

Trotsky's Last Year

Part Five

By David North
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This is the fifth part in a series. The first part was published on August 20. The second part was published on August 21. The third part published on August 25 and the fourth part on August 29.

In his discussions with James P. Cannon and Farrell Dobbs during the visit of the Socialist Workers Party delegation to Coyoacán in June 1940, Trotsky had expressed concern over the SWP's excessively syndicalist approach to its work in the trade unions. There was insufficient attention to politics, that is, to revolutionary socialist strategy. This found expression in the SWP's adaptation to the pro-Roosevelt trade unionists, which Trotsky described as "a terrible danger." [1] He felt it necessary to remind the leaders that "Bolshevik policies begin outside the trade unions." [2]

It is evident that Trotsky intended to continue and deepen the discussion of the issues that had arisen during the SWP leaders' visit. Following their departure from Mexico, Trotsky began working on an article devoted to an analysis of the trade unions. The draft was found on Trotsky's desk after his assassination and was published posthumously in the February 1941 issue of the theoretical journal, *Fourth International*. It was titled *Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*.

As is characteristic of Trotsky's writings, he sought to situate his analysis of the trade unions in the appropriate historical and international context, and to identify the essential processes that determined, apart from the personal motivations and rationalizations of individual leaders, the policies of these organizations. Only on this objective basis was it possible to develop a Marxist, i.e., genuinely revolutionary, approach to work in the trade unions. Trotsky's article began with a concise identification of the place of the trade unions in the world capitalist order:

There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power. This process is equally characteristic of the neutral, the Social-Democratic, the Communist and "anarchist" trade unions. This fact alone shows that the tendency towards "growing together" is intrinsic not in this or that doctrine as such but derives from social conditions common to all unions.

Monopoly capitalism does not rest on competition and free private initiative but on centralized command. The capitalist cliques at the head of mighty trusts, syndicates, banking consortiums, etcetera, view economic life from the very same heights as does state power; and they require at every step the collaboration of the latter. In their turn the trade unions in the most important branches of industry find themselves deprived of the possibility of profiting by the competition between the different enterprises. They have to confront a centralized capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power. [3]

Arising from this universal feature of modern capitalist development, Trotsky argued that the trade unions—to the extent that they accept the capitalist framework—could not maintain an independent position. The rulers of the trade unions—the bureaucracy—sought to pull the state over to their side, a goal which could only be achieved by demonstrating that they had no interests independent of, let alone hostile to, the capitalist state. So as to make clear the extent and implications of this subordination, Trotsky wrote: "By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism." [4] Trotsky emphasized that the development of modern imperialism required the stamping out of any semblance of democracy within the old unions. In Mexico, he noted, the trade unions "have, in the nature of things, assumed a semi-totalitarian character." [5]

Trotsky insisted that it was necessary for revolutionists to continue to conduct work within the trade unions because masses of workers remained organized within them. For that same reason, and that reason only, revolutionists could not, Trotsky insisted, "renounce the struggle within the compulsory labor organizations created by fascism." [6] Clearly, Trotsky did not believe that fascist unions were "workers organizations," in the sense that they represented the interests of the working class. Work within the unions, a tactical necessity, did not signify reconciliation with the bureaucracy, let alone a vote of confidence in this reactionary social stratum. The aim of the Marxists' interventions within the trade unions under all conditions was "to mobilize the masses, not only against the bourgeoisie, but also against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime." [7]

Trotsky proposed two slogans upon which the struggle against the bureaucratic agents of imperialism should be based. The first was the "complete and unconditional independence of the trade unions in relation to the capitalist state." [Emphasis in the original] This slogan implied "a struggle to turn the trade unions into the organs of the broad exploited masses and not the organs of a labor aristocracy." [8] But the achievement of this was inseparably linked to the winning of masses of workers to the revolutionary party and the program of socialism.

Commenting on the situation in the United States, Trotsky viewed the sudden emergence of industrial unions as a major development. The CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations], he wrote, "is incontrovertible evidence of the revolutionary tendencies within the working masses." [9] But the weakness of the new unions was already evident.

