UNDERSTANDING THE OPPORTUNIST LIMITATIONS OF THE UNITED SECRETARIAT OF THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

The 15th Congress of the USFI expressed its sense of political confidence that a new period of struggle was developing in its document: 'A Congress of Optimism and Renewal'(1) It outlined how opposition to neoliberalism and war was emerging in terms of the development of the global justice and anti-capitalist movement. It is argued that the period of defeats since the 1970's was coming to an end, but that the tasks connected to this situation were still immense. The problem with this emerging sense of confidence is that the temptation would be to dilute the programme and perspectives of Marxism in order to make immediate gains. In an additional document: “A New Phase of the Workers and Social Movement” it is outlined how the contradictions of globalised capitalism has led to new forms of radicalisation and opposition to the system, which only to some extent offset the unfavourable balance of class forces caused by the economic restructuring of the world and the demise of Stalinism. (2) They conclude that: “But the current situation is different from the situation at the beginning of the 1990's. The revival of the workers, social and political movements is uneven, and takes different forms in different national political situations. But beyond this or that conjuncture there is an undeniable change in the social, political and ideological climate. This encourages the emergence of anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist currents, on the social and trade unions fronts as well as politically.”(3) It could be said in criticism of this perspective that the offensive of the forces of capital against labour has not lessened in this new period since the beginning of the new century. The balance of class forces is still in favour of the interests of the present economic system despite the development of new forms of opposition. Most crucially it was vital to recognise that the trade unions in most countries had not recovered from the effects of the offensive of globalised capitalism. Thus instead of recognising this situation it was tempting for the USFI to project the role of the working class onto the new social movements and to define their ideology of anti-capitalism as an expression of an impetus for proletarian revolution. Hence the problem was that the USFI could undermine the credibility of the revolutionary programme because of its enthusiasm for the emerging anti-capitalist forces.

Formally the situation of aggressive militaristic assertion of the hegemony of the USA is acknowledged alongside the attempt of capital to promote measures of privatisation and deregulation of the economy, of the end of the welfare state, but this process occurs alongside what could be considered to be an illusory perspective that 'resistance and recomposition of the struggles and centres of militancy of the world of labour' is occurring.(4) This view is contradictory, it is false to implicitly assert that the forces of both capital and labour are both strengthening in some mysterious simultaneous process. Instead the ability of capital to go on the offensive means that labour is on the defensive. The balance of class forces favours the interests of capital as against those of labour. However, this does not mean that new forms of opposition are not being developed, such as opposition to the wars of American imperialism. Indeed this point is admitted when it is reluctantly admitted that the labour movement is often undergoing right wing developments in terms of adaptation to neoliberalism, but that this reactionary process also occurs alongside the emergence of new forms of radicalism in terms of the forces of anti-capitalism. This contradiction can be explained in terms of the fact that the forces of anti-capitalism have emerged from outside the traditional labour movement and trade unions. But it is admitted by the USFI that this situation is complicated by the fact that the strength of the working class is being undermined by the emergence of a low paid and unskilled precariat, who are relegated to taking low paid and insecure employment. Furthermore, women continue to have an inferior situation when compared to men in economic terms. But despite these difficulties it is concluded in an optimistic manner that “At the same time thousands of activists and cadres who have not experienced any historic defeat are still active in the grassroots and trade union movements, ready to relaunch or create the conditions for a recomposition of the workers and social movements on a new basis.”(5) No examples of this type of development are outlined, instead it is asserted. But such optimism could be utilised in order to gloss over the significance of the actual unfavourable balance of class forces.

Thus it could be argued that the document uses the concept of the recomposition of the labour movement in order to underestimate the difficulties involved in this actual situation. This actual process of recomposition is not yet occurring, and it could be argued that the expression of this possibility is not yet emerging. Instead what seems to still characterise the character of the labour movement in this period was a right wing trajectory in order to accommodate the neoliberal offensive of capital. Hence the emergence of radicalism in terms of anti-capitalism is still a minority trend within mainly young people. This development still has tenuous links to the traditional labour movement. Hence for the document to contend that partial struggles are occurring in defence of social gains seems to be an expression of wishful thinking, or the projection of what is occurring within specific countries into being a manifestation of a general trend. What is being underestimated is the continued ideological effect of the demise of Stalinism which has for a considerable period of time undermined the legitimacy of the aim of socialism. This point is being emphasised by the fact that the forces of anti-capitalism expressed protest against the existing system rather than being emphatically in favour of an alternative. Instead of emphasising this point, the protests in Seattle against the G8 are considered by the USFI to be a turning point in the process of resistance to neoliberalism. It is argued that such developments have 'created a new internationalism'. (6) Such an assessment is an over-optimistic interpretation of what a few demonstrations have achieved. It is also illusory to suggest that the anti-capitalist movement has achieved the following: “This movement is already influencing the cadres of the workers and social movement on the national level by offering the beginnings of an alternative analysis of the world situation, alternative demands, and the perspective of a different society.”(7) Such a view optimistically ignores the fact that anti-capitalism is generally an activist trend that lacks systematic and coherent understanding of what they want, and is also uncertain about how to realise their aims. Certainly, it has had an influence in society but this does not mean that it has been able to overcome the situation of political crisis within the labour movement.

