Whither Trotskyism?

By Will Herberg

As a political tendency in the Communist movement, Trotskyism is today facing a period of great and decisive change, a period of organizational regrouping and ideological reorientation. For the international opposition movement—which is today the bearer of the struggle for the future of the Comintern—these recent developments are of considerable importance and must receive our careful consideration and objective evaluation.

1. The Sectarian Character of Trotskyism

The entire political development of Trotskyism is conditioned by its essentially *sectarian* nature as an international fraction. Its profound sectarianism forms the method of operations of Trotskyism as a world movement and therefore determines the forms of its development.

Eager sectarianism is the very essence of Trotskyism. Sectarianism is not a matter of numbers; it is a question of political relation and attitude to the masses. An international tendency in Communism that makes its basis of concentration *not* the general living issues of the international (and national) class struggle but issues—many of them outlived—of differences in the Soviet Party is condemned to ultimate sectarianism. This is just what Trotskyism does. The concentration of Trotskyist forces on a world scale takes place primarily on the issues of Soviet policy in which Trotsky differed sharply with the leadership of the CPSU or else on those broader international questions on which also Trotsky clashed with the Soviet Party leadership. These questions form a closed system of dogma without any regard to their actuality or to their present relation to the vital questions of the revolutionary movement. In international questions — and especially in questions of the class struggle in individual countries—Trotskyism has always had only the vaguest general outlook, a sort of ghostly emanation of its central articles-of-faith. This general orientation—in essentials consistently ultra-left—has always been extremely unstable and subject to rapid decomposition—which is already setting in!

Trotsky himself welcomes the sectarianism that is the essence of his system. *"To be a 'sectarian' today,"* he declares, *"is an honor for every real revolutionary!"* In his letter on the situation in the *Leninbund* Trotsky lays down as the essence of his fraction: *"a particularly narrow and careful selection of the like-minded."* This is strictly and accurately true. It is in fact the very essence of Trotskyist sectarianism: a circle of people who "think alike" on a given set of *dogmas* in only distant political connection with the actual struggles of the masses

It is not therefore surprising that the boasted "internationalism" of Trotsky is no more than the inverted shadow of the "internationalism" of Stalin. Trotsky, like Stalin, proceeds along the line of the mobilization of the international movement for the program of a fraction of the CPSU—this is his "internationalism"! Trotsky, like Stalin, cares not a whit about the specific conditions in the various countries and brands as "opportunism" the attempt to apply and adapt the general line to these conditions. Had Trotsky the power he would, like Stalin, expel from the Comintern all except those who agree with him in every detail all along the line. Trotsky, like Stalin, issues his Open Letters to serve as basis for the separation of the sheep from the goats, the "loyalites" from the "renegades." The lesson is plain: Trotsky and Stalin differ *not* on the *system* of international *leadership* (distorted internationalism) but on the question of *which* Russian fraction is to have the hegemony in directing, i.e., in mobilizing the Comintern along *its* program!

2. The Political Development of Trotskyism

As Trotsky himself very correctly declares, the central point of his political system is the estimation of the class character of the Soviet Power. And it is not unindicative of the sectarian barrenness of Trotskyism that today—thirteen years after the October Revolution—the confusion on this basic question grows greater with every "crisis," with every "discussion"!

From almost the very beginning Trotskyism took as its point of departure some form or variety of the theory of Thermidor. Towards the middle of 1928 Trotsky himself formulated his views in precise and classical form when he characterized the present period of the Russian revolution as an "inverted Kerensky period," as the "Kerensky film run backward." Trotsky said.

"The function of the historic Kerensky period consisted in this: that on its back the power of the bourgeoisie passed over to the proletariat. The historic role of the Stalin period consists in this: that upon its back the power is gliding over from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie."

