

The Minimum Platform: Some comments to Start the Discussion

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[This is a translation of an article written by comrades Aldo Andres Romero and Roberto Ramirez, members of the Movement to Socialism (MAS) of Argentina. It appeared in the journal Debates, No. 1, August 1998.]

The Minimum Platform put forward for discussion by Iranian revolutionary socialists (see ISF No.1) touches a wide range of theoretical, political, organisational and also historical questions, which are, of course, on the table for discussion by all revolutionary Marxists.

In these comments, of course, we do not pretend to go into a deep consideration all those subjects, but to analyse schematically the full text. We will give our initial opinions about some of the points raised. This we believe can help to organise later a more profound discussion about the more important questions. To simplify things, we will follow the same order as the document, leaving to the end some comments of general character.

To begin with, we must establish the basis to start the discussions. We see the Minimum Platform as a positive proposition, which we see, initially, as convergent with objectives and methods sustained by ourselves.

The text has a characteristic which seems to us very positive and differentiates it from many "programmes" that in reality are no more than a list of slogans with more or less explanation. It proposes a certain balance-sheet of the experiences of the revolutionary movement and looks for the establishment of bases that can allow the establishment of "a common understanding of experiences and tasks".

Also, we think the text is unequal in the areas it covers. We see some solid sections, like the "balance sheet" of Stalinism in the section on Democracy and Socialism. But we find other parts more confused, and even contradictory with other parts of the same document.

As an example of the latter, in the section on Revolutionary Theory, the "evolutionism" and "determinism" of the Second International is correctly rejected. But this is in open contradiction with the idea, advanced in the section on The Meaning of Socialism, that the struggles stemming from this awareness will inevitably lead to the establishment of a workers' state and eventually a socialist society.

Introduction

We agree with the characterisation of the existence of a serious crisis, which necessitates the search for a reunification "across the broad spectrum of left revolutionary socialists". A journal such as the one proposed by our comrades can be one of the tools with which to work for that purpose – although it would be wrong to propose it as an absolute and self-sufficient rule. Also, we agree that "the revolutionary socialist tendencies must attempt to distinguish themselves from reformists, revisionist and opportunist currents on the basis of some basic or minimum positions" from which would be possible to develop an effort together to elaborate a program.

The Meaning of Socialism and the Transitional Society

Our discussions related to the levels of degeneration in USSR and the nature of the state of the wrongly called "real socialism", and some of the theoretical and programmatic consequences deriving from this historic experience, seem to us convergent with those of our Iranian comrades.

"The present state must be removed and a state of a new kind established. In this way, according to Marx, there is a period of transition between capitalist and communist society identified by the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat based on all the oppressed and toiling masses. This dictatorship does not imply a despotic form of government, but a necessary phase to allow the working class to establish its rule and start the transition period through the abolition of private property. This will be in reality the first truly democratic form of government based on the will of the majority of the population and is therefore a new form of state which from its onset is trying to pave the way for its own dissolution. [...] one cannot talk of a transitional society when this power has been taken away from the proletariat. Such a society can only return to capitalism [...] In the same way that a workers' state in its struggle against the old order must deepen the socialist revolution, it must never forget that in its efforts for the construction of socialism the only way to a conclusive victory is indeed the international extension of the socialist revolution. [...] Relations of production constantly change during the transition period; hence its name. To nationalise is not the same as to socialise. Social ownership only starts with state ownership of the essential means

of production. However, its qualitative growth and the transformation of the first to the second continues only gradually. One cannot therefore determine the nature of such a society according to its constantly changing relations of production. Those tendencies who have argued that according to the high percentage of growth of state ownership, due to the increasing role of the state plan in the economy or because of low inflation or low unemployment this or that country is closer to socialism, forget that in the period of transition to socialism, the priority lies with politics. What guarantees this transition is not the percentage of state ownership but the rule of the organs for the self-government of the producers, i.e., the soviets."

We believe than these concepts coincide a great deal with our own vision, developed in the book *Despues de Stalinismo* (After Stalinism) and also in the articles published in the magazine *Herramienta* (Nos. 1 and 2: *Debates Sobre "Despues de Stalinismo"* and *"El socialismo y el estado"*). This is a very important point, because, for various reasons, among Trotskyists and the revolutionary left there predominated an "economist" vision of the transition, which identified the "workers' state" simply and only with the state ownership of the means of production, making secondary more important questions, such as: in whose hands is the state? What are the nature and the direction of the changes at the level of production relations and the forms of expropriation? The road followed by the ex-USSR and road to restoration followed by all the supposed "workers' states" put these old conceptions in doubt. We think, therefore, it is very positive that the Iranian comrades started the Platform by considering what happened to the late "socialist camp". Today, it is not possible to establish a platform of socialist struggle for the future, if the lessons of the "socialist" experiences of the 20th century are not taken seriously into account.