It is true that the various anti-capitalist movements indicate a willingness to challenge the views and aims of existing forms of society, but this does not mean that the following comment is accurate in terms of the significance of this development: “This means a leap forward on the levels of anti-capitalist consciousness, (more radical) forms of struggle, (more global) demands and (more militant) forms of involvement. It is the beginning of a new phase.”(8) Such a perspective overestimates the ability of activism to change society, and so underestimates the continued necessity for theoretical clarity and the connected role of Marxist politics. Indeed the document has to admit that the major feature of the situation is still characterised by the rightward shift of Social Democracy and the accommodation of the labour movement with the aims of capital, including support for the wars of USA imperialism. Hence the result of this situation was an unprecedented crisis for the labour movements of the world, but instead of outlining the seriousness of this situation, the USFI contends: “Thus a political, social and electoral space has opened up in which radical anti-capitalist currents, movements and parties can come forward, win a serious hearing from society and become a major factor in the workers and social movement.”(9) It has to be explicitly outlined how such a conclusion could never be realised. The anti-capitalist movement lacked the theoretical and political clarity required to make a substantial contribution towards resolving the political problems within the various labour movements. However, it is true that anti-capitalism could provide some form of impetus towards contributing to the renewal of the traditional workers organisations. But it is also vital to accept that anti-capitalism was ultimately not the answer to the problems of the existing organisations of the working class. Ultimately what was vital was for these organisations to engage in struggle, and to reflect on what should be the politics of opposing capitalism. In contrast, the USFI seemed to effectively, or implicitly suggest, that the anti-capitalist movement could take the place of the existing labour movement. This perspective was an important strategic mistake or illusion. In order to uphold their perspective they over-emphasised the importance of struggles by workers in the 1980's and 1990's, and so glossed over the related significance of defeats and the general victory of capital over labour in this period. Hence this view led to the exaggerated claim that sections of the working class combined with the anti-capitalist movement in the Seattle demonstration. Instead only glimpses of such a development occurred, and the overall situation was still defined by the balance of forces favouring capital rather than labour. But the USFI seemed to ignore this situation and preferred to emphasise the importance of actions by the working class, and to contend that what has resulted : “It created a new political framework, a radical will, a new perspective, and the embryo of an alternative to the defensive social struggles which had never stopped all through the previous period”.(10) This impressionistic view, and the connected one-sided emphasis on the increasing role of militant workers struggles, was an important mistaken view of the balance of class forces. It is true that it was possible to locate examples of militant opposition to neoliberalism, as in Argentina of 2002, but this situation was an exception to what was a general accommodation to the offensive of capital against labour. Instead of providing this consolationist and over-optimistic understanding of the present situation it was necessary to actually outline how the working class lacked the development of an effective strategy in order to promote opposition to the offensive of capital. Instead of outlining this strategy, the USFI preferred to provide impressionistic descriptions of how the working class was becoming receptive to the necessity of struggle because it was inspired by the anti-capitalist and anti-war movement. In actuality some workers supported the militaristic aims of USA imperialism and the anti-war movement became increasingly unimportant.

The USFI document does outline in detail the aims of American imperialism to reinforce its domination of the world via the role of militaristic actions. It also outlines how globalisation has meant the consolidation of an international world economy based on the role of trade and the concentration of capital. The context for this development is established in terms of the offensive of capital against the social gains of labour which was initiated by the actions of Thatcher and Reagan. In this context the trans-national companies have increased their ability to dictate economic policy to national states. In this context the intensification of the exploitation of labour and the oppression of women has occurred. The process of the decline and the transformation of the Stalinist states are outlined in terms of creating the conditions for capitalist restoration. There has also been the increasing recent emergence of Russia and China as two important economic powers with tendencies that seem to express their aspirations to become imperialist. But it is argued that globalisation occurs alongside the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalry, which could be considered to be a dogmatic view, but in general the USFI outlines the history of the last thirty years in fairly perceptive terms. The ascendency of Russia to world power status is outlined, but the document also makes the dogmatic claim that the EU is a rival of the USA. In actuality there are close economic and political relations between the EU and the USA.

The emergence of left wing forces in Latin America is described by the USFI but discussion of their prospects is not elaborated. Instead in vague terms it is outlined that popular struggle is reviving, and that radical demands are being made in several countries. Most of the indications of militancy refer to the peasantry and the role of the working class is not discussed. The failure of populist governments is indicated but the elaboration of a strategy of mass struggle is not established. Hence in an impressionistic manner we have a description of mass movements emerging but the programmatic conclusions that results is not indicated. Instead in a reluctant manner it is admitted that a section of the Left is committed to politically working within the existing institutions. Hence this would imply that the forces of revolutionary Marxism are still weak, but the USFI is not able to make this point in an explicit manner. Instead of establishing what should be a perspective of strategy and tactics in this unfavourable situation it outlines a description of struggle and implies that the prospects of success may be becoming promising. But what is omitted from this analysis is any effective description of the balance of class forces which would outline in more detailed terms the prospects of the success of the revolutionary forces. However, it is admitted that the overall context in which developments have to be understood is in terms of the continued domination of the USA. This situation has to be acknowledged if the forces of opposition to capitalism are to be promoted. But instead of this type of analysis there is only empirical recognition of this context of American hegemony.

The USFI document does provide detailed economic analysis of why the boom in the world economy is being replaced by recession. But it makes a dogmatic conclusion from this analysis: “World capitalism is thus facing a difficult situation, combining its internal sources of tension with a considerable loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the world's population, who view this system more and more as a pure and simple obstacle blocking the satisfaction of their social needs.”(11) This comment is dogmatic because the major limitation undermining the development of class consciousness is the inability concerning promoting effective alternatives to capitalism. The demise of Stalinism has discredited the generation of the influence of what could be defined as the ideology of socialism, and so capitalism is able to politically overcome the setbacks of crisis in terms of continued mass support for its system. But the USFI defends its conclusion because it is suggesting that the role of economic recession combined with the development of the anti-capitalist movement is providing the generation of a mass sentiment in favour of ending the system. This approach is very optimistic and over-exaggerates the importance of opposition to the present system. Instead it has to be admitted that what characterises the situation is continued offensive against labour in conditions of increasing recession. This optimistic standpoint of the USFI also leads to the superficial view that the USA might not be able to embark on war in 2003, and implies that discontent with the USA is intense on a world scale. Such an opinion also over-estimates the level of opposition to the USA and implies that a credible alternative is possible. This standpoint glosses over the actual difficulties involved in developing a principled struggle for world socialism.

However, this optimistic approach is modified when it is admitted that: “The capitalist class continues it neo-liberal offensive while adapting to new difficulties and resistances.”(12) This standpoint is connected to a more sober analysis of the successes of capital in the 1980's and 1990's and it is admitted that: “Objectively, it is putting the proletariat on the defensive, with a risk of a new dramatic decline in its living standards and capacities to reorganize itself.”(13) But instead of making the realistic conclusion that this situation required a protracted period of the re-organisation of the forces of the working class, it is being suggested that because material conditions will not improve this situation is providing an impetus for struggle: “This is already leading to fierce social conflicts, even in the absence of any assured alternative, perspective or solid organization. A new cycle has begun of fiercer, broader, but also more difficult struggles, around immediate, partial demands that almost spontaneously emphasize the need for an overall solution and raise once more 'the political issue' (the issue of who governs and what role political parties have).”(14) It is being argued that in the new and more difficult conditions that the increasing limitations of neo-liberalism will result in mass opposition. The working class movement will undergo a transformation and increasingly uphold an anti-capitalist approach.

