

Towards a Revolutionary Programme

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(Based largely on a paper introducing a discussion at the International Socialist Forum, March 1998.)

I. Introduction: some elementary considerations

1. A great deal of work and collaboration is needed for the elaboration of a programme adequate to the situation in which the international working class finds itself at the end of the century. No one has such a programme.
2. The programme must be specific, concrete. In order to make any progress towards it, work is necessary to clarify a common theoretical and methodological basis: the concrete is not arrived at except through abstractions and analysis.
3. In beginning this work, it is unfortunately necessary to state the obvious: that we need a sober understanding of where and who we are, namely not a party (let alone a 'mass party') with majority or even significant minority following in the working class, putting before it our programme. Rather, we are at the point of clarifying as far as we can the problems faced by the vanguard which comes forward in the working class as it is forced to break from reformism (the Labour Party, in Britain).
4. Programme, in the sense we are working for it here, means not a list of demands, minimum and/or transitional. It must be a demonstration of the necessity of socialism arising out of the structural crisis/contradictions of capital and out of the prerequisites prepared by the socialisation of production under capitalism. It must, as part of this demonstration, indicate the main lines of an answer to the basic questions of how the working class will carry out its historic task, and what obstacles it must overcome.

II. Theoretical considerations

Without thinking this through theoretically, there will be only a fruitless and unfortunately all too familiar exchange about revisions or modifications of existing programmes, e.g. the 1938 Transitional Programme, instead of a real development from the Communist Manifesto and subsequent programmes.

1. Often quoted is Marx's aphorism: 'Theory becomes a

material force as soon as it grips the masses'. It has too often been understood as: 'the "theory" which we have must be grasped by the masses'. Instead, it is necessary to read a few lines later in Marx's text, and take heed: 'Theory must reflect the needs of the masses'.

Marx is here writing about the need of the masses to liberate themselves, to make their own revolution. And he includes in this all the felt needs of workers to defend themselves, to prevent their degradation at the hands of capital, to ensure the minimum standards of human existence, to have a measure of human dignity.

It must be stressed at this point that defence against degradation and decadence is surely even more necessary than it was in Marx's day, when capitalism was still in the ascendant, still carrying forward the development of humanity's productive forces. However, this defence takes place today under conditions where the existing, essentially defensive, organs of the working-class movement are not only inadequate but have been incorporated into the mechanisms of capitalist control. This consideration has as its true context the historical nature of the period in which we are living.

2. With reference to some of the campaigns now being conducted, it should be said that programme cannot be confined to an assertion of working-class or human 'rights' which cannot in itself challenge the system as a whole. While the work of socialists must address all the demands and struggles of all sections of the working class, the guiding principle of our organising work and political line must have as its content and must express the historical nature, role and destiny of the proletariat in putting an end to class society and thus abolishing itself as a class.

This basic discovery of Marx's, that class society in its self-movement itself brought into existence the class which must overcome the most developed form of alienation and exploitation, is the fundamental basis of any revolutionary programme. This of course entails the content of Marx's rejection of idealism and of 'contemplative' materialism, and his consequent assertion of praxis, conscious revolutionary-practical activity: the overcoming of alienation not in the head and not as individuals, but through the self-emancipation of the proletariat, which in abolishing classes emancipates humanity.

- 3 Marx's first use of the term 'permanent revolution' was not in his writings following the revolutions of 1848 but much earlier, in his essay 'On the Jewish Question' (1843).

His purpose was to emphasise that the proletariat is the class whose revolution goes beyond the taking of political power to 'permanent' (ongoing) transformation of the foundations of social life, of man's whole social being. We have too often seen the theory of 'permanent revolution' as nothing more than the (highly important, it goes without saying) refutation of the 'two-stage' theory, i.e. the 'theory' (most systematically advanced by the Stalinists) that proletarian leadership and the proletarian revolution can become the perspective of the working-class movement only after the 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution is achieved. Instead, it is necessary to strive to grasp the implications of this social revolution. This mistake was undoubtedly part and parcel of the tendency of Trotskyists to give an over-political, over-historical emphasis to the tasks of Marxists. This tendency was understandable, perhaps even inevitable, in the conditions of isolation and repression imposed by Stalinism; but it was also harmful, and not to correct it would be fatal. It affects directly this question of programme.

