

The Fourth International in Perspective

This is the transcript of a speech given at a conference organised by *Socialist Outlook* on 14 November 1998 at the University of North London to commemorate sixty years of the Fourth International. The conference was also addressed by three other veterans of the movement – John Archer, Bill Hunter and Charles van Gelderen.

BEHIND ME you will see the symbol of the Fourth International, in front of me on the platform are red roses – the symbol of New Labour. Whether that is a sign of the ambivalence of what you are about to hear is for you to decide!

If you had asked those who attended the founding conference of the Fourth International, or were already members of Trotskyist organisations, whether they would live to see the revolution, most would probably have said no. For two reasons.

First, that being committed to building a revolutionary leadership they didn't expect to survive. And they were correct: because there is a long roll of honour of Trotskyists who lost their lives fighting for Trotskyism either in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany or in the gulags of Stalinism. The chances of committed Trotskyists in Europe and other countries dying in the concentration camps, in the cells of Stalinist Russia, in the torture chambers of Argentina and Chile, was very high. For that reason alone they didn't expect to live to see the triumph of the socialist revolution. In the democratic countries Trotskyists such as Jock Haston, Roy Tearse, Heaton Lee and Ann Keen saw the inside of gaols. James Cannon and members of the Socialist Workers Party in the USA were imprisoned as a result of the Smith Act during the war.

The second reason is that the transition from capitalism to socialism is not a matter of a day's work but of years and decades. Those are the two reasons why those who joined the movement in the thirties were unlikely to see the victory of the socialist revolution.

However, one would have expected that in the sixty years since the foundation of the Fourth International it would have made more progress than it has done. Particularly seeing that we were

supposed to be witnessing the death agony of capitalism – an epoch of “wars and revolutions”. If we compare the conquest of power with the conquest of the Himalayas, then you would have expected that at least we would have climbed some peaks, got out of the valleys and established some base camps for the conquest of the heights.

Unfortunately we have to say that these expectations were not fulfilled. And if we are today to discuss the history of the Fourth International, then we must be critical of our mistakes and our failures, and try to understand where our perspectives and analyses were wrong and where we have to revise them.

Though I no longer consider myself a Trotskyist I am proud to have belonged to the movement and to have made that contribution. Though we may not have achieved our aims and perspectives, nevertheless the Fourth International, if it has been a failure, has been an honourable one.

One of the things we have to be proud of is that, throughout the Second World War, Trotskyists held high the banner of international working class solidarity when the masses and the labour movement and the Stalinists wallowed in national chauvinism and national hatred – I remember that the slogan of the French Communist Party during the German occupation was “à chacun son Boche”, which meant “let everyone kill his own Hun”. In that period the French Trotskyists in collaboration with German Trotskyists published an illegal paper *Arbeiter und Soldat* aimed at the German soldiers in the occupation forces, fought for an internationalist policy and organised Trotskyist anti-Nazi cells in the German army. They were betrayed: the German comrades were shot and many of the French comrades ended in concentration camps.

Now for some criticism. Let's remember what the perspectives of the founding conference were. Capitalism was in its death agony. The productive forces were stagnating. Reformism and Stalinism would be exposed and all the objective conditions for the socialist revolution were present except one – a revolutionary leadership. The task the Fourth International set itself was to provide that leadership. How far has this perspective been vindicated now sixty years later? What progress has the Fourth International made towards accomplishing this task?

The Fourth International has had some successes in Sri Lanka, Bolivia and Indochina. But in no advanced capitalist country has the FI succeeded in winning mass support or been anywhere in sight of achieving power.

Trotsky characterised the regime in the Soviet Union as a transitional one with no future. Either the bureaucracy would open the road to capitalism or the working class would rise up in a political revolution to defend socialist property relations. The first part of this prognostication has unfortunately proved correct. The Stalinist regimes have collapsed into Mafia-style capitalism. But contrary to our hopes and predictions the working class has failed to defend socialist property relations.

We have to recognise without illusions that our analysis was wrong. Sixty years after we pronounced the death agony of capitalism we still have a capitalism which undoubtedly has its problems and its crises, but there is no prospect of its overthrow in the near or intermediate future. And at the same time the influence of Marxist and socialist ideas is at its lowest since 1848. It's no good – and I make no apology for being critical – it's no good coming here and celebrating the sixty years of the FI without asking ourselves what went wrong and what we need to criticise and to revise.

Let's compare the perspectives described with what actually happened. The war did come and ended with the radicalisation of the working class and the revolutionary situations we predicted. The collapse of Nazism saw armed resistance movements in Italy, France and Belgium, largely under Communist Party leadership. We saw bourgeois regimes on their knees. But we were unable to break through, and the Stalinist and social democratic leaderships maintained their mass support.

Now, Bill Hunter argues in his book [*Lifelong Apprenticeship: The Life and Times of a Revolutionary*] that the only reason capitalism survived was due to the treachery of the social democratic and Stalinist leaderships. This is only a partial explanation. We have to ask ourselves why, despite our correct criticisms and their betrayals, the reformists and Stalinists continued to have mass support. I think the first self-criticism we

have to make is that we underestimated the hold of reformist and nationalist and even bourgeois ideology on the working class.

Bill Hunter says that our predictions of capitalist collapse were not that ludicrous. He quotes bourgeois politicians and academics who were themselves extremely pessimistic about the survival of capitalism. But is it sufficient to say that if we were wrong at least we were wrong in bad company?! From 1947-48 we saw the longest and most extensive boom and expansion of capitalism. We saw not the destruction of bourgeois democracy or decline of reformism but the continuance of stable parliamentary democratic regimes and improved standards of living. Yet year after year we continued to base our policies on the perspective of imminent slump, a radicalised working class and revolutionary situations.