But, the problem with this view is that it underestimates the importance of the development of class consciousness. In other words the ideological effect of the period of the offensive of capital against labour was to discredit the credible role of militant action. Instead it increasingly seemed to be appropriate to accept the domination of capital and to try and improve conditions in a more modest and less assertive manner. This modest standpoint has not suddenly been undermined by the onset of recession. Instead it takes a period of time for the recovery of the labour movement to occur. This aspect is not being acknowledged because of the subjective impatience of the USFI. Instead it seems to automatically connect the capitalist offensive with the dynamic of opposition. In this context the various supposed victories of the anti-capitalist movement are exaggerated and projected into being the beginning of an offensive of labour. Hence it is implicitly suggested that the historic crisis of leadership is being ended and that instead the situation is maturing for a general struggle against globalisation. Consequently the conclusion of the USFI is premature and effectively illusory: “In the context of this kind of international mobilization and more general relaunch of class struggle, we must find a way to rebuild the workers and anti-imperialist movement from top to bottom, to welcome the emergence of vanguards whose experiences are those of the new epoch we are living in, and to re-launch a new internationalism and a revolutionary international.”(15) This standpoint does not represent a realistic conception of the actual balance of class forces, and nor does it accept the character of the actual situation in terms of the current limitations on the levels of class consciousness in 2003. Instead the role of the anti-capitalist movement is being exaggerated and the problems with the existing trade unions are glossed over. The result was the justification of a perspective that is not realistic. Hence the USFI is not providing effective guidance for the development of the class struggle.

The above document submitted to the 2003 Congress of the USFI was accompanied by a connected document: “Resistances to Capitalist Globalization' (16). This document maintains that opposition to globalisation and war means that the world has entered a new period of radicalisation. This development has led to the promotion of an international workers movement. Not only is this process concerned with issues about globalisation, it has also become concerned with opposing war, and social and environmental questions. It is being argued that the traditional labour movement is becoming increasingly aligned with the new activists. The conclusion is that: “In this sense we are dealing with what one can call a 'founding movement' or a 'founding historical experience'. This framework of a common political experience is shaping the collective consciousness of a new activist generation. This does not mean that the 'new' (the globalisation movement) is replacing the old (the traditional workers movement). The link between the two remains the key issue. But it means that the unfolding of the movement is for a different globalization is the foundation from which we can perceive and think about what is new, theorize, act and organize our political work on a qualitatively higher level.”(17) In other words it is being suggested that whilst the differences between the anti-capitalist movement and the traditional trade unions has not been overcome, there is nevertheless a process of convergence. This view is an illusion and is based on the over-estimation of the importance of the anti-capitalist movement, and is also based on underestimating the continued defensive condition of the trade unions. What is actually happening is that activists have carried out some important mass actions, but their influence within society was still limited. It is premature to suggest that the labour movement is becoming transformed by this development. Furthermore, it is also quite illusory to contend that: “The social forums, whether continental or worldwide, are the main rallying points for forces opposed to neoliberal globalization.”(18) In actuality these Forums only mobilised a few left wing inclined intellectuals and lacked popular support. Indeed their isolation indicates that the anti-capitalist activists are also relatively a small movement and have not realised popular momentum. But it is also necessary to argue that despite these limitations the anti-capitalist movement could have acquired a dynamic that resulted in advancing the process of struggle against the existing system. Indeed, this was the very potential of the anti-war movements of 2003.

What are only briefly referred to by the USFI document are the important limitations of the anti-capitalist movements which are defined in terms of its ambiguity about the question of power. In actuality this issue is connected to the fact that the anti-capitalist movement was aware of what it is against, but was vague about what it was in favour of. Hence there was a general reticence to outline a detailed conception of an alternative type of society in terms of the aims of socialism. Indeed this point is accepted by the USFI when they admit that a vital task is 'redefinition of the socialist project'. (19) The problem is that this aim is not explained, and instead is considered to be something for the future. In contrast to this reticence about what is meant by socialism we would consider that elaboration in this context is vital if mass support for the revolutionary transformation of society is to be truly realised. But instead of recognising the importance of theoretical tasks, the USFI's perspective implied that the apparent progress of the Anti-Capitalist movement was starting to resolve these important theoretical issues. The role of what is defined as a mass movement is considered to be promoting the possibility to elaborate socialism and to advance the revolutionary project. Hence the vital theoretical tasks involved in generating the ideological conditions for a mass movement seemed to be underestimated. Thus it is suggested that the process of discussion in order to 'clarify collective perspectives' is effectively occurring, or could do so in the near future. (20)

It is outlined by the USFI document that the interests and conditions of the working class have been undermined by the decline of the strength and influence of the trade unions, which are often reduced to being strong only in the public sector. But this emphasis on what is admitted is an adverse balance of class forces is to some extent mitigated by what is considered to be the potential of the anti-capitalist protestors. The document also outlined how globalisation is resulting in frequent forms of economic crisis, and inter-imperialist contradictions are intensifying, and the assertion of the hegemony of the USA is resulting in the intensification of the possibility and actuality of war. Hence it is being suggested that the limitations of globalisation are becoming increasingly apparent to more people. Thus despite the continued weakness of the traditional labour movement there has also been the generation of an era of radicalisation: “Since the mid 1990's a rise in consciousness, albeit uneven, has been perceptible. The initial opposition to neoliberal politics is ushering in a general critique of the dictatorship of the market...though very often the capitalist mode of production itself is still not being consciously called into question.”(21) Hence it is being suggested that despite the limitations of the emerging mass movements, in terms of the inability to establish a coherent alternative to capitalism, the continued weakness of the trade unions is nevertheless being mitigated by the militancy of the new social movements. So despite the admitted continued domination of capital, and the connected accommodation to the system of Social Democracy and the limitations of the trade unions, the dynamism of the new social movements can to some extent compensate for these limitations and so provide the possibility for a serious challenge to the domination of capitalism.

