

# A Contribution to Discussion on 'Revolutionary Socialism: The Minimum Platform'

Cliff Slaughter

My comment is limited at this stage to the Platform's sentences:

The different organisations coming out of the Left Opposition, having played a major role in resisting this (Stalinist) degeneration and in safeguarding the revolutionary tradition, have proved eventually to be incapable of developing this theory in correspondence with the new changing situation. A thorough review of this experience, the fight to liberate revolutionary theory from decades of decline and a serious effort in developing it in accordance with present-day conditions must be in the forefront of the tasks of all socialist revolutionaries.

I think it wrong to not differentiate, in this matter of theoretical work, between different sections of the movement calling themselves Trotskyist (for example, there was a crucially important fight against the positions of Pablo and Mandel and in this way against the pressure of Stalinism, even if later some of those who participated in that fight, like the Workers Revolutionary Party and its International Committee, fell into similar opportunist positions in relation to the national bourgeoisie in colonial and ex-colonial countries). Nonetheless I agree wholeheartedly with this emphasis on the necessity of critically reviewing the movement's experience in the context of a fight to develop Marxist theory.

For many years comrades in Trotskyist organisations conducted a fight for what they understood as 'party-building'. Today, none of us will contest that Stalinism has disintegrated, with the Communist Parties having become 'social-democratic', but at a time when social-democracy itself, as a method of capitalist rule in the advanced capitalist countries depending on control of the working class through some reform concessions, is finished, because it is no longer in accord with the needs or the capabilities of capital in the period of accelerated articulation of its structural decline (see Meszaros, *Beyond Capital*). Thus the working class has been betrayed and failed by its 'traditional' parties.

The Fourth International was founded as 'the world party of socialist revolution' in order to defend proletarian internationalism against these betrayals as long ago as 1938. When the programme of the Fourth International was revised, especially as by Pablo and Mandel, there was a fight to defend it. But it is absolutely necessary to recognise also that the 'party-building' in which we engaged for so long **did not 'build parties'**, even if from time to time

one group or another had a certain temporary influence in particular sections of the working class or the youth.

There is of course no doubt that the power and pressure of the Stalinist bureaucracy, physical as well as ideological, on the working class and particularly on the Trotskyists, imposed grave and often impossible difficulties for the building of revolutionary parties. Today the physical pressure is no more and the ideological pressure residual. We are obliged to not only expose and oppose the open bankruptcy of Stalinism and Social-Democracy as manifestations of capital's structural crisis, nor only to review the ways in which these objective changes open up the class struggle in new ways, but to review **also our own conceptions and methods of 'party-building'**, the 'subjective' side of things, as it were.

Central to the thinking of all who have tried to continue the fight of Trotsky and the International Left Opposition has been the opening section of the 1938 'Transitional Programme': 'The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat'; and again, 'The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.'

An essential fight was taken up in the Trotskyist movement against those (e.g. Michel Pablo) who effectively abandoned the fight for independent revolutionary leadership with ideas of the 'self-reform' of the Stalinist bureaucracy and of the ability of Stalinist and reformist leaderships to lead revolutions under 'mass pressure'. But was this enough? I have come round to the opinion that the 'crisis of revolutionary leadership' was until very recently understood in a dangerously wrong and narrow way. I mean to say that there was a tendency in our movement to assume that the crisis of leadership would be resolved by replacing one leadership by another (and that that other was us). This took the most extreme forms in the proclamations of more than one group that they were indeed 'the (reconstructed) Fourth International'. (Since the Fourth International was the name for a 'world party of social revolution', their claims were and are patently absurd).

Much of what went for 'party-building' was done with this conception that what was needed was to build an apparatus and train 'cadres' to **replace** the bureaucratic apparatuses of the existing parties. All those who have been working in the Trotskyist movement will recognise the outcome of this conception in the grotesque regimes which

developed under the leadership of Healy in Britain and Lambert in France and no doubt in other countries. (See especially the volume published on the occasion of the death of the French comrade Raoul).

Certainly history itself has shown that the actual results of the betrayals of Social-Democracy and Stalinism and their control of the working-class movement (not only the considerable fragmentation of the organisation and consciousness of the working class but the space and time given to capital for displacing its contradictions, achieving renewed expansion after World War Two, and prolonging its life) posed tasks which went far beyond merely replacing one leadership by another. Only in and through a wholesale necessary reconstruction and regeneration of the class movement of the proletariat, achieved in the course of the growth of a mass socialist movement, could a new revolutionary leadership be forged in the vanguard of the class.

