The Liberating Influence of the Transitional Program – George Breitman (1974). Part 2 – The Labor Party Question

[Earlier this month, we published the first of three talks by the veteran American Trotskyist George Breitman on the transitional approach to politics and on its impact during the formative years of the Socialist Workers Party in the 1930's. We are now publishing the second of these talks, which focuses on the attitude of early Trotskyist movement towards the creation of an independent labor party in the United States and on the transitional method generally. Breitman's detailed discussion of how the SWP overcame its initial sectarian and propagandist tendencies on this issue remains of relevance both to the question of the formation of broad parties on the left and to how revolutionaries should orientate towards mass movements around immediate and partial demands. The third and final of Breitman's talks will be published next month. *Ecosocialist Scotland, 26 January 2026*]

2. The Labor Party Question

I can't repeat the ground covered yesterday, but I'll give a brief chronology.

1928—Our movement begins when Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern are expelled for "Trotskyism" from the American Communist Party (CP).

1929—The Communist League of America (CLA) holds its founding convention and adopts its platform.

1931—The CLA holds its second convention.

1933—The International Left Opposition, to which the CLA is affiliated, makes the most important shift in its history, giving up its efforts to reform the Comintern and calling for a new International. In this country, the CLA ceases to consider itself a faction of the CP and set out to build a revolutionary Marxist party. This means the beginning of a turn away from almost pure propagandism directed at the CP toward intervention in the class struggle, with the aim of linking up with leftward-moving tendencies to construct the cadres of the revolutionary party.

1934—The CLA merges with the American Workers Party (AWP) headed by Muste to form the Workers Party of the United States (WPUS).

Spring of 1936—We dissolve the WPUS and join the Socialist Party (SP) and the YPSL in order to win over to the Fourth International young revolutionaries recently attracted by those organizations.

Summer of 1937—We are expelled from the SP and YPSL, with our forces considerably increased, and begin a discussion in preparation for the founding convention of a new party.

New Year's 1938—The SWP is founded at a convention in Chicago that adopts a declaration of principles and other basic documents to guide the new organization.

End of March 1938—Cannon, Shachtman, Dunne, and Karsner go to Mexico to meet with Trotsky to discuss plans for the founding conference of the Fourth International (FI) to be held later that year.

Trotsky introduces to them the idea of the Transitional Program, to be written as the basic program of the FI founding conference. They discuss this and related problems for an entire week, and then agree that they will go back to the United States to ask the SWP to approve it and act as its sponsor at the international conference, even though it will

require changing certain positions previously adopted by the SWP. One of these is the SWP's position on the Ludlow amendment to the U.S. Constitution for a referendum on war, which I discussed yesterday.

The other is the SWP's position on the labor party, which I shall discuss today. Before doing that, however, I would like to carry the narrative further as regards the disposition of the Transitional Program as a whole, aside from the labor party question.

Cannon and Shachtman got back to New York in time for a Political Committee meeting in mid-April, nine days before a plenum of the National Committee. The Political Committee adopted an agenda for recommendation to the plenum, which was to be changed a week later on the eve of the plenum; they changed the rules for attendance—previously it was to be open to all members, now it was to be closed except for NC members and a few invited guests—and they received reports from the delegates, the minutes reporting only, "Comrades Cannon and Shachtman give full reports on their journey."

There is no record of the Political Committee deciding to recommend anything regarding these reports; it only designated Cannon, Shachtman, and Dunne reporters to the plenum but did not take a position on anything, which is not how it is usually done. We can assume that the Political Committee wanted time to think over the Transitional Program and related proposals.

In referring to this plenum yesterday, I called it stormy and chaotic, and I don't think that is an exaggeration, although the minutes contain only motions and a few statements made specifically for the record. In the first place, the plenum was extended from three days to four, an unusual thing; and even so, a considerable part of the agenda was not acted on, and at the end had to be referred to the Political Committee.

The first point on the agenda was a report by Cannon on the matters discussed in Mexico, supplemented by brief remarks on factory committees by Shachtman. The second point was questions from the National Committee members, answered by Cannon, Shachtman, and Dunne. The third point was a five-hour recess to study documents (the first draft of the Transitional Program had arrived shortly before the plenum), including stenograms of the talks with Trotsky (those that dealt with the Transitional Program have just been published for the first time in the second edition of the Transitional Program book).

Then the political discussion began on transitional demands and related questions. But when the political discussion ran out, instead of a vote being taken, voting was deferred to the third day of the plenum; in fact, before the vote was taken, time was consumed with local reports on the branches, labor party sentiment, the antiwar movement, the CP, etc. The members of the plenum were plainly not in a hurry to vote on the key proposals. But the clearest sign of uncertainty or confusion was the nature of the motions presented and finally voted on.