The USFI outlines its perspective in the following terms: “More generally, our task is both to contribute to the emergence of a short-term programmatic synthesis for the radical left and to work on redefining a socialist alternative. The essential objective is to develop the central theme of popular control by the citizens and to deduce from this the necessity of challenging private property in the means of production.”(22) What is flawed about this standpoint is that it is considered to be adequate in order to resolve the limitations of the anti-capitalist movement it is necessary to advocate supporting socialism. What is ignored is that the various activists of the global justice movement possibly support a conception of society based on small scale economic activity and the role of local communities as an alternative to large scale production. Hence it would actually be vital to outline how the importance of workers control should be the vital feature of a socialist economy. This perspective need not deny the continued role of the market, or the importance of the price mechanism. In other words it is not sufficient to merely contend that we are in favour of socialism. This approach reduces socialism to being a mere principle and not an expression of how we conceive of a credible alternative form of society to that of capitalism. In contrast, the assumption being made by the USFI is that the dynamics of the process of the class struggle will somehow automatically resolve these issues and so provide more popular support for socialism. This assumption is an illusion. Instead the process of class struggle will involve constant ideological tension about what is socialism and how it can be realised. In this context the forces of revolutionary Marxism cannot hope in the manner of the USFI that such outstanding questions can be automatically resolved by the dynamics of class struggle. Indeed they admit themselves that the aim of socialism has little support from the forces of the anti-capitalist movement. Hence it is vital that credible arguments are provided in order to promote the influence of revolutionary Marxism. Instead they seem to be suggesting that the supposedly progressive dynamics of the class struggle will somehow resolve these issues. But it is not sufficient to suggest that Marxist support the aim of social equality, rational organisation of the world economy, extension of social rights, nationalisation of the banks and important public services. In other words, such aims are merely an expression of the principles of an alternative. Instead what is called for is a detailed analysis of the aspects of what constitutes a socialist economy. It is also necessary to outline what would express the genuinely democratic character of an alternative society, such as the commitment to multi-party democracy and free elections. Instead of this clarity, the USFI only outline the briefest of details about how they would define socialism. This is not an adequate basis if the aim is to convince people of the alternative to capitalism.

The USFI defines its perspective in the following manner: “To give coherence and lasting dynamism to international struggles, it is necessary to recreate a global alternative to the inegalitarian, hypercompetitive, capitalist social model. Developing this global alternative can only be done on the basis of the current experience of popular and democratic movements and on the basis of the social, environmental and political needs that they express.”(23) This comment indicates that it effectively upholds the view that a new vanguard of mass struggle is being created in terms of the role of the anti-capitalist, anti-war and ecology movements. The aspect of the continuing limitations of the existing working class movement is acknowledged but effectively glossed over. However, the actual weakness of the new struggles is not assessed and instead only their potential to contribute towards the transformation of society is outlined. In this manner it is suggested in an optimistic manner that the possibility for internationalist forms of struggle to develop is being created. The task of the Fourth International is to relate to this situation. The problem with this analysis is not that it is enthusiastic about aspiring to relate to new forms of struggle. Any principled revolutionary Marxist tendency should attempt to connect with new popular developments. But instead the result of this orientation is that the continued unfavourable balance of class forces is being glossed over, and therefore it is suggested that a new era of class struggle is starting to occur. Instead it is necessary to accept that issues like opposition to imperialist wars are still only the activity of a minority, and the general labour movement is on the defensive. This recognition of the actual situation does not mean that we should be pessimists, but rather we should attempt to understand in the most realistic manner as possible what the current balance of class forces is. Instead of this the USFI seems to be adopting a shallow form of optimism in which the continuing domination of capital is being underestimated. This approach could be the basis to become pessimistic if what is being considered to be progress does not materialise. (This point will be analysed in terms of the perspectives of 2010.)

The overall conception of tasks is outlined in the document: 'Role and Tasks of the Fourth International'(24) It is argued that what is considered to be the onset of crisis of neoliberalism has facilitated the basis of opposition. Thus it is concluded that: “The movement against capitalist globalization is a strong lever in the renewal of the workers and social movements, and the development of a new emancipatory perspective.”(25) Such an approach would seem to have been broadly correct, but it is based on the optimistic understanding that the domination of the traditional leadership of the working class is being replaced by a new and more principled and dynamic vanguard: “From the start of the new cycle, militant, radical forces (political, social, trade union, civic and intellectual) outside the control of the traditional workers movement bureaucracies have been playing an integral role and even taken the initiative.”(26) What it would be more accurate to suggest is that the new layer of activists have operated outside of the sphere of influence of the traditional bureaucracy and as a result have been able to develop independent forms of mass action. But it would be an illusion to suggest that in some manner this process has undermined the continued domination of the existing leadership of the labour movement. Furthermore, it is also a flawed view for the USFI to suggest that the anti-capitalist movement can unify the exploited and oppressed. Instead of this possibility what is actually occurring is the creation of a new, but small layer of dedicated activists. Their influence did become popular in 2003 because of the anti-war agitation, but this did not mean that a new form of effective leadership was being created. Hence the USFI was both right and wrong with the following comment: “We find ourselves in a new, very particular situation. The working class is still in a position of weakness, on the defensive, but the radical left is recovering and regaining the political initiative on a grand scale.”(27) What is ignored by this view is that the radical left were still isolated because of the very weakness of the working class. Furthermore, a few mass mobilisations could not overcome the ultimate situation of the limitations of the anti-capitalist movement. What was occurring was that a few activists could mobilise mass actions around popular issues. But such a possibility was conjunctural and was not sustained. Indeed the actual invasion of Iraq by the USA and UK actually demoralised the mass anti-war movement because many of the participants in this action believed that they could effectively oppose the possibility of war. The result was the decline of the anti-war agitation, and the anti-capitalist movement was reduced to a few dedicated activists. Such a fluctuating situation could not revive the labour movement.