In other words the USSR is approaching Thermidor, the last stage of the revolution, the first stage of the victorious counter-revolution. And since the Kerensky period was, as Lenin pointed out, the period of dual power, the "intertwining of two class dictatorships" (Lenin), it follows, according to Trotsky, that in the "inverted Kerensky period" there exists and is maturing within the Soviet Union the class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie side by side with the dictatorship of the proletariat!

Such conceptions have their own inner logic and their own laws of motion. Exactly what they led to became sensationally clear in the Soviet-Chinese crisis towards the middle of 1929. In reaction to these events the German *Leninbund* supported more or less by Trotskyist groups in other countries, adopted an attitude which declared:

1) *"In Russia we have no proletarian dictatorship . . . In Russia the state power is no longer in the hands of the proletariat but in the hands of the bureaucratic apparatus . . . standing apparently above classes but actually representing the interests of the economically stronger class, . . . the capitalists . . .*

2) *The defense of the USSR cannot therefore be unconditional—at most it can be only a very conditional defense.*

This viewpoint Trotsky categorically rejected; along with the Russian Opposition and some other groups he called for the unconditional support and defense of the USSR! It is clear that this stand of Trotsky represents a definite political retreat on his part. But it must also be recognized that, however justified Trotsky's polemic against Urbahns may be on this question, Trotsky is himself politically and historically responsible for the theories of Thermidor in *every* form. Moreover, in spite of his retreat, Trotsky's own position has become no clearer. Apparently Trotsky now believes that while the Soviet Power is still a proletarian dictatorship, it is being led by Thermidorian elements, i.e., by those who pave the way for the counter-revolution and express its interests. In essence this is no more correct and even more self-contradictory than the "consistent Thermidor" of Urbahns. Urbahns has only developed in a logical and thorogoing manner what he has been taught by Trotsky!

Closely connected with this is *the question of "socialism in one country."* By the Trotskyites this question has been elevated into an untouchable dogma while the official polemic of the Comintern on the question has unquestionably been conducted in an extremely abstract and academic manner, thru the mere piling of one Lenin quotation upon another. Yet this is a very real question and objective examination will show, we believe, that the Trotskyist conception is essentially wrong and based upon a false estimation of the economic and social forces making for the building of Socialism in the USSR. But even more wrong is the current Trotskyist exaltation of the question.

On *the questions of Socialist construction in the USSR* Trotsky and his Russian group have always consistently represented a position of "super-industrialization" and of "super-collectivization" and have always stood for a "hard" political and economic line among the peasantry. Trotsky's criticism of the official Party line in these respects was always from the *left* and constituted, in fact, an ultra-left tendency. When, towards the middle of 1928, the policy of the leadership of the CPSU changed (the Stalin-Bukharin bloc broke) and turned to the "left," Trotsky was the first to recognize this fact, declaring that Stalin was "borrowing from the platform of the opposition" and that he was making this "left curve" under the "lash of the opposition." But this traditional left viewpoint is undergoing rapid change. In a very interesting recent article on Soviet economy, Trotsky undertakes a new critique of the Stalinist line even before the recent "new turn")—from the *"right"!* He characterized Stalin's line as *"ultra-left!"* Even the *Leninbund* discovers that Stalin's line has "ultra-left features!"

The ultimate consequences of this striking reorientation are hard to estimate. But one thing can already be said: Trotsky, like Stalin, maintains his mantle of infallibility. He makes his "new turn" under the camouflage that it is a mere "continuation" of the old; he does not present frankly the reasons for his reorientation nor the actual relations between the old and the new.

