The *Transitional Programme* Reasessed

I AM largely in agreement with Bob Pitt's verdict ("The Transitional Programme and the Tasks of Marxists Today", *What Next?* No.11) on the *Transitional Programme* adopted by the founding conference of the Fourth International. This contribution is an attempt to enlarge on some of the issues he raised.

Pitt very correctly pinpoints the fundamental error in perspectives: the belief that capitalism had reached a complete impasse "Because it is no longer capable of developing the productive forces ... Mankind's productive forces stagnate". As Pitt points out, and as we now know with the benefit of hindsight, since 1938 the productive forces have expanded at a previously unknown rate, despite repeated crises. As Pitt states: "From the vantage point of the end of the twentieth century we can see that the inter-war years were in fact merely a particularly unstable *phase* in the overall development of the capitalist mode of production. The error that Trotsky committed was that he mistook this unstable phase for the terminal crisis of the system – the 'death agony of capitalism'."

However, orthodox Trotskyist defenders of the 1938 programme might concede that, admittedly with hindsight, Trotsky may indeed have mistaken the *middle-age crisis* of capitalism for its terminal agony, but nevertheless this terminal decline though postponed is still to come and therefore the *Transitional Programme* and its method is still valid or will be when the terminal crisis finally develops in the 21st century. Will this be the case? It is not clear what Bob Pitt's answer to that question would be. He argues that programmatic aspects of the *Transitional Programme* – the "transitional method" – cannot be separated from the false perspectives. "The transitional method", he writes, "was developed in response to ... a *transitional situation* – a pre-revolutionary crisis on the eve of transformation into a revolutionary crisis, during which the struggle for workers' power would be directly posed." In this case, Pitt seems to argue, the transitional method would be applicable when this situation develops in the future.

If this is indeed so, then the Fourth Internationalists were merely premature. The *Transitional Programme* (suitably updated of course) should be reissued in the year 20?? in preparation for the at last arriving "terminal crisis".

I think this is wrong. For two reasons. One is that there is no such thing as a "terminal crisis". The second is that the "transitional method" – if not completely flawed – poses some problems.

The "terminal crisis" theory is based on the assumption, drawn from Marx's *Capital*, that at some stage the capitalist economic system will come up against a "ceiling" above which production or the productive forces will not be able to rise; production will either stagnate or go down resulting in increased misery for the mass of the exploited, leading to revolutionary situations.

I have tried to show in numerous articles, mostly in *New Interventions*, that this is not so. Even though Marx talked famously of capitalism being a "fetter on the productive forces", other passages of *Capital* accepted that after each "crisis" production could recover and reach new levels; also that, so long as the productivity of labour increased, the same amount of exchange-value would represent a greater quantity of use-values, and with no change in the "rate of exploitation" or even its increase both the labourer and the employer could appropriate an increased mass of use-values.

This, let me emphasise, does not mean that capitalism is free of contradictions and problems. On the contrary, it is inherently unstable and has to expand exponentially at an ever increasing rate in order to maintain itself. This in itself brings it up against the capacity of the planet to sustain growth, leads to ever increasing pollution and environmental disasters. This, combined with its inherent instability, creates repeated crises. However, as Bob Pitt rightly points out, "crises arise from a combination of factors, among which economic [and, I may add, environmental] dislocation may well prove decisive, but which will also include ideological forms, established political traditions, the specific character of the workers' movement and so on, all of which will vary from country to country". In other words, unless politically overthrown capitalism will recover or

limp on after each crisis.

This brings us to the second question: the validity of the "transitional method" in these periods of crisis and increased social conflict. Why did I say it poses some problems?

Pitt put his finger on the crucial weakness when he quoted Trotsky as saying: "It is easier to overthrow capitalism than to realise this demand [sliding scale of hours] under capitalism. Not one of our demands will be realised under capitalism. That is why we are calling them transitional demands." The unspoken assumption here is that the workers do not yet understand the necessity to overthrow capitalism. But they do support various transitional demands (for example, preventing unemployment by a sliding scale of hours) and they are prepared to fight for them. Obviously they must believe these demands are achievable (at least partly), otherwise they would not go on strike or demonstrate for them.