In contrast to a realistic perspective, the USFI considered that the dynamism of the anti-capitalist movement could begin the renewal of the role of the working class and so promote the possibility of revolutionary struggle: “The road that lies between us will be long and difficult between the present moment, when the reorganization of the social movement is beginning, and the later stage when a turnaround in the class relationship of forces will relaunch offensive battles on an international scale, creating a favourable ideological and political climate for a socialist perspective.”(28) The problem with this approach is that what could be considered to be a possibility is defined in terms of being a probability or an expression of a supposed favourable logic of class struggle. What is not considered is that the anti-capitalist movement was not yet strong enough in order to promote the renewal of the labour movement. More than the determined actions of a few dedicated activists were required in order to facilitate the transformation of the trade unions into militant organisations. Indeed it could be argued that this was not the aim of the anti-capitalist struggle which considered its struggle in terms of generating concern about global justice, the problem of war and ecology. Hence it could be argued that it was only the various forces claiming to be Trotskyist that had an aim of connecting the anti-capitalist movement with the concerns of the trade unions. Instead of recognising this situation, the USFI had the illusion that unity between the forces claiming to be against the offensive of capital, was imminent. However the dilemma was that in order for this eventuality to be realised required a process of ideological transformation. Both the anti-capitalists and the trade unions had to be won to the perspective of revolutionary Marxism. What the USFI could not acknowledge was that its weakness, and that of similar groups, meant that its very perspective of developing a revolutionary form of struggle was unlikely to be realised in the near future. Ironically arguing that anti-capitalism was likely to promote unity with the trade unions had the opposite effect because the activists did not have this intention. Instead what was required was that the USFI, and similar forces, attempt to win the support of the anti-capitalists for a revolutionary conception of class struggle. But the very opportunism of the USFI meant that they could not explicitly outline the existing limitations of the anti-capitalists such as their effective unwillingness to strive for unity with the labour movement. Only a critical approach could establish the limitations of the present radical forces and instead establish what needed to be realised if this situation was to be overcome. In contrast, the uncritical opportunism of the USFI was counter-productive.

Hence instead of outlining the difficulties of the present, the USFI had a confident perspective that contended: “We do this work in the conviction that activists will emerge from a flourishing mass movement to build a revolutionary socialist mass party rooted in the proletariat.”(29) What was not recognised with this comment, and the related confident understanding that activists and revolutionary forces could work together, was that this possibility would be difficult to develop. What was not acknowledged was that the anti-capitalist forces were often against the role of a party and considered that organisation should be informal and decentralised. Indeed this point is effectively recognised by the USFI which dilutes its conception of revolutionary work to the role of campaigns and to agitating against international summits. In this sense its effective programme is reduced to that of the anti-capitalist campaigners, and so an emphasis is given to cancelling the Third World Debt, promoting the Tobin Tax, opposing institutions like the World Bank and IMF, and for ecology issues. This minimum programme is not connected to more revolutionary demands, and the aim of socialism is not elaborated. Thus to all intents and purposes, the USFI has become an expression of activism. Formally, there is an emphasis on the necessity of a transformation from spontaneous anti-capitalism to a socialist programme, but this does not undermine the importance given to activism. Instead the overall perspective is about how the potential of the anti-capitalist movement provides the basis for the transformation of the class struggle. In a sense what are being expressed are doubts about the possibility to generate effective struggles by the labour movement.

It is admitted that an important aim is to promote the militant renewal of the trade unions. This task is outlined in terms of making common sense suggestions for making a contribution towards the regeneration of the unions. But there is no attempt to relate the problems of the defensive character of the unions to their present inability to act in order to defend their members. So what is not outlined is that the defensive character of the unions is totally inadequate in order to oppose the offensive of capital against labour. The only manner in which the unions can become effective is to adopt a new and offensive strategy which would mean that instead of concentrating on trying to uphold the limited gains within capitalism, the unions would attempt to establish workers control of industry. Indeed it would be vital that revolutionary Marxists uphold this perspective in terms of outlining how it represents the only effective manner in which the offensive of capital can be truly undermined. This means that strikes should become the pretext to promote the possibility of workers control. Instead of this standpoint, the USFI effectively has doubts about the ability to renew the struggles of the working class and instead emphasises the ability of the new layer of activists.

The result of this standpoint is that the major aim of what have been proletarian parties is that they should re-define themselves as anti-capitalist. This means that there should be a regroupment of revolutionary parties in these terms. This process of recomposition means that unification between revolutionary and reformist trends are permissible. The aim of opposing neoliberalism means that the dilution of what have been Marxist organisations is allowed. In contrast, it is defined as sectarian to uphold a distinctive identity. Hence it is the very role of the revolutionary left to promote this task of the formation of anti-capitalist parties: “Only the revolutionary left is currently in a position to take the initiative for anti-capitalist recomposition and keep it on course with a radical, pluralist, socially rooted project with a mass character. But this implies a deep, well thought out rejection of sectarianism in practice.”(30) Thus the traditional aim of creating a Trotskyist party is effectively defined as being an expression of ultra-leftism. In order to justify this standpoint the programme of this new party is defined by anti-capitalism and the approach of the transitional programme is diluted into a minimum programme that would be acceptable to activists. This apparent opportunism is justified in terms of the necessity of unity and the building of what is considered to be a broad left wing political organisation. But in order to uphold this standpoint it is being argued that the character of the class struggle has been changed by the role of the anti-capitalist activists. Hence the party has to modify its objectives and aims in order to relate to this new dynamic social force with revolutionary potential. But it could be argued that this modification of perspectives involves impressionism and an effective adherence to opportunism. Most importantly the tasks of the primary aspects of the class struggle, how to regenerate the labour movement, are being neglected.

The USFI ultimately argues that the present situation is so different to that of the past that the immediate task is to refound the programme. Apparently the new ascendency of the anti-capitalist movement has meant that the programme of 1938 has become inadequate. However, what this standpoint could justify given the new emphasis on the role of the anti-capitalist party, is the necessity to dilute the perspective of proletarian revolution. Obviously the changing situation will constantly call for adjustments to be made to the programme, such as the regular elaboration of new perspectives. But it could be argued that the approach of the USFI is suggesting more than this type of modification, instead it wants to make systematic its apparent degeneration into extremely right wing centrism. In other words they have become disorientated by the continued decline of the militancy of the traditional labour movement on the one hand, and the ascendency of the anti-capitalist activist on the other. The result is that they consider the programme of revolutionary Marxism to have become outdated. What is being expressed is not the welcome call for theoretical innovation but instead the dilution of principles and aims so that they become acceptable to the general consciousness of the anti-capitalist activist. In the name of opposing dogmatism they are attempting to justify the revision of programme and the perspective of proletarian revolution. This regression is not surprising given the consistent acceptance of right wing centrism by the USFI.

