

The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International

Following is the full text of the central thesis adopted by the World Congress of the Fourth International which met in Switzerland in September, 1938.

The Objective Prerequisites for a Socialist Revolution

The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.

The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already, new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the weight of the social crisis affecting the whole capitalist system weigh ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the State and undermines the unstable monetary systems. Democratic regimes, as well as fascist, stagger on from one bankruptcy to another.

The bourgeoisie itself sees no way out. In countries where it has already been forced to stake its last upon the card of fascism, it now toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe. In the historically-privileged countries, i.e., in those where the bourgeoisie can still for a certain period permit itself the luxury of democracy at the expense of national accumulations (Great Britain, France, United States, etc.) all of capital's traditional parties are in a state of perplexity, bordering on a paralysis of will. The "New Deal," despite its first period pretentious resoluteness, represents but a special form of political perplexity, possible only in a country where the bourgeoisie succeeded in accumulating incalculable wealth. The present crisis, far from having run its full course, has already succeeded in showing that "New Deal" politics, like Popular Front politics in France, opens no new exit from the economic blind-alley.

International relations present no better picture. Under the increasing tension of capitalist disintegration, imperialist antagonisms reach an impasse at the height of which separate clashes and bloody local disturbances (Ethiopia, Spain, the Far East, Central Europe) must inevitably coalesce into a conflagration of world dimensions. The bourgeoisie, of course, is aware of the mortal danger to its domination represented by a new war. But that class is now immeasurably less capable of averting war than on the eve of 1914.

All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet "ripened" for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only "ripened"; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period, at that—a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.

The Proletariat and Its Leadership

The economy, the state, the politics of the bourgeoisie and its international relations are completely blighted by a social crisis, characteristic of a pre-revolutionary state of society. The chief obstacle in the path of transforming the pre-revolutionary into a revolutionary state is the opportunist character of proletarian leadership; its petty bourgeois cowardice before the big bourgeoisie and its perfidious connection with it even in its death agony.

In all countries the proletariat is wracked by a deep disquiet. In millions, the masses again and again move onto the road of the revolutionary outbreaks. But each time they are blocked by their own conservative bureaucratic apparatus.

The Spanish proletariat has made a series of heroic attempts since April, 1931, to take power in its hands and guide the fate of society. However, its own parties (Social Democrats, Stalinists, Anarchists, POUmists)—each in its own way—acted as a brake and thus prepared Franco's triumphs.

In France, the great wave of "sit-down" strikes, particularly during June, 1936, revealed the whole-hearted readiness of the proletariat to overthrow the capitalist system. However, the leading organizations (Socialists, Stalinists, Syndicalists) under the label of the Popular Front succeeded in canalizing and damning, at least temporarily, the revolutionary stream.

The unprecedented wave of sit-down strikes and the amazingly rapid growth of industrial unionism in the United States (the CIO) is most indisputable expression of the instinctive striving of the American workers to raise themselves to the level of the tasks imposed on them by history. But here, too, the leading political organizations, including the newly-created CIO, do everything possible to keep in check and paralyze the revolutionary pressure of the masses.

The definite passing over of the Comintern to the side of the bourgeois order, its cynically counter-revolutionary role throughout the world, particularly in Spain, France, the United States and other "democratic" countries, created exceptional supplementary difficulties for the world proletariat. Under the banner of the October Revolution, the conciliatory politics practiced by the "People's Front" dooms the working class to impotence and clears the road for fascism.

"People's Fronts" on the one hand—fascism on the other;

World Congress Greetings to Leon Trotsky



Dear Comrade:

The Conference of the Fourth International sends you its warmest greetings.

The barbarous repression which rabidly attacks our movement in general and you in particular prevented you from being with us to bring to our debates the contributions of the former founder of the Red Army, the organizer of the October insurrection, the theoretician of the permanent revolution, and the direct successor of Lenin.

The Stalinist, the fascist, and the imperialist enemies have subjected you to severe trials. Leon Sedoff, Erwin Wolf, Rudolf Klement are dead, fallen victims to the Stalinist counter-revolution. Ta-Thu Thau lies suffering in the prisons of French imperialism. Numerous German and Greek comrades are being tortured in fascist prisons. You are the object of constant attempts at assassination. But all these persecutions, though they rain painful blows upon us, have as their final result only the definite strengthening of our conviction of the value of the Marxist program, of which you are in our opinion, since the death of Lenin, the principal interpreter.