A motion was made by Maurice Spector, supported by Cannon and Abern, that the SWP approve the Transitional Program, and a motion was made by Shachtman, supported by Burnham, that the SWP approve the Transitional Program, and the debate over these motions became one of the two focal points of the plenum, leading to roll-call votes duly recorded in the minutes and a division that was sixty to forty. Of course the motions were not exactly the same. But I had to reread them several times before I detected a possible nuance, and three of the twenty-eight who voted—Goldman, Clarke, and Cochran—voted for both motions, with a statement that they considered then essentially the same.

The possible nuance was this. Spector’s motion “endorses and adopts” the thesis written by Trotsky, whereas Shachtman’s

“endorses the general line of the thesis . . . and adopts it as a draft of an analysis.” But this thin line is made thinner yet by the fact that a second part of Spector’s motion “subscribes in principle to the conception of the program of transitional demands proposed” in the thesis. So one endorses and accepts while subscribing in principle, and the other endorses the general line and adopts it as a draft of an analysis. The vote was seventeen for Spector’s motion, eleven for Shachtman’s.

The same thing happened with the second part of these motions, directing the Political Committee to prepare a program of actions based on the Transitional Program and the conditions and needs of the American working-class struggle. To me, the two motions seem the same, but they led to a thirteen to twelve vote in favor of Spector’s. There was agreement only on the third part of the motion, that the program to be prepared by the Political Committee be submitted to the membership for discussion and referendum.

When such a thing happens, when a National Committee is divided thirteen to twelve over motions it is hard to distinguish between, then it is safe to conclude that the situation is not normal, or, to put it another way, that it contains the potential of a crisis. In my interpretation, there were two elements involved. One was what may be called personal. Cannon had been convinced by Trotsky, and he wanted the SWP leadership to endorse the Transitional Program without equivocation or pussyfooting. Others, including Shachtman, probably still had some reservations, hence wanted to affirm only “the general line.” They resented being pushed or pressured; they wanted more time to try to square the new line with what they had said in the past, and they reacted against the motions supported by Cannon as a way of expressing their dislike of him as a “hand-raiser” for Trotsky, as someone who unthinkingly went along with whatever Trotsky proposed, in contrast to themselves as independent thinkers.

This was closely connected with something that had happened the previous year, 1937, when we were still in the SP. Trotsky was the first, in a confidential letter to the leadership, to conclude that the SP experience was coming to an end and that we should prepare to be expelled and set up our own party. Cannon, agreeing, quickly sent a letter from California, endorsing Trotsky's perspective. Shachtman and Burnham, who were in the New York leadership, almost flipped out when they got this letter, because they had settled themselves in for an extended, an indefinitely extended, stay in the SP, and they were bitter about Cannon "the hand-raiser," even after they were compelled to agree with his proposal.

The difference between them was that Cannon was a more astute politician, saw things faster, and did not feel that there was anything shameful about endorsing a good idea just because Trotsky had made it; whereas they, being perhaps less self-confident, had greater psychological difficulty in reaching a decision.

But the other element, a purely political one, played the main role in producing the strange situation of a fight over two similar motions. That was the one I referred to in some detail yesterday. Namely, that the SWP leadership was being asked to sharply change positions on important questions like the labor party, which they had held for several years and which they had reaffirmed just a few months before at the founding convention of the SWP; and that the reasoning Trotsky used in the Transitional Program seemed in some ways new to them, so new that at first they were jolted by it.

Supporting this part of my interpretation are the facts about what happened after the plenum. A Political Committee subcommittee was set up to draft a national program of action based on the Transitional Program, which was to consist of two parts, one on transitional demands, the other on the labor party question. In June, Spector and Burnham brought in separate drafts on the Transitional Program, but as they

worked on them, the realization grew that really there were not any significant differences, and what emerged was a joint document. There were differences over various passages, but these were settled by majority vote (except Workers Government or Workers and Farmers Government), and in the end the comrades who had voted against each other at the plenum all accepted the final draft, which was submitted to the membership for the referendum.

So the leadership should be credited with the good sense to reach agreement, once they had a little more time to assimilate the Transitional Program. They should also be credited with avoiding a factional situation, which was unwarranted and would have done great damage, since there was no political basis for it. Their united presentation of the document did a lot to win the support of the party ranks for both Trotsky's Transitional Program draft and the American adaptation of it. A full-scale discussion took place in the ranks, and in the referendum that followed, over 90 percent of those voting endorsed the international resolution, and about 95 percent endorsed the American program of action (I'll report on the labor party vote later).

I do not mean to imply that everybody in the party, leadership or ranks, absorbed the full meaning of the transitional method all at once or quickly. Late in the fall, two members of the Political Committee were still trying to get us to replace the slogan of the sliding scale of wages with a "rising scale of wages." There were also some strange things said during the discussion.