Democracy and Socialism

The positions developed by our comrades in this respect are very important, and in great proportion coincide, as we have said, with those developed by us in the above-mentioned articles in *Herramienta* and with the article by Jean-Philippe Dives published in [the French discussion journal] *Carre Rouge* No.7, *The Black Book of communism: a preventive operation of ideological warfare*). As our Iranian comrades said: "During the period of transition, state ownership must gradually and consciously move towards social ownership. The level of this growth is directly related to the level of democracy in the councils. Without the widest democratic rights in the councils state ownership will not only fail to show any signs of transition to socialism but it will strengthen a collective bureaucracy. If the producing masses who form the vast majority of society are not allowed to democratically control and supervise the planned economy, no other authority in that society will have the willingness to produce for social needs". [...] the leading role of the party should not

be confused with the political power of the state during this period of transition. Democracy within the councils is inversely proportional to party dictatorship. The one party system is no more than a denial of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Freedom of political parties must be the epigraph of the Soviet state."

Together with these fundamental positions that we agree with, there are others which need discussing, as the comrades themselves noted. For example, to propose parliamentary representative bodies forces a previous study about the problems of political delegation and effective participation of the masses in the "democracy of the new order". The socialist transition is inseparable from the direct growth of democracy from the base, the predominance of social over political and the progressive withering away of the state.

Also, the affirmation than during the transition period, the material incentive to increase production cannot be economic profits, but only a reduction in the working day, seems to us unnecessarily rigid. In our opinion, it is only possible to advance the idea that planning can not impose a purely economic logic of maximisation, but democratic and flexible guidelines to give priority to social and cultural progress of the masses and the qualitative reduction of the working day.

The Revolutionary Party

The Platform insists with particular emphasis on the relationship that must exist between the construction of the party, the development of the programme and the real union with the workers' vanguard. This seems to us correct, but not enough. The size of the theoretical, programmatic and organisational problems that we are facing when tackling the relation masses-vanguard-party, is underestimated by simply stating "the revolutionary party of the working class is in fact the vanguard workers party. It is a party combining the revolutionary socialist program and the vanguard layers of the workers movement [...]. The vanguard party is in fact the accumulated consciousness of the class. Here the vanguard party combats bourgeois illusions and guards the collective consciousness gained."

We also feel that the programme question is treated with banality and is impoverished when the comrades refer to, "a programme arisen from inside the specific class struggles and already crystallised in the mind of the vanguard of these struggles" and, "the revolutionary socialist programme is no more than a concentrated generalisation of the experiences of the vanguard (on the international scale) and its comprehension. Marx did not make the workers movement socialist, it was the working class that converted the liberal Marx to communism."

Such formulations can lead to confusions and mistakes. For example, it can be understood as a lack of awareness

of the great need to make a specific effort in the elaboration of theory and programme. Also, it leaves gives room for a purely workerist interpretation of the programme question.

We also consider the attacks in the text against “the intellectuals” is unilateral and lacking equilibrium. The history of the workers’ movement history is full of notorious examples of bureaucratic, petty-bourgeois and even bourgeois leaders, who, taking positions in the organisations created by the workers, boycotted the interests and positions of the workers, without having much “intellectual” about them. Historically, it is not true than in the workers’ movement “the most important sections of the bureaucracy” have been born from the ranks of the intellectuals. On the other hand, analysing specifically the question of the revolutionary organisations, what comes to light is numerous examples of condemnations of “the intellectuals” – condemnations which served not to promote genuine working-class cadres, but the domination of “the practical men”, the aparatchiki as Lenin called them. It is also worth remembering that the bureaucratic counter-revolution in the USSR caused not only the extermination of millions of workers and peasants, and of hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries, but it also massacred the best of the scientific and artistic intellectuals.

Democratic Centralism

The document is right to declare the need for a debate to clarify the concept of “democratic centralism”, emphasising that it is not a question of “administrative regulations”, and highlighting the importance of recognising the right to form tendencies and factions. But experience shows us that this is very far away from exhausting the problems of democratic centralism on the theoretical and practical levels.

But it is not only a question of the party “regime” and the revolutionary party as an institution. In that sense, although what is said in the text is in general correct, the elaboration of this subject and conclusions seem to us insufficient; we do not believe than guaranteeing an ample democracy (tendency rights, etc.) is enough to sort everything out.

We are not dealing just with organisational schemes and abstract working rules, but with the real relations that, in this or that concrete circumstance of the class struggle, the party establishes with the vanguard, the masses; the policy of the party; its relations with other parties and organisations than declare themselves revolutionaries; the relations of the militants between themselves and with the leadership; the criteria and mechanisms of cadre selection, the conditions for, and problems of, the turning of militants into “professional revolutionaries”, etc.

The problems of building revolutionary organisations and of their internal “regimes” have turned out to be much

more complex and difficult than initially thought. A radical reconstruction is necessary.

