

what is Trotskyism?

by Ernest Mandel



This pamphlet is based on a speech delivered in 1969. There have been developments in the six years since then, particularly in the Fourth International itself. Not only has it grown to include sections in some 40 countries but it has also developed from being a "vibrant youth movement" as Mandel describes it here.

He was speaking after the period of international student radicalisation around 1968 when a number of Fourth International sections, notably in Britain, Europe and the USA, played major roles in the Vietnam solidarity campaigns of that time.

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ERNEST MANDEL was born in Belgium in 1923. In the resistance during the war, he was arrested three times by the Nazis. Escaping twice, he was eventually condemned to hard labour and deported to Germany.

After the war he worked for the Belgian revolutionary socialist weekly *La Gauche* of which he became editor in 1956. He was a member of the Economic Commission of the Belgian TUC from 1955-61.

A leading militant of the Fourth International, he is the author of "Marxist Economic Theory" and a number of other books and pamphlets.

WHAT IS TROTSKYISM?

A SPEECH BY ERNEST MANDEL, A LEADING MEMBER OF THE
FOURTH INTERNATIONAL, DELIVERED DURING A DEBATE WITH
MONTY JOHNSTONE, THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT
BRITAIN'S CHIEF "EXPERT" ON TROTSKYISM.

The fact that Monty Johnstone is here debating with me this evening on the problem of Trotskyism today should, in itself, be considered evidence of what Trotskyism is not. I am not going to insult the intelligence of anyone present by saying that it is not counter-revolutionary, or an agency of fascism or an agency of imperialism, or any of that nonsense. For if that were the case, not only would this debate not take place but many other things which have been happening in the world in the last few years would be incomprehensible.

One thing Trotskyism is not, is a defeated tendency in the international workers' movement. It is not a Menshevik-type revision of Marxism that has been crushed definitively, as was said in the Soviet Union in its fifteenth party congress in 1927; as was repeated by the unfortunate Nikita Sergeivitch Khrushchev at the twentieth party congress of the

Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956; as has been repeated over and over again in innumerable publications under the control of the stalinist bureaucracy. Because, if it were really a crushed, defeated, non-existent, eliminated, Menshevik tendency, why would anybody want to discuss with it? Why is Monty Johnstone here debating? Why is the Soviet bureaucracy, after having crushed, destroyed, eliminated and vanquished this tendency, forty, thirty, twenty, and ten years ago, why are the spokesmen for these bureaucrats today forced to write books, pamphlets, and articles and keep coming back to this problem? Why have there been three or four new books on Trotskyism published in the Soviet Union in the last twelve months, if ours is a definitively defeated tendency?

So I think that the first point we ought to make this evening is to render historical justice to the founder of the Red Army and to the leader of the insurrection of the October revolution which initiated the first victorious working-class revolution in a whole country. On this ninetieth anniversary of the birth of Leon Trotsky, which coincides with the anniversary of the October revolution, the political movement he founded, the ideas he stood for, the programme he defended, live stronger than ever in the world.

There is today a vibrant youth movement. Thousands of young people are coming to Trotskyism all over the world. And that is the only reason Monty Johnstone of the Communist Party feels obliged to debate with us about Trotskyism. That is the only reason why the Soviet bureaucracy has to put out a steady stream of speeches, pamphlets, magazine articles and books on the subject of Trotsky.

Trotskyism today is mainly a youth movement; a movement of youth that is being built and expanded on the five continents. For that very same reason I am not going to dwell in the least on the question that Monty Johnstone is going to talk about quite a lot.



7000 militants at the February Ligue Communiste election rally. Ligue candidates received over 250,000 votes in support of their propagandistic campaign.

What Trotsky wrote or did not write in 1905, in 1917, or in 1918. For I want to say from the beginning that this is pretty irrelevant to the actualities of the contemporary revolutionary struggles. Does anyone really think that 250,000 people vote for a Trotskyist Presidential candidate in France, does anyone really think that in Ceylon today a Trotskyist trade union leader leads tens of thousands of workers in big strikes, does anyone really think that tens of thousands of people demonstrate behind banners which the whole of public opinion in Japan today calls Trotskyist, because of what Trotsky wrote in 1907 or 1912?

