

Socialist Nostrums and How to Build The International



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by Balazs Nagy June 2013

A Comrade wrote recently: the new rising tide of the international working class starting in 2011 is what is putting all groupings which claim to be Trotskyist to the test. If the working class was not defending itself as it does and was to go quietly to its doom, such groupings would have another lease of life with their glorious socialist nostrums drawn from the previous period. But as things are, it is all put in question: the understanding of the meaning of the Transitional Programme and how you build the International. That is indeed the nub of the question, and our comrade has put his finger right on it. There undoubtedly is a rising tide, even if it has peculiar features which make it rather difficult to form a clear picture of it. These peculiar features themselves echo and reflect difficult conditions which are more severe and weigh more heavily than in the past under which the working class is seeking a way forward. They deform and retard it. Let us try to sum them up (in broad outline).

* What we are dealing with is that they are coming out of a defeat, but not just any old defeat such as they might have known in the past. The liquidation of the USSR as a consequence of the fact that the bureaucracy held power, but also of the conscious action of a good part of that bureaucracy, meant an historical setback for the working class on an international scale. There is no doubt that in itself this threw the class a long way backwards. Its Soviet section was disorientated and demoralised cheap jerseys and unable to stand up for itself apart from a few sporadic ashes. For too

long, the domination of Stalinism had, by crushing and eliminating its best elements, disfigured its gains and poisoned its consciousness.

* A Flatrate number of consequences in turn worsened and generalised this defeat. The Stalinist parties right-wing policies had already long since weakened the working class. Now this leaderships treachery became a sudden general collapse, with these parties shrinking considerably if not disappearing. Stalinism exploded (not its base in the bureaucracy, and not its politics in general). The mistake we made in Workers International was to conclude from this that it opened the road for the working class to march towards revolution. That is to say that we one-sidedly welcomed a victory (the defeat of the bureaucracy) which was above all the defeat of the USSR brought about by the bureaucracy in its decrepitude.

* What this counter-revolutionary turn in events and the dislocation of the USSR brought about was to undermine the morale of communist workers and disarm them in the face of recrudescing and unbridled bourgeois propaganda (helped by many ex-Stalinists) against socialism and Marxism, a propaganda which exploited the abominable and universally abhorred practices of Stalinism. At the same time this gave a new lease of life to an, itself degenerate, social democracy. The so-called ultra-liberal offensive of the bourgeoisie was already well under way, and it was abruptly strengthened and made general. It became omnipresent, planet-wide in vigour and scope, and its sharp point was aimed at the destruction of the working class as a class. This is no exaggeration!

* The bourgeois practice of de-industrialisation centring on Europe was not simply an economic transfer to countries with much inferior wages and trade union rights, or the winding down of unprofitable industries (such as mining). It was also and above all a policy of physically destroying an important, indeed the most robust, conscious and militant, part of the working class. This destruction considerably increased the weight of the petit bourgeoisie, but not in production (since

small farmers and craft workers have largely been eliminated) but in bureaucracy of every kind, in services and in intermediate layers in general.

* The way the trade unions have been domesticated, with the help of swollen trade union bureaucracies, into social partners constitutes another important facet in this destruction of the working class.

* The attacks on the gains workers have made in the social field etc. have developed into a general offensive, described everywhere as reforms (!!), intended to make this destruction utter. On the other hand, it is necessary to locate, among the special features of the current rising tide which render it more difficult, the contradictory but for the most part negative heritage of the Fourth International. Broadly speaking it has two aspects:

a. The overwhelming majority of this heritage is negative, although its history undeniably has some positive aspects. From the start of World War II, with Trotskys assassination, the Fourth International entered a long process of degeneration. I shall omit the details, but this long first phase of its perversion ended with the big split of 1952-53, followed by an exponential rise in splits and desertions. Again omitting details, I merely state that there exists a whole galaxy of organisations and internationals; – this dispersion and proliferation in turn have been accompanied by and engendered a whole constellation of theories and ideas whose sources can be located already well before the degeneration and in my view show a lack of understanding of Marxism and above all how it was enriched by Lenin and Trotsky. (The second part of my work Marxist Considerations on the Crisis is devoted to a detailed examination of this problem during the revolutionary wave of 1942-1946).

