

## Trotsky and the Internationalist Communist Left

Our criticisms of Trotsky are not based on abstract moralising with the benefit of hindsight. In the 1920s and 1930s there **was** a revolutionary opposition to the degeneration of the Communist International which based its critique of that degeneration on the methodological premises of Marx and Lenin and which used that method to criticise Trotsky himself. This consisted of founding members of the Italian Communist Party at Livorno in 1921, revolutionary militants who fought inside the Communist International against the policy of making a “united front” with the leaders of the social democratic movement responsible for the murder of workers and revolutionaries; who inside Italy opposed so-called *bolshevisation* of the Communist Party and ousting of the Left from its leadership despite their representing the majority of the membership; and who, as a result, were eventually removed from their positions by the CI.

Persecuted by the Fascists as well as the Stalinists, they carried on their struggle inside Mussolini’s prisons and in exile abroad. In 1928 at Pantin in Paris they formally constituted themselves as the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd’I). For a decade, until 1938, they uninterruptedly issued *Prometeo* (*Prometheus*), first in Brussels, then in France. It was by the name of *Prometeo*, their monthly journal that they were often known. Politically they based themselves on the *Platform of the Left* - the theses Amadeo Bordiga had presented in 1926 at the 3rd Congress of the PCd’I and which had been held by force of circumstance outside Italy in Lyons. For the first time the organisational manoeuvres of the “bolshevised” leadership of Gramsci and Togliatti resulted in a vote for Gramsci’s “Centre” theses against those of the Left. <sup>(1)</sup>

At Pantin they passed a resolution which, amongst other things, called for a 6th Congress of the CI with Trotsky as president to reintegrate all the oppositions expelled from the CI.

The Italian Left had already solidarised with the Russian Opposition “in defence of the victorious principles of October” but had underlined that “there exist differences”. Trotsky, for his part, warmly welcomed the existence of the Italian Left. In his reply to *Prometeo* of September 25th, 1929 he stated:

The Platform of the Left (1926) produced a great impression on me. I think that it is one of the best documents published by the international Opposition and it preserves its significance in many things to this very day.

*Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1929 p.318*

However, he wanted to leave to “time and events” the verification of their mutual understanding. This exchange was a reflection of fundamental differences from the beginning. To start with, the Italian Left recognised that their physical dispersal was a product of the international counter-revolution and saw the need to understand what had happened to the proletariat during this period and to draw up a *bilan* (balance sheet) for the revival of the working class and its party. Thus, though they supported the project of Trotsky for an international centre of all the international oppositions, they could not work directly under the Trotskyist secretariat since it had no platform of political positions based on the lessons of the October Revolution. The negative criteria of anti-Stalinism they saw as an inadequate basis for action. Their attitude was summarized in a letter by Vercesi (at that time one of their leading members and editor of *Prometeo*):

There are many oppositions. that is bad; but there is no other remedy than confrontation with their rival ideologies . . . If so many oppositions exist, it is because there are several ideologies whose actual substance must be made clear. And this cannot just be done through simple discussion in a common organisation.

Our watchword is to take our efforts to the ultimate conclusions without being derailed into a "solution" that would in reality be a failure.

*Letter in Contre Le Courant no. 13, August, 1928*

The main difference between the positions of Trotsky and those of the Italian Left at this time concerned the united front. In the *Rome Theses* formulated in 1922 by Bordiga for the PCd'I before the left had been ousted from leadership, the Italian Communists first raised their banner against the decline of the Communist International which, at its Fourth Congress of that year, decisively stepped back toward social democracy - a step applauded by Trotsky. The Social Democrats who had led and organised the massacre of the flower of the German working class were now re-baptised as "worker's parties" and alliance with them against the fascist threat was now sought. In the *Rome Theses* the Italian Communists opposed the tactic of the united front. Though not rejecting the necessity for tactics or for "indirect" methods of struggle when the class was on the defensive the Italian Left rejected the "expedients" and "manoeuvres" which were intended to win mass support but only at the cost of undermining the hard-won political independence of the revolutionary proletariat which the Bolsheviks had struggled for from 1903 to 1922. This was why the Communist Party of Italy under Bordiga applied the tactic of "the united front from below", i.e. working with workers in the Social Democratic Parties where common struggles were possible, but not with their organisations. This left the Communist Party of Italy free to mercilessly criticise the leadership of Social Democracy for its class collaborationism. This was not, however, how the CI envisaged the united front since they did propose formal alliances with the old anti-working class leaderships of Social Democracy and this led only to further confusion.