The overwhelming majority of these people have not read what he wrote and are not interested in reading all that - this is a mistake on their part, because everybody should be interested in the history of the revolutionary movement -but they rightly regard that as irrelevant to the main problem which we have to understand and explain: What is the origin, what is the root of the strength of world Trotskyism today, why do thousands and thousands of people flock to its banner on a world scale, and why do the Soviet bureaucrats and Monty Johnstone, their British spokesman have to re-open a debate which they hoped had been finished with machine-gun bullets thirty or thirty-five years ago, in the period of the infamous Moscow Trials ?

I will give four basic reasons why the Trotskyist movement is stronger now than ever before; why thousands of people are adhering to it throughout the world; why it has a bigger numerical, geographical and political extension than ever before, even during the 1920s, while it was still a tendency inside the Communist parties and the Communist International.

The first reason has to do with a basic problem of the colonial revolution and the way forward for the underdeveloped, semi-colonial countries. Stalinism and Stalinist parties, parties which call themselves Communist, still follow a Menshevik or semi-Menshevik policy. That is, they believe as the Russian Mensheviks believed, that because these countries are backward, because the industrial bourgeoisie has not yet come to political power, that the immediate strategic task for the working class and poor peasantry is somehow to establish an alliance with national bourgeoisie against imperialism and against feudal and semi-feudal forces. The aim of such an alliance would be to arrive at a coalition form of government - a "government of the four classes" as it was called in China from 1925 to 1927 - a government of the "National Front", or a regime of "National Democracy", as it was called in the new official programme of the Soviet Communist Party.

Experience has confirmed what Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution proclaimed as early as 1906; that there is no way out for any underdeveloped colonial or semi-colonial country along such a road that any struggle that limits itself to fighting against rural, feudal or semi-feudal landlords, or foreign imperialism, while keeping the national bourgeoisie in power, while maintaining capitalist property relations intact, while refraining from establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat allied to the poor peasantry, will inevitably leave these underdeveloped countries backward, stagnating, exploited and superexploited by international and national capital. Such a policy will not be able to tear the millions populating these countries out of their age-old miseries. Experience has also taught

a much more terrible lesson. Thousands and thousands of communists in Brazil in 1964, in Iraq in 1958, a five hundred thousand Communists in Indonesia in 19 had to pay with their lives for the illusion that it was possible, desirable, or necessary to establish relationships of coalition and collaboration with bourgeois or semi-bourgeois political forces. Such subordination and sacrifice of independent mass struggle can only lead to crushing defeat for the working class and the poor peasantry.

Trotskyism lives and grows, wins new members, attracts new tendencies and builds new parties in the underdeveloped countries because it stands for this basic rule of revolution. There is no possibility of acquiring real national liberation, real independence from imperialism, without overthrowing the bourgeois class together with the agents of foreign imperialism and the feudal and semi-feudal landlords. There is no possibility of liberating the people, peasants and workers, without establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat allied with the poor peasantry, without creating a Workers' State. Only in those countries where this happened - China, Cuba, North Vietnam, and it's happening now in South Vietnam - is there a way to social and economic progress. Wherever, through the responsibility of the Communist Parties following the Moscow line, which is Stalinist Menshevism, this has been prevented from happening, there have been defeats, misery, tears and bloodshed for the working people of those countries.

It is this contemporary reality, rather than quotations from 1907, 1917 or 1921, that has to be faced by anyone who wants to understand what is going on in this sector of the world revolution. For the Trotskyist movement, for the revolutionary Marxists throughout the world, it was a moment of great vindication when the leading idea of the permanent revolution - that the only road to victory in a backward country is through a socialist revolution - was taken over by the Cuban revolutionaries and proclaimed in the Second Declaration of Havana, after



the first victorious revolution in the Western Hemisphere. This gave proof that Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International had been one hundred per cent correct in their strategic line for the underdeveloped countries.

The second reason for the growth of Trotskyism on world scale is that we stand completely and unconditionally for the revolutionary road to socialism in the industrialised imperialist countries as against the reformist electoral road defended by the Communist Parties in Western Europe, Japan, North America, Australia and New Zealand. When we say that we follow the revolutionary road, this does not mean that we are partisans of putschism or adventurism, that we think that a few hundred people here and a few hundred there can snatch power unexpectedly without anybody taking notice of it, in the advanced capitalist countries. There the bourgeoisie represents tremendous power. It has political experience, it has the benefits of political tradition and political continuity. Its rule over these countries does not depend simply and solely upon its weapon of repression - its army and its police - but rather upon the ideological and political influence it still wields over a large part of the petty bourgeoisie and even among a part of the working class itself.