The document comments: “The new historical period of capitalism and revolutionary socialist struggle will call for genuine programmatic refoundation, which will take the full measure of the structural, social and cultural upheavals both within capitalism and among the exploited classes and oppressed layers. This refounded programme will include a critical balance sheet of the first 150 years of the workers movement and of the experience of the first victorious socialist revolutions and their degeneration. It will take account of the current state of consciousness among the popular masses and link up with their demands and modes of action and organization. We will contribute as much as possible to this programme, while keeping in mind that a transitional programme for the 21st century will not be the prerogative of one group of specific current.”(30) In terms of how this aim of re-elaborating the programme is outlined it would seem to be justified in reasonable terms. The very changing and complex events since the initial transitional programme was adopted would seem to indicate that a new programme that was able to explain novel developments, especially since the advent of world war two, would seem to be justified. The problem is that intention to reconstruct the programme could also become the basis to uphold the recent impressionism of the USFI in terms of their understanding of the character of the class struggle. Most importantly what they could be trying to uphold is the view that the anti-capitalist activists have become the most important social force for change. They may be preparing to argue that the traditional working class is no longer the most suitable or effective agency of social change, and that instead the activists have become the vanguard of the process of the transformation of society. Indeed, this is the logical conclusion of the various documents being submitted to the 2003 conference.

Formally, the USFI maintains that its emphasis is still on the role of the working class. Hence it is argued that: “The decisive role for anti-capitalist and socialist strategy of the globalized waged class....The analysis must include the multiplicity of the working class's concrete situations, its methods of struggle, its immediate demands and forms of organization.”(31) But this formal commitment to the continued social importance of the role of the working class is outlined alongside an uneasy empirical recognition of the new significance of the anti-capitalist activist. In terms of the commitment to programme what is outlined is the necessity of the workers and peasants alliance in global terms. This view can be welcomed, but this approach seems secondary when compared to the emphasis on the contemporary importance of the new mass revolutionary and internationalist anti-capitalist forces. Indeed it is argued that the World Social Forum that has been organised by these activists could become the basis to create a new international. The progressive character of the anti-capitalists is that they organise outside of the control of the traditional Social Democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies, even if they are also reluctant to support the revolutionary parties. However, this aspect does not discourage the USFI from outlining reasons why it considers that this reluctance to support principled Marxism could be overcome: “At the same time this movement is deeply political. It has imposed a spectacular polarization against the ruling classes; relaunched an anti-capitalist perspective and a hope of emancipation and created a public space that is both centralized and decentralized, in which analytical thinking is combined with political confrontation and activist commitment, a terrain where political currents exist de facto.”(32)

Thus the central issue for the USFI is how to promote the development of a political situation in which the anti-capitalist activists would become more willing to support the creation of a new international. Such a prospect would imply that much of the existing Marxist programme could be diluted in order to realise this aim. In other words to what extent would the very perspective of proletarian revolution itself be compromised in order to further this process of unity? The problem is that the activists did not want unity with Marxist forces. Hence they must consider that some aspects of the programme of Marxism are problematical or superfluous. Indeed it could be argued that their aim was to create organisations in which the emphasis was on action, and the role of theory, such as evaluating the history of the class struggle, was considered to be irrelevant. Thus the question confronting the USFI was would they be prepared to compromise important aspects of their programme in order to contemplate developing unity with the anti-capitalist forces? Such a possibility would seem to be the logical conclusion of the following view: “We cannot imagine the qualitative step towards the creation of a new international without an important contribution from these new forces. These important but diverse forces cannot be formed into a new international political organisation at this stage but they can be strengthened politically through a process of experience and clarification and by the intervention in these debates of the revolutionary forces, especially the FI.”(33) The question of unity is defined according to the terms of the anti-capitalists. Therefore the actual issue is to what extent will the USFI compromise in order to achieve regroupment? In order to try and maintain orthodox credentials the USFI maintains that it will be developments in the class struggle which will create the political conditions for the emergence of a new anti-capitalist organisation. But this perspective tells us nothing about what aspects of the programme the USFI may be prepared to sacrifice in order to realise unity. The indicator of their standpoint is outlined by their view about the possibilities for unification between Marxist groups: “Rapprochement between organizations identifying with Marxism and the socialist revolution can only make sense in relation to the battles, the real movement and the tasks of today and the future.”(34) Thus they are suggesting that unity with the anti-capitalists is actually more promising for the USFI because it will be about the political tasks of the present, and so does not concentrate on issues that occurred in the past. This indicates that the dynamic of the approach of the USFI was the necessity to develop common action in the present, and this possibility could create the basis of the formation of a new anti-capitalist party. Such an emphasis establishes that the most favourable basis for unity is with the anti-capitalist activists rather than the generally 'dogmatic' Marxist groups. Bu the logic of such a possibility is that the very aim of upholding a revolutionary challenge to capitalism and striving for socialism could be replaced by the protest politics of the activists.

In a historical sense, the USFI denies that an accommodation to opportunist politics is their aim. Instead they still contend that they are the authentic continuators of the approach of Trotskyism and that upheld the transitional programme in difficult circumstances, including the period of the offensive of capital in the 1980's and 1990's. But this claim to uphold the principles of Marxism is combined with a pragmatic orientation in the present: “Our main task as the FI is to contribute to a vast reorganization of the workers, social and political movement on a world scale, with the perspective of forming a new internationalist, pluralist, revolutionary and activist force with a mass impact. This perspective will inevitably mean going through a long process of political experiences and clarifications.”(35) In practice their major orientation will not be about the renewal of the class struggle but instead generating united front work with anti-capitalist activists in order to create the possibility to form a new party. But if this aim is to be realised, the tendency to dilute the aims and programme of the USFI could become inevitable. Indeed this prospect is outlined explicitly when it is accepted that the influence of the USFI has not been expressed in terms of practical unifying developments. Therefore: “The conclusion is that a revolutionary Marxist organization must be capable of demonstrating that it has a specific political function to fulfil in day-to-day activity, mass work and movements.”(36) In other words the USFI must prove that it is practical in its political work, which implies that its orientation to the anti-capitalists be improved.(37) If the requirements of practice suggest that theoretical revisions must be made, such a perspective seems to be implied by the emphasis on the importance of activism. Formally the USFI contends that it should not underestimate the role of revolutionary Marxist organisation, but this opportunist conclusion seems to be implied by their opportunist trajectory.

