

WHAT IS AN ACTION PROGRAMME?

'What is an Action Programme' is a commentary on a draft Manifesto now being discussed by the I-CL. It is reproduced from the I-CL Internal Bulletin.

WHAT IS AN 'ACTION PROGRAMME'? If you attempt to work up a document of *answers, slogans, action projects*, either you are

guided by 'inspiration', pet ideas, or some other arbitrary and subjective approach; or you attempt rigorously to draw practical conclusions from a Marxist analysis of reality and general codifications summing up the experience of the working class so far, focused on the situation facing the British working class.

Your Action Programme will be preceded and accompanied by general propaganda and *in depth* expositions of the various parts of the Action Programme — otherwise the cadres of the organisation themselves will not understand, or not adequately understand, the Action Programme or some of its sections.

When the 1938 Transitional Programme was produced, a whole background of socialist culture, inside the FI ranks and even to a degree on its periphery, could be assumed. The massive debate and the hammering out of such slogans as on the workers' government by the early Communist International was still living and recent memory (at most 15 to 17 years back) for many of the cadre. Many of the early documents were in their possession or easily available. For example, in the 'Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International', Trotsky's exposition of the workers' government slogan feels no more need of *additional* warnings of the dangers discussed by the CI than to add a summary of the mis-use of the slogan by the Stalinists.

Today, massive lacunae exist in Marxist analysis of society, amounting to a major crisis of Marxism. The weakness of our draft Manifesto in explanation of the condition of capitalism is one illustration of this. Moreover, the general cultural level of the revolutionary movement has been thrown backward massively, to such an extent that perhaps most of the current 'Trotskyist' groups could learn valuable positive lessons from the Left in the Second International!

Many of the basic concepts used in drafting the Action Programmes of the '30s have lost most of their meaning, or never had any, for the present-day Left. Some of them ('Workers' Control', 'Nationalisation', 'Workers' Government') have been given a reformist/utopian character in their current usage. The very conception of socialism itself needs to be restated — for it has simply been perverted into a repulsive elitist 'statism' by the dominant sections of the British left.

Many, or most, of the demands essential to an Action Programme have been made into fetish-objects, outside of and above rational judgment and critical and concrete assessment by the 'orthodox' Trotskyist sects, because they are part of the 'Transitional Programme'. And even the more flexible USFI 'Trotskyists' who *don't* parade the Transitional Programme in ritual procession as Catholics parade statues of Jesus on the feast

of Corpus Christi, keep it as an ancestral heirloom in a place of reverence, not quite sure what to do with it, but given to taking chunks of *its verbiage* to buttress some political monstrosity, whether it be the IMG's recent mis-use of the idea of the Socialist United States of Europe to gain their entry into the ranks of working class chauvinism on the Common Market, or their earlier mis-use of the slogan of workers' control. (The politics of the IWC today are a still recognisable version of the central slogan of the European FI sections' work in the Social Democracy in the early to mid '60s). They are like barbarians who appropriate stones from a once imposing building whose structure has been shattered, to construct hovels for themselves.

And, after the fetishists and their political first cousins, the vandals who believe their hovels are holy because stones from the 'Transitional Programme' cathedral are visibly part of them, come — naturally — the *negative* fetishists, IS. For them too the Transitional Programme and the method of the Transitional Programme are outside of rational consideration. Irrational *rejection* is their attitude, with fear as superstitious as the reverence of the WRP. They *reject* in all conditions slogans like the Sliding Scale of Wages, and are entirely confined to the minimum/maximum conception of a programme.

The proof of the negative-fetish character of IS's attitude to the Transitional Programme is that in all their writings and comments, despite all their pretence of cool rationality, they have never rationally assessed the origins, significance, elements, and remaining validity of the 1938 draft. All we have is the true assertion that the demands and slogans in the Transitional Programme were presented in the 1938 *document* in a setting of brief analysis and all-pervading recognition of chronic capitalist crisis — and, taking off from that, Tony Cliff allowed himself (at the Skegness rally, 1971) to regale an audience, half of which had never heard of the Transitional Programme, with the idea that if you take it seriously you wind up like Posadas, believing in flying saucers.

For all these reasons, explanations, re-statement (as on state capitalism vs socialism) and detailed expositions with reference to the history of the slogan (as on the workers' government) are essential.

"The significance of the programme is the significance of the party", said Trotsky, discussing the Transitional Programme of 1938. For the I-CL this type of manifesto signifies an attempt to *start* a process of educating and developing the organisation's cadres in the politics of the Transitional Programme. The Action Programme element, the slogans and responses, are tools in the hands of the cadres — it is vital that the cadres understand the

use, the limits, and relation to the other tools, of each demand. For we do not present or serve up even a much more simple 'Action Programme' *in toto*: the *organisation* uses its judgment to decide how to swivel the various elements in the programme so as best to use them in any concrete situation.

Given that framework, there is no reason why we cannot valuably produce a simplified short pamphlet for wider circulation, called 'Action Programme', summarising some elements from the Manifesto and backed up by the Manifesto and other material.