Our clear and uncompromising stand in favour of the revolutionary road to socialism essentially pivots around three points:

Firstly, objective situations independent of the will and control of any group or party periodically create pre-revolutionary situations in industrialised advanced countries. At these moments of revolutionary mass upsurge these objective situations unavoidably lead to large-scale actions of the working class such as general strikes and factory occupations which obviously go beyond the limits of struggle for immediate wage demands and working conditions. The duty of revolutionary parties and groups representing the revolutionary vanguard is to prepare themselves and the best working class militants to intervene during

these hours, days, and weeks, for it is only through these periodic upsurges of the mass movement that the chance is presented to overthrow capitalist power. You cannot overthrow capitalism gradually; you cannot abolish a bourgeois army battalion by battalion; you cannot destroy the power of the bourgeoisie piece by piece. You can only accomplish these aims through the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses, and revolutionary actions of this sort are not possible every day when "business as usual" prevails. Revolutionary action is possible only during those pre-revolutionary situations when the tension of the class relations is at its maximum and the class conflict is sharpest. A party, a vanguard and a class must be prepared to intervene at that juncture in a

One of many mobilisations by sections of the Four



decisive manner in order to make a breakthrough towards the conquest of power and a victorious socialist revolution.

Secondly, if you want to develop a situation in which the working class wants to know what to do next in which conditions for revolution are favourable, you must engage in prior propaganda, agitation, and action for transitional demands, especially for the key demand for workers' control of production, which crowns all other demands of the working class in its struggle for power in the industrialised countries. To think that a working class which has been educated day after day, month after month, year after year, is nothing but immediate trade union demands and elect-

ational in solidarity with the Irish revolutionary struggle



oral politics, will, in some mysterious way, suddenly become capable of revolutionary consciousness and action in a revolutionary situation is to believe in magic or miracles.

Lenin said that the ABC of revolutionary policy and the duty of a revolutionary party is to conduct revolutionary propaganda also in periods that are not yet revolutionary. Lenin said that this is precisely what makes the difference between a revolutionary and a reformist or centrist party. When revolution does break out, many people suddenly discover their revolutionary soul. But a revolutionary party has the constant duty to propagandise for revolution, even if the situation has not yet reached the point of showdown between the classes. Its work in this respect can be an influential factor in accelerating revolutionary consciousness.

Thirdly, we believe that the struggle for transitional demands, for those demands which cannot be incorporated or assimilated into the normal functioning of bourgeois society, should not be conducted solely by propagandistic means. Every opportunity should be taken to impel the working class into motion around such demands. They should be introduced into the ongoing daily struggle of the class by all avenues. Unless the workers acquire experience by fighting for these demands in partial struggles, they will be unable to generalise their outlook at the height of revolutionary intensity. Otherwise, these demands will appear to them as something that falls from the sky, that is imposed from without or advocated only by small minority groups.

I would like to ask Monty Johnstone how he squares the following quotation from Lenin regarding the obligations of a vanguard party with the course followed by the French Communist Party in May 1968. Lenin said:

Will this situation last long? How much more acute will it become? Will it lead to revolution? This is something we do not know, and nobody can know. The answer can

be provided only by the experience gained during the development of revolutionary sentiment and the transition to revolutionary action by the advanced class, the proletariat. There can be no talk in this connection about "illusions" or their repudiation, since no socialist has ever guaranteed that this war (and not the next one), that today's revolutionary situation (and not tomorrow's) will produce a revolution. What we are discussing is the indisputable and fundamental duty of all socialists - that of revealing to the masses the existence of a revolutionary situation, explaining its scope and depth, arousing the proletariat's revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary determination, helping it to go over to revolutionary action, and forming, for that purpose, organisations suited to the revolutionary situation.

Just compare that quotation, which breathes the spirit of genuine Bolshevism, with the conduct of the Communist Parties of France, Italy, Greece and Belgium and other capitalist countries over the past twenty-five years (not to go still further back to the prewar period), especially with the conduct of the French Communist Party in May 1968, and you will understand both the fundamentally reformist character of these parties and why thousands of young rebels are adhering to Trotskyism in these countries.