We have tended to discuss programme (including the 1938 Transitional Programme of the Fourth International) exclusively from the standpoint of the conquest of political power by the working class and the transitional demands which can help advance the consciousness and organisation of the working class from its present state towards that conquest. Now, learning from experience as well as from these abstract considerations, we must surely take on board what Meszaros has recently stressed: that the fundamental division of labour imposed by capital must be challenged and must begin to be broken in the course of the revolution.

And here we reach the most crucial, and at the same time the most difficult, questions of programme, in every country, and not only as they did in Russia when capitalism broke 'at its weakest link'. There, the penalty paid by the Russian people for the isolation of a relatively backward capitalist country is clear for all to see, as is the exaggerated form it gave to the reactionary utopia of 'socialism in a single country'. But the question of a real transfer of power to the social body, to the masses, goes beyond the conquest of state power. This question, a fundamental one if the state really is to begin to 'wither away' from the day of the proletarian revolution, has to be addressed by all who seek to develop a truly revolutionary programme.

III 'Inroads into the domination of capital'?

Creative thinking about programme, and the work based on this thinking, must therefore have as one of its main objectives the study of how the domination of capital over the very lifeblood of society can and must be challenged by the working class itself (that is what social revolution means) and not only how class-consciousness of the need to take state power develops in ideas and practice.

Now, this difficult question of 'inroads into the domination of capital' (Meszaros) inevitably provokes the rejoinder: how could such 'inroads' avoid the fate of being mere utopian islands doomed to defeat, since the economy as a whole, with its international division of labour, remains capitalist? Of course, the idea of defending communities from destruction (for example by schemes of 'mutual aid' or the use of alternative technology), or of imposing social control or workers' control on jobs, etc, etc, must on no account be counterposed to the revolutionary struggle for state power. But it is a more difficult and important question than can be dealt with by that simple posing of alternatives. In a letter of Istvan Meszaros (1992) he uses the phrase, 'transfer power (in the course of the conquest of power) to the social body'.

Thus, (a) forms of resistance and initiative must be developed and nurtured which, as the conditions of severe social and political crisis mature, giving rise to mass struggles which raise the question of state power, can be transformed by the working class itself into organs of social control. From the other side of the question, as it were, (b) the political struggle in preparation for these conditions of major crisis must be conducted in full awareness of the vital importance of the forms of struggle in (a) above and in intimate connection with them. The organs of struggle for power and of workers' state power - so far as we know, workers' councils - will in this way be enabled to be at the same time organs of social control in production and distribution.

Especially in view of the bitter experiences of the working class with Stalinism's 'command economy' and bureaucratism, as well as with the reformist 'nationalisation' and 'state control', this aspect of the programme must be central for the new party which the working class will have. That is, the programme will not be some abstract formula promising god knows what but must strive to express how and why the working class itself undertakes its self-emancipation. This is what Rosa Luxemburg means in *Reform and Revolution*, when she writes: 'If our programme contains the formula of the historic development of society from capitalism to socialism, it must also formulate, in all its fundamental characteristics, all the transitory phases of this development, and it should, consequently, be able to indicate to the proletariat what ought to be its corresponding action at every moment on the road towards socialism.'

It is in this fundamental sense that still today, as Marx put it in 1851, the 'battle-cry' of the working class is 'the permanent revolution'. So deep and insoluble are the problems thrust forward by capital's structural crisis that we should by no means assume that we are decades away from major class confrontations. Take the problem of unemployment: Francois Chesnais has rightly raised the question of perspectives for the movement in France today, asking: how can it develop without a broader development of working-class democracy? Democracy is not meant abstractly here. The question arises in the sense:

how can the separate regional and local protests, however militant (occupations, etc.), go beyond protest, how can they be coordinated with each other, nationally and on the European scale? How can they be coordinated with the struggles of the employed and organised workers, who are led by union bureaucrats who actively oppose and use the trade union organisations against any such coordination? Here are workers without a voice, without a place in the famous 'civil society', either through unions or through the 'Socialist' and 'Communist' Parties in parliament which claim their allegiance. Some form of coordination leading to a type of workers' councils regionally and nationally suggests itself naturally. This is surely the question which should be being discussed by socialists in the unemployed movement.