That is why our greeting contains more than just affection for the great present-day theoretician of revolutionary Marxism. There is also the certainty that the enemy's blows, however heavy, will not prevent the doctrine of the socialist revolution from becoming the living reality of tomorrow. The Conference of the Fourth International marks a new spring forward of our movement along the road of unification, of organizational reinforcement, and of the perfecting of its propaganda by the adoption of the transitional program. We express the strong hope that you will long share in its successes as you have shared in its vicissitudes.

These are the last political resources of imperialism in the struggle against the proletarian revolution. From the historical point of view, however, both these resources are stop-gaps. The decay of capitalism continues under the sign of the Phrygian cap in France as under the sign of the swastika in Germany. Nothing short of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie can open a road out.

The orientation of the masses is determined first by the objective conditions of decaying capitalism, and second, by the treacherous politics of the old workers' organizations. Of these factors, the first, of course, is the decisive one: the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus. No matter how the methods of the social-betrayers differ—from the "social" legislation of Blum to the judicial frame-ups of Stalin—they will never succeed in breaking the revolutionary will of the proletariat. As time goes on, their desperate efforts to hold back the wheel of history will demonstrate more clearly to the masses that the crisis of the proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind's culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International.

The Minimum Program and a Transitional Program

The strategic task of the next period—a pre-revolutionary period of agitation, propaganda and organization—consists in overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and

its vanguard (the confusion and disappointment of the older generation; the inexperience of the younger generation). It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and inalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.

Classical Social Democracy, functioning in an epoch of progressive capitalism, divided its program into two parts, independent of one another; the *minimum program* which limited itself to reforms within the framework of bourgeois society, and the *maximum program* which promised substitution of socialism for capitalism in the indefinite future. Between the minimum and the maximum program no bridge existed. And indeed Social Democracy has no need of such a bridge, since the word Socialism is used only for holiday speechifying. The Comintern has set out to follow the path of Social Democracy in an epoch of decaying capitalism; when, in general, there can be no discussion of systematic social reforms and the raising of the masses' living standards; when every serious demand of the proletariat and even every serious demand of the petty-bourgeoisie inevitably reaches beyond the limits of capitalist property relations and of the bourgeois state.

The strategic task of the Fourth International lies not in reforming capitalism but in its overthrow. The political aim: the

Manifesto of the Congress

Against Imperialist War!

The following manifesto was issued by the conference during the height of the war crisis over the issue of Czechoslovakia.

Unite against exploitation, oppression, war and fascism!
Forward for the class struggle, international socialism, and freedom!
Workers, exploited, and colonial peoples of all countries!

The founding conference of the Fourth International—the World Party of the Socialist Revolution—meeting in September, 1938, issues this appeal at a time when the greatest peril threatens the masses of the entire world and the cause of their emancipation from modern slavery.

We are confronted with the horrors of a new imperialist world war. It is a monstrous lie that the war will take place between "peaceful" and "warlike" nations, because war is inherent in capitalism itself, and every capitalist nation is engaged in the mad armaments race.

It is a monstrous lie to say that the war will be between "democratic" and "dictatorial" countries, because the "democracies" are already allied with many dictatorships and when war does break out the first victims will be the democratic rights and institutions already largely undermined in the "peaceful" countries.

It is a lie to say that the war will take place for the national independence or freedom of Czechoslovakia. That is a

cruel falsehood in which Czechoslovakia is playing the same role as "poor Belgium" in 1914.

The Anglo-French imperialists, who mercilessly beat down the fighters for independence in India, Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, Palestine, and everywhere, recognize nothing but their "independent right" to exploit millions of slaves, black, brown and white, throughout the world.

The capitalist world is mortally wounded. In its agony it exhales the poisons of fascism and totalitarian war, which threatens to subject the workers and farmers everywhere once more to a new and horrible servitude, and to unleash the forces of destruction which will shatter modern civilization.

In the midst of abundance, with a productive apparatus which could, well organized and directed, cover more than all the present requirements of humanity, capitalism dooms millions of men to unemployment, miserables doles, or to starvation.

