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.

The Liberating Influence of the Transitional Program – George Breitman (1974). Part 1 – The Ludlow Amendment

[Revolutionary Marxists face a perennial challenge, to avoid the twin dangers of sectarianism and opportunism, by engaging with the actual struggles of the working class and the oppressed, whilst simultaneously working towards the ultimate goal of socialism. In the following contribution, veteran American Trotskyist George Breitman, discusses this challenge and outlines the *transitional method*, examining the difference between tactics and principles and the relationship between them. While Breitman's focus is on aspects of the history of the American SWP, and some of his terminology is rather dated, the essence of his approach is still of immense value. It outlines how revolutionaries should relate to movements around immediate and democratic demands and stresses the importance of the *experience* of struggling for partial demands in raising class consciousness. In this first talk Breitman outlines the approach of the American SWP towards the 'antiwar' Ludlow amendment and how, under the influence of Trotsky, it moved from an abstentionist position to one of critical support. In the second talk, which we intend to publish later this month, Breitman considers the approach of the American SWP towards the formation of an independent 'labor' party in the United States, and Trotsky's view on this, a topic that remains highly relevant to the debate about the formation of new left parties both here in Scotland and elsewhere. *Ecosocialist Scotland, 7th January 2026*]

The following are transcripts of three talks I gave under the title “The Liberating Influence of the Transitional Program” at the Socialist Activist and Educational Conference held in Ohio in August 1974. They are part of a larger study I am trying to prepare about important chapters in the history of the Socialist Workers party and its predecessors that were not dealt with or not dealt with much by James P. Cannon’s *History of American Trotskyism*. These transcripts can be considered “work-in-progress”, which I hope to revise and improve (especially the talk on the labor party) before their publication in final form. I hope this will spark criticisms and suggestions that will help improve them.

George Breitman, May 1975

1. The Ludlow Amendment

Many of you know that in our movement there are no official versions of history, whether it’s the history of our own movement or anything else. But for the benefit of those who don’t know it, I want to mention it at the outset. The only thing you have to accept in order to join our party is its program and the obligation to promote it in accord with its rules and constitution, which of course includes the right to try to persuade the party to change this or that part of its program or constitution. You don’t have to agree with every conclusion in Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, with every formulation in Cannon’s books about party building and the development of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its predecessors, with every opinion in the books by Farrell Dobbs and Art Preis on the Teamsters and the CIO, or the writings of George Novack on the philosophy of Marxism, of Mary-Alice Waters on the relations between feminism and the Marxist movement, of Evelyn Reed on anthropology and the matriarchy. We publish and circulate these works because of their value for our Marxist education, because of their

general consonance with our revolutionary program, but it would be as silly to demand that all of us must agree with everything they write as it would be to demand that they should write only what we would all agree with 100 percent.

This is my way of saying that my remarks today about certain aspects of the early history of our party, centering around the year 1938, are neither "official" nor "approved." All they represent is my opinion, which is based partly on my memory of that period and partly on recent research, including the reading of documents that I had not seen at that time. I think that the facts I will cite are reliable, and I hope that you will be able to distinguish without difficulty between those facts and my interpretation of them.

In November of this year [1974] it will be forty-six years since James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, and Martin Abern, expelled from the leadership of the Communist Party, began publishing the *Militant*. But it wasn't until New Year's 1938, in the tenth year of our movement, that the Socialist Workers Party was founded at a national convention in Chicago. 1938 was also the year when the Fourth International was founded at an international conference in Paris in September, one year before the start of World War II. At this founding conference the delegates adopted as their major programmatic document a resolution written by Trotsky in Mexico, entitled "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," which later came to be referred to as the "Transitional Program."

I am going to talk about some of the problems that arose in the process by which the SWP endorsed the Transitional Program, and changes resulting from this endorsement that continue to influence the SWP to this day. If I do not speak as much about the transitional program itself as the title of this talk might have led you to expect, it is because of (1) a lack of time, (2) the belief that most of you already know about the transitional program, and (3) the abundance of

literature available on the subject in the book, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution.* Published last year, that book contains the Transitional Program resolution itself, a series of discussions by Trotsky with different SWP leaders and members about the program, and at least two useful introductions by Joseph Hansen and George Novack. A second edition of this book has just been published, and that contains a number of additional stenograms of Trotsky's discussions on the transitional program, taken down before the program itself was written, some of which are relevant to my talks.

However, I do want to say a couple of things about the Transitional Program and the transitional method. Of Trotsky's many valuable contributions to Marxist theory there are two, in my opinion, that stand out above the others. One is his theory of the permanent revolution, conceived when he was twenty-six years old, which challenged the conventional wisdom of the movement of his time about the possibilities and perspectives of revolution in most of the world and, after it was confirmed by the Russian Revolution of 1917, became a keystone in the reorientation of the international Marxist vanguard (although for a number of years after 1917 the term "permanent revolution" was not used by anyone).