But we, ever-so-clever revolutionists, know that workers will not win these demands and will then draw the conclusion that they must now overthrow capitalism; or, at least, support the revolutionary party in its bid for power. For Trotskyists the achievement or otherwise of the demands the workers originally fought for is irrelevant. All that matters is the experience of struggle which will – somehow – imbue the mass of the working class with the required revolutionary consciousness. That is the theory. But in real life it doesn't work that way.

Let us take the example quoted, the demand for the sliding scale of hours – the reduction of working hours, without loss of pay, in order to absorb the unemployed. According to the theory, the employers will resist such demands to the death rather than concede – resulting in permanent strike or permanent lock-out, increasingly violent confrontation between workers and the forces of the state. It is of course *possible* that, given the right conditions, a substantial enough number of workers will decide to support the revolutionary party in a bid for power. But that is only one possibility. If in the first place workers took up the demand for the sliding scale it was because (a) they believed it was achievable at least in part, and (b) either they had no confidence in the possibility of overthrowing capitalism or they were not convinced anyway that there was a viable socialist alternative to it.

For the working class to make the transition from fighting for transitional demands to fighting for a socialist overturn they must *believe that socialism is a realisable and feasible alternative*. It has, indeed, been the case that during certain periods large layers of the working class did have this belief in both the feasibility and desirability of socialism. From the latter part of the nineteenth century right up to the First World War, there were mass socialist parties which, while fighting more immediately for reforms, nevertheless did publicly assert the desirability and possibility of socialism. Millions of workers, petty bourgeois and intellectuals held these views. Then from 1917 onward – and even more so after the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II – this view was bolstered by the perceived actual fulfilment of these expectations in Russia – actually existing socialism worked! (The criticisms of the Trotskyists and non-Stalinist lefts, anarchists, etc about the reality of Stalinism were largely ignored – and the faithful dismissed all "evidence" about the negative features of the Stalinist regimes as "capitalist propaganda".)

Given these perceptions, the possibility of even more numerous sections of the working class and petty bourgeoisie and intellectuals progressing from reformist or transitional demands to support for a socialist transformation in times of crisis could not be entirely discounted. (The other ever present possibility was of course that defeat in the struggle for immediate and transitional demands would demoralise the workers, lessen their confidence and lead to passivity until the effects of the defeat wore off.)

However, since the collapse of the "actually existing socialisms" (the Stalinist regimes) in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the belief mentioned above in the viability of a socialist alternative has been eroded. Today there are in the advanced capitalist countries fewer socialists of any kind – revolutionary, gradualist, parliamentarian, libertarian, etc – than at any time since the formation of the Second International. With the continuing problems of capitalism impacting on consciousness, the socialist alternative can regain credence, but this will not happen overnight nor without active propaganda by socialists.

In "Revisionist Thoughts – Reformist Conclusions" (*New Interventions*, Vol.8 No.3, Spring 1998), I wrote: "Reformism is still an option, not only because it is still objectively possible, but also because working class people will not abandon attempts to win improvements within the capitalist framework and opt for the revolutionary alternative until they become convinced that, firstly, the reformist road is closed, and, secondly, the revolutionary alternative is both desirable and feasible.... Even if reformist policies should fail to win improvements, people will need to be convinced that the revolutionary Marxist alternative is feasible and desirable. On both counts this is unlikely in the near or foreseeable future.... The negative features of 'existing socialism' in the former Soviet bloc and its ignominious collapse have discredited the idea of socialism in the eyes of millions. At the moment no significant parties or movements exist which stand for a socialist alternative, and are seen as capable of replacing existing governments. The communist parties have collapsed and the social

democratic parties, including the British Labour Party, have accepted that there is no alternative to the capitalist market. In these circumstances, it is likely that most protests and conflicts will remain within the bounds of seeking changes within the framework of capitalism – whether it be a 35-hour week, better public services, improved pensions, etc."

If the "transitional method" is flawed, what, then, should we put in its place? Bob Pitt's reference to Marx's approach points the way: "This approach – combining propaganda for workers' power and socialism with agitation around basic demands *that could be achieved within the framework of capitalism* [my emphasis] – was later formalised in the minimum-maximum programme. The most famous example of this is the programme adopted by the German social democrats at their Erfurt Congress in 1891."