Especially since 1925 *the general international outlook* of Trotskyism has unquestionably marked it as the most consistent and logical representative of ultra-leftism in the Comintern. The characteristically Trotskyist doctrine of "permanent revolution," the Trotskyist attitude on the Chinese revolution as well as the Trotskyist viewpoint on the Anglo-Russian Unity Committee give sufficient evidence in this direction. On these questions Trotskyism permits no change of landmarks for they are engraved on the "tables of the law." But on a number of questions less directly tied up with the inner dogma of Trotskyism, change is already setting in—and *significant* change too! Starting out as consistent ultra-leftism Trotskyism is gradually giving way on one point and another—and is rapidly reaching a position where it criticizes the present line of the Ecci from the "right"! Trotsky himself declares: *"Even the right wingers may be correct on many questions!"* On the question of *stabilization,* who does not remember the Zinovievist and Trotskyist prophecies of "collapsing" and "crashing" stabilization? But now Trotsky writes long articles in criticism of the Ecci's "third period" phantasies, rejecting the "radicalization" abstractions and the nonsense of the "imminent collapse" of stabilization. His "borrowings" from the "right wingers" have indeed been heavy! In *the tactical line in mass work* the Trotskyites started out with a pronounced ultra-left line. Thus, the *Volkswille* (the organ of the *Leninbund*) was able to agree with the German Party leadership on its sectarian splitting trade union line and the American Trotskyites originally shared their program (the document, *The Right Danger in the American Party*) with the ultra-left official Party leadership. But today what changes! Today Trotsky polemicizes against the doctrine of "social-fascism" and against putschism in Austria. Today the *Leninbund* and the orthodox Trotskyites are borrowing heavily from the "right wingers" in trade union line. Today the *Militant* attacks the Party leadership for its "sectarianism" and the "abandonment of the united front tactics"! Indeed Trotskyism is reorientating itself!

But the sectarian essence of Trotskyism rises dominant! It still clings to the age-old lable of "Left Opposition" with a desperation that grows as the pretext for it disappears. The more copiously they borrow from us the more piously do they shout "right wingers," "Social-democrats," "national Socialists," etc.!

The empty repetition of old phrases, the empty clinging to old prejudices is the hall-mark of sectarianism. This the international Trotskyist fraction shows with the greatest clarity. It may change its "practical" conceptions and outlook but it therefore clings all the more strongly to its threadbare dogmas.

It is this sectarian refusal to look facts in the face and to draw the inevitable consequences from these facts that constitutes an almost insurmountable obstacle in the way of a real and thoro reorientation of the Trotskyist political outlook. Yet even within these limits the new developments within Trotskyism have the greatest significance for us from the viewpoint of general perspective as well as from the viewpoint of immediate tactics.

A Masterpiece of Sectarianism

The "Program of the National Unemployment Conference" published in the *Daily Worker* of April 3, 1930, makes as clear as daylight the utterly ultra-left sectarian and sterile character of the unemployment work and policies of the Party. It shows that the real content of the "new turn" (the mock war against the "ultra-left excesses") is merely a diplomatic cover for a continuation of the ultra-left course.

The Estimation of the Situation

According to the Program, American industries are already "bankrupt"—yet the present crisis is merely a "cyclical" crisis! The bluff policy of the present regime never reached such heights as in this document. Not only did "1,250,000 demonstrate in gigantic meetings and parades" but on March 6, 1930 took place ". . . the greatest mass workers demonstration *in the history of America.*" And then has the theory of "social-fascism" ever reached such heights as in the declaration that: "The A. F. of L. . . . has become a fascist organization."

The Political Line of the Program

Of course the political line of the Program completely rejects the idea of attracting and mobilizing great masses of workers on elementary demands against unemployment. *Actually the Program requires more than is required of a worker to become a member of the Communist Party!* Let us see. The Program includes: 1) the proletarian dictatorship; 2) the fight against "Lovestoneism; 3) the support of the Communist electoral candidates; 4) the support of and affiliation to the RILU; 5) the strengthening of the TUUL; 6) the defense of the Soviet Union and the struggle against world imperialism, and 7) the support of the struggles of the colonial masses! This is a Program designed to rally the masses of the unemployed!

The Program has some immediate demands. Insofar as they are correct, they are taken from our program put forward months ago. The demand on punishing "bad" policemen is certainly opportunist. It is also to be noticed that the recognition of the USSR and the granting of credits, which should be a basic demand in the unemployment situation, is not even mentioned among the demands. As a whole the immediate demands are com-

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