For Trotsky, however, the united front was the expression of the highest achievement of the Comintern. He always based his political framework on its first four congresses whilst the Italian Left based itself on the first two. The gulf that was to open up between them stemmed from Trotsky's view that social democracy was essentially proletarian because it organised a section of the working class. The Communist Left however recognised that to use this criterion could baptise any counter-revolutionary force as proletarian. The task of communists is to fight to make the principles of communism clear to the working class. The gulf between the Italian Left and Trotsky now became a chasm. In 1933, with Trotsky still refusing to see the need for any more than organisational consolidation of all the oppositions under his leadership, the Italian Fraction decided they would have to do the work of political clarification on their own. In November the first issue of *Bilan* was published.

After 1933 Trotsky firmed up his strategic approach which set his supporters' attention firmly towards seeking accommodation with anti-proletarian forces rather than a realignment with the remaining revolutionary fractions.

Three particular decisions show that the implications of that approach had already led the Trotskyists out of the proletarian camp prior to the publication of their *Transitional Programme* in 1938. The three defining points, to be dealt with in turn, are the entry of the Trotskyists into Second Internationalist organisations; their support for the Spanish anti-fascist forces during the Civil War and their interpretations of anti-imperialism in the wars in China and Abyssinia/Ethiopia.

## The "French Turn" of 1934

In 1934 the Trotskyist movement, then known as the International Communist League, took what Trotsky described as "the most serious turn in its whole history". Starting with his French section, Trotsky urged his followers to join the parties of the Second International and other equivalent organisations *en bloc*. Trotsky's solution to the failure of Stalinism was to go back to social democracy. This was a rupture with everything the working class had fought for in the period between 1914 and 1926. It meant going back to supporting imperialist factions, back to the old trades unions who had supported imperialist war, back to those who had actively led the murder of communists and workers during the revolutionary period after 1917. Nevertheless the tactic soon spread to other

sections, notably in Britain, USA and Spain. The idea of Trotskyist “entryism” by which generations of Trotskyists have reinforced social-democratic political organisations was thus apparently born with “the French turn”.

The French Trotskyist organisation made its decision to take “the decisive turn” in the summer of 1934 after heavy political pressure from Trotsky, then resident in France. A year before, the comrades of the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy had been bureaucratically squeezed out of discussion by the Trotskyists. They had anticipated, and argued against, the trajectory of Trotsky and his followers. In the journal *Bilan* (the balance-sheet) our comrades argued that the Trotskyist strategy was an essentially reactionary substitute for efforts to draw together an analysis of the decline of the proletarian revolutionary wave. Writing in August 1933 they assessed the approaches of Trotsky to the left-wing Social Democrats as being a move “Towards the Two and Three-Quarters International”. They argued that:

Trotsky is committing a colossal error in advocating common work with the left socialists with the aim of building a new communist party.

The contrasting approach of the Left Fraction as against the Trotskyists was precisely around the question of the need for analysis and understanding of the nature of the period rather than to engage in organisational manoeuvres to try to create a mass party when there was no material possibility to do so.

The proletariat suffered in 1927 a terrible defeat in not succeeding in countering the counter-revolutionary success of Centrism. [Stalinism would be a more normal shorthand today although many riders would need to be added to stress that the historic process can not be dictated by an individual within the communist parties ed.]