One that I remember now with some amusement is a debate that was never settled, echoes of which I still encountered in the 1950s among certain kinds of comrades. That was over the question of whether transitional demands can be realized under capitalism, the implication often being that transitional demands were good or acceptable only if or when they could not be realized under capitalism and could not be supported if

they could be realized under capitalism, the further implication being that supporting demands that could be realized under capitalism would lead us into some kind of horrendous trap and make rank opportunists of us all. It sounds more amusing now than it did then.

Anyhow, my point is that we did not grasp the meaning or master the use of the transitional method all at once—it took time, in my own case it was a matter of years, not months. But we did grasp it in part relatively quickly, which testifies to the maturity of both the leadership and the membership, and to the fact that our past had prepared us for this leap forward, for in practice we had been learning basic elements of the transitional approach before 1938, but without ever having generalized it our concretized it or theorized it or worked out the relations between the different parts as Trotsky did for us in 1938.

Now let me get back to the labor party question. Lenin waged a fight in the early years of the Comintern against those sectarian elements who refused to work in or give critical support to the candidates of existing labor parties, and this fight was so successful that hardly any communist thereafter held such a position. The question that concerned our movement in the 1930s was not whether to work in a labor party created by other forces, but whether it was permissible for revolutionaries to advocate the formation of a labor party. In a few moments I will trace the history of our movement on this question, but I will start by referring to my own experience, which began in 1935, when I first joined.

In 1935 the CIO and the new industrial unions were just being born; soon they were to turn their attention to politics—openly capitalist politics, as in their support of Roosevelt in 1936, but also hybrid politics, as in the formation of Labor's Non-Partisan League (LNPL) nationally and the American Labor Party in New York, which had the potential of taking an independent labor party direction. Nineteen

thirty-five was also the year when the Stalinists dropped their third-period policies, including opposition to labor parties as social-fascist formations, and began to call for the formation of a national labor party. Labor party resolutions began to be discussed in various unions and other mass movements and often were adopted at union conventions, although that was about as far as it went.

What I learned as a new member was that it was impermissible for us to advocate the formation of a labor party. We could advocate independent labor political action in general, because that encompassed the idea of revolutionary workers' politics, but we could not advocate formation of an independent labor party because a labor party, necessarily reformist, would inevitably betray the workers. I remember that in 1936, when I was writing a pamphlet to be published by the unemployed movement in New Jersey, I felt it necessary, in reporting action taken by this movement, to try to distinguish between its endorsement of independent political action (which we favored) and its endorsement of a farmer-labor party (which we didn't).

In 1936 we joined the SP and YPSL, and our labor party position immediately became, and remained, the clearest point of distinction between our faction, called the Appeal Association or caucus, and the centrist faction, called the Clarity caucus. They advocated a labor party, for reasons that sometimes sounded radical and other times sounded opportunist, and we opposed advocacy. In the year and a half we spent in the SP and YPSL, there must have been thousands of individual discussions and debates around the labor party, no one ever joining our faction without coming to accept our antiadvocacy position. In fact, it was often the crucial point for the revolutionary-minded youth of the SP and YPSL, dominating their decision on whether to join the Appeal or Clarity caucus.

At our founding convention there was no debate on the labor

party question. Instead, there was agreement, you could say unanimity, with the statement in the Declaration of Principles that the revolutionary party cannot "properly take the initiative in advocating the formation of Labor or Farmer-Labor Parties," and with the statement in the main political resolution, "Faced with the prospect of the formation of a national Labor party of one kind or another, the [SWP] has no need of altering the fundamental revolutionary Marxian position on the Labor Party question. The revolutionary party cannot take the responsibility for forming or advocating the formation of a reformist, class-collaborationist party, that is, of a petty-bourgeois workers' party."

But having settled accounts with the SP and having turned our eyes to the union movement, it began to be clear to the leaders of the new party that considerable pro-labor sentiment was developing in this country and that the party had better pay attention to it. Burnham took the lead in this respect in the Political Committee, but Cannon also was starting to concern himself with it. Burnham then wrote an article called "The Labor Party: 1938," reviewing the recent developments and urging an active orientation toward them. Even he, however, felt it incumbent to tip his hat to the convention formula: "The revolutionists are not the originators or initiators of any labor or any other kind of reformist party; they not merely give no guarantees or false hopes for such a party but, on the contrary, warn against the illusion that such a party can solve any major problem of the working class. The central task of the period ahead remains the building of the revolutionary party itself."

In the Political Committee, Burnham explained the strategy behind his article: he said that "there is now a labor party movement, and that we have to find ways and means of working in it." With this approach, the question of advocating a labor party could be skipped over; a movement already existed, so we didn't have to advocate it, all we had to do was get in. He

asked the Political Committee to endorse his article and recommend its approach to the plenum coming in April. The Political Committee decided merely to refer the whole matter to the plenum, and that is how things stood at the time of the talks in Mexico.