The other contribution of which I speak was made by Trotsky in 1938, when he was fifty-eight years old and completing the fortieth year of his revolutionary career. Here, in his full maturity, a few weeks after Stalin's liquidation of Bukharin and Rykov in the third big Moscow trial and two and a half years before his own death, Lenin's collaborator and continuator drew on the experiences of the most eventful four decades in revolutionary history and put them together in a new synthesis that we call the Transitional Program.

That is usually what new great ideas consist of—a rearrangement of old ones, the sifting out of some, a new emphasis for others, a recasting of priorities and

relationships. In and of itself, there was not much that was new in the Transitional Program; some of the parts dated back, as Trotsky noted, ninety years to the *Communist Manifesto*; other parts were so recent that they had not yet been assimilated or expressed in writing, deriving from the actions of the workers themselves, such as the sit-down strikes in the mid-1930s in France and the United States.

Trotsky's contribution was to take these parts and put them together, to unify them, in a way that even his closest collaborators were at first to find unique, maybe even disturbing. His aim was to write a program that would help the revolutionary vanguard to intervene successfully in the class struggle in a period when conditions were objectively prerevolutionary but the masses were still under the influence of the counterrevolutionary Second and Third Internationals or without any leadership at all. As he put it:

"The strategic task of the next period– a prerevolutionary period of agitation, propaganda, and organization– consists in overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard (the confusion and disappointment of the older generation; the inexperience of the younger generation). It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of *transitional demands*, stemming from today's conditions and from today's conscious ness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat."

The Transitional Program was written for specific purposes, in the midst of a world depression, on the eve of a world war, for the founding conference of the Fourth International. That has led some people to question or belittle its usefulness for today or tomorrow, when conditions are different. This seems

to me the worst kind of formalist thinking, if thinking is the right word. In the first place, it overlooks the fact that the essential conditions are not different– that the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard is even greater and more pregnant than it was in 1938. If not all the 1938 demands are applicable today (some weren't even applicable yet in 1938), the essential tasks are the same, and the *method* of the Transitional Program as it was written in 1938 is absolutely applicable today. In fact, the transitional method, in my opinion, is an even greater contribution than the Transitional Program itself. In presenting the transitional program, Trotsky emphasized its continuity with the past, rather than what was innovative in it. He said that it "draws the balance of the already accumulated experience of our national sections and on the basis of this experience opens up broader international perspectives." But this was even truer of the transitional method than of the Transitional Program itself. The transitional method was being used by us before the Transitional Program was written– after all, the disparity between the maturity of objective conditions and the subjective immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard did not begin in 1938, and the need for bridges between the vanguard and the masses had existed for a long time.

But before 1938 we weren't conscious of the transitional method that we used on occasion; we certainly were not fully conscious, and we used it haphazardly therefore, or incompletely, or empirically. Trotsky generalized it, concretized it, drew out its implications, showed its logic and necessity, named it, and indelibly imprinted it in our consciousness. For most of us the exposition of the transitional method was quite a revelation, bigger than the one the Moliere character had when he learned that he had been speaking prose all his life.

In 1938 the SWP was rather an exceptional organization. That

also is an opinion, but there is plenty of objective evidence to back it up. It was the only organization in the United States that fought against the prevailing tidal waves of New Deal reformism and Stalinist opportunism from a revolutionary standpoint, and it was the only organization inside the Movement for the Fourth International that approached the norms of Bolshevism in the quality of its cadres, the solidity of its principles, and the level of its organizational practice. This is not to say that it was free of serious weaknesses, but it is to say that it had serious strengths as well. This was Trotsky's opinion, and it was for this reason in 1938 that he turned to the SWP leaders for discussion before writing the Transitional Program and that he asked the SWP to adopt and sponsor it at the founding conference of the Fourth International.

A history of our movement in this country from its inception in 1928 to the founding of the SWP in 1938 has been written by Comrade Cannon in the book called *The History of American Trotskyism*. It will have to suffice here to say that the first major turning point in this history came in 1933, after Hitler's victory in Germany, when our movement discontinued its ef forts to reform the Communist International and its affiliated parties and set out here in the United States to gather the cadres of a new Marxist party as part of a new, Fourth International.