To state today that we wish to establish new parties upon the basis of the first four congresses of the International is to command history to pedal backwards ten years. It is to abstain from the understanding of events taking place after these congresses and **it is eventually to wish to place new parties in an historic setting not their own**. The setting in which we would wish the new parties to be placed tomorrow is already defined by the experience gained from the exercise of proletarian power and by all the experience of the world communist movement. The first four congresses were, in this work, an object of study which must be submitted to the most intense examination and critique. If we were to accept them evangelistically we would come to the following conclusion: the death of Lenin, or the removal of Trotsky, were the causes of the victory of capitalism in a number of countries and the success of Centrism in the USSR and the International.

The writers of *Bilan*, however, understood that the Trotskyist attempts to woo Social Democracy would only end in ignominious failure. They correctly forecast the point at which the Trotskyists would find themselves in 1938:

The immaturity of the situation [i.e. the lack of an understanding of the historical epoch] gives us an inkling of the strong probability that the currently gestating “two and three quarters” International will be reduced to nothing more than a simple change to the label of the ILO [the Trotskyists International Left Opposition, ed.].

For Trotsky and his followers the “French turn” and the reorientation towards Second Internationalist and other parties of capital was a further practical application of the policy of the “United Front” which had developed as Comintern policy during the decline of the revolutionary wave (1920 - 22). During the 1930s, both Stalinists and Trotskyists alike were to draw out counter-revolutionary conclusions from that position.

At this point Trotsky, and Trotskyism ceased to be a proletarian current for the Italian Left (as it was now to be known). It announced that now

... it is necessary to lead an un pitying and merciless struggle against him and his partisans who have crossed the Rubicon and rejoined social democracy.

*Bilan*

A year earlier Stalin had formally taken the USSR back into the theatre of competing imperialism's by joining that "den of robbers" (Lenin), the League of Nations. His aim was simple. Hitler's aim of a "Drang nach Osten" (Drive to the East) was obvious to all. Stalin realised that an attack on the USSR was inevitable, and thus he tried to win an alliance with France and Britain. The Comintern's role in this was to come at the 7th Congress in 1935 and relegated its temporary radicalism (since 1928) against social democracy to the history books. It not only baptised the socialists as friends of democracy but also every Liberal, Radical or otherwise anti-fascist party in Western Europe. The united front had now reached its apogee in the Popular Front. The response of the Italian Fraction was to disown any links - even remotely oppositional ones - with the Comintern and to state that the 7th Congress had placed a tombstone on the existing CPs. Meanwhile, Trotsky denounced the Popular Front as a perversion of the united front but his criticism lacked force since he accepted the essential rationale of the Popular Front - defence of the USSR from the fascist menace. And yet the forces which had "laid the bed for fascism" in the revolutionary upheaval after World War One were precisely the organisations Trotsky had encouraged his followers to enter - the Socialist parties.

After the rise of Hitler anti-fascism - i.e. opposition to a particular aspect of capitalist imperialism, meant increasing support for its other aspect - capitalist democracy. This expressed itself in Spain, in China and ultimately worldwide in World War Two. It was the ideology which masked the traditional appetites of the capitalist powers and which enabled them to dragoon millions of proletarians into their armies. As we have seen, Trotsky also called for support for this crusade in terms of the defence of the USSR. A year after his murder the USSR finally achieved what it sought - an alliance with the Western imperialist powers, including the USA "in defence of democracy".

## The Spanish Civil War

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The first step in legitimising anti-fascism as a motive for defending Western and Stalinist imperialism came in Spain.