The third reason for the growth of Trotskyism today has to do with the crucial question of workers' democracy. The main historical goal to be attained in those countries that have already abolished capitalism is the institution of democratically centralised workers self-management in opposition to the material privileges and the monopoly of political and economic power wielded by the bureaucracy. The bureaucratic rulers are the object of hatred by thousands of youth, critically minded intellectuals, and advanced workers in these postcapitalist states.

That was graphically evidenced during those few months in the Czechoslovakia of 1968 when these elements of the population had the chance to speak out at least in part, their real thoughts and feelings. The bureaucratic regimes in these countries are one of the main reasons for the discrediting of the cause of socialism in the industrialised West which deterred much larger numbers of students, intellectuals, and workers from coming out wholeheartedly in favour of socialist revolution and communism.

What I am referring to is not a full-fledged socialist society, that is to say, a society without any social differentiation, where commodity production and money relations have withered away. Such conditions cannot exist in any of the East European countries today and that is not what is involved in our discussion of their political situation and problems. What is both possible and urgently called for in the existing situation is what I call a political revolution, a set of changes in the superstructure of the system which would initiate or fulfill the elementary demands of the Marxist and Leninist programme on the nature of a dictatorship of the proletariat, leading to the building of a socialist society. In none of the works by Marx or Engels will you find a single sentence, for example, which asserts that the dictatorship of the proletariat means the monopoly of power by a single party.

Nor will you find the slightest support for the abominable notion that the dictatorship of the proletariat means the application of a repressive censorship, not against nonexistent representatives of capitalism and landlordism, but against the working class. These practices have been introduced and implemented by Stalinism.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Kremlin bureaucracy not only violated the sovereignty and independence of a small nation and a fraternal and allied workers state. It was equally criminal in other respects. It identified the suppression of democratic rights such as freedom of expression for workers, students and intellectuals, with the name of Communism by taking away from the Czechoslovakian workers the

rights they had regained between January and August 1968 to vote independently on resolutions, to have them published in their trade union journals, to criticise the government if they disagreed with its policies and to criticise the managers of their factories.

These were not very extensive rights and they were a far cry from the full-fledged socialist democracy they were entitled to and striving for. Lenin in State and Revolution says that under the dictatorship of the proletariat the workers should have a thousand-fold more freedom of self-expression and self-organisation than they enjoyed under bourgeois democracy.

Nevertheless, even this elementary right was taken away and hundreds of thousands of soldiers were sent into the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic for that purpose. That was a shameful disgrace. That is why we Trotskyists first have to re-establish what Marxism and Leninism really stand for, because the crimes of Stalinism have so distorted their true content in the minds of many workers.

Socialist democracy involves far more than the self-evident right of the workers to free expression without state censorship or penalties. Socialist democracy means the self-management of the working class on a democratically centralised basis. It means that the workers should run the factories not only as individual and separate units, but the economy as a whole. This requires the subordination of the national planning authorities to the congress of workers councils. It means that the mass of the working class actually exercises the power and determines through its discussions and decisions how the annual national income shall be divided between the consumption and the accumulation funds, that is, between what is used up and enjoyed for immediate needs, and what is set aside and reinvested for future growth.

Without the possession and exercise of such rights the working class does not really rule, whatever compliments the official propagandists may offer to console

it for its lack or loss of power. It is because the Trotskyist programme most consistently advocates the democratic rule of the workers that it is bound to find more forces in the Soviet Union and East Europe, where the underlying trends of development are more and more directed toward a political revolution by the masses against the arbitrariness of the bureaucratic autocracy.

Finally, Trotskyism is most noteworthy today for its uncompromising internationalism. After August 1914 and still more after October 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks set about to revive the principles and the instrument of internationalism which had been trampled upon by the prowar and pro-imperialist social democratic leaders. One of the most bitter fruits of the anti-Marxist theory of socialism in one country which Stalin originated and imposed upon world Communism from 1924 on, was the violation and the betrayal of the international solidarity of the working-class struggle. This flouting of internationalism culminated in the scuttling of the Communist International by Stalin in 1943 as a favour to Churchill and Roosevelt.

Now the leaders and followers of international Stalinism are beginning to taste some more of these bitter fruits, which result from subordinating the welfare of the workers movement to the narrow and selfish dictates of the Kremlin bureaucracy. They see the appalling spectacle of the two largest workers states in the world at each other's throats, and even hinging at the possibilities of hostilities between each other. This situation has come about not because either the Soviet or the Chinese masses willed it but because it is a logical consequence of the deplorable petty bourgeois nationalist tendencies and outlooks that guide the bureaucratic strata at the head of these countries today.