I suggest that particularly after 1945 there was another underlying and insufficiently questioned (hardly explicit and hardly conscious) assumption, namely, that since the first act in the world socialist revolution (October 1917) the working class, except for short periods following defeats, is more or less in a state of latent readiness for revolution, requiring only our correct 'intervention' in the struggles inevitably forced upon it by capitalism in its last stage, imperialism. The extreme forms (which many of us must be criticised for having countenanced for far too long, even if we raised this or that criticism) were to be seen in the Healy WRP's insistence from the 1970's that we were in a 'revolutionary situation' and Lambert's Organisation (Parti) Communiste Internationaliste with his notion of 'the imminence of the revolution'. Here again is the fallacy that the working class, at boiling-point as it were because of the nature of the epoch since 1917, needs only to be 'supplied' with a new party. One can now see the dangers of one of Healy's standard arguments, namely that the post-World War Two working class was 'undefeated', in contrast to the working class suffering under the weight of defeats in the thirties. This was no less disarming to the movement than were the 'objectivism' and 'history is on our side' conceptions of some calling themselves Trotskyists that some of us criticised\*.

Some of us in Britain had joined the Young Communist League and the Communist Party in the immediate post-war period, and broke with Stalinism in 1956 as a result of the 20th Congress and the Hungarian Revolution. In the Stalinist movement, we were of course convinced that

\* Perhaps the most consistent thinker along this line of false conclusions from the 'crisis of leadership' was Nahuel Moreno, who discovered that in the epoch imperialist decay we can speak of the 'law of inversion of causality'! That is to say, the 'causal law' between economy and politics, between objective and subjective, is inverted. In this epoch, the objective conditions do not determine the subjective, but the reverse.

the future of mankind was ensured by the socialism being built in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China, soon to be spread over the world, and that the Communist Parties were the defenders of the October Revolution. We lived in this enthusiastic state, even though some of us always rejected Pollitt's 'How to Win the Peace', 'parliamentary roads to socialism' and 'peaceful coexistence'. On reflection, I now find myself having to face up to the reality that when we then became Trotskyists and together with Healy's group formed the Socialist Labour League, we did not by any means make the necessary thoroughgoing review of our experience and of the outlook which had kept us in the Stalinist movement. The dangerously one-sided understanding of 'crisis of leadership' to which I have referred, I now think, disposed us to underestimate the real task of overcoming that crisis of leadership.

Thus, there were some very basic reasons, rooted in our whole historical outlook, why we did not have as much success as we could have had in 'party-building' or in preparing for the day (now!) when revolutionary parties could be built. I say this without of course forgetting, I repeat, that the physical and ideological weight of Stalinism constituted a massive objective obstacle to such building. But the persistence of the flawed historical outlook I have indicated was surely itself an unrecognised product of the pressure of Stalinist ideology.

I would add that, notwithstanding the starkly brief statements of the 1938 Programme, Trotsky himself did not have this mechanical understanding of 'crisis of leadership'. Thus, in 1935:

Without the slightest exaggeration it may be said: the whole world situation is determined by the crisis of the proletarian leadership. The field of the labour movement is today still encumbered with huge remnants of the old bankrupt organisations. After the countless sacrifices and disappointments, the bulk of the European proletariat, at least, has withdrawn into its shell. The decisive lesson which it has drawn, consciously or half-consciously, from the bitter experiences, reads: Great actions require a great leadership. For current affairs, the workers still give their votes to the old organisations. Their votes - but by no means their boundless confidence. On the other hand, after the miserable collapse of the Third (Communist) International, it is much harder to move them to bestow their confidence upon a new revolutionary organisation. That is just where the crisis of the proletarian leadership lies. To sing a monotonous song about indefinite future mass actions in this situation, in contrast to the purposeful selection of cadres for a new International, means to carry on a thoroughly reactionary work...