The 16th World Congress of the USFI occurred in 2010. The 'Report on the International Situation' was one of the most important documents. (38) It outlines the seriousness of the economic crisis and the related weakness of globalisation. The USA is undergoing relative decline compared to the emergence of China as a powerful rival. Left wing developments in Bolivia and Venezuela are outlined. The emphasis is also on the importance of the issue of ecology and a programme of demands for a workers government is outlined. These demands do express the attempt to promote socialism. What is emphasised is defence of the welfare state, expansion of public services, distribution of wealth, nationalisation of the banks, and planned economy under workers control, tackling ecological issues, and rejection of Keynesianism as inadequate. This programme is brief, but it can be welcome insofar as it implies a left wing advance since the emphasis on the role of anti-capitalism. The perspective of change that is being outlined in the document would be a satisfactory basis to generate the possibility to overcome the domination of capital and instead establish a workers government that aimed to promote the possibility of socialism or different relations of production. But what is omitted is any perspective about how this process of transformation could be realised. For example, it does not elaborate any conception of the role of workers control within capitalism which could generate the transformation of the relations of production in order to establish the emergence of a different type of economic logic. Nor does it refer to important tactics like the general strike, or the necessity of a mass movement in favour of the formation of the workers government. But despite these omissions it could be suggested that the USFI is not adapting to the logic of anti-capitalist activists and their reticence to support socialism. Instead, despite being outlined in brief the USFI has outlined a principled platform for a workers government to adopt.

Another document presented to the 2010 Congress of the USFI is: 'Mobilization for the climate and Anti-Capitalist strategy'(39) This outlines in a convincing manner how the capitalist system disregards the interests of ecology and that only a different socialist society can ensure that the concerns of the environment are upheld. Hence what is being outlined is a serious argument that Marxists should consider themselves to be eco-socialist because the aims of the ecology and socialism are interconnected. This document is connected to another one entitled: 'Capitalist Climate Change and Our Tasks'.(40) The analysis makes another useful contribution to how capitalism undermines the interests of the environment, and contends that socialism should be based on addressing the problems inherited from a system that makes profit more important than ecological concerns. Hence what is being argued for is that any credible socialist platform should connect the issue of the environment with the perspective of social justice. Such a standpoint should make no concessions to the Malthusian view that supposed over-population is a major cause of ecological problems. A useful list of demands is outlined in terms of a minimum programme including the struggle for peace, ending poverty, upholding equal rights, access for peasants to land, opposing privatisation of services like water, developing a plan for global ecological sustainability. (41) These two documents represent a very important contribution to our understanding of the relationship of ecological concerns to the importance of socialism. People can learn much useful information from these studies.

The document for the 2010 Congress: 'Role and Tasks of the Fourth International' is less optimistic than the perspectives for the 2003 congress in that it outlines how the economic crisis is intensifying the attempt to undermine the social gains of working people.(42) Instead of the previous emphasis on the promise of the role of the anti-capitalist activists, the document comments: “Social fightbacks are continuing to rise on a world scale but in a very unequal fashion and remain on the defensive. The global justice movement has lost the dynamism that it had up to 2004.”(43) In this one brief comment it is admitted that the whole emphasis of the perspectives of the USFI in 2003 has been discredited. The expectations they had of the global justice activists has not been realised and instead the USFI will have to revise its political approach. Instead the emphasis returns to the role of the working class, but it is admitted that their struggles are still of a defensive character. Indeed it is admitted that anti-capitalist consciousness has evaporated and that reactionary forms of consciousness may become ascendant. In a cautious manner there is an emphasis on the importance of radicalisation in Latin America, but this is not able to overcome the obvious fact that the Lula government in Brazil has not realised the expectations of the USFI. It is also noted that Social Democracy is continuing its evolution towards accommodation with neo-liberalism. Thus the USFI is aware that its task of creating an anti-capitalist and progressive left wing is in crisis, and that the social forces for this development have effectively become defunct. Thus it has no other option than to emphasise the importance of the class struggle and the necessity of the self-organisation of the workers. But this perspective is outlined in terms of continued adherence to the aim of promoting anti-capitalist parties: “Building broad anti-capitalist parties is the current response we offer to the crisis in the workers and left movement and the need for its reconstruction.”(44)

In other words it could not be said that the reluctant recognition of the necessity to reassess the apparent failure of the project to create anti-capitalist parties around the global justice activists has led to an assertion of a left wing development. Instead the USFI is trying to suggest that they have become the anti-capitalist party because of the decline of their hoped for allies. Hence what is still being rejected is any suggestion that they should orientate towards the other forces of the revolutionary left. Instead they emphatically contend: “It is not a question of taking up the old formulas of regroupment of revolutionary currents alone. The ambition is to bring together forces beyond simply revolutionary ones. These latter can be a support in the process of bringing forces together as long as they are clearly for building anti-capitalist parties.”(45) The problem with this perspective is that it now lacks any credibility because of the apparent demise of the activists who composed the anti-capitalist forces. Instead the USFI can only vaguely hope that it will be possible to create new political parties which are to the left of Social Democracy. In actuality they have to admit that they are only able to work with organisations of a similar political nature to themselves, such as the Scottish Socialist Party, and the Portuguese Left Bloc. In terms of the World Social Forum it has to be admitted that its possibilities were never realised because of the decline of the anti-capitalist forces.