Trotsky also wanted us to work in the labor party movement, but he didn't see any need to be devious about it. Instead, as you can tell from the Transitional Program book, he argued that we should change our position and begin to advocate the formation of a labor party, and he sought to convince the SWPers that they should do the same.

In the discussion, at the beginning, Cannon said that he thought the prevailing sentiment of the party was "to join the LNPL and become aggressive fighters for the constitution of a labor party as against the policy of endorsing capitalist candidates; if we can do that without compromising our principles, that would be best in the sense of gaining influence." Shachtman too was concerned about the possible compromising of our principles. More than once he reminded Trotsky that we cannot advocate a reformist party and yet he (Trotsky) was advocating something that seemed just that.

Trotsky replied that he was not advocating a reformist labor party. He was trying to find a pedagogical approach to the workers. "We say [to the workers], you cannot impose your [political] will through a reformist party but only through a revolutionary party. The Stalinists and liberals wish to make of this movement a reformist party, but we have our program, we make of this a revolutionary—"

Here Cannon interrupted: "How can you explain a revolutionary labor party? We say: The SWP is the only revolutionary party, has the only revolutionary program. How then can you explain to the workers that also the labor party is a revolutionary party?"

Trotsky: “I will not say that the labor party is a revolutionary party, but that we will do everything to make it possible. At every meeting I will say: I am a representative of the SWP. I consider it the only revolutionary party. But I am not a sectarian. You are trying now to build a big workers’ party. I will help you but I propose that you consider a program for this party. I make such and such propositions. I begin with this. Under these conditions it would be a big step forward. Why not say openly what is? Without any camouflage, without any diplomacy.”

Cannon: “Up till now the question has always been put abstractly. The question of the program has never been outlined as you outlined it. The Lovestoneites have always been for a labor party; but they have no program, it’s combinations from the top. It seems to me that if we have a program and always point to it. . . . ”

Shachtman was still not convinced: “Now with the imminence of the outbreak of the war, the labor party can become a trap.” He was very much on guard against traps and illusions. “And I still can’t understand how the labor party can be different from a reformist, purely parliamentarian party.”

Trotsky: “You put the question too abstractly; naturally it can crystallize into a reformist party, and one that will exclude us. But we must be part of the movement . . . we always point to our program. And we propose our program of transitional demands.”

It is obvious from reading the stenograms that the SWP leaders were hung up by some of their previous formulas on the labor party question. Trotsky tried to bring new light on the matter, and the way in which he did this, in line with the Transitional Program as a whole, appeared to them to represent something new: “The question of the program has never been outlined as you outlined it,” Cannon said. The problem seemed solved; the only thing that remained was how to explain the

change. If the new position was correct, how about the old position? Had the old position been correct in the past but become invalid as the result of new and different conditions? Or had it always been wrong? If so, what was the source of the error?

The voting on the labor party at the April plenum was very much like the voting on the Transitional Program, except that this time there was a third position, presented by Glen Trimble of California, whose motion would simply reaffirm the position taken at the founding convention, that is, would continue to oppose advocacy. Trimble's motion was defeated seventeen to four. The two major positions were expressed in motions by Cannon and Burnham.

Cannon's was very short: "That we adopt the draft statement distributed to members as the position of the Plenum; and instruct the Political Committee to take this as a basis, concretize it and elaborate it, and submit it to the Party for discussion culminating in a referendum vote." The draft statement he referred to was one written by Trotsky, which appears in the Transitional Program book under the title "The Problem of the Labor Party."

The motion by Burnham was longer and more detailed, generally along the lines of his recent magazine article, but at no point in real contradiction with the line of Cannon's motion. The vote was closer this time: twelve for Cannon's, ten for Burnham's, two abstentions (weeks later one of the abstentions was changed to a vote for Cannon).

When the time came to draw up the document authorized in the Cannon motion, almost the same thing happened as with the Transitional Program. That is, virtually everyone who had voted for either the Cannon or the Burnham motion realized that there were no real differences between them on the labor party, and they all voted for a common NC majority resolution and jointly defended it in the referendum discussion against

an NC minority resolution introduced by Hal Draper.

But the results in the discussion and the voting were not the same as with the Transitional Program. Despite the virtual unanimity of the leadership, a large part of the SWP membership (and of the youth) was and remained against the change of position. The new position received only 60 percent in the referendum, as against 90 percent for the Transitional Program and 95 percent for the American adaptation.

Here I must differ with a statement George Novack made in his introduction to the Transitional Program book. He notes that the labor party question is not included in the Transitional Program and says, “This is for good reason. This problem is peculiar to our country, which is the most politically backward of all the advanced capitalist countries,” the only one where the workers don’t have some party of their own. But obviously this was not true of all countries in 1938 and it is not true today. There are many countries in the world, especially colonial, semicolonial, and neocolonialist countries, where the workers don’t have a party of their own class, and where the general labor party approach could be appropriate. And although the Soviet Union was the only workers’ state in the world, that didn’t stop Trotsky from writing a lot in the Transitional Program about the problems that were “peculiar” to that country.