Revolutionary Strategy

The Minimum Platform text, declaring that Trotsky’s and Lenin’s positions were revolutionary, states the need to improve them, but fails to clarify what the Iranian comrades mean by it. To propose that such improvement would be something like returning to “Marx’s classical position” overlooks the fact than in relation to the character and dynamism of revolutions, there were different moments and positions in Marx’s own development. Marx urged different strategies according to the situation and circumstances. We can, for example, find concepts ranging from permanentist to stage-ist. A simple “return to Marx” sorts out nothing, especially because many things have happened since. The experiences of the revolutions of the 20th century must be a fundamental element in this necessary reconstruction. It cannot be avoided the need of an actualisation of the revolutionary strategy integrating theoretically all the experience of this century.

We are not pretending to bring a finished, elaborated answer to this discussion, rather an attempt to critically examine the contributions from our current, as part of the necessary clarification. The comrades are right when they say that today it would be difficult to find a “pre-capitalist state” like the one in the Russia of the Tsars, to apply the formula of “uninterrupted revolution” (Lenin) or “permanent revolution” (Trotsky). Practically all the states are bourgeois and capitalist relations dominate them all. But this does not prove that Lenin and Trotsky’s revolutionary theories cannot be reconstructed for the particular present-day context. Neither does it justify hurried and unbalanced political conclusions. For example, in relation to the validity and importance of the democratic and anti-imperialist tasks in the process of the socialist revolution – although practically, nowadays, there are no states like the Russia of the Tsars, this does not deny the existence of democratic tasks that in a new context acquire great importance. Also, the globalisation of capitalism has not reduced the asymmetries, the dominant and exploitative relations between the metropolitan countries over the backward peripheries, and this is something not considered in the text.

The comrades’ position seems to be very influenced by the disastrous experience of the capitulation to Khomeini by the Iranian Communist Party and also many sections of the Trotskyists, because the authors of the Platform have developed it in a struggle against that terrible adaptation to “bourgeois nationalism”. But the necessary rejection of following the bourgeois a nationalist direction is theorised in a way than seems confusing to us. For example, it could be understood than the concepts of “uninterrupted revolution” of Lenin and the “permanent revolution” of Trotsky gave excuses, years later, to justify capitulations to the bourgeois in Iran and other countries, and this seems

wrong to us. Independently of the need to develop revolutionary theory – since Lenin's and Trotsky's do not fully answer, nowadays, new problems – let us not forget that their political conceptions were mainly directed against the bourgeoisie.

The Revolutionary Program

Earlier we have criticised some formulations related to the programme. On the other hand, we agree with points raised in this section, such as highlighting the central importance of the programme, the rejection to the division between minimum and maximum programme, as well as the reduction of programme to “transitional programmes” or “action programmes” – which, by the way, Trotsky never intended. From here, obviously, there remains the need to develop a really up-to-date programme.

The Organisation of Socialist Revolutionaries

We sympathise with the central idea inspiring this chapter. Any proposal of revolutionary regrouping has to start from the recognition of reality and the need of experiences, positions and diverse contributions. If it was not so, the very idea of alliance or regrouping would be questionable.

Political Struggles

This is directly applied to the view our comrades have of the situation and tasks for Iran; we can not take position about them.

Revolutionary Theory

We share the view of the need to restore and develop Marxist theory, as well as the recognition of its current crisis. The comrades have a view of the historical direction of Marxist theory that is necessary to consider: “The deviations of the Second International transformed this revolutionary theory into a dogmatic and deterministic system of belief that replaced the central role of revolutionary critical practice with a mechanical social evolutionism. The Third International, influenced by the experience of Bolshevism and the First World War paved the way for a revival of this revolutionary theory. However, during the Stalinist degeneration of the Comintern not only was this process blocked but under the backward spiral of the ideology of the ruling bureaucracy of the degenerated Soviet state the very same social democratic deviations deepened considerably. The different organisations which came out of the Left Opposition, having played a major role in resisting this 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.”

We agree about the importance, that theory has “in the present situation”. But precisely for that reason, this subject requires a further development.

Summary

We have considered the text, mentioning issues of agreement, differences and questions related to them. To finish we want to point other important matters hardly discussed or even not mentioned. For example, there is nothing about important questions of the present day, like the appreciation of the objective and subjective changes in the world working class, the crisis and degeneration of the “old workers’ movement”, the strong need to become an active part in the complex process than can lead to what has been called the “refounding”, “reorganisation” or “reconstruction” of the workers’ movement, etc. Also – by not putting sufficient emphasis on the necessity for theoretical development to take into account the new realities of the world class struggle – the Minimum Platform appears to present us with some simplifications and/or ideas that, instead of been laid as hypothesis open to debate, appear as “normative” formulations with little foundation.

In summary, we find in the Iranian comrades’ Platform an approach and fundamental ideas convergent with our own, and therefore, we see the possibility to find ways to discuss and collaborate, to develop agreement, to clarify differences and work together looking for answers to the numerous and important questions that the totality of the revolutionary Marxists have not tackled, or have tackled insufficiently. For that purpose, both a common publication and the establishment of bases to take forward a constructive debate from different publications can be of use.

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