This meant that we now turned our primary attention away from the Communist Party, and that our main activity, the dissemination of propaganda, began to be combined with intervention and action, where possible, in the class struggle. At the end of 1934, after the Minneapolis strike had shown our competence in intervention and action, our movement merged with a left-centrist current led by A. J. Muste (this became the Workers Party) and then, in the spring of 1936, we entered the Socialist Party in order to merge with young revolutionary elements who had been attracted to that

organization. Our forces, considerably augmented, were expelled from the Socialist Party and its youth organization, the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), in the summer of 1937 (although they represented the majority of the YPSL). The expelled left-wingers then called a national convention to create a new revolutionary party affiliated with the Fourth Internationalist movement and, after an extensive internal discussion, that is how the SWP came to be founded in 1938.

The discussion preceding that convention was very rich, covering a broad number of current international and national problems as well as the fundamental principles to govern and guide the new revolutionary party. From Mexico, Trotsky, who had recently completed his historic work of exposing the Moscow trial frame-ups, participated in this discussion to some extent, but chiefly on the so-called international questions– the Spanish civil war, the Sino-Japanese war, the class character of the Soviet Union, and the nature of democratic centralism in general.

A declaration of principles and a constitution were adopted; a political resolution, resolutions on trade union and unemployed work, resolutions on the Soviet Union and Spain, a resolution on organizational principles and standards, reports on the international movement, the youth movement, the election of a national committee– these were only some of the important things taken up and acted on at the convention. As a young delegate to the convention, I left it not only tired but inspired and certain that we had taken a big step toward the American revolution; and I am sure that that attitude was shared by most of the rank-and-file delegates.

In 1937 Trotsky had been pressing for an international conference to found the Fourth International. He felt that the international conference of July 1936 had made a mistake in not taking that step then, and he kept urging after his arrival in Mexico in 1937 that it be done by the end of that year. But it didn't prove possible, for various reasons, one

of them being that the U.S. leadership felt that it had to concentrate first on the founding of the SWP. So after the new party was launched, it was agreed that a delegation of SWP leaders would go to Mexico for talks about the international conference and related matters. And this took place at the end of March 1938, less than three months after the SWP convention.

The SWP delegation consisted of Cannon, Shachtman, V. R. Dunne, and Rose Karsner, and they met with Trotsky and others at Trotsky's home for an entire week. After some initial, introductory discussions, more formal sessions were held on six consecutive days, four of which were devoted entirely or largely to the Transitional Program and the method it implied. Stenograms were made of these six discussions, which were not corrected or revised by the participants but gave the essence of the exchanges. For security reasons mainly– to protect Trotsky's right of asylum in Mexico– these six stenograms were shown only to the National Committee members of the SWP at a plenum the next month and then were retrieved.

None was ever published in any form, not even an internal bulletin, during Trotsky's life, and until just this year none was ever published anywhere, with one exception– a discussion about the labor party, which was printed in an SWP educational bulletin in 1948. Fortunately, copies of the six stenograms were kept by Trotsky and included by him in the archives sold to Harvard in 1940. Last year Pathfinder Press got access to the stenograms for the first time and permission to print them, and they have just been published as material added in the second edition of *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*. There, in the back of the volume, you can read the material from the four stenograms that dealt with the transitional program (and next year you will be able to read the rest of these stenograms, dealing with other questions, in the second edition of the *Writings 1937-38*). The newly added material should not be confused with the other stenograms

about the Transitional Program in that book, most of them from the period *after* Trotsky wrote the program, which were in the first edition.

No memoirs or reminiscences of the discussions have been published, but it is clear from the stenograms– not just by reading between the lines, but from some passages– that the SWPers must have been startled and even shaken up by some of Trotsky's proposals and arguments and his way of looking at certain things that struck them as new.

On the fourth day of the discussions transcribed, Trotsky began the session by saying, "In the preceding discussions some comrades had the impression that some of my propositions or demands were opportunistic, and others that they were too revolutionary, not corresponding to the objective situation. And this combination is very compromising, and that's why I'll briefly defend this apparent contradiction." Perhaps Trotsky was exaggerating a little here, but he apparently felt that he had not yet fully convinced the other participants in the discussion, because they were not sure about the "orthodoxy" (a word I dislike) or the realism of his positions.

In a number of places the stenograms show them asking Trotsky the same questions, getting him to restate his arguments so that they can grasp them better; in other places, they voice doubts or reservations; in still others, disagreement (Shachtman in particular could not see how slogans on workers' control and workers' militia were applicable in the United States in 1938). Such a thing is of course quite common, even inevitable, in any free political discussion where new proposals are introduced that require recon sideration of long-established patterns of thought. Besides, this was not an ordinary discussion or an abstract discussion. Some of the positions Trotsky was asking them to reconsider had been passionately reaffirmed less than three months before, in the declaration of principles and the political resolution adopted by the founding SWP convention. So they wanted to be damned

sure that they understood what Trotsky was proposing, because even if they were convinced, that wouldn't settle it– they would still have to go home and convince first the Political Committee, then the National Committee, and then the party as a whole. So nobody reading those stenograms today is entitled to cheap feelings of condescension toward those comrades, who bore heavy responsibilities in this situation and acquitted themselves well.