But comrade Novack was correct in saying that there was good reason for the labor party not being included in the Transitional Program. And the reason was that the leaders were aware of the opposition of many members to the new labor party position and were afraid that if the questions weren’t separated, so that they could be voted on separately, this might endanger adoption of the Transitional Program first of all in this country, and secondly, indirectly in the rest of the International. This was good and sound reasoning, in my opinion. In my own case, I could not have voted for the Transitional Program at that time if it had included a

provision in favor of labor party advocacy. At least 40 percent of the party would have been in a dilemma if they had had to vote on the two matters in a single package.

Today, when there isn't anybody in our movement who disagrees on the pro-advocacy position, it may be difficult to appreciate the heat that accompanied that discussion in 1938. The source of the difficulty was that, for several years before 1938, we, the members had been taught that it was unprincipled to advocate the formation of any party but the revolutionary party. And the difficulty was compounded because the leadership, instead of forthrightly stating that this was a mistake that now must be corrected, denied that it had been considered a principled question or tried to sweep it aside as irrelevant. This way of handling the change, which is not typical of Bolshevism or of our movement before or since, complicated the whole situation, distracting the discussion away from the essence of the problem into side issues, and made it more difficult for the members to resolve the question correctly.

"The question of the labor party has never been a question of 'principle' for revolutionary Marxists." That is the opening sentence of Trotsky's draft statement, printed in the back of the Transitional Program book, which was incorporated with a few changes into the National Committee majority resolution in the referendum. In my opinion, that sentence was wrong. It had been a question of principle, and when I say that, I am not concerned with whether it had been formally labeled a principle, but with how the party membership had been educated to view the question.

In the National Committee draft, that sentence was changed from "The question of the labor party has never been a question of 'principle' for revolutionary Marxists" to "The question of the attitude toward an existing labor party has never been a question of principle for revolutionary Marxists." In my opinion, the changed sentence was correct, as

it stands, but in the context, it was an evasion of the problem that was troubling and confusing many party members.

I have decided not to try to prove what I have said here—that before 1938 we treated labor party advocacy as a principled question, even if we didn't label it that way. I'll merely repeat what Cannon said in Mexico, that our party would become aggressive fighters for a labor party "if we can do that without compromising our principled position." I'll assume that is sufficient until somebody challenges my statement.

At that time I thought that our principled position had always been against advocating a labor party, and in the course of that discussion, both written and oral, nobody, absolutely nobody, ever said that we had previously had any other position. If they had done so, it would surely have shaken me and the other 40 percent of the membership that voted against the new position and might have persuaded us that we were wrong. But nobody ever mentioned our having had any other position, or even said when we had adopted the one we had up to 1938. You may think that odd, but in those days—before offset printing made possible relatively inexpensive production of the old bound volumes of the *Militant*, and at a time when the resources of our party did not make available the old internal bulletins and documents of our movement—the general membership was not as well informed about the history of our own movement, in the form of accessible documents, as it is today. Anyhow, in the course of that discussion, which I followed closely and anxiously because, for the first time, my confidence in the leadership was shaken, nobody ever asked or said when we had adopted our pre-1938 position or if we had had a different position before that.

And so it wasn't until a few weeks ago, in preparing this talk, that I learned that our pre-1938 position had first been adopted in 1931, and that we had indeed had a different position before then—a contradictory one, in fact.

A few months after our expulsion from the CP in 1928, the *Militant* printed a long document by Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern, "The Platform of the Opposition," filling most of the paper's eight tabloid pages. One section was called "The Perspective of a Labor Party." I will read a few passages from it:

The perspective of coming mass struggles involves the question of developing these struggles in a political direction and unifying them in a centralized form. The movement for a Labor Party is today at low ebb as a result primarily of the passivity of the workers and the decline in movements of struggle in the past period. The coming period of developing economic struggles will very probably be reflected in tendencies toward the revival of the Labor Party movement.

It is not reasonable to expect that the masses of the American workers, who are still tied ideologically and politically to the bourgeois parties, will come over to the Communist Party politically in one step in a period not immediately revolutionary. All past experience, and particularly the recent experiences in the mining, textile and needle trades industries, where the workers who supported Communist leadership in strikes did not vote for the Communist ticket, do not sustain such expectations. The perspective of a Labor Party, as a primary step in the political development of the American workers, adopted by the Party in 1922 after a sharp struggle in the Party and at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, holds good today, although the forms and methods of its realization will be somewhat different than those indicated at that time.