Indicative and noteworthy in the highest degree, however, is the fact that the new "leftist" trade union organization was no sooner founded than it fell into the steel embrace of the imperialist state. The struggle among the tops between the old federation and the new is reducible in large measure to the struggle for the sympathy and

support of Roosevelt and his cabinet. [10]

The intensification of the global crisis of capitalism and the extreme exacerbation of social tensions produced within the trade unions, in the United States and internationally, a sharp turn to the right, i.e., toward an even more extreme suppression by the trade unions of working-class resistance to capitalism. “The leaders of the trade union movement,” Trotsky explained, “sensed or understood, or were given to understand, that now was no time to play the game of opposition.” The trade union officialdom were not innocent bystanders in the consolidation of the most repressive forms of bourgeois rule. “The basic feature, the swing towards the totalitarian regime,” Trotsky bluntly stated, “passes through the labor movement of the whole world.” [11]

To the extent that the Socialist Workers Party harbored even the slightest illusions in the possibility of amicable relations with the “progressive” trade unionist leaders, it failed to recognize the historical role of the labor bureaucracies in the epoch of imperialism. As Trotsky had warned the very courageous but surprisingly naive comrade Antoinette Konikow of the SWP delegation: “Lewis [the famed leader of the United Mine Workers] would kill us very efficiently...” [12]

The last paragraph of his essay summed up the historical situation that confronted the trade unions:

Democratic unions in the old sense of the terms, bodies where in the framework of one and the same mass organization different tendencies struggled more or less freely, can no longer exist. Just as it is impossible to bring back the bourgeois-democratic state, so it is impossible to bring back the old workers’ democracy. The fate of the one reflects the fate of the other. As a matter of fact, the independence of trade unions in the class sense, in their relations to the bourgeois state, can, in the present conditions, be assured only by a completely revolutionary leadership, that is, the leadership of the Fourth International. This leadership, naturally, must and can be rational and assure the unions the maximum of democracy conceivable under the present concrete conditions. But without the political leadership of the Fourth International the independence of the trade unions is impossible. [13]

These words were written eighty years ago. The analysis Trotsky made of the degeneration of the unions—their integration into the state power and corporate management—was extraordinarily prescient. The tendency toward the “growing together” of the unions, the state and capitalist corporations continued throughout the post-World War II period. Moreover, the process of global economic integration and transnational production deprived the trade unions of a national framework within which they could apply pressure for limited social reforms. No room was left for even the most moderate resort to the methods of class struggle to achieve minimal gains. The unions, rather than extracting concessions from the corporations, were transformed into adjuncts of the state and corporations that serve to extract concessions from the workers.

Consequently, not a trace of “workers democracy” remains in the bureaucratic-corporatist structures that are called unions. The old terminology survives. Corporatist organizations like the AFL-CIO and its affiliates are still called “unions.” But the actual practice of these organizations bears no relationship to the socio-economic function traditionally associated with the word “union.” The practice of the revolutionary party cannot be based on the uncritical use of terminology that does not reflect the evolution of the phenomenon it ostensibly described. The degeneration of the old organizations cannot be overcome

simply by calling them “unions.” As Trotsky had insisted in September 1939, in the early stages of the fight against Shachtman and Burnham, “We must take the facts as they are. We must build our policy by taking as our starting point the real relations and contradictions.” [14]

The fight for workers democracy and the complete independence of the organizations of the working class remain critical elements of the contemporary revolutionary program. But this perspective will not be realized through the renewal of the old organizations. The process of corporatist degeneration over a period of eighty years precludes, in all but the most exceptional circumstances, the resuscitation of the old unions. The alternative strategical course, raised by Trotsky in *The Transitional Program* in 1938, is the policy that conforms to present-day conditions; that is, “to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society, and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.” [15]

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On August 7, 1940, exactly two weeks before his death, Trotsky participated in a discussion on “American Problems.” Responding to a question about the draft, Trotsky insisted that party members should not evade conscription. To keep them out of the army, under conditions in which their generation was being mobilized, would be a mistake. The SWP could not avoid the reality of war:

We should understand that the life of this society, politics, everything, will be based upon war, therefore the revolutionary program must also be based on war. We cannot oppose the fact of the war with wishful thinking; with pious pacifism. We must place ourselves upon the arena created by this society. The arena is terrible—it is war—but inasmuch as we are weak and incapable of taking the fate of society into our hands; inasmuch as the ruling class is strong enough to impose upon us this war, we are obliged to accept this basis for our activity. [16]

Trotsky recognized that there existed a profound and legitimate hatred of Hitler and Nazism among masses of workers. The party had to adapt its agitation and political formulations to the politically confused patriotic moods without making any concessions to national chauvinism.