Trotsky himself was aware of the problem facing the SWPers, and his tone throughout was patient, friendly, and pedagogic, for he was talking to close comrades, not opponents. And by the time they left to return to the United States, they had become convinced, if perhaps not fully aware of all the implications, and had agreed that they would ask the SWP to sponsor the Transitional Program at the coming international conference and to modify certain important points in its national program.

Before continuing the narrative, I am going to turn to two of the questions on which Trotsky wanted the SWP to change its positions. These, I think, are at the heart of the transitional method, and discussing them in some detail will be my substitute for discussing the transitional program and the method as a whole, which I've said has already been done more than adequately by Comrades Hansen and Novack in their introductions to the Transitional Program book. I should add that I am inclined to do it this way because these two questions were the ones that I personally, as a young SWP activist, found the hardest to figure out. These two questions were the Ludlow amendment and the labor party.

In the 1930s, as the American people began to learn more about World War I, partly through muckraking congressional investigations, and as the threat of World War II began to come closer, a considerable antiwar or pacifist sentiment developed in this country. One of the forms this took was that of so-called isolationism, an expression of a desire not to

get involved in foreign wars. Beginning in 1935, the Stalinists attempted to exploit this antiwar sentiment by channeling it behind Roosevelt's foreign policy and the policy of "collective security," according to which war would be prevented through an alliance by the peace-loving countries (the United States, USSR, etc.) against the bad, aggressive, peace-hating countries (Germany, Italy, and Japan).

In 1935 a Democratic congressman from Indiana named Ludlow introduced a bill in the House of amend the U.S. Constitution so that Congress would not have the authority to declare war until such a declaration had been approved by the people voting in a national referendum. Of course the bill had many loopholes, one of which was that this limitation on the war-making power of Congress would not apply if the United States were invaded or attacked; and this wasn't its only weakness. Support began to build for the amendment as fears of war were deepened in this country by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. The Ludlow amendment was reintroduced in the House in 1937 and in the Senate by La Follette of Wisconsin, and it finally came to a vote in the House in January 1938, nine days after our convention.

The Roosevelt administration was bitterly opposed to the amendment and used all its patronage pressures to bring about its defeat. The Communist Party also opposed it, charging that it was in the interests of the reactionaries and fascists because it would limit the ability of the U.S. government to deter the fascist powers from starting a war. Just before the vote in the House, a Gallup poll showed that 72 percent of the population favored the Ludlow amendment. Most of the new industrial unions supported the bill, along with the National Farmers Union. The pro-Ludlow sentiment in the United Auto Workers (UAW) was so strong that the Stalinist members of its executive board were forced to vote in favor of it. In the House of Representatives the bill was defeated 209-188, a

rather close vote, considering all the circumstances.

So far I haven't been able to find any references to the Ludlow amendment in our press before the vote in the House in January 1938, but without any specific articles in our press, I knew at that time what our position on the amendment was, and I approved of it wholeheartedly.

Before explaining what our position was, I shall have to make a correction of what Comrade Hansen said about it in 1971 in a speech included with the introductory matter in the Transitional Program book. After telling who Ludlow was and what his amendment called for, Comrade Hansen said, "Comrade Trotsky proposed that the Socialist Workers Party should offer critical support to the Indiana Democrat's proposed amendment to the bourgeois constitution of the United States. After a bit of hesitation by some comrades our party adopted this position. Trotsky considered the matter so important that he included a paragraph about it in the Transitional Program." I am afraid that Comrade Hansen must have relied on his memory here instead of checking the facts; perhaps because he didn't have access to the records when he was making the speech, but in any case, he doesn't have it right.

The fact is that we were opposed to the Ludlow amendment before Trotsky had any opinion about it. If we had had a member in the House on January 10, 1938, he would have voted against the amendment, after making or trying to make a revolutionary speech differentiating the SWP from the nonrevolutionary forces opposing it. And if you had been a sympathizer in 1938, asking me why we were opposed, I would have answered at length along the following lines:

"Pacifism is one of the most pernicious elements obstructing the revolutionary struggle against imperialist war. It misleads and disarms the workers, delivering them defenseless at the crucial moment into the hands of the war makers. Lenin and the Bolsheviks taught us that implacable opposition to

pacifism and the illusions it creates is obligatory for all revolutionaries. All the documents of the Left Opposition and Fourth International stress the principled character of the struggle against pacifism in all its forms. Our stand on this question demarcates us from all other tendencies. The Ludlow amendment is a pacifist measure, designed to create the illusion that it is possible to prevent war at the ballot box while leaving power in the hands of the capitalists. It misdirects the workers from the real struggle against war, and therefore we cannot support it or assume any responsibility for it. Not to oppose it would be a betrayal of our revolutionary principles."