This was a very unfavourable situation for the development of revolutionary movements. Even if we had made no mistakes we have to say – admittedly with hindsight – that the period after the war from 1948 onwards was one in which no revolutionary movement could have broken out of isolation. Nevertheless, we attempted to break out of this isolation and, to do so, attempted to apply the *Transitional Programme* adopted in 1938.

Let me give you two examples. In 1945-46 there were discussions in the Revolutionary Communist Party on our policies to combat the unemployment and redundancies we expected at the end of the war. Some argued that our comrades in industry should put forward the demand that non-unionists go first, others that we should fight for the principle of last in first out. Others of us said this was a policy of retreat, of accepting unemployment. Instead we should apply the *Transitional Programme* – the demand for a sliding scale of hours. In other words, absorb the redundant workers through a reduction of hours without loss of pay.

In the factory in which I worked in Manchester we were faced with precisely that problem in 1949. 300 workers out of 2,000 were declared redundant. As a Trotskyist I moved in the shop stewards' committee that we resist this and demand that the redundant workers be kept on until they found alternative employment and until then be absorbed by adopting four days' work for five days' pay. Nobody on the shop stewards' committee ever put forward the idea of "nons first" or "last in first out". A mass meeting was called, the workers came out on strike. We attempted to spread the strike through the Manchester area, and throughout the textile machinery makers' combine in Lancashire and Yorkshire. A shop stewards' conference called by the Platts' strike committee and which I chaired was attended by shop stewards representing 50,000 workers in the Manchester area – it supported our demands and formed an action committee to campaign for a one

day general strike.

Now, remember this was 1949. It was an isolated packet of redundancies in a period of full employment. Within the first fortnight of the strike most of the redundant workers had walked into other jobs. Our demands had become academic. The strikers decided to go back to work without our demands having been met. Nevertheless, the Platts' shop stewards' committee campaigned to have this policy adopted throughout the engineering industry in the event of any future redundancies. We got this accepted by the Textile Machinery Makers (TMM) shop stewards' central committee representing 10,000 workers in Lancashire and Yorkshire. And these demands were taken up elsewhere in the country. For example, in 1953 a strike at S. Smith Ltd in Cricklewood in London took place against redundancy with these demands. They won four weeks' pay in lieu of notice, compared with the one week's pay then prevalent in the industry. This was a partial victory. We were not able to prevent further redundancies but won concessions. By the 1970s redundancy payments based on one week's pay for each year of service became law. If in the 1949 strike the employers had granted this, the workers would have considered it a significant victory.

Here was an example of Trotskyists trying to apply the *Transitional Programme* – which was designed for a revolutionary situation – in a non-revolutionary situation. Was it a waste of time? In my opinion, no. Today redundant workers get relatively large sums – which is better than a kick in the teeth. Though our fight for transitional demands did not bring about the revolutionary results we expected, we did make a contribution in improving conditions. Of course, the reverse side of that is that those concessions can be used by the state and the employers to defuse the opposition to redundancies and unemployment.

The other thing I want to mention is our attempt to relate to the mass labour movement. There was a bitter division within the Revolutionary Communist Party at the end of the war as to whether we should enter the Labour Party. I was one of the minority which eventually did do, with the agreement of the International. There are two ways of looking at revolutionaries entering a mass reformist party. One is the concept of a short term raiding party – you go in with fifty members, you come out with a hundred. This was not our conception. We believed that a revolutionary party can develop out of the struggles in a reformist movement, but as an organic

process, as the result of the development of a left wing movement which would eventually split from the Labour Party and of which the Trotskyists would be the hard core.

When we entered the Labour Party in 1947 we attempted to overcome the sectarianism and dogmatism that had characterised our movement. For example, we started the *Socialist Outlook* in 1948 together with a number of left trade unionists and left Labourites, such as Tom Braddock MP, Jack Stanley, general secretary of the Constructional Engineering Union, and Jim Figgins of the National Union of Railwaymen. I remember that we deliberately ensured that we were a minority on the editorial board and on the management committee of the Labour Publishing Society that published the paper. I think that was correct because our aim was to bring people with us, to develop a general consciousness and not to make the *Socialist Outlook* a narrow Trotskyist paper but a catalyst for the development of socialist and Marxist consciousness.

Some of our fellow Trotskyists criticised us on the grounds that we were disguising ourselves as left reformists. I don't take that as a criticism. What else could a revolutionary movement do in a non-revolutionary situation? Either we say reforms are impossible: only the building of the revolutionary party will solve your problems. OK we can do that. But then we become a sect, like the SPGB, and abstain from participation in daily struggles. On the other hand, if you try to participate in such struggles you always face the danger of being seen as reformists. In fact the people that supported us in the *Socialist Outlook* and when the Socialist Fellowship was formed (not on our initiative but on that of left Labourites), and who supported our policies for extending nationalisation, workers' control, support for colonial liberation struggles, opposition to the Korean War – demands that we put forward as revolutionaries – didn't see these policies as inconsistent with their own gradualist and reformist approach. Now that is a problem: how do you, as a revolutionary movement in a non-revolutionary situation, prevent yourself from becoming a pure sect without the risk of being seen as reformist?

I understand my speaking time is up. I hope in the closed sessions to continue to try and find an answer to these problems. Let me just finish by saying that I make no apology for being extremely critical of the history and actions of the Fourth International. Nevertheless, at least we participated in and are part of the history of the development of the working class struggle.