is entitled: 'The New Era and Tasks of Revolutionaries'(32) It outlines how the crisis of 2008 has led to political destabilisation and the election of Trump. But it is suggested that this situation is compatible with the interests of American capital in a globalised world: “Behind the slogan “Make America Great Again” Trump has in his own way defined a perspective which meets the imperialist needs of the US and which is shared by a large fraction of the establishment he claims to oppose. Behind this slogan lies the defence of the interests of American capital faced with global competition against the peoples and against its own working class.”(33) The problem is that this perceptive comment is not developed and instead what is justified is a understanding of capitalism in decline which 'opens a period of wars, instability and revolutions'(34) Indeed it is argued that a process of transition to socialism is occurring because of the contradictions between unregulated globalisation and the interests of the various imperialist rivals. The result is generalised political instability, the migrant crisis, and a permanent condition of war. Hence the outcome of this situation is that the USA asserts its supremacy within a globalised economy. The world working class has grown in the recent period and is much stronger than in the past. The instability of capitalism opens up opportunities for the international intervention of the working class. Thus the conclusion to be made is that: “The only relevant divide is a class divide, the irreconcilable opposition between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, between the exploited classes and the capitalist class.”(34) But in this situation of instability the influence of the forces of reaction has developed, and so the choice is increasingly between the working class acting to transform society or the retrogressive decline of society based on the victory of the right wing. Hence it is vital to organise the working class on the basis of the revolutionary transformation of society including maintaining decent wages and the socialisation of the major industries. To this end it is necessary to unify the forces of revolutionary Marxism in a single party.

The problem with this perspective is that it upholds an evolutionist and objectivist view that the crisis of capitalism is creating the conditions for the inevitability for the development of class struggle that will result in the overthrow of capitalism. The fact that the working class is presently on the defensive because of austerity, and the limitations imposed by the lack of influence of Marxist parties, is completely ignored. Formally the possibility of reactionary developments is admitted, but the overall trend is to outline the increasingly favourable potential for the revolutionary role of the working class. In this context the present limitation of low levels of class consciousness is ignored. Instead the dynamics of the increasingly favourable objective situation will resolve this situation. Furthermore, the conception of an alternative society is not outlined in explanatory detail, and instead socialism is effectively equated with the role of nationalism. Hence the document seems to have the opposite faults to those of the views of the USFI majority, where they are pessimistic, this contrasting perspective is very optimistic. The defenders of this document will claim that they are aware that history is 'not on our side' and that they outline the difficulties of the potential for overthrowing the system. This point may be formally correct, the overall emphasis is on the fact that the working class has no other historic choice than to act to overthrow capitalism, or else society will regress into barbarism. Such a view outlines the choice between polarising either/ors, which actually underestimates the difficulties of developing class struggle in the present situation. Instead its tendency for economic determinism resolves political issues concerned with developing mass mobilisation. However, despite the flawed perspective it at least outlines the reasons why it is necessary to unify the forces of revolutionary Marxism. So whilst this document cannot be supported because of its economic and political dogmatism, it is still an important contribution to challenging the unprincipled role of the USFI. We should not support its economic and political analysis, but its organisational conclusions are welcome.

Footnotes:

(1) International Committee of the USFI: Capitalist globalization, imperialisms, geopolitical crisis and its implications in International Viewpoint, July 2017 p1-20

(2) ibid p2

(3) ibid p3

(4) ibid p3

(5) ibid p7

(6) ibid p8

(7) ibid p8

(8) ibid p9

(9) ibid p12-13

(10) ibid p13

(11) ibid p13

(12) ibid p15

(13) ibid p15

(14) ibid p19

(15) ibid p19

(16) USFI: Towards a Text on the Role and Tasks of the Fourth International, in International Viewpoint, (2017) p1-14

(17) ibid p2

(18) ibid p12

(19) USFI: Social Upheavals, fightbacks and alternatives, In International Viewpoint (2017) p1-18

(20) ibid p3-4

(21) ibid p6

(22) ibid p10

(23) ibid p11

(24) ibid p15

(25) ibid p17

(26) Manos of the Greece section and Jeff M of the USA: 'Let's seize the Opportunities, and build an International for revolution and communism' (2017) In International Viewpoint p1-17

(27) ibid p3

(28) ibid p6

(29) ibid p11

(30) ibid p11

(31) ibid p11

(32) Jakob: The New Era and Tasks of Revolutionaries, In International Viewpoint (2017) p1-16

(33) ibid p2

(34) ibid p3

(35) ibid p10