On the same day that the House voted down the Ludlow amendment, the newly elected Political Committee (PC) of the SWP held its first meeting. The PC minutes of that date show that under one point on the agenda Burnham proposed launching an antiwar campaign, consisting of eight "concrete points." The eighth point read as follows: "For the Ludlow amendment on the general motivation of the opportunities which it, as an issue, provides." All the points were approved, except the eighth, which was defeated by a vote of six to one. A countermotion to that eighth point was made by Shachtman, as follows: "That in our press we criticize the Ludlow amendment and the pacifist agitation connected with it from a principled revolutionary standpoint." This was carried– six for, one against.

In accord with this motion, our paper the *Socialist Appeal* carried a front page article by Albert Goldman, introduced with an editorial statement pronouncing it to be "the Marxian view on the amendment." Goldman's article begins by saying that the Ludlow amendment poses an old problem in a new form for Marxists and workers generally. But, he assures the readers, "It is only necessary to apply the accepted principles of revolutionary Marxism to solve the problem correctly." Applying them, he showed all the shortcomings of

the Ludlow amendment and the pacifist illusions fostered by its advocates, demonstrated that it would not really prevent war, differentiated our position from that of the Stalinists, and pointed to the destruction of the capitalist system as the only solution to war. I might add that he also said that the Ludlow amendment carried even greater dangers than other pacifist schemes precisely because it added "an element of democratic procedure."

Also in accord with the PC motion were two editorials in the next issue of our magazine. The longer one, which could have been written by Burnham, denounced the pro-imperialist forces that voted down the Ludlow bill and explained why. The shorter editorial, which could have been written by Shachtman, sought to "represent the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism." Among other things, it said: Where pacifist nostrums are not outright frauds and deceptions, they are pernicious illusions which drug the masses into pleasant dreams and hallucinations and paralyze their fighting power. To teach the masses that they can "prevent war" by a popular referendum is to foster a disastrous illusion among them. . . . Like the panacea of "disarmament," or "international arbitration courts," the referendum illusion diverts attention from the need of an intransigent class struggle policy against war every day in the year, because it cultivates the idea that when the "real" was danger faces us in the remote future the masses will be able to avert it by the mere casting of a ballot. … In sum, to support the Ludlow resolution is to inculcate in the minds of the workers the idea that war can be "prevented" or fought by some means other than the class struggle, that imperialist war can be averted otherwise than by the revolutionary socialist overturn of capitalist rule."

The PC minutes of February 18 have a point called "Ludlow Amendment," followed by this information: "Letter read supporting Burnham's position on the Ludlow Amendment." Not included with the minutes, and not identified as to author,

this letter turns out to have been written by Trotsky, although it was signed “Hansen” for security reasons; its text can be found in the second edition of Writings 3 7-38, which should be out next year. The letter was addressed to Cannon, whom Trotsky gave permission to show it to Burnham if he wished. Cannon did, and he also turned it over to the Political Committee as a whole. The letter said that on the Ludlow question Trotsky was with Burnham, not with the majority of the Political Committee. He felt that after the congressional vote the question was settled practically, but he wanted to make some comments on the important question of methodology. The government position against the Ludlow amendment, Trotsky wrote, represented the position of the imperialists and big business, who want their hands free for international maneuvering, including the declaration of war. What is the Ludlow bill? Trotsky wrote: It represents the apprehension of the man-in-the-street, of the average citizen, of the middle bourgeois, the petty bourgeois, and even the farmer and the worker . . . looking for a brake upon the bad will of big business. In this case they name the brake the referendum. We know that the brake is not sufficient and even not efficient and we openly proclaim this opinion, but at the same time we are ready to go through his experience against the dictatorial pretensions of big business. The referendum is an illusion? Not more or less an illusion than universal suffrage and other means of democracy. Why can we not use the referendum as we use the presidential elections? . . .

“The referendum illusion of the American little man has also its progressive features. Our idea is not to turn away from it, but utilize these progressive features without taking the responsibility for the illusion. If the referendum motion should be adopted, it would give us in case of a war crisis tremendous opportunities for agitation. That is precisely why big business stifled the referendum illusion.”