As Bob pointed out, both Engels and Lenin defended the minimum-maximum approach, and it was the revisionists led by Bernstein who rejected this approach *by playing down if not renouncing entirely the maximum part.*

I think the minimum-maximum approach is still relevant both in non-revolutionary and pre-revolutionary situations, and I will explain why. And as part of this I want to make a distinction, which is seldom made, between (a) fighting to impose demands on hostile governments and employers and (b) measures carried out by socialist governments in power as steps on the transition from capitalist to socialist economy.

The first are for example the fight for a 35-hour week to absorb the unemployed, the fight against the poll-tax, against hospital closures, more funds for the NHS etc, i.e. reformist demands – the minimum programme. It is true these are harder to win in a period of economic recession because the resistance to them will be fiercer and the relationship of forces may be less favourable. But they are still at least partially winnable. If, as orthodox defenders of the *Transitional Programme* still assert, these demands are unachievable, then they are guilty of leading people up a blind alley when they encourage workers to engage in struggle. The workers will sense this and understandably be reluctant to be used as pawns and guinea pigs.

The maximum programme, i.e. the transition to socialism, requires the coming to power of socialist governments. This in turn requires such parties to win the support of the majority of the working class and its allies. They can do this by combining practical support of those in struggle for the immediate demands with general propaganda and education – explaining and popularising the concepts of a feasible socialist alternative to capitalism – and most importantly working out a concrete programme of measures which, once in power, they intend to carry out, and explaining how this would resolve the problems of unemployment, poverty, etc.

These would include such measures as ensuring social control of all major investment through public ownership and/or restructuring of the banking network, measures to nationalise industries and utilities that need planning on a national or international scale (with democratic input), transfer of other enterprises into cooperative ownership and control by their workforce and interested local communities, investment (via the now publicly-controlled financial network) in hospitals, public transport, education, etc, reduction in hours to create jobs, etc, etc.

In other words, the minimum and maximum programmes must be fought for in parallel and simultaneously. One or other component of this two-pronged strategy will take precedence at different times and in different countries, depending on circumstances.

There remains something to be said about the road to governmental power – by winning a parliamentary majority or through insurrection and soviets?

The *Transitional Programme* has little to say about parliamentary activity. This is understandable since it argued that "in the present epoch the class struggle irresistibly tends to transform itself into civil war". Referring to the fascist countries, it said that "the revolutionary wave ... will immediately be a grandiose sweep and under no circumstances will stop short at the experiment of resuscitating some sort of Weimar corpse.... As soon as the movement assumes something of a mass character, the democratic slogans will be intertwined with the transitional ones.... soviets will cover Germany before a new constitutional assembly will gather in Weimar. The same will be true of Italy and the rest of the totalitarian and semitotalitarian countries".[1]

In fact, on this issue too, the *Transitional Programme*'s prognosis was proved wrong. Not only in Italy and Germany but also in the victorious countries, and in the whole of Western Europe and North America, parliamentary-democratic regimes continue to this day. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of the population, and indeed of the working class and their organisations, accept the rules of parliamentary democracy.

Instead of the *Transitional Programme*'s cavalier dismissal of the possibility of the working class using parliamentary democracy – won by past struggles such as those of the Chartists – I suggest the following approach, which I argued for in "A Programme for the Left" (*New Interventions*, Vol.7 No.3, Autumn 1996):

"So long as parliament is still relatively freely elected, so long as alternative structures have not arisen naturally, as a result of social movements,

it is ludicrous for socialists to talk of 'destruction of the state machine' and its replacement by non-existent 'soviets'. When the Tory Heath government was forced to resign by the miners' strike in the 1970s, even the most militant miners accepted as natural that the government to replace it should be decided by a general election. As long as parliamentary democracy exists and is accepted by the mass of the working class and middle class, socialists must have the perspective of winning a socialist majority in parliament. True we must be aware of the possibility, even probability, that reactionary forces would attempt to subvert an elected socialist government by military coups d'états, etc (as in Chile), and that in any case a socialist majority would have to undertake a radical transformation of the state machine.... It is quite possible that the scenario might be a re-run of the English Civil War of the seventeenth century with Parliament versus the modern Royalists in the course of which a New Model Army and new popular institutions would develop. But this does not justify rejecting the 'parliamentary road' in advance, or calling for non-existent soviets as if the Russian revolutionary road of 1917 had universal application."