The crisis of revolutionary leadership cannot, of course, be overcome by means of an abstract formula. **It is a question of an extremely humdrum process. But not of a purely "historical" process, that is, of the ob-**

**jective premises of conscious activity, but of an uninterrupted chain of ideological, political and organisational measures for the purpose of fusing together the best, most conscious elements of the world proletariat beneath a spotless banner, elements whose number and self-confidence must be constantly strengthened, whose connections with wider sections of the proletariat must be developed and deepened - in a word, of restoring to the proletariat, under new and highly difficult and onerous conditions, its historical leadership.** [Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1935-36, pp. 31-2]

At the discussion meeting called by International Socialist Forum on 80 years of the Russian Revolution, Istvan Meszaros took as his theme what is surely the main question, namely: the **causes** of that great historical earthquake, the October Revolution, have not gone away; on the contrary they demand revolutionary work even more urgently; therefore let us address our responsibility to collaborate in comprehending these causes, overcoming past mistakes, elaborating revolutionary perspectives which can inform the work of combining and coordinating the many struggles forced upon the working class by capital in this period of its structural crisis, and engaging in joint work to take these perspectives forward.

The Iranian comrades, particularly in their resolution 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Iran' (published in International Socialist Forum, No.1), have made a most important beginning in this work. Their 'Revolutionary Socialism: The Minimum Platform...A Proposal for Discussion' (in the same issue) can be one of the most important bases for the renewal that is needed. The form of the initial alliance to work for this renewal, as the 'Platform' indicates, must be an open one, with the participants continuing to do their own work, publish their own journals if they so wish, and so on. In his way we will begin to learn how to develop the insight of Istvan Meszaros in the closing chapters of **Beyond Capital**, i.e., that the future mass socialist movement will be 'inherently pluralist', with its component parts developing through their growing and necessary ability to combine and coordinate their efforts (and **thus** to achieve class-consciousness), not to accept 'control' (and a 'revolutionary consciousness' already formed by professed Marxists from above). Thus the revolutionary party which is necessary *will play its part of striving to learn from and give direction to the mass movements of the working class through this self-combining and self-coordinating, from within the workers' movement and not from outside or above it, thinking to **control** it.* This is the path along which the 'crisis of leadership' will be resolved.

For this reason, i.e., because the first task is to find a form of work through which the renewal of Marxism in theory and practice can be addressed, some of us proposed on 8 November to the Executive Committee of Workers International that we accept the proposal of Iranian comrades to form an alliance on the basis of their 'Minimum Theo-

retical, Political and Organisational Platform'. This was accepted, and we look forward to meetings in the immediate future to discuss how to advance this work.

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## Addendum

The above notes were based upon brief remarks made at the Forum's discussion meeting (on 80 years of the October revolution) on 2 November last. I should like to add the following extract. from notes which I had written earlier, in July of this year.

1. Marxists are obliged to strive to review their theoretical ideas and political perspectives in the light of the development of capitalism, of the class struggle and in particular the experience of the revolutionary movement and their own practice. This involves resisting, so to speak, the temptation to ignore the weight of objective changes.

Istvan Meszaros has recently drawn attention to a neglected remark of Marx (in his of 8 October 1859 letter to Engels):

The specific task of bourgeois society is the establishment of a world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon this world market. As the world is round, this seems to have been completed by the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan. **The difficult question for us is this: on the Continent the revolution is imminent and will immediately assume a socialist character. Is it not bound to be crushed in this little corner, considering that in a far greater territory the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant?** [my emphasis, CS]

Meszaros points to the implications of this remark for the question of what processes must take place before capital would reach its 'structural limits'. One could add another aspect.

Marx's expectations of 'imminent' revolution in Europe proved to be misplaced (which of course did not in any way lead him to question his conviction that capital's production relations would be unable to contain the productive forces developed under capitalism itself, and that in 'becoming conscious of these contradictions and fighting them out', the working class would make a socialist revolution). But it is interesting to see that Marx, on the basis of the objective facts of capital's international expansion, thought that a socialist revolution isolated in 'one corner of the world', even the most advanced one, Europe (let alone in backward Russia), might be 'bound to be crushed'.