Today’s average SWP member will not find Trotsky’s thinking on

the Ludlow amendment extraordinary or controversial; in fact, it may seem rather commonplace and hardly worth the time I am giving it. This testifies to the political development of our movement since 1938; in certain respects we have come a long way; we live on a higher political plateau now. But what seems simple now to a new member didn't seem at all simple to the politically most astute leaders of our party then, as we can see from what happened after Trotsky's letter was read by the Political Committee. Trotsky thought that because the referendum had been rejected in the House nothing more could be done about it. The members of the Political Committee knew better, realizing that the amendment would continue to be an important American political question for some time. So they decided, after hearing Trotsky's letter, to formulate their position anew. Goldman introduced a series of four motions, some of which were amended by Shachtman. The first two motions stressed the need to use the interest aroused by the amendment to expose the war preparations and the bourgeois and Stalinist opponents of the bill and to expose all pacifist illusions, by clearly stating at all times that whoever says any kind of referendum will stop war is seriously mistaken. The third motion declared that we cannot assume responsibility for the amendment under any circumstances, and it is impermissible for us or our members in mass movements to organize or participate in or endorse any campaign for the amendment.

Up to this point it's clear and consistent. Goldman's fourth motion, however, says that since the amendment has been adopted by the most progressive forces of the labor movement, since the working class learns through experience, and since we need to be closely connected with those forces, our comrades in the mass movement are instructed to vote in favor of the Ludlow amendment, and to introduce pro-Ludlow clauses in antiwar resolutions, "at all times making clear our position on the amendment."

Shachtman disagreed with Goldman's point four and amended it

to in struct our comrades to state our specific position on the Ludlow amendment, either orally or in writing, and to abstain when the vote is cast. Instead of stopping there, however, he added an exception: in those exceptional circumstances where our comrades hold the balance of power between the Stalinists and patriots on one side and pro-Ludlow forces on the other, our comrades are instructed to defeat the Stalinists and patriots by casting their vote for the Ludlow amendment with the qualifications given above.

And this was the position adopted by the SWP on February 10, by five to two (Cannon was absent)— to abstain, except in special circumstances where we should vote in favor in order to defeat the Stalinists and patriots. And although the Political Committee held other discussions on antiwar work during February, this was and remained the SWP's position when its delegation went to talk with Trotsky the following month.

In the back of the second edition of the Transitional Program book you will find the stenogram of the discussion in Mexico about the Ludlow amendment. There we can see Shachtman especially— who was the chief formulator of the abstentionist position, although of course the Political Committee as a whole was responsible for it— still dragging his heels: "there is great danger that in jumping into a so-called mass movement against war— pacifist in nature— the revolutionary education of the vanguard will be neglected. At the same time, not to enter the movement leaves us mainly in a propaganda position." And at the end, returning to a point he had made in the February magazine article, he asks: "How do you distinguish between our support of the Ludlow amendment and our attitude toward disarmament programs, international arbitration, etc.?"

Trotsky's answer: "They have nothing to do with one another. The Ludlow amendment is only a way for the masses to control their government. If the Ludlow amendment is accepted and made part of the constitution it will absolutely not be analogous to disarmament but to inclusion in the right to vote of those

eighteen years old”– that is, a democratic right.

Trotsky’s arguments in this discussion were so persuasive that the others were convinced. The Ludlow amendment was not the subject of much debate at the stormy plenum of the SWP National Committee held a month later. It was not taken up until the last hours of the plenum. Then two motions were presented.

Cannon’s motion said: “That the Plenum finds that the Political Committee took a correct principled position on the Ludlow amendment but made a tactical error in failing to give critical support to this movement without making any concessions whatever to its pacifist and illusory character.”

Motion by Carter: “That the Plenum reverses the position of the Political Committee on the Ludlow Amendment and declares it incorrect; that the PC be instructed to issue a statement in support of a popular referendum on the question of war, with a critical declaration in reference to the pacifist and illusory tendencies in the pro-Ludlow movement.”

Seven members spoke during the discussion, and then Cannon made a substitute motion for the whole: “The Plenum finds that the Political Committee was correct in principled opposition to the pacifist illusions contained in the Ludlow amendment– an opposition that was fully justified– the PC nevertheless took a purely negative position which prevented the party from utilizing the entirely progressive sentiment of the masses who supported the idea of submitting the warmongers to the control of a popular referendum before the declaration of war. The Plenum instructs the PC to correct its position accordingly.”

This substitute motion carried, and the Carter motion was defeated, the vote not given. A month later, our paper printed a public National Committee (NC) statement reporting the change in the SWP’s position on the Ludlow amendment and explaining why. At this point it could be said that the error

was corrected and the differences liquidated– so completely that three months later, in August, nobody thought, that it was out of order for the Political Committee to send the National Committee members the copy of a draft written by Goldman for an improved version of the Ludlow amendment, that is, one free of the defects in Ludlow's bill, which we were to try to get some member of Congress to introduce so that we could use it in our antiwar propaganda and agitation.