To sum up what I have said so far. I agree with Bob Pitt's contention that because the perspectives of terminal collapse and revolutionary situations from which the *Transitional Programme* and its method flowed did not materialise, it could not be applied as intended during the long post-war period of boom and rising living standards. I also think that the parallel pursuit of both strands of the minimum-maximum programme (the relative weight of each strand depending on the specific situation) is correct.

However, I would differ with Bob Pitt's argument that demands such as the sliding scale of hours were irrelevant during the post-war period. In *Reluctant Revolutionary*[2] I related how as a shopsteward in the engineering industry I proposed this demand and got it accepted in my own factory. This took the form of demanding that redundant workers be kept on until alternative work at union rates was found for them elsewhere, and that meanwhile working hours be reduced without loss of pay to absorb the redundant workers. This was fought for in the Platt's strike of 1949 and was later adopted as policy by a shopstewards' conference representing over 10,000 workers in the textile machinery industry. There were several strikes in support of these demands which, though they did not succeed in preventing redundancies, forced the employers to concede longer periods of notice with pay in lieu and eventually resulted in statutory redundancy payments guaranteed by law.

Thus these demands, intended by we Trotskyists as "transitional demands", though they did not – and could not, due to the actual economic and political situation – lead to revolutionary struggles, nevertheless did win partial concessions from the employers and the state. They in fact became minimum demands.

Postscript

SINCE WRITING this article I have read in *A History of Contemporary Italy* by Paul Ginsborg (Penguin Books) some interesting references to "transitional demands" achieved by the working class movement in Italy. One was the sliding scale of wages:

"The *scala mobile*, introduced in the national contracts of 1945 and 1946, was a system to safeguard workers' real wages against the effects of inflation. Every two months price rises were calculated in relation to the 'shopping basket' of an average working class family. An increase in the cost of the basket led automatically to a proportional rise in the size of the workers' pay packets."

Ginsborg goes on to comment: "The employers granted the scheme without any real battle having to be waged. They feared the unpredictable consequences of galloping inflation and viewed the *scala mobile* as an instrument both to protect a weakened and numerically reduced working class, and to guarantee productivity. With hindsight, it is possible to say that they underestimated the system's utility as a permanent defence of workers' living standards. In future years the importance of the scheme was revealed by the repeated attempts made to modify its workings, attempts which were finally crowned with success in the referendum of 1985" (pp.97-8).

That the workers saw the benefits of this measure was underlined when in September 1947 60,000 landless labourers in the Po Valley went on strike for twelve days. As well as an eight-hour day, an increase In family allowances, the *imponibile di mano d'opera* (contracts to oblige landowners to employ a certain number of labourers in strict proportion to the size of the estate) and greater security of tenure, they also demanded that the *scala mobile* be applied throughout the region. By no means all these demands were granted, but the strike was certainly a partial success. It won the eight-hour day, index-linked increases and the *imponibile.*

Throughout the post-war years the Italian workers also fought vigorously against unemployment with lengthy factory occupations against redundancies and factory closures (for example, the occupation of the British-owned Leyland-Innocenti factory in Milan which lasted throughout the winter of 1975-6). Though they often failed to reverse closures, the militancy of the working class secured the setting up of a *Cassa Integrazione* – the state-financed fund for workers

made redundant, paying out 90% of previous wages in the first year of redundancy.

This confirms my argument that so-called "transitional demands" which Trotskyists say cannot be won under capitalism – but the fight for which must always be related to the conquest of power – can in fact be, at least partially, won short of overthrowing capitalism and that they do in practice help workers' living standards.

Notes

1. Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*, Pathfinder, 1977, p.141.
2. Harry Ratner, *Reluctant Revolutionary: Memoirs of a Trotskyist 1936-1960*, Socialist Platform, 1994. See also Harry Ratner, "Struggles Against Redundancies in the Textile Machinery Industry in the North West", *North West Labour History Journal*, No.23, 1998/9.