The ruling class which long ago broke the chains of feudalism in the name of democracy and equality, brings together the darkest elements of reaction and the most debased of the lower depths of society to abolish all the democratic rights conquered by the people. It wants, with the dagger and fascist knout, to preserve the sovereignty it would lose through the inexorable victory of socialism.

Capitalism is utterly incapable of assuring the well-being

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conquest of power by the proletariat for the purpose of expropriating the bourgeoisie. However, the achievement of this strategic task is unthinkable without the most considered attention to all, even small and partial questions of tactics. All sections of the proletariat, all its layers, professions and groups should be drawn into the revolutionary movement. The present epoch is distinguished not for the fact that it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried on indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution.

The Fourth International does not discard the program of the old "minimal" demands to the degree to which these have been preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness. Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But it carries on this day-to-day work within the framework of the correct actual, that is, revolutionary perspective. Insofar as the old, partial "minimal" demands of the masses clash with the destructive and degrading tendencies of decadent capitalism—and this occurs at each step—the Fourth International advances a system of *transitional demands*, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very bases of the bourgeois regime. The old "minimal program" is superseded by the *transitional program*, the task of which lies in systematic mobilization of the masses for the proletarian revolution.

Sliding Scale of Wages and Sliding Scale of Hours

Under the conditions of disintegrating capitalism, the masses continue to live the meagerized life of the oppressed; threatened now more than at any other time with the danger of being cast to the pit of pauperism. They must defend their mouthful of bread, if they cannot increase or better it. There is neither the need nor the opportunity to enumerate here those separate, partial demands which time and again arise on the basis of concrete circumstances—national, local, professional. But two basic economic afflictions, in which is summarized the increasing absurdity of the capitalist system: that is *unemployment and high prices*, demand generalized slogans and methods of struggle.

The Fourth International declares uncompromising war on the politics of the capitalists which, to a considerable degree, like the politics of their agents, the reformists, aims to place the whole burden of militarism, the crisis, the disorganization of the monetary system and all other scourges stemming from capitalism's death agony upon the backs of the toilers. The Fourth International demands *employment and decent living conditions* for all.

Neither monetary inflation nor stabilization can serve as slogans for the proletariat because these are but two ends of the same stick. Against a bounding rise in prices, which with the approach of war will assume an ever more unbridled character, one can fight only under the slogan of a *sliding scale of wages*. This means that collective agreements should assure an automatic rise in wages in relation to the increase in prices of consumer goods.

Under the menace of its own disintegration, the proletariat cannot permit the transformation of an increasing section of the workers into chronically unemployed paupers, living off the slops of a crumbling society. *The right to employment* is the only serious right left to the worker in a society based upon exploitation. This right today is being shorn from him at every step. Against unemployment, "structural" as well as "conjunctural," the time is ripe to advance along with the slogan of public works, the slogan of a *sliding scale of working hours*. Trade unions and other mass organizations should bind the workers and the unemployed together in the solidarity of mutual responsibility. On this basis, all the work on hand would then be divided among all existing workers in accordance with how the extent of the working week is defined. The average wage of every worker remains the same as it was under the old working week. Wages, under a strictly guaranteed *minimum*, would follow the movement of prices. It is impossible to accept any other program for the present catastrophic period.

Property owners and their lawyers will prove the "unrealizability" of these demands. Smaller, especially ruined capitalists, in addition will refer to their account ledgers. The workers categorically denounce such conclusions and references. The question is not one of a "normal" collision between opposed material interests. The question is one of guarding the proletariat from decay, demoralization and ruin. The question is one of life or death of the only creative and progressive class, and by that token of the future of mankind. If capitalism is incapable of satisfying the demands, inevitably arising from the calamities generated by itself, then let it perish. "Realizability" or "unrealizability" are in the given instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle. By means of this struggle, no matter what its immediate practical successes may be, the workers will best come to understand the necessity of liquidating capitalist slavery.

Trade Unions in the Transitional Epoch

In the struggle for partial and transitional demands, the workers, now more than ever before, need mass organizations; principally, trade unions. The powerful growth of trade unionism in France and the United States is the best refutation to the preachments of those ultra-left doctrinaires, who have been teaching that trade unions have "outlived their usefulness."

The Bolshevik-Leninist stands in the front-line trenches of