Formally the USFI still declared that it upheld a programme that was transitional and based on promoting the class struggle, but it admits that it: 'does not have the legitimacy to represent in and of itself the new mass international that we need'(46) So despite the apparent failures of its attempt to create a new anti-capitalist organisation the USFI still insists that this is its aim. Hence in a modest manner, it is accepting that its programme cannot be the basis of the creation of a genuine international organisation of the working class. Instead only via the role of political and organisational compromise will it be possible to establish a credible and effective anti-capitalist party. In contrast, it is also against reconstruction of the Fourth International through a process of fusion with other Trotskyist tendencies because they apparently lack genuine expression of democracy. But the USFI would be willing to have participated in Chavez's call to form a new fifth international. The aim would be to establish a programme that all could agree with and to uphold a democratic form of organisation. In other words, the USFI remained committed to consulting with forces that were effectively more right wing than itself, but was against establishing relations with rival left wing groupings. This indicated the continued right wing trajectory of the USFI, which still took the now discredited form of upholding the failed policy of trying to create anti-capitalist parties. The problems with this standpoint were glossed over by the USFI because it had become obvious that the social basis for this perspective had failed. The apparent decline of the global justice movement meant that the USFI lacked the immediate prospect to develop anti-capitalist parties. An organisation that was capable of making a ‘left turn' would admit that its approach had failed, and would instead attempt to concentrate on promoting the reconstruction of the Fourth International. But the opportunism of the USFI meant that it could not transform its trajectory in this manner, and instead continued to insist on its aim of developing a broad anti-capitalist party. The only result of this standpoint is to accept that the parties of the USFI act as loyal supporters of new left wing reformist organisations like the Portuguese Left Bloc. But such opportunist organisational actions could not gloss over the fact that the actual perspectives of the USFI had become discredited. What was called for was a renewal of left wing policies and attempts to re-establish connections with the other Trotskyists. But instead of that possibility, the USFI could only try to consolidate its failed policies in terms of continuing regroupments of what were effectively flawed examples of an anti-capitalist party. The result of such developments could only be the continued dilution of Marxist politics in the name of unity and the interests of the class struggle.

Consequently, the standpoint of the USFI was undermined by the apparent limitations of the traditional labour movement and its inability to go beyond a defensive stance, and also by the decline of the anti-capitalist forces, which were effectively considered to be the new vanguard of the possibility to realise socialism. This meant there was an ideological crisis of the USFI but they did not respond by becoming more left wing and so trying to relate to other Trotskyist forces. Instead they continued to assert in a dogmatic manner the perspective of developing anti-capitalist parties: “In the new anti-capitalist parties which may be formed in the years to come, and which express the current stage of combativeness, experience and consciousness of the sectors that are most committed to an anti-capitalist alternative, the question of a new international is and will be posed.”(47) But this prediction was effectively wishful thinking because such developments were only occurring in a minority of countries. Indeed it was accepted that the possibility of a new international was not occurring in the present: “A new international will only be the result of a prolonged period of joint action and common understanding of events and tasks for overthrowing capitalism.”(48) Some possible examples of this development are provided by the USFI perspectives but these instances cannot express any momentum towards a new international. Indeed what they were reluctant to consider was that the various anti-capitalist parties were often nationally orientated and so were not interested in developing an international.

Thus it has to be suggested that the approach of the USFI between 2003 and 2010 was a failure. Does this mean that they were wrong to try and relate to the emerging anti-capitalist forces? Not at all. But they should have related in a more principled manner in terms of continuing to uphold a consistent perspective and emphasis on the importance of the role of the working class. The ultimate problem was that they lacked a strategy of struggle for the working class in a period of the continued offensive of capital in a situation of growing economic crisis. Instead it seemed to be suggested that anti-capitalism had provided the answer to this issues, and that the activists could become the vanguard of the class struggle. But this effective prediction was never going to happen. This illusion meant that the perspectives of the USFI were completely undermined by the decline of the role of the global justice activists. Ultimately they had to return to the standpoint of establishing the primary role of the working class, but instead of making such a principled reorientation they continued to call for the formation of anti-capitalist parties on what would be a minimal programme. In this context there seemed to be no mention of the role of transitional demands, except in the briefest terms, and the elaboration of a strategy of struggle was not carried out. Instead the USFI attempted to resolve its acute political crisis by a collection of organisational attempts to join and adapt to various left reformist parties, which were considered to be anti-capitalist. The major result of this development was that the USFI continued to become more opportunist. The ultimate result of this evolution was the collection of right wing documents for discussion at the 2018 world congress. In other words the point being made is that the only principled manner in which the USFI could overcome its increasingly political crisis would be to make a left wing turn and to develop more principled strategy based on a consistent recognition of the difficult demands of the class struggle. But instead of this the apparent failure of the perspectives of 2003 has led to a continued right wing evolution and the related adaptation to the role of left reformist organisations which are defined as anti-capitalist parties. The USFI has effectively adapted to these organisations and its own distinctive profile has often become obscured. Increasingly it is only independently defined by its occasional international meetings. However, the situation is not only one defined by this right wing evolution because there are left wing forms of opposition within the USFI which uphold a more principled trajectory. It should be the task of the forces of revolutionary Marxism to try and relate to these critical currents within the USFI.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) USFI 'A Congress of Optimism and Renewal' International Viewpoint, 2003 p1-5

(2) USFI A New Phase of the Workers and Social Movement, International Viewpoint 2003 p1-45

(3) ibid p3

(4) ibid p3

(5) ibid p5

(6) ibid p5

(7) ibid p5-6

(8) ibid p6

(9) ibid p7

(10) ibid p8

(11) ibid p39

(12) ibid p41

(13) ibid p42

(14) ibid p42

(15) ibid p45

(16) USFI Resistances to Capitalist Globalization, International Viewpoint 2003 p1-29

(17) ibid p4-5

(18) ibid p5

(19) ibid p7

(20) ibid p7

(21) ibid p24

(22) ibid p25

(23) ibid p27

(24) USFI Role and Tasks of the Fourth International, International Viewpoint 2003 p1-24

(25) ibid p2

(26) ibid p2-3

(27) ibid p3

(28) ibid p4

(29) ibid p4

(30) ibid p14

(31) ibid p15

(32) ibid p17

(33) ibid p17

(34) ibid p18

(35) ibid p20

(36) ibid p21

(37) ibid p21

(38) USFI Report on the International Situation, International Viewpoint 2010 p1-16

(39) USFI Mobilization for the climate and Anti-Capitalist strategy, International Viewpoint 2010 p1-10

(40) USFI Capitalist Climate Change and Our Tasks, International Viewpoint 2010 p1-18

(41) ibid p12-13

(42) USFI Role and Tasks of the Fourth International, International Viewpoint 2010 p1-16

(43) ibid p3

(44) ibid p9

(45) ibid p10

(46) ibid p12

(47) ibid p13

(48) ibid p13