b. I think that in Workers International we have finally got to the point of understanding the essential elements of this (to do with Marxism and its development), just as, very probably, several activists scattered around the multitude of organisations will have understood them or will be able to

assimilate them. These special features, and others, make the rising tide more difficult and chaotic. They are expressed in its jerky, meandering, character, proceeding in fits and starts, retreats interspersed with sudden rebounds. It carries on all the same, because it is often provoked and pushed forward by the greed and impatience of the bourgeoisies attacks. They thus obviously and mutually reinforce each other. Driven back to the last ditch, the working class is forced to defend itself with every means at its disposal. But we must be on guard: Spontaneity has its limits! Nevertheless, the tide is rising. It started in Africa. The revolutions which have unfolded in North Africa gave the signal. There was the massacre of the miners at Marikana which galvanised workers and activists who support them in South Africa, where the illusion in relation to the ANC is shattered, even if not finally put to rest. In Namibia, too, our comrades are conducting a large-scale and fruitful struggle at the heart of the Namibian working class which is busy organising and spreading its struggle. Since the beginning of 2012 the working class of Europe has visibly redoubled its defensive struggle. It has even forced the union leaderships to adopt a more forthright fight in defence of its interests and resisting attacks, including repeated general strikes (which sadly entail their own powerful capacity to exhaust). All this in a number of European countries. As a whole, these struggles have disrupted the tranquillity of the so-called "partnership" on the part of trade unions. – Moreover, with much difficulty, lack of clarity and mal-formation, the working class has even been able to start a long struggle to rebuild its parties. That is the profound significance of the appearance of Die Linke, Syriza and the Front de Gauche.

Party Building has Started

In the midst of and because of the difficult and raw special features mentioned before, these formations are unlike the, as it were, conventional splits in the past. This renders these formations more limited and pragmatic, but also more receptive to the rising working-class tide (despite often very big

differences between them). They are not homogenous organisations but coalitions of a variety of organisations, of breakaways from social democracy and from the exhausted and shrunken communist parties, as well as those coming from this or that organisation claiming allegiance to the Fourth International, as well as some groups of petit bourgeois. For all that, they are relatively stable coalitions rather than simple ad hoc blocs. The fact that no single one of the organisations which have joined in the coalitions is able, taken separately, to project a convincing presence reflects the weighty difficulties presented by the peculiar features of the present tide. But the other fact that they have achieved and maintain and develop their coalition attests to the existence and strength of the working-class tide. They are at the beginning of a road which can lead to the emergence of revolutionary parties of the working class – as long as certain conditions are fulfilled. This start is embodied in the independent way they position themselves in relation to the bourgeoisie, and it is concentrated in their opposition to the latter's European policy. It is a remarkable fact that in France the near majority of all organisations claiming adherence to Trotskyism (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, Lambertist Parti Ouvrier International, Lutte Ouvriere) are outside of and even opposed to the Front de Gauche coalition, while in Greece a far from negligible part has remained outside Syriza (to say nothing of the Stalinist KKE, and I am not sure of the situation in Die Linke in Germany). The fact remains that a terrible sectarianism, one of the as it were hereditary taints of pre-war Trotskyism, one of the factors at the root of the degeneration of the so-called Fourth International but also a fruit of this degeneration – against which Trotsky fought incessantly – condemns these organisations to stay outside this promising re-awakening of the working class. This refusal is not their only defect, but the refusal to get mixed up in the vulgar masses for fear of losing their (actually long-squandered) virginity has long ago become second nature to them. This is what breathes life into