It is therefore necessary to keep the perspective of a Labor Party before the eyes of the Party and the working class. We speak here not for the immediate formation of such a Party and surely not for the adventurism and opportunism that has characterized this work in the past, particularly in the organization of fake Labor Parties that had no genuine mass

basis. The Labor Party must have a mass basis and must arise out of struggle and be formed in the process of struggle. To this end, the propaganda slogan must be really revived, and as soon as it has found roots in the masses and their experience in the struggle, it must become an agitational, and finally an action, slogan.

The rest of this part of the 1929 platform discusses what a labor party of the kind we would propagandize for cannot be—it cannot be a two-class party, or an enlarged shadow of the CP, and so on, so I won't read those parts.

That was February 1929. We then decided to hold the founding convention of the CLA in May, and the platform containing this position on the labor party was introduced as the leadership's main document for the convention, serving as the basis for discussion first in the branches and then at the convention. There, according to a report on the convention by Cannon in the *Militant*, the labor party question was one of the two sharply debated on the convention floor. After describing minority viewpoints, including some who wanted nothing to do with any labor party even after it was formed, and some who were against advocacy but would work inside a labor party, Cannon wrote:

It was the opinion of the majority that, although it certainly is not a pressing question of the moment, the labor party question has a great importance for the future when the radicalization of the workers will begin to seek political expression. Therefore it is imperative to have a clear and definite stand on it. A misjudgment of the probable line of development of the American workers or a sectarian doctrine which would prevent us from approaching and influencing new upward movements, might have the most serious consequences later on. The formulation of the Platform on the Perspective of a Labor Party was adopted by a majority after a thorough discussion.

I wish that I had known in 1938 about this stage of our thinking on the labor party nine years earlier. I think it might have helped me avoid a serious error. Because, in my opinion, our 1929 position was substantially correct. It did not make a principle out of what was actually a tactical question. It did not reject taking a clear and definite stand merely because there was no labor party movement of significance in existence. It distinguished between the labor party as a subject for propaganda, and the labor party as a subject for agitation or action. And it had what proved to be a realistic perspective on the relative future growth of the revolutionary party and the mass movement.

That was the position at our first convention, in mid-1929, before the start of the big depression and at a time when all factions of the Communist Party, right, center, and left, were in favor of advocating a labor party, although their motivations and reasoning varied greatly. This position was changed, and even criticized, at our second convention in mid-1931, when the depression was over a year old and when the CP, now deep into its third-period madness, also was opposed to any pro-labor party development.

I don’t mean to suggest that the CP’s opposition to labor party advocacy was the same as ours. To the CP, anybody who advocated a labor party was a social fascist. We condemned their position, first of all because the whole theory of social fascism was false and suicidal from start to end, and secondly because if that was all their opposition to a labor party rested on, it was insufficient, because it meant that when they ultimately gave up social fascism they might or would return to advocacy of a labor party. (Which, incidentally, they did, in 1935.)

The political resolution adopted at our second convention, in 1931, was a long document, and the section called “Social Reformism and the Perspectives of the Revolutionary Movement” was also long. Contrary to the CP, we warned that the basis

for social reformism, far from being “narrowed down,” was being extended in the form of a growth of a leftist bureaucracy in the unions and a revival of the social democracy. Most of the section is devoted to a discussion of how to fight the reformists—how the CP should fight them, through the united front correctly understood and applied and so on, in a period when it must not be assumed that the United States was fated to be the last capitalist country to enter the revolutionary crisis.

The labor party question was presented in this context. The resolution saw the AFL bureaucracy, “their socialist assistants and the ‘Left wing’ progressive toadies of the Muste school” working consciously to erect barriers to the growth of the revolutionary movement in every area. “On the political field most of these elements seek to erect a barrier in the form of a ‘Labor’ or ‘Farmer-Labor’ party, that is, a bourgeois workers’ party in the image of the British Labor Party.”

The 1931 resolution then criticizes the many false formulations of the labor party question held in the American CP from 1923 to 1928, saying that none was based on a Marxian conception of the role of the labor party or of the nature of our epoch. Of course many of these formulations and policies had been adventurist or opportunist, or a combination of both. Now, said the resolution:

all these conceptions and practices must be thrown overboard because they were originally wrong. . . . The American Communists cannot undertake to organize a petty bourgeois workers’ party “standing between” the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Abstractly considered, to be sure, were there a mass movement which would organize a labor party, the Communists would have to take up the question of working within it as a revolutionary nucleus. But this is a different matter

entirely. Moreover, it is a matter which has less of a timely significance today—even abstractly—than in past years, since there is no substantial movement at all for a labor party in the 1932 elections.