We cannot escape from the militarization but inside the machine we can observe the class line. The American workers do not want to be conquered by Hitler, and to those who say, “Let us have a peace program,” the worker will reply, “But Hitler does not want a peace program.” Therefore *we* say: We will defend the United States with a workers’ army, with workers’ officers, with a workers’ government, etc. If we are not pacifists, who wait for a better future, and if we are active revolutionists, our job is to penetrate into the whole military machine. ...

We must use the example of France to the very end. We must say, “I warn you, workers, that they (the bourgeoisie) will betray you! Look at Petain [the French general who led the Vichy regime and ruled the country on Hitler’s behalf], who is a friend of Hitler. Shall we have the same thing happen in this country? We must create our own machine, under workers’ control.” We must be careful not to identify ourselves with the chauvinists, nor with the confused sentiments of self-preservation, but we must understand their feelings and adapt ourselves to these feelings critically, and prepare the masses for a better understanding of the situation, otherwise we will remain a sect, of which the pacifist variety is the most miserable.

Trotsky was asked how the political backwardness of the American worker would affect the ability to resist the spread of fascism. His reply cautioned against a simplistic and one-sided evaluation of the working class. “The backwardness of the United States working class is only a relative term. In many very important respects it is the most progressive working class of the world: technically, and in its standard of living.” [18] In any event, objective developments would provide a powerful impetus for the development of class consciousness. Trotsky emphasized the contradictions in the development of the American working class:

The American worker is very combative—as we have seen during the strikes. They have had the most rebellious strikes in the world. What the American worker misses is a spirit of generalization, or analysis, of his class position in society as a whole. This lack of social thinking has its origin in the country’s whole history—the Far West with the perspective of unlimited possibilities for everyone to become rich, etc. Now all that is gone, but the mind remains in the past. Idealists think the human mentality is progressive, but in reality it is the most conservative element of society. Your technique is progressive but the mentality of the worker lags far behind. Their backwardness consists of their inability to generalize their problem; they consider everything on a personal basis. [19]

Nevertheless, despite all the objective difficulties and problems in the development of mass consciousness, Trotsky rejected the view that the United States stood on the brink of fascism. “The next historic waves in the United States,” he predicted, “will be waves of radicalism of the masses; not fascism.” An essential condition for the victory of fascism was the political demoralization of the working class. That condition did not exist in the United States. Therefore, Trotsky stated confidently to the interviewers, “I am sure you will have many possibilities to win the power in the United States before the fascists can become a dominant force.” [20]

Trotsky’s analysis of fascism was dialectical and active, not mechanical and passive. The danger posed by fascism could not be determined merely on the basis of quantitative measurements. The victory of fascism was not merely the outcome of the numerical growth of its adherents, supplemented by the open and concealed sympathy and support of the capitalist elites and the bourgeois state apparatus. Following the August 7 discussion, Trotsky dictated another article, published posthumously, under the title “Bonapartism, Fascism, and War,” in the October 1940 issue of *Fourth International*.

The motivation for this article was not only to clarify issues that had arisen in the August 7 discussion, but also to reply to an essay by Dwight Macdonald, a supporter of the Shachtman-Burnham minority. Published in the July-August 1940 issue of the left journal *Partisan Review*, Macdonald’s essay expressed the demoralized skepticism of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals who were breaking with Marxism and shifting toward the right. Awed by Hitler’s military successes, Macdonald proclaimed the Nazi regime “a new kind of society,” whose durability had been underestimated by Trotsky. [21]

The same superficial impressionism that motivated the petty-bourgeois minority’s theoretical improvisations in relation to the Soviet Union was applied by Macdonald to the Third Reich. He wildly declared that the German economy, under Hitler, “has come to be organized on the basis of production rather than profit,” an empty phrase that explained nothing. [22] Macdonald stated that “these modern totalitarian regimes are not

temporary affairs: they have already changed the underlying economic and social structure, not only manipulating the old forms but also destroying their inner vitality.” [23]