The Soviet leaders have even gone so far as to encourage and allow so-called communist journalists to talk about "the yellow peril" and to depict the Chinese people as misled by "new Genghis Khan" and a "menace to civilisation". The fact that such

utterly reactionary and racist utterances can come from a government and a party that still call themselves communist shows the degree of degeneration to which these organisations have succumbed.

At the height of its power, Stalinism boasted of the monolithic character of the world Communist movement which was bound together by ideological terror and enforced conformity. Now all that is passed. The last Moscow conference of the "World Communist Parties" demonstrated how far disintegration has proceeded. There are hardly two Communist parties which have any measure of autonomy today that think alike and pursue the same line.

They contend against one another and harbour all sorts of divergent tendencies and factions. One can count up to fifteen "Communist" tendencies on a world scale. The Stalinists used to deride the Trotskyist movement in the past for being ridden by incessant factionalism and splits. They are silent on this score nowadays - and for good reason! None of the splits among the Trotskyists has been comparable to the gigantic fissures that have opened up in the international Communist movement and keep widening from year to year. Confronted with the tremendous centralised power of the imperialist counter-revolution in the world arena the youth and the revolutionaries on all continents keenly feel the need for an equivalent centralisation of their own forces. They cannot believe that the polycentrism and decentralisation that characterise world Stalinism - where the revolutionary movement and the working class in each country is left to its own devices and no one is concerned with the international interests and aims of the struggle for socialism - is ideal. They cannot believe this because it runs counter to the most urgent needs of the struggle of the working masses and to the traditions of Marxism and Leninism.

They were moved to respond so powerfully to Che Guevara's famous appeal for "two, three, many Vietnams" because it corresponded to their innermost urge for an international coordination or their anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist

efforts. Che's final message was essentially a call for some central leadership for the world revolution.

This explains why the idea of the Fourth International as a new revolutionary working-class organisation carrying on the best traditions of Marxism, which many dismissed as unreal and Utopian, is capturing the minds and stirring the imagination of thousands of young people all over the globe. The socialist revolution cannot advance and certainly cannot triumph on a world scale without the resurgence of the need for a new revolutionary international impressing itself on the consciousness of serious fighters for a new world. The international we want to build and are building will be centralised, but it will not be bureaucratically centralised. It will be free of the bureaucratic centralism of the Stalinist type, that fake centralism which had nothing in common with Lenin's conceptions of organising the working-class vanguard, which spawned the disintegrated and reactionary tendencies at work in the world Communist movement today. History will prove that democratic centralism, with its freedom of discussion, is no obstacle but the indispensable vehicle for elaborating a programme and implementing united action against the class enemy.

These, then, are the four pillars of Trotskyism today: the theory and practice of the permanent revolution, the revolutionary road to socialism through working-class mass action in the advanced capitalist countries, political revolution for socialist democracy in the Soviet bloc and China, and proletarian internationalism. The Fourth International is a growing force on all of the continents because its fundamental ideas express the objective requirements of the world revolutionary process and carry on the ideas of Leninism, of socialism and communism in our epoch.

continued from inside front cover:

Since then a massive resurgence in working class struggle has taken place and many Fourth International sections have been developing to become forces capable of intervening in such struggles

An example is the French section. Alongside its success in driving fascist groups off the streets of France, it has been able to lead solidarity campaigns with workers in struggle and to organise successful workers conferences. Another example is the Spanish group, LCR, which recently fused with the Basque ETA VI movement.

Events in the world political scene since 1969 have reinforced the points made by Mandel here. In particular there was an addition to the list of "defeats, misery, tears and bloodshed" caused by the protagonists of a "peaceful road" to socialism. This came with the betrayal of the Chilean workers and peasants by those who refused to prepare and arm them against the right wing. The result was the successful and bloody coup of the military dictatorship in September 1973.

The fact that Stalinist groups continue to pursue "peaceful road" policies to the extent that in countries such as France, Portugal, Italy and Spain the Communist Parties aim to put a brake on mass working class struggle in order that they can ally with sections of the ruling class makes all the more relevant today this basic principle of Trotskyism: that the revolutionary road with mass working class action is the only road to socialism.

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