It is the reformists of all shades, the Thomases and the Mustes, who seek to set up this petty bourgeois party as a wall against the workers' progress towards Communism; in this work, they are only fulfilling their mission and role of prolonging as much as possible the "reformist period" in the development of the American working class. It is no accident that the Right wing liquidators of the Lovestone group have as the central point in their program the idea that the Labor Party's formation is an essential and imperative step for the American workers, which the Right wing is ready to initiate, to form and build up. It is this perspective which it recommends to the Communist movement as a whole to adopt. The Left Opposition, at its formative stage, leaned in the direction of this reformist perspective which constituted to a certain extent an uncritical carry-over of the preceding group struggles in the party, prior to the time when the Left wing took shape and was established as a political grouping distinct from all the others in the movement. The firmer establishment of its Marxian position dictates a break with this early standpoint and the adoption of the one outlined here. The adoption of this revised point of view, the result of clarification in its own ranks, marks a step forward that will enable the Opposition to bring greater clarity on this vital problem into the revolutionary and labor movements as a whole.

That was 1931. A year later, Trotsky had talks in Turkey with Albert, Weisbord, the leader of a small group that was making an approach to the Left Opposition, although it shared many of the ideas of the Right Opposition, including its labor party position. After their discussion, Trotsky wrote a letter to Weisbord and a statement on the labor party, both printed in

Writings 1932. In the letter he praised the position taken by the CLA at our second convention "because in the theses not only was a correct position taken on the essence of the question but also an open and courageous criticism of its own past was made. Only in this way can a revolutionary tendency seriously assure itself against backsliding."

In the labor party article, he said that he found the CLA convention position on the labor party "excellent in every part, and I subscribe to it with both hands." It is an article very worthwhile, especially for those who may think that we should have been or should be in favor of the formation of a labor party under all circumstances. But I leave all that out to quote two passages:

3. *A long period of confusion in the Comintern led many people to forget a very simple but absolutely irrevocable principle: that a Marxist, a proletarian revolutionist, cannot present himself before the working class with two banners. He cannot say at a workers' meeting: "I have a ticket for a first-class party and another, cheaper ticket for the backward worker." If I am a Communist, I must fight for the Communist Party.*

And a little later, after mentioning how the Comintern's policy toward the Kuomintang and the British Labor Party in the 1920s produced an opportunistic adaptation to the will of the Comintern's allies and, through them, to that of the class enemy, he said:

We must educate our cadres to believe in the invincibility of the Communist idea and the future of the Communist Party. The parallel struggle for another party inevitably produces in their minds a duality and turns them onto the road of opportunism.

It should be noted that there had been no explicit reference to a principle about the labor party in the 1931 convention's

resolution, but Trotsky's use of such a term was not inconsistent with that resolution; it merely spelled out what was implicit in the whole approach of the resolution.

By now it must be plain that there was a principle involved in the thinking behind the position we held between 1931 and 1938. And it was a most fundamental principle—the principle of the need and primacy of the revolutionary party, whose construction is indispensable for everything else. Those who depart from this principle, or subordinate it, or compromise it, like the social democrats or the Lovestoneites, cannot possibly have the right position on the labor party.

But it does not follow that everybody who advocates a labor party is necessarily subordinating or compromising the principle that the building of the revolutionary party comes foremost for Marxists. It does not follow that advocating a labor party is contradictory to building the revolutionary party; in fact, advocating a labor party is not only consistent with building the revolutionary party in certain conditions but also a means toward building the revolutionary party, if the revolutionaries know what they are doing and how to do it right.

So on the labor party there was a confusion between principle and the tactics that were presumed to flow from the principle, which, as I showed yesterday, is the same thing as happened with the Ludlow amendment. The difference is that the Ludlow amendment mistake was of relatively short duration, a few months, whereas the labor party mistake lasted for seven years and therefore was harder for many of us to correct. The Transitional Program, or, more exactly, the transitional method that it taught us, enabled us not only to understand this mistake, some of us sooner than others, but also to better grasp the dynamics of unfolding class struggles and how to relate to them in a way that was positive and creative rather than purely propagandist, abstentionist, or dogmatic.

It showed us that advocating a labor party does not necessarily make us responsible for everything that happens in connection with a labor party that is formed under the leadership of other forces, any more than advocating a strike makes us responsible for everything that happens during a strike under the leadership of other forces. The nature of our responsibility depends on the nature of our program and the way we present it. We are responsible only for what we advocate, not for the victory of opponents over what we advocate.

It showed us that advocating a labor party does not necessarily mean that you are advocating the formation of a reformist party. It depends on how you advocate it, on what content you give your advocacy, on what program you advance for the labor party. The posing of the question—can a labor party be revolutionary?—which seemed unreasonable to us before 1938, was very useful educationally. Trotsky did not give the question an absolute or direct yes answer. We will try to make it as revolutionary as we can, he said, and he might have added, just as we do with the unions.

It showed us that advocating a labor party does not inevitably produce in the minds of the revolutionary cadre a duality regarding the primacy of the revolutionary party or turn the cadre onto the road of opportunism. It can do these things, but it need not, if the cadre is firm in principle in the first place and if the leadership is always alert to maintain the cadre's educational-political level and consciousness. Advocating a labor party can result in these retrogressive things, but it does not follow that it must, therefore it does not follow that the mere possibility must compel us to abstain from what can be a fruitful tactic for the building of the revolutionary party.

Of course it is true that a party that is weak on the principle of the revolutionary party will get into trouble with a labor party tactic. But the SWP was not weak on that

principle, so that general truth was irrelevant in this case.

In 1931, when we replaced the 1929 position, we said that it had been wrong, for which Trotsky praised us. In 1938, when we replaced the 1931 position, we did not make any such explicit judgment. We said only that the 1931 position was abstract and that conditions had changed sufficiently to make the abstract formulas of the past obsolete. These were valid criticisms, and it is to the credit of the party and its leadership that, with help from Trotsky and the Transitional Program, we were able to arrive at a correct position, in a relatively short time, without the loss of cadres and without serious damage to morale. Perhaps this was the most that could have been achieved under those conditions.

I did not think so at that time. I resented what I took to be the leadership's refusal to make a judgment about the 1931 position, so much that my resentment prevented me from understanding what was correct and progressive in its 1938 position. In addition, I was basically wrong because I thought that the 1931 position was correct. Later I saw and now I see that the 1931 position was not just abstract but wrong, not just rendered obsolete by new conditions but wrong before the coming of new conditions—not in every word, but on the whole. I think that the public opinion of the party will reach this conclusion too, actually though not officially, when in the not-too-distant future we will make these old documents more available for study by the membership.

The personal lesson that I learned, rather painfully, was the need to be more objective in the analysis of political problems. It was hard for me to admit to myself that we had been mistaken, that I had been mistaken, so hard that I wanted to cling to the error. And I justified clinging to it by the less than perfect arguments used by the leadership to motivate the correction. That's not a good way to reach a decision. A position may be correct even though its proponents do not defend it in the best way possible. We have the obligation to

recognize a correct position independently, so to speak, of the arguments of others who find it correct. It took me almost three years after the end of the 1938 discussion before I was able to do that with the labor party question. Fortunately, the party was not so slow.

Although the subject of these talks played a decisive part in my political life, that is not the main reason that I have gone to the trouble of telling you about them.

Building the revolutionary party is a difficult and arduous process. Recently I read the translation of a 1933 article by Trotsky about how hard it is to achieve a healthy society even after the workers have come to power, written for an American bourgeois periodical but not published at that time.

“To achieve harmony in the state,” he wrote, “—even on the basis of collective ownership and planned management encompassing all facets of the economy—is only possible as the result of an indefinitely prolonged period of efforts, experiments, errors, crises, reforms and reorganization.” That description struck me as appropriate also for the task of building a party capable of leading the revolutionary workers to power—a prolonged “period of efforts, experiments, errors, crises, reforms and reorganization.

We have reason to be proud of the achievements of the SWP. It is qualitatively superior to any of its opponents in this country, and, thanks to the continuity of its leadership, which enabled it to avoid repeating the same errors over and over, it enjoys several advantages over other sympathizing groups or sections of the Fourth International. This did not come about by accident or sheer good luck; it is the result of struggle and consciousness. A correct appraisal of the SWP and its achievements, which is necessary for further progress, is furthered by an awareness of the difficulties it has encountered and the way it overcame them, rather than by an ignoring of those difficulties or a depreciation of their

magnitude.

The other reason that I think discussions such as this are justified is that they contribute to party consciousness-raising about the abundance of weapons in our political and theoretical arsenal. The metaphor most commonly used to call our attention to the debt we owe our predecessors is that we are "standing on their shoulders," which explains why we can see some things that they couldn't. I think I prefer a less athletic figure of speech, that of the arsenal. It was built by the pioneers of the Marxist movement and expanded by their successors. It is bigger, and its contents are more varied and useful than anything they had at their disposal. Available to us now are not only the actual weapons—the ideas, theories, programs, principles, strategies, tactics, and so on—but the history of their development, refinement, and improvement, which includes trial and error and experiments that failed as well as those that succeeded. We don't have to start from scratch, with the bow and arrow, and we are not doomed to repeat errors merely because we don't know their history. We can learn from the past, both what to continue and perfect and what to avoid.

No other movement has such a rich arsenal; the others would like to forget the past. The Stalinists, for example, would never dream of reprinting the books they published in the early 1930s, during the period of social fascism; we, on the other hand, are using precious resources to print material from the 1930s by Trotsky and others that we were too poor to print in permanent book form then and that we are determined to add to our arsenal for the benefit of the youth of today and tomorrow.

This arsenal is big, but it's going to have to be bigger before humanity turns it into a museum. You are going to have to build new weapons to hasten that day, but before you can do that you have to master the ones in our present stockpile. These talks are intended as a contribution to that process.