Macdonald asserted that “the Nazis have won because they were fighting a new kind of war that, as clearly as Napoleon’s military innovations, expressed a new kind of society,” which surpassed the old capitalist systems of its adversaries. [24] Macdonald’s ignorant idealization of the Nazis’ economic system had little to do with reality. By the late 1930s the state of the German capitalist economy was on the brink of disaster. Between 1933 and 1939, the national debt had tripled, and the regime was struggling to meet interest payments. It is widely recognized that Hitler’s decision for war was to a great extent driven by fear of an economic collapse. As historian Tim Mason explained:

The only ‘solution’ open to this regime of the structural tensions and crises produced by dictatorship and rearmament was more dictatorship and more rearmament, then expansion, then war and terror, then plunder and enslavement. The stark, ever-present alternative was collapse and chaos, and so all solutions were temporary, hectic, hand-to-mouth affairs, increasingly barbaric improvisations around a brutal theme. ... A war for the plunder of manpower and materials lay square in the dreadful logic of German economic development under National Socialist rule. [25]

Trotsky described Macdonald’s article as “very pretentious, very muddled, and stupid.” [26] He saw no need to devote time to refuting Macdonald’s analysis of Nazi society. But Trotsky did respond to Macdonald’s failure, typical of demoralized intellectuals, to examine the political dynamic underlying the advance of fascism. Its victory was the outcome, above all, of a catastrophic failure of the leadership of the mass parties and organizations of the working class. Fascism is the political punishment meted out to the working class for the squandering of opportunities to overthrow the capitalist system. Why did fascism triumph? Trotsky explained:

Both theoretical analysis as well as the rich historical experience of the last quarter of a century have demonstrated with equal force that fascism is each time the final link of a specific political cycle composed of the following: the gravest crisis of capitalist society; the growth of the radicalization of the working class; the growth of sympathy toward the working class and a yearning for change on the part of the rural and urban petty bourgeoisie; the extreme confusion of the big bourgeoisie; its cowardly and treacherous maneuvers aimed at avoiding the revolutionary climax; the exhaustion of the proletariat; growing confusion and indifference; the aggravation of the social crisis; the despair of the petty bourgeoisie, its yearning for change; the collective neurosis of the petty bourgeoisie, its readiness to believe in miracles; its readiness for violent measures; the growth of hostility towards the proletariat which has deceived its expectations. These are the premises for a swift formation of a fascist party and its victory. [27]

In the cycle of American developments, Trotsky maintained, the situation was not yet propitious for the fascists. “It is quite self-evident that the radicalization of the working class in the United States has passed only through its initial phases, almost exclusively in the sphere of the trade union movement (the CIO).” [28] The fascists had assumed a defensive position. Countering the doubts of all those who wondered,

while they sat on the sidelines, whether victory was possible, Trotsky wrote:

No occupation is more completely unworthy than that of speculating whether or not we shall succeed in creating a powerful revolutionary leader-party. Ahead lies a favorable perspective, providing all the justification for revolutionary activism. It is necessary to utilize the opportunities which are opening up and to build the revolutionary party. ...

Reaction wields today such power as perhaps never before in the modern history of mankind. But it would be an inexcusable blunder to see only reaction. The historical process is a contradictory one. Under the cover of official reaction profound processes are taking place among the masses who are accumulating experience and are becoming receptive to new political perspectives. The old conservative tradition of the democratic state which was so powerful even during the era of the last imperialist war exists today only as an extremely unstable survival. On the eve of the last war the European workers had numerically powerful parties. But on the order of the day were put reforms, partial conquests, and not at all the conquest of power.