As we have already seen, Trotsky had specifically declined invitations from leaders of the Italian Communist Left to re-examine the degeneration of the Russian revolution within the context of the overall reflux of the revolutionary wave. Trotsky's refusal to come to terms with the extent of that reflux allowed him to misunderstand the nature of events and consequently what the Marxist response to them should be. In April, 1936 he wrote that:

The situation in Spain has again become revolutionary. <sup>(2)</sup>

In fact, within months his own supporters, far from seeking independent proletarian positions - the most basic prerequisite to recover after fifteen years of defeat, were being urged to fight for the Spanish bourgeois democracy against Franco's army.

Modern day Trotskyists try to muddy the positions that were taken so let there be no confusion. In February 1937 Trotsky wrote,

Only cowards, traitors or agents of fascism can renounce aid to the Spanish republican armies. The elementary duty of every revolutionist is to struggle against the bands of Franco, Mussolini and Hitler. (3)

Again, in September of the same year,

Everywhere and always, wherever and whenever revolutionary workers are not powerful enough immediately to overthrow the bourgeois regime, they defend even rotten bourgeois democracy from fascism. (4)

Later in the same article he dealt with a possible objection:

... during a war between two bourgeois states, the revolutionary proletariat .... must take the position that 'the defeat of our own government is the lesser evil.' Is this rule not applicable also to the civil war in which two bourgeois governments are fighting against one another? It is not applicable .... In the Spanish civil war, the question is: democracy or fascism ... the revolutionaries can be successful by dealing military blows to the number one foe: fascism. (5)

## China and Abyssinia

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Having touched on the early Trotskyist adaptations to social democracy and anti-fascism, the cases of China and Abyssinia provide further evidence of the Trotskyist support for "the lesser evil" in times of imperialist war.

A series of quotes from 1937 serve to show the extent and thoroughness with which Trotsky urged his followers to take part in the Sino-Japanese wars. Many of the articles from which the quotations are drawn were, at least in part, polemics against non-Trotskyist Left Communist oppositionists who correctly argued against such concessions to "defencism".

... the duty of all the workers' organisations of China was to participate actively and in the front lines of the present war against Japan... (6)

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... we must carefully distinguish between the imperialist countries and the backward countries, colonial and semi-colonial. The attitude of the working class organisations cannot be the same. The present war between China and Japan is a classic example ... Only conscious or unconscious agents of Japanese imperialism can put the two countries on the same plane. (7)

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A Japanese victory will serve reaction. A Chinese victory would have a progressive character. That is why the working class of the world supports by all means China against Japan. (8)

In the case of Abyssinia, a different source shows an exactly parallel stance being taken by Trotskyists in Britain. C.L.R. James, then (1936) an entryist in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) argued,

... that the I.L.P., in its obligation to the colonial peoples must assist them in their struggle against Italian Fascism. <sup>(9)</sup>

James made the position even clearer. He replied to a taunt that:

you [James and the Trotskyists, ed.] support war by the use of Abyssinian lives and refuse to use your own bodies for the war which you back,

by volunteering to take service under Haile Selassie. <sup>(10)</sup>

These examples illustrate the process by which the Trotskyists left the proletarian camp in the 1930s. They are not produced to detract from the heroism of the Trotskyists who were slaughtered in Siberia (along with members of the Russian Communist Left) during the late 1930s. Neither do we seek to suggest that Trotsky himself was ever a conscious agent of imperialism. What we are trying to show is that the positions taken up by later Trotskyists are not aberrations. They are part of the methodology of Trotsky and Trotskyism. The move to counter-revolutionary positions was prepared and completed during Trotsky's lifetime.

## The Internationalist Communist Party since World War Two

Whilst Trotsky was developing his own small contribution to the defence of capitalism the International Communist Left was at first reduced to small scattered groups, its members dispersed or imprisoned. However, with the first stirrings of the proletariat against the war in Italy in 1942-43 it was able to reconstitute itself into a party, the Internationalist Communist Party. This has continued to exist to the present-day holding fast to the basic revolutionary principles of the Communist International's first two Congresses. Defending a revolutionary defeatist position toward fascist and anti-fascist alike, it was the only political party thrown up by World War Two to do so, both in theory and in practice. <sup>(11)</sup>

It won away many young militants from the ranks of the Stalinist partisans and for a time led thousands of workers in struggle in post-war Italy. The restrictions of this struggle to Italy and the capitalist recovery after World War Two ensured that the new party did not exist outside Italy after 1952. <sup>(12)</sup>

In this year the PCInt produced a platform which was at the time the clearest expression of the revolutionary methods and goals of the October Revolution.