Looking today at the implications for the socialist revolu-

tion of this world-wide spread of capitalism to which Marx referred, it is naturally not 'revisionist' to say that, in contrast to Marx's expectations in the middle of the eighteenth century of proletarian revolutions in Europe, the period after the early 1920's has seen the working class outside the imperialist countries more likely to be compelled to engage in revolutionary struggles than the better-off workers (at the former's expense) of Europe and North America. This does not at all mean that socialism can or will develop in the more backward countries, or that Marxists should 'concentrate' on those backward countries. After all, Lenin's 'weakest link' understanding of the Russian revolution and Trotsky's explanation of uneven and combined development and permanent revolution long ago anticipated the revolutionary answer to such ideas.

2. Lenin, in his last writings (the 'Testament') sees himself as guilty before all the workers of Russia for having underestimated the bureaucratism and reactionary elements which had already (1923-24) come to the top in party and state. He was, at the same time, convinced that the World War and October had opened the 'epoch of wars and revolutions' and, even after the defeats in Germany, Hungary and Italy, looked to the rallying of the best of the working class to the Communist International to ensure that even with further reverses the isolation of the Russian revolution would soon be overcome.

That was **three-quarters of a century ago**. There are no successful proletarian revolutions in the imperialist countries. The results of the revolutionary victory in Russia were, because of the counter-revolutionary usurpation of power by the bureaucracy, accommodated by imperialism for decades, as they were in Eastern Europe and China. The power of Stalinism in that period enabled capitalism to ride out revolutionary struggles in the rest of the world and to displace and defer the eruption of its historical contradiction. (If we understand the depth of these products of the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism, we will understand better the great intensification of the contradictions of capital unleashed by the collapse of Stalinism, the opposite of the appearance of expansion of capital manifested in the current restoration of capitalism in the ex-Stalinist countries.) In the scores of revolutionary struggles for liberation fought by workers and poor peasants in Latin America, Africa and Asia, it is the bourgeoisie (for years aided and abetted by the international Stalinist apparatus) into whose hands the power has fallen, and national bourgeois states turn bloody repression against the workers and peasants.

It could of course not be expected that Lenin or anyone else could have anticipated the 'world order' (imperialism, Stalinism, 'cold war', 'socialist camp', peaceful co-existence and peaceful competition, etc.) that was made possible by the betrayals after 1924, especially the victory of Nazism in Germany, the Spanish defeat, World War Two and the 'post-war settlement' in which the imperialists and the Stalinists successfully sealed off the

working class of Eastern Europe from its brothers in the West. Trotsky was surely right to insist that 'the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus', but 'laws of history' do not make revolutions, and nor are they immutable. They are another word for the **developing contradictions** of class society. And these contradictions result in great class struggles. And in these great struggles 'men become conscious of the contradictions and **fight them out**'.

The working class in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist period could not succeed in doing that. Another way of saying this is: under the enormous pressure of the defeats and their consequences - the essence of which was the relationship of forces between capital and a working class terrorised and ideologically dominated by Stalinism - the Marxists of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International were unable to find a strategy and organisation and a relationship with the struggles of the class which could rearm that class and enable it to resolve its 'crisis of leadership'. Under this heading come the many ways in which 'pressure of Stalinism' led to revisionism in the Fourth International (and not only Pablo's 'centuries of degenerated workers' states' or 'dual nature of Stalinism' or the eventual 'Spartacist' type of degeneration, but also the prostration before bourgeois nationalist forces).

3. So we have already arrived at Trotsky and Trotskyism. When Trotsky fell to the assassin in 1940 it was 'midnight in the century'. Trotsky proclaimed 'I am confident in the victory of the Fourth International. Go forward!' He did think that proletarian revolutions would follow the war as a result of the same contradictions which had caused the war. He thought that Stalinism would not be able to halt this revolutionary wave. As part of this perspective, he gave great weight to the contradictions within the Soviet bureaucracy itself, writing about the revolutionary positions of the 'Reiss faction'. Despite his profound understanding that Stalinism was 'counter-revolutionary through and through' he could not possibly have knowledge, at that point, of the depth of the repression which wiped out not only the Reiss faction but every single living expression of opposition, and not only in the Soviet Union.

Trotsky's central thesis of 'the crisis of working-class revolutionary leadership' proved to be a formulation on the basis of which Trotskyists in their concentration on 'the subjective factor' failed to give the necessary consideration to the historical analysis of the objective world (as if it was enough to say 'epoch of wars and revolutions', 'last stage of capitalism', 'all the objective prerequisites for socialism exist, only the crisis of leadership needs to be resolved', and so on). In this way it was virtually taken for granted that when we say, 'the working class is the only revolutionary class in society we mean it is, in capitalism's last stage, always ready for revolution provided only it is supplied with the right leadership.