The American working class is still without a mass labor party even today. But the objective situation and the experience accumulated by the American workers can pose within a very brief period of time on the order of the day the question of the conquest of power. This perspective must be made the basis of our agitation. It is not merely a question of a position on capitalist militarism and of renouncing the defense of the bourgeois state but of directly preparing for the conquest of power and the defense of the proletarian fatherland. [29]

Macdonald epitomized the rapidly growing stratum of demoralized petty-bourgeois intellectuals who saw in the victory of fascism the decisive refutation of Marxism and the entire socialist perspective. The situation was, for all intents and purposes, hopeless. He wrote:

Is not the working class everywhere in full retreat, where it has so far escaped the fascist yoke? And even if the workers later on show some signs of revolt, where will they find their leadership? From the corrupt and discredited Second and Third Internationals? From the tiny, isolated revolutionary groups, split by sectarian quarrels? And finally, has not the authority of Marxism itself, the very fountainhead of all revolutionary science, been shaken by the failure of its disciples to give adequate answers, in practice and in theoretical understanding, to the historical developments of the last two decades?

I must admit that these questions are, to say the least, justified. The sort of "revolutionary optimism" favored in certain quarters—an optimism which becomes more obstinate and irrational the worse things turn out—seems to me to do no service to the cause of socialism. We must face the fact that the revolutionary movement has suffered an unbroken series of major disasters in the last twenty years, and we must examine again, with a cold and skeptical eye, the most basic premises of Marxism. [30]

Macdonald actually titled his funeral dirge "The Case for Socialism." It was, rather, as his own evolution soon proved, the case for the repudiation of socialism.

The demoralized skeptics, Trotsky observed, proclaimed the failure of Marxism because "fascism came instead of socialism." But the skeptics revealed in their criticism, aside from personal demoralization, a mechanical and passive conception of history. Marx did not promise the victory of socialism; he revealed only the objective contradictions in capitalist society that made socialism possible. But he never claimed that it would be achieved automatically. In fact, Marx, Engels and Lenin waged a relentless struggle against all the political tendencies, opportunist and anarchistic, that undermined the struggle for socialism. They were aware that a bad leadership that succumbed to the influence of the ruling class "could obstruct, slow down, make more difficult, postpone the fulfillment of the revolutionary task of the proletariat." [31]

The existing situation was created to no small degree by the failures of working-class leadership.

Fascism did not at all come "instead" of socialism. Fascism is the continuation of capitalism, an attempt to perpetuate its existence by means of the most bestial and monstrous measures. Capitalism obtained an opportunity to resort to fascism only because the proletariat did not accomplish the socialist revolution in time. The proletariat was paralyzed in the fulfillment of its task by the opportunist parties. The only thing that can be said is that there turned out to be more obstacles, more difficulties, more stages on the road of the revolutionary development of the proletariat than was foreseen by the founders of scientific socialism. Fascism and the series of imperialist wars constitute the terrible school in which the proletariat has to free itself of petty-bourgeois traditions and superstitions, has to rid itself of opportunist, democratic, and adventurist parties, has to hammer out and train the revolutionary vanguard, and in this way prepare for the solving of the task apart from which there is not and cannot be any salvation for the development of mankind. [32]

To be continued

- [1] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40* (New York: 1973), p. 273
- [2] *Ibid*
- [3] "Trade unions in the epoch of imperialist decay," in *Marxism and the Trade Unions* (New York: 1973), pp. 9-10
- [4] *Ibid*, p. 10
- [5] *Ibid*, p. 11
- [6] *Ibid*, p. 11
- [7] *Ibid*, p. 12
- [8] *Ibid*, p. 12
- [9] *Ibid*, p. 16
- [10] *Ibid*, p. 16
- [11] *Ibid*, pp. 16-17
- [12] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, p. 267
- [13] *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, p. 18
- [14] "The USSR in War," *In Defence of Marxism* (London: 1971), p. 24
- [15] "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," (New York, 1981), P. 8
- [16] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, p. 331
- [17] *Ibid*, p. 333-34
- [18] *Ibid*, p. 335
- [19] *Ibid*, pp. 335-37
- [20] *Ibid*, p. 33-38
- [21] "Socialism and National Defense," *Partisan Review* (July-August 1940), p. 252

- [22] Ibid, p. 254
[23] Ibid, p. 256
[24] Ibid, p. 252
[25] Tim Mason, *Nazism, Fascism, and the Working Class* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 51
[26] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, p. 410
[27] Ibid, p. 412
[28] Ibid, pp. 412-413
[29] Ibid, p. 413-14
[30] *Partisan Review*, op.cit., p. 266
[31] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, p. 416
[32] Ibid, pp. 416-17

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