In 1977 it made a significant contribution to the growth of a future world party of the proletariat by initiating the series of international conferences of groups of the Communist Left and since 1983 has inspired the formation of the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party to which the CWO adheres. With the formation of this Bureau a new stage in the process towards the reformation of the Party, based on the lessons of proletarian revolutionary experience began. In contrast to this work of reconstruction, Trotskyism, with its myriads of splits (at least 20 in Britain since 1945), goes from crisis to crisis in which "purer" Trotskyisms succeed one another at a dizzy rate. Trotskyism is a cul-de-sac for state capitalists, those critical supporters of the former USSR and of imperialist war, who are running round in circles trying to find a way forward.



The profusion of Trotskyist sects in existence today is witness to the mass of contradictions which make up the elements of Trotskyism, and objectively these groupings represent the left wing of the bourgeoisie's political apparatus. They stand, not for the emancipation of the proletariat, but for a state capitalist order in which they will be the new bosses. Objectively they function as the left wing of the social democratic or Stalinist parties, providing these parties with cover from attacks by revolutionary political positions and most importantly giving them credibility in the eyes of the working class. By sticking slavishly to the formula that the proletariat has only a crisis of leadership they fail to recognise the real conditions for the revival of the revolutionary party. These lie in the objective need to struggle of the mass of the proletariat and the party's own programmatic clarity. Unable to perceive these basic conditions, the Trotskyists cannot escape from their historical cul-de-sac without retracing the road back to the revolutionary lessons of the proletariat has taken. In doing this they would, of course, cease to be Trotskyists since they would not only have to abandon their fundamental confusions but would also have to recognise the bourgeois, anti-revolutionary nature of Trotskyism itself.

(1) Ironically, part of the manoeuvring had involved a vicious campaign against Bordiga who, in the pages of the Party newspaper, *Unita*, was vilified as a Trotskyist throughout 1925-26. In 1930 Bordiga himself was finally expelled from the PCd'I for his supposed Trotskyism. For more information in English about the early struggle of the Italian Left against 'bolshevisation' see the CWO's pamphlet, *Platform of the Committee of Intesa, 1925 - the start of the Italian Left's fight against Stalinism as Fascism increases its grip*. Available from the group address.

(2) *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, Leon Trotsky, (1973), Pathfinder Press, page 211

(3) op.cit. page 242.

(4) op.cit. page 282.

(5) op.cit. page 283.

(6) *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1937-38)*, (1970), Pathfinder Press, p. 107.

(7) op.cit. page 109

(8) op. cit page 111

(9) *Against the Stream*, Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, (1986), Socialist Platform, page 183.

(10) Op.cit. page 186.

(11) For more on the early years of the PCInt., see the series in *Workers Voice* nos. 73-74 and no.78. Back issues available from CWO address.

(12) By this time the PCInt had survived the crisis of the return of Bordiga to revolutionary activity after 20 years away from politics. Like Trotsky he brought enormous prestige to revolutionary politics in view of his past contribution - but he also brought with him the baggage of the past. Unable to comprehend the real nature of the USSR, vacillating on the necessity of the Party in this period, incapable of seeing that the progressive era of national struggles was over and failing to understand the nature of the trade unions as bulwarks of capitalism in the imperialist epoch, he threatened to overturn the patient work of theoretical appraisal by the Italian Left over two decades. Bordiga never joined the PCInt. but his reappearance cost it many cadres and it was not until 1952 that his opposition was finally overcome.