But just to present an "Action Programme, with minimal explanation, would be a bare collection of slogans drawn together mainly from the Transitional Programme. It would be a literary exercise in collation, of not much value.

Alfred Rosmer, in *Lenin's Moscow*, reports the comment a communist militant made when Lenin's pamphlet *Left Wing Communism* appeared around the time of the Second World Congress of the CI in 1920. He said, "It is a dangerous book", meaning that people would take from it *only* recipes and licence for artful dodges and 'flexibility' of a type altogether different from that which Lenin was trying to teach the ultra-lefts. He was right, of course.

The Transitional Programme of Leon Trotsky is also a 'dangerous book' in the epoch when almost the whole political culture of which it was a sort of distillation or 'abstract', designed for a specific purpose, has disappeared. The specific character of the Transitional Programme and even more of the Action Programme for France — lean, honed-down, unintentionally creating an illusion of literary-scientific self-sufficiency, though Trotsky disclaimed anything like that — bears witness to the fact that Trotsky was preparing levers to insert into the labour movement, where a lot could be taken as common ground and the task of the Trotskyist cadres was one of re-orienting the existing movement for action.

It also relates to an immediate situation where the labour movement 'switches points' and fights back — or is crushed in the relatively short term. We can operate with no such assumptions. The cadres of so-called 'Trotskyism' have largely forgotten or are ignorant of much that the 1938 Trotskyists could take for granted in the mass labour movement they related to in the 1930s (or, at least, did take largely for granted, on pain of otherwise renouncing all hope of re-orienting the movement in time for the coming show-down). Moreover, we operate in a situation of simmering, rather than crushing, crisis.

The Transitional Programme's slogans have too often been abused, misunderstood, applied in opposition to the spirit of the method of the Transitional Programme — by the French OCI

(Lambert sect) for example, with their 'workers' government' without reference to the state, class mobilisation, or programme in *any sense* of the word. The same in Ireland where former associates of Workers' Fight apply what they understand as the Transitional Programme approach to the 26-County Labour Party — and effectively if unintentionally support the coalition government!

In the Middle Ages physicians worked from anatomical textbooks by Galen which they inherited from the ancient world. In a period when it was deemed degrading for such people to do manual work, the doctor would sit in the operating room on a high stool, with Galen's book open, giving directions to minions and apprentices who actually carried out the operations. Eventually the textbook was discovered to deal not with the anatomy of men and women, but of monkeys! If our former comrades in the 'League for a Workers' Republic' were to go and study the discussion and documents that produced the slogan and demands in the slim pamphlet they fetishise, they would have to understand that they bear the same sort of relation to Trotsky and the early Comintern and Fourth International as the medieval physicians did to Galen.

How do we *use* a Manifesto or Action Programme? One of the central theoretical insights of the old Workers' Fight groups from its study of the history and problems of the Fourth International was on what a programme is and is not. It is not a blueprint, a fixed document, nor even codifications from experience distilled into directives for action. It is all of these things, but more — a living, fluid inter-relation of these with conjunctural analyses and, above all, concrete assessments and responses on the part of the revolutionary organisation. It is a living thing, not a document. It can only live and develop in and through the practice of the revolutionary party — "The significance of the programme is the significance of the party".

Its *revolutionary* validity or otherwise is determined not only by whether its theoretical bedrock and basic analysis is sound, but by the other more immediate, more conjunctural factors — that is, all that is specific to the reactions, concrete analysis, and practice of the party. This is where revolutionary Marxism divides from even the best and most useful academic blueprint-making.

Not to understand this is to be open to serious errors — the error of seeing 'a document' as 'the programme' in itself (the beginning of the process of fetishisation); the error of believing a programme can have revolutionary life apart from the revolutionary party and the working class. (It *can* have a sort of life, the *basic* codifications that is, but more like suspended animation, with the risk of 'Galenisation' if too long divorced from the practice of a revolutionary organisation or if allowed to flake off from the revivifying struggle

for its development as the party develops).

It can lead to the sort of errors Workers' Fight made on the USFI (though our relationship to the USFI consists of a great deal more positive than errors), of appearing to agree with most of the basic codifications, which we saw as the programme, and being perplexed by the vast range of political, practical, and tactical differences that somehow existed and separated us from the USFI. We didn't understand that these too are 'the programme' — the *living* part, and, for immediate purposes, the most decisive part.

An I-CL Manifesto will be of us to the degree that the I-CL is of use in reacting to and anticipating events — and also in responding creatively to new situations and gaps in the document, of which they were are bound to be some that we will not detect. Central here is a Marxist detachment and critical spirit. Even if every member of the I-CL agrees with every phrase in the final draft — then especially there can be no fetishisation, no Bordigist complacency about our own products. In 1930 Trotsky acidly replied to the Bordigists who claimed they had 'not departed from' their programme of 1925, which in 1925 Trotsky had approved, by pointing out that the purpose of a programme is not 'not to be departed from', but to be used and developed and supplemented as new situations arise. The same comment would do for the present-day 'Trotskyists' who claim 'not to depart from the Transitional Programme.'