I have traced the course of this thing, perhaps in too much detail, because I think that a study of mistakes of this kind, frankly recognized and correctly analyzed, can be at least as useful educationally as a study of correct policies or actions. Everybody makes mistakes, even geniuses like Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky. The Russian Revolution of 1917 would have been impossible if the Bolsheviks had not learned many valuable lessons from the defeat of 1905. In politics mistakes are unavoidable, said Trotsky; what is reprehensible is clinging to mistakes and refusing to correct them. This of course does not apply to the Ludlow dispute. But the Ludlow thing was important methodologically, as Trotsky said in his letter to Cannon. So it deserves further comment.

Reading Trotsky's approach to the Ludlow question now, I am struck by how much more rounded and all-sided it was than the one we had at the time. This enabled him more effectively to select out the major elements of the problem– for example, he began with a concrete class analysis, taking off from the fact that the ruling class was opposed to the Ludlow amendment, whereas that fact was subordinated in our analysis, which tended to center on a secondary factor, the illusions that the Ludlow forces fostered. Of course, what the ruling class wants in a particular case need not always be conclusive (sometimes they make mistakes, too), and sometimes it is not even clear what the ruling class wants (that certainly was the case with the impeachment problem last year). But what the ruling class wanted on the Ludlow amendment was both relevant and clear,

and it fructified Trotsky's thinking. For us, the position of the ruling class was something of an embarrassment that we didn't care to dwell on and didn't altogether explain, even poorly, concentrating instead on the question of illusions.

Illusions and the necessity to combat them were a prominent feature not only of the Ludlow discussion but also of other questions facing the SWP at that time. This stems from the abiding obligation we have to help the masses overcome bourgeois ideology in all its forms and variants, including illusions about the nature of bourgeois democracy. Recently, for example, our propaganda and action around Watergate had to take into account, and include material to counteract, the illusions widely generated about Congress, the courts, and the Constitution.

But here, as with everything else in politics, a sense of proportion is needed, and I am afraid that it was sometimes lacking. Sometimes, like today's TV housewife who is driven frantic by the absence of sparkle on a drinking glass or the presence of a ring around her husband's collar, we were a little obsessed by the illusion factor. Perhaps "obsessed" is too strong, perhaps a better word is "overpreoccupied."

But the struggle against illusions is not an end in itself. It is only a means toward an end, and not the central means. Its weight varies from one situation to another, sometimes considerably. And the way in which we struggle against illusions is not uniform and unvarying in all situations; in one case it is best done head-on, in another a more indirect approach proves more effective. And since effectiveness is or should be a paramount factor, a distinction has to be made between merely making the record against illusions, no matter how loudly and vehemently, and setting into motion forces that actually help people to raise their political consciousness.

We tended to throw all illusions into one bag marked "Dangerous, Expose at All Costs." Trotsky was more selective,

more discriminating. In a different context, in a 1930 pamphlet that will be in English later this year, he had occasion to refer to the consciousness, mood, and expectations of the revolutionary workers in Russia at the time of the October Revolution, and there he discussed what he called their “creative illusion” in “overestimating hopes for a rapid change in their fate.” It was an underestimation of the effort, suffering, and sacrifice they would be required to make before they would attain the kind of just, humane, socialist society they were fighting for. It was an illusion in the sense that between that generation and that kind of society lay civil war, imperialist intervention, famine and cannibalism, the rise of a privileged bureaucracy, totalitarian regimentation and terror, decimation in the Second World War, and much more that they did not foresee; it was an illusion based on an underestimation of the difficulties that would face them after the workers took power in backward Russia, which would have been infinitely smaller if the revolution had succeeded in spreading to the rest of Europe.

And it was creative because the workers’ expectations enabled them to deal the first powerful blow against the world capitalist system and open up the era of proletarian revolutions and colonial uprisings. The record shows that the Bolsheviks did not spend much time or energy combating such illusions; they were too busy trying to imbue the masses with the determination to make the revolution.

In any case, Trotsky was able to differentiate among illusions if he could designate some as creative. Even more important, he was able to distinguish different sides or aspects of an illusion, as in the Ludlow discussion. Instead of a single label on the illusion or illusions connected with the Ludlow amendment, he called attention to the fact that certain aspects were progressive at the same time that others were not.

The idea that war can be abolished or prevented without ending the capitalist system that spawns war does not have much to recommend it from a Marxist standpoint. But if the spread of that idea leads masses of people into action to try to prevent the government from going to war, or to set limits on its power to declare war, isn't that a good thing from the standpoint of Marxists? Even if the idea that sets them into motion against the capitalist government is not scientific, and is therefore wrong and illusory, isn't it good, that is, progressive for them to conduct such a struggle? Isn't that precisely the way that they can learn what is wrong and illusory about their ideas on how to end war?