IV. The implications of 'structural crisis'

It is certainly true that, in all informed discussion concerning the 1938 Transitional Programme, it has been recognised that, as Trotsky was at pains to point out, a programme is much more than the immediate programme of transitional demands. The latter are, naturally, attuned to the particular current phase of development of the working class and its struggles. In those discussions it has rightly been emphasised that the nature of the historical epoch we are in is fundamental (in this case 'the epoch of imperialist decay'). However, Trotsky's formulation 1; 'the world situation is chiefly characterised by the crisis of working-class revolutionary leadership', was too often interpreted in such a way as to take for granted the objective situation of capitalism. (See International Socialist Forum No.2, 1998.) The 'orthodox' position among Trotskyists has tended and still tends to be that it remains enough to say 'we are in the epoch of imperialist decay', 'we are still in the epoch of wars and revolutions', and

even 'Lenin's list of defining features of imperialism serves best to characterise our period' (as in the resolution of the 1998 LIT Congress) - and anyone who says different is a revisionist or a 'disenchanted intellectual'. I have been obliged to answer that it is the enchanted ones who worry me.

It cannot be too often repeated that the programme must be clearly and definitely situated in the actual stage of capitalist society's development. When Bernstein revised the revolutionary programme, he based himself on an impressionistic comparison of new and older surface forms, concluding that capitalism had shown itself able to adapt to historical change: disappearance of general crisis, development of credit, employers' organisations (cartels), wider means of communication and information services, together with growth of the middle classes and betterment of working-class conditions of life. He also argued that the price of labour-power would increasingly be controlled by strong trade unions in such a way as to isolate the price of this commodity from the market as a whole. Rosa Luxemburg answered (Social Reform or Revolution) with an analysis of the mounting historical contradictions of capital, and predicted: 'Once industrial development has attained its highest point and capitalism has entered its descending phase on the world market, the trade union struggle will become doubly difficult'.

The stage called imperialism began over a century ago (remember, 'a week is a long time in politics'). It is surely perfectly clear that there are great changes in the world and that it would be foolish, entirely abstract, to think that programme, strategy and tactics can be deduced from the character of imperialism in general, or in terms of Lenin's list of its characteristics. The question now of capital's structural crisis, brought forward above all in Meszaros' *Beyond Capital*, needs a whole separate discussion. But it must be said that those seeking to develop the revolutionary programme need to say yes or no to this thesis. This



draft is based on its acceptance.

It is 28 years (1970) since Marx's Theory of Alienation was published, in which Meszaros referred to 'the present phase of socio-historical development, when for the first time in history capitalism is being shaken to its foundations as a world-system (whereas all the past crises of capitalism were partial and localisable, the "transcendence of labour's self-alienation" is "on the order of the day")'. It is this seminal idea of a universal structural crisis that is later developed in *Beyond Capital*. But in the same passage we find the germ also of the point developed above about the taking of political power in relation to the social revolution as a whole: '...in the contemporary world situation it is no longer possible to conceive even the immediate tasks of socialist movements in terms of the political conquest of power - not as when the world-historical task was the breaking of the first and "weakest link of the chain" - but in terms of strategic socio-economic alternatives, with far-reaching global implications.'

This is surely, however difficult, the great challenge in the fight for a programme.

Any serious Marxist study today has to recognise that in the 1970s, with the end of the so-called post-war boom, capital's historical crisis became truly structural, universal; not only geographically but in the vital sense of permeating all mechanisms of political, social and ideological control as well as the economy. This universalisation does not eliminate uneven development but on the contrary exacerbates it. Furthermore, we have come to understand that not 'soviet communism' but on the contrary the crisis of Stalinism, which began before the 1970s, was the major political threat to capital's own domination politically and ideologically as well as constituting an enormous accelerating factor of its economic structural crisis. The collapse of Stalinism in 1989-90 was surely a qualitative change in the relationships and parameters of the class struggle internationally. The challenge is to go beyond the programme which preceded this qualitative change (and this means going beyond what has now become the commonplace that particular demands in the 1938 Programme are out of date: 'drive the bureaucracy out of the soviets'? 'political revolution'?)

The main point here is that the character of the period as one of structural crisis is fundamental to all discussion on programme. Meszaros has rightly made much use of Marx's letter asking if our revolution in Europe, 'this little corner' will not be crushed so long as capital remains in the ascendant on the world stage. It is no longer in the ascendant. And the force which has been its principal political and ideological support in surviving until now, Stalinism, is no more.

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