This kind of thinking, I maintain, is by no means the least

of the sources of that conception of 'building the revolutionary party' which thinks of the party as a wellinformed apparatus which will replace the existing 'traditional' leaderships. There was a neglect of theory, in that 'Marxism was taken for granted and the main work done was in explaining and exposing Stalinism. The school of 'Revolutionary History' is useful but is no answer to this.(The Healy 'philosophy' is not worth referring to.)

Inevitably Trotsky's thinking was dominated by the revolutionary nature of the period opened up by October 1917, and he fought a bitter struggle against all those who saw something permanent or semi-permanent in the victories of fascism and the Stalinist, bureaucracy. It is **not enough** to say such things as that Trotsky's prognosis of new revolutions was 'negatively confirmed' in 1944-45, On the basis of Stalinism's counter-revolutionary repressions and betrayals and of its 'settlement' with the victorious imperialists, there were great objective changes: imperialism was able to enter a new phase of its development, an expansionary phase within its 'last stage', imperialism turning the destruction of the war and the military and economic demands of the 'Cold War' to its advantage, releasing the full might of the now established hegemony of U.S. capitalism on a global scale. Its historical contradictions were displaced' and their eruption to Q great extent deferred for a whole generation, only to appear from the 1970's onwards with even greater repressed force and on the world scale.

Trotskyists explained many times that the post-war expansion was due not to some inherent potential of capital to overcome its contradictions and serve society's progress but rather a result of Stalinism's 8 betrayals. What they did not analyse, understand or explain was the social reality created by that expansion (and its relation to Stalinism). That neglect of theory came dangerously close to disarming the working class in face of the later eruption of capital's 8 contradictions with redoubled force as the structural crisis rapidly unfolds in every sphere of economy, society, politics and ideology. I repeat what I have said already several times to my own comrades: it was left to Istvan Meszaros ('Beyond Capital' and 'The Power of Ideology') to do the necessary work.

4. We all know that Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky were no prophets but men who saw their theories as a **guide to action**. And so, more than once they saw the need to 'measure' their own ideas and achievements against the real development of what Marx called the 'class movement' of the proletariat and of the class struggle as a whole. Now, we lesser mortals who strive to fight in continuity with their fight have to do the same thing. The Fourth International after 1940 did not have any Marxists to compare in any way with Marx, Engels, Lenin or Trotsky (ask where are the 'works' of any Trotskyist since Trotsky's death). But I maintain that an **accounting** of where Trotskyism stands now is positively essential. Why? Much could be written (and will be) about this, but I am thinking of something as short as the Critique of the Gotha

Programme or even the few sentences in Lenin's 'Testament'.

I say '**positively** essential' because we we have the responsibility and real possibility to go forward with a resurgence (reconstruction, reconstitution, revival) of the essentially internationalist class movement of the proletariat, after the generations of reaction characterised above all by the domination of Stalinism and the consequent time and space given for capital's expansion.

What are these 'real possibilities' and responsibilities? The expansion achieved by capitalism after World War Two has reached its limits. This has been true for some time, but only with the collapse of its main pillar, Stalinism, has it become more and more apparent. That collapse was not an 'external factor' but part of and contributor to the articulation of the present phase of capital's structural historical crisis.

Stalinism is no more! The worst thing Trotskyists could do, after 1990, is to continue as if Trotskyism was a being whose alter ego is Stalinism (Trotskyism properly understood, as the continuation of Marxism, was never merely that). The working class now confronts the class enemy without the weight of Stalinism, despite the dangerous survivals of its ideological legacy. It confronts a class enemy whose room for manoeuvre is for that reason massively reduced; but the fact that capital is now battering against its structural limits also reduces that room for manoeuvre. The ruling class conducts, necessarily, a continuous offensive against the working class, provoking defensive struggles which are not yet, or in themselves, combined into the movement of the class as a class. The building of revolutionary leadership cannot be done except in and through this struggle, with all its new characteristics produced by the contradictions of capital at this new stage. **New theoretical tasks! New ways of working in the class movement of the workers! Confidence in the working class and in ourselves!**