When I read you the second position adopted by the Political Committee on the Ludlow amendment, in February 1938, after Trotsky's letter was read, you may recall that in one place Goldman's motion said, "the working class learns through experience." This was a commonplace in our movement; everyone subscribed to it. But the difference was that Trotsky held that the workers' experience with a struggle for something like the Ludlow amendment was exactly the thing that could help them learn about and go beyond their illusion. The Political Committee, even as it was saying "the working class learns through experience," took the view that we should try to discourage the workers from having such an experience with the amendment and that we should dissociate ourselves from the experience if they went ahead with it anyway.

The PC view was that this is an illusion, therefore we can only expose and denounce it. Trotsky's view was that this is an illusion, but it has a progressive potential. Therefore, without assuming any responsibility for the illusion, and without hiding our belief that it is an illusion– but without making our belief that it is an illusion the major feature of our approach to it– because it has a progressive potential, let us encourage and help the workers to fight against the government on the war question. Let us join this movement and

become its best builders, because this is the most effective way of helping them overcome some of their illusions about war and democratic capitalism.

It seems to be the difference between the approach of narrow propagandism and the approach of revolutionary activism. In the first case you write an article explaining “the Marxian principles on war” and hand it out to those who are interested in such matters; you won’t affect many people that way, but you have done your duty and presumably can sleep well. In the second case you intervene in the class struggle, helping to set masses into motion against the ruling class or to provide bridges for those in motion from the elementary, one-sided, and illusory conceptions they start out with toward better, more realistic, and more revolutionary concepts about capitalism and war and how to fight them.

I do think that the source of our error was in great part the remnants of the narrow propagandism that prevailed in the first years of the Left Opposition in this country, when we were restricted almost entirely to trying to reach the ranks of the Communist Party with our written and spoken ideas. Subsequently we consciously set out to transcend this phase, with increasing success. But occasionally, especially when new problems were posed, we had a tendency to slip back. The transitional method that Trotsky recommended to us was precisely the thing we needed to enable us to say good-bye forever to such lapses.

If it was not an error of propagandism then it is hard to explain the thing Shachtman said Mexico that I have already cited: “There is great danger that in jumping into a so-called mass movement against war– pacifist in nature– the revolutionary education of the vanguard will be neglected.”

At first sight this seems like a non sequitur. Why should jumping into a mass movement, or only entering one with more dignity than jumping provides, present a danger, a great

danger, that the revolutionary education of the vanguard will be neglected? How does it follow? What is the possible connection? It doesn't make sense unless the reasoning is being done from the standpoint of propagandism, where you feel that the most urgent task you have is to present your entire program without ambiguity or possibility of misrepresentation on all occasions– a necessity that occurs to you because you lack confidence about the revolutionary education, the ideological solidity of the vanguard, that is, of yourselves.

In such a case, if you are not sure of it, the main thing becomes the strengthening of the revolutionary education or ideological condition of the vanguard group, and doing something about that seems more important, much more important, than taking advantage of an opportunity to intervene in the class struggle.

By contrast, let us consider how we would pose the same problem today, after having absorbed the meaning of the transitional method. We would say, "Here is a mass movement that we can enter, where we can win over people to our revolutionary positions and help raise the consciousness of many more. It is a pacifist movement, which means that in order to work effectively there our own members must be well educated about the nature of pacifism, what's wrong with it, and how to counter its influence. Which means, therefore, that before we enter and after we enter we must make sure that our members are immunized politically against pacifism, if that is not already the case. That is, instead of neglecting, we must increase the revolutionary education of the vanguard on this point." Shachtman counterposed mass work and revolutionary education of the vanguard. We, on the other hand, combine them, because not only the masses learn that way, but we, the vanguard, do too.

Methodologically we also seemed to be suffering from a confusion about the relation between principles and tactics.

Principles are propositions embodying fundamental conclusions derived from theory and historical experience to govern and guide our struggle for socialism. Relating broadly to our goals, they set a framework within which we operate. Although they are not eternal, they have a long-range character and are not easily or often changed. In fact, we have essentially the same principles today that we had in 1938. The dictatorship of the proletariat, or the struggle for a workers' state, as the form of state transitional between capitalism and socialism– that is a principle with us. Insistence on class-struggle methods against class- collaborationist methods– that is another. Unremitting opposition to pacifism in all its guises, because pacifism is an obstacle to revolutionary struggle– that is a third.

Tactics, on the other hand, are only means to an end. "Only" in this context is not meant to disparage them; without the appropriate tactics, principles cannot be brought to life, so there is clearly an interdependence between principles and tactics. But tactics are subordinate in the same way that means are subordinate to an end. They are good if they enhance and promote the principle, not good if they don't. In addition, tactics are flexible, adjustable, variable. They depend (or their applicability depends) on concrete circumstances. To advance a particular principle, tactic A may be best today; but it may have to be replