

A Disappointing Contribution

A response to *The Minimum Platform: Some Comments to Start the Discussion* by Aldo Andres Romero and Roberto Ramirez, which appeared in ISF No.3.

Dear Comrades Romero and Ramirez,

We were very disappointed with your comment on the Minimum Platform. The document, coming out of the rich experience of the defeat of the Iranian workers' movement, explicitly claims to be a minimum set of ideas around which a discussion can begin. Because its limitations are obvious, and in fact deliberate, we hoped you would take them as an opportunity to develop our joint theoretical work. So far, this has not happened, and you merely picked out a few of the points of the Platform, agreeing with some and disagreeing with others.

The significance of the document for ex-"Healyites" like us, and ex-"Morenoites" like you, is that, from the defeat of the Iranian revolution in 1978-80, comes assistance in breaking out of the sterile dogmatism in which the various Fourth Internationals got trapped. For decades, the Trotskyist movement continually shuffled political programmes, sought new alliances and fusions, re-jigged the old phrases – and fragmented more and more. We tried to fit the huge changes taking place in the class struggle into old slogans, instead of analysing them and developing our ideas in line with them. Now, with the eclipse of Stalinism – totally unexpected for all of us – we have an opportunity to return to the most fundamental of Marx's ideas and to re-examine our own history. The vital lessons cannot be drawn for a new generation of revolutionaries, without the most ruthless questioning of our traditional notions. We know from our own experience how hard and painful it is to break away from remnants of those old ideas, but we must not evade this task.

You say that you disagree 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". We are unable to see to which passage in the document this refers. But, even if such an idea did appear, this would make it even more important to state what you think is the alternative. You also say the document is "unnecessarily rigid" when it talks about the reduction of the working day. You may be right. But then you should develop your own conceptions on this point.

The main issue is the revolutionary party and its relation to the working class. You say that the document "underestimates [...] the theoretical, programmatic and organisational problems". OK. Please help us to tackle those problems. What exactly do you mean when you write about "a lack of

awareness of the great need to make a specific effort in the elaboration of theory and programme", and "a purely workerist interpretation of the programme question"? You refer to "attacks in the text against 'the intellectuals'." We can only find one place where the word "intellectuals" occurs. Let us recall the paragraphs concerned:

The most ridiculous form of sectarianism is displayed by those intellectuals who, having read a few so-called Marxist books and having gathered a few supporters, call themselves the nucleus of the revolutionary party and then in philistine arrogance start telling the working class how to conduct itself. Tens of cliques and sects have been busy building such "Leninist" parties for decades, whilst the first stage in building this party, ie the process of developing a revolutionary socialist programme and its integration with the real struggles of the working class and its vanguard has not even started. These are the same people who have only learned one slogan from Lenin: consciousness comes from outside the workers' movement. In reality, this has always been a cover for substituting the working class with a clique of a few power-hungry individuals.

Without this or that party, the proletarian vanguard can exist, but without the proletariat the party is irrelevant. 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. Lenin and Trotsky did not put forward the idea of building workers' Soviets, but with the establishment of such Soviets by the workers themselves they realised the significance of such structures. The proletarian vanguard soon grasps the revolutionary programme, often faster and deeper than the "intellectual" from outside the class. If our understanding of the sentence "consciousness comes from outside the class" is that the working class cannot understand theory, we must remind everyone that in the latter part of the twentieth century the vanguard of the proletariat is well educated and can read the Communist Manifesto. Intellectuals are nothing special, they should demand no special privileges from the proletariat. On the contrary, if they have no science or knowledge to contribute, they might as well stay "outside" and not infect the movement with their inevitable prejudices. In fact the term "intellectual"

itself has lost the significance it may have had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is today merely an excuse for power-seeking petit-bourgeois elements wishing to sound off inside the communist movement. It is from this layer that the most important sections of the bureaucracy arise.

Although this was written specifically with the Iranian Left in mind, we certainly know several British sects to which it applies. Do you not have such problems in Argentina? Why do you disagree with this "attack" against this particular species of self-styled "intellectual"? In any case, the question of the role of intellectuals in the revolutionary movement is itself

one of great importance. As the document suggests, changes in the working class mean that many of our old ways of regarding this issue must be thought out again, including the very division between the workers and the intellectuals. Our task is to deepen our theoretical understanding of revolution, precisely in order to discover new forms of revolutionary struggle.

Please, comrades, let us try to move this discussion forward as fruitfully as we can.

With best wishes for 1999,

Cyril Smith and John Ballantyne

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