and gives concrete meaning to our comrades words when he says: the new rising tide of the international working class starting in 2011 is what is putting all groupings which claim to be Trotskyist to the test. If the working class was not defending itself as it does and was to go quietly to its doom, such groupings would have another lease of life with their glorious socialist nostrums drawn from the previous period. I shall not go into greater detail here on the Lambertists, Lutte Ouvriere, etc. It needs doing and I am sure other comrades will do it. But we must draw the general conclusion that through these conditions a concrete path has opened for building the revolutionary parties which have for so long been lacking, while the main body of those who claim to be Trotskyists have remained outside of them. And that we can no longer remain passive in the face of this paradox. But do be careful! This is only half the truth. It is only complete if we see and integrate into our conception that we are dealing with profoundly unstable coalitions which have not even got half way towards building revolutionary parties, even if we should not underestimate what has been achieved. To look just at the Front de Gauche (the other coalitions have more or less the same characteristics) we should view it politically as a centrist formation which, given its size and position could cheap nba jerseys (and should) evolve towards a revolutionary party. Now the forces holding it back at its present stage are enormous, because none of the organisations of which it is composed have ever gone beyond this centrist stage at which they are stuck. The cause and content of their centrism is to be found in the incomplete, unfinished character of their break with the bourgeoisie. Vehement as it may be, their criticism is only directed against the so-called ultra-liberal version of bourgeois politics, against its attacks, but remains still within the limits of a kind of Keynesian policy – which is just as bourgeois. It also remains at a strictly national level. For the time being, all the organisations making up the Front de Gauche coalesce and reach mutual understanding within these two limitations. That

Workers is what constitutes their shared ideology, which might differ in detail inasmuch as a left Keynesian is different from a so-called classical Keynesian. (You can play the same tune in different ways.) In this sense, the political line of Ch. σιωπηλ?? Picquets Gauche Unitaire (Unified Left), which split from the NPA, or the Gond faction which also 16.05.2013 broke away from the same NPA, only differ very slightly, or not at all, from Mélanchon's Parti de Gauche (Left Party). These former Trotskyists of ill repute have – rightly – joined the Front de Gauche, but in doing so they have – wrongly – completely adapted to its centrist (and in fact bourgeois) line. The French Communist Party (PCF) is entirely controlled by the ex-Stalinist bureaucracy in the trade unions and local government, which sets its seal on its policies while the shrunken working class rank-and-file is kept at the back, as indeed it always was. This partly explains why on the one hand it has not been able to break completely with Hollandes social democracy (especially in view of local elections) and on the other the fact, as comrades have noted, “Communist workers find Mélanchon more popular than their own central committee.”

Sectarianism and opportunism

In reality, the way in which so-called Trotskyist organisations react to a concrete opportunity opening up to forge a genuine worker's party provides a measure of how deeply they have degenerated. The vast majority of them line up on a sectarian position while a minority split away and joined the Front de Gauche, only to languish in opportunism. Probably the truth of the matter is what Trotsky said: the sectarians take that stance because they are scared that the possibilities offered by an opening will expose their opportunism. In fact we are confronted here with the same basic problem that has faced the workers movement from the outset: how are revolutionaries to relate to the class as a whole and its movement? It is no coincidence that Marx and Engels twice (!) referred to this problem in the Communist Manifesto, once in the form of a general explanation that communists are not separate in any way from other proletarians

but are distinguished by two essential elements: they represent (1) the international character of the movement and (2) its more distant general goals. In the second instance they go concretely into greater detail on these principles in relation to particular parties in specific countries. Nor was it a coincidence that Trotsky devoted two chapters of the Transitional Programme to the need to struggle against both these scourges – sectarianism and opportunism. The whole of his fight for the Fourth International was entirely marked by this struggle in theory and practice. You only need to look at his works to see this – and to arm yourself against these evils. Moreover, he never stopped guiding the members of the International right through the 1930s not just in the struggle for the united class front but also to enter the social democratic parties, not to adapt to them and get infatuated with them, but to push them to go further towards socialism and strengthen the revolutionary party so that it would come out stronger in the case of a split. It is particularly important to re-read the articles on the fusion of the French Trotskyists with wholesale nba jerseys Marcel Piverts new party which broke away from Blums social democratic party in 1938. One should think about Trotskys letters (published in Pierre Broue's *Le Mouvement communiste en France*, Minuit 1967), even if the situation is different and the problems are raised in a different context, with different questions and different actors. So recognising the centrism in todays Front de Gauche does not at all mean thinking it is the same as the centrism of the 1930s. The difference arises above all in the fundamental difference between the situation then and now. Then, the world was marching towards a coming war, and petrified centrism was condemned to explode very soon. Today, on the other hand, we are confronted with the impossibility of any return to Keynesian-type policies or any re-hash of them. The wholesale mlb jerseys bourgeoisie simply are not able to just do it. They are even forced to cut their military expenditure and the budget of their European venture. So they are obliged to pursue their austerity policies. Two

consequences appear inevitable:

* On the one hand, the masses of workers and working people will be obliged to fight back harder

* On the other, in the short term, all centrists will be faced with a choice: surrender or advance.

On the question of programme

In this context, the task of building the party in France, linked to rebuilding the Fourth International, will go by way of the unstinting support of Workers International members for the opening that Front de Gauche represents, which is part of and a significant stage in this process of reconstruction. It will also allow us to get to grips with the reconstruction of the Fourth International and link up with building the party by virtue concretely of the fact that it will make it easier for us to intervene with all those who claim allegiance to the Fourth International. At the same time, and in the same way that we undertake the building of the revolutionary party in a manner closely connected to the concrete situation, i.e. as associates of the Front de Gauche, we should also in the same way approach our tasks and demands, in short the Transitional Programme. Obviously our strategic orientation remains the proletarian revolution as a precondition for building socialism. This goal is supposedly shared by all organisations claiming allegiance to Trotskyism, from the Pabloite NPA to the Lambertist POI, by way of Lutte Ouvriere, the CWI's GR and all the various factions in these organisation. But how to achieve it? That is the fundamental question and that is where all the differences emerge and stand Bronwen out to the point that they actually obscure this general orientation. Our comrade is 1,000 times right when he says that various organisations keep repeating their old nostrums for building the International and the same demands without understanding what either this work of building or the Transitional Programme actually mean. Concretely, this means that it is absolutely not enough to repeat mechanically a programme which was written in 1938 (not that that makes it outdated!). In itself it is significant that centrists of every kind,

including those who claim allegiance to the Fourth International, are mostly unable to explain openly, against all the desperate efforts of various wings and strands of the bourgeoisie to find and put forward endless remedies and solutions to repair a floundering bourgeois economy, that the one and only remedy is to move on to socialism by way of the overthrow of the capitalist system of ill repute. If certain organisations like the Lambertist POI or Lutte Ouvrière do put forward the socialist solution, it remains isolated from real living problems and remains suspended in mid-air. But even if most organisations do suggest something, it is very often a new recipe for correcting or improving the existing capitalist system, eked out at most with this or that old demand from the Transitional Programme. Even if these entirely retain their validity today, nonetheless, put there in themselves, they also become a version of a – maybe more radical – bourgeois solution, because they remain fixed and lose that essential thing, i.e. their character as a transition to socialism. I shall not refer to Trotskys many explanations on that score: how this programme acts as a bridge by mobilising the mass of the exploited to make it easier for them to understand the need to overthrow capitalism. So it is easy to understand why we insist both on its concrete content, sticking close to reality, and on its merely transitional character. So it becomes clear why we need to adapt our old programme to the living, concrete requirements of today. However, we must specify immediately that even without adapting it in that way, the main assertions of our Transitional Programme, and even most of the specific demands are still entirely valid. But here too, our task is to translate that into the language of todays problems, so that it can immediately be read and understood by all workers here and now. Everybody knows, for example, that although the USSR occupies an important position in this programme, it no longer exists. However, we should use even this obsolete part not just to formulate our demands against the weight and despotism of the workers bureaucracy, but simply in order to understand this bureaucracy and the

Stalinist conceptions and reflexes which still prevail in a big part of it. As a system, Stalinism is finished, but it still lives as a theoretical and practical heritage. I believe another example is that it is no longer enough to repeat what the programme says about banks. Indeed, we need a whole series of demands over finance, in particular, debt (where the demand to cancel the debt is not enough to arouse a movement against it, but should have a transitional character aiming at this outcome, the essential point of which is to mobilise working people). Similar problems arise over Europe, where the – still correct – call for a United Workers (or Socialist) States of Europe as such is not sufficiently rooted in the concrete and immediate questions of the day. (I have attempted to approach these problems in my articles through demands for a public investigation into the debt and a struggle for a Working Peoples Europe.) Adapting our programme properly is not a matter of scratching our heads to make up this or that demand, but of laying hold of those which have arisen in the course of the struggle, either spontaneously or brought in by some other organisation. Most demands of this kind are around already. (Let us not forget that in 1917 the Bolshevik Party, lacking a worked-out peasant policy, simply adopted that of the Left Social Revolutionaries.) So we take hold of those which are already going around as demands. Not all of them, obviously, but those which, like the Transitional Programme, have the capacity to mobilise working people. Generally speaking we do not repeat them as they exist formally, but give them the character of class mobilisers (which is the essential point about the Transitional Programme) which point the way to socialism. I think a good example is the struggle Mélanchon has launched for a Sixth Republic. Look how the revisionist fake Trotskyists reacted! A comrade called Yvan Lemaître (probably in the NPA) wrote an article criticising another article by comrade George Kaldy (Lutte Ouvriere) in which the latter announced that his organisation would not join in the demonstration called by Mélanchon. Lemaître (like the NPA) declared in favour of the demonstration, but squarely asserted

in the article that, like Kaldy, we do not share the position of Mélanchon and the PCF (Parti Communiste Français) on the Sixth Republic. Here you can see very well the completely negative, not to say harmful attitude these two organisations have, which very well expresses the sclerotic state they are in. Obviously you could take this slogan as it stands as a call for a return to a possibly improved Fourth Republic, which is probably what all the inveterate centrists think (including many leaders of the PCF). Others who think Mélanchon is a bit of a pin-up figure may just see this slogan as one of his catchphrases. In my view, a Marxist ought to take up this demand and provide it with a quite different content and meaning. For us, a Sixth Republic should be and will be a workers republic crowing a victorious struggle against the bourgeoisie. In this sense it has the same algebraic quality that a workers and peasants government had for Trotsky (and still has for us). The dynamics of the struggle will provide the exact detail and content of this republic. Another example has appeared most recently in Great Britain, where the central trade union force rallying a left alliance has rightly adopted the demand for the reestablishment of the welfare state practically liquidated by the bourgeois offensive. Of course it cannot be re-established, but it is up to us Marxists to explain that we think that there has to be a struggle for a real, actual welfare state, i.e. a workers and socialist one! We must keep working in this area and further enrich our arsenal of demands, bringing them together in order to point them all in the direction of the socialist revolution, as a great bridge towards it, never losing sight of their fundamental and essential content, which is to mobilise the working masses to fulfil their work of emancipation. To sum up: in every organisation listed above, their centrist politics is clearly marked by three major defects:

a. Either they repeat their ultimate aim of socialism, but without any real link (apart from empty assertions) between these distant goals and today's concrete tasks and demands.

b. Or they put forward these current and concrete demands drawn also from our Transitional Programme (but not updating it), but remain stuck at this level and do not dare argue for socialism. They forget that these demands are only a bridge which is meant to cross the river to socialism.

c. They have no opening for building / rebuilding the Fourth International. In the best case, they poach individual members one by one while squabbling with other centrist groups, convinced that they have already built (or rebuilt) the true Fourth International. In the worst cases, they do not even have any such prospect, and some of them throw it all overboard and opt for a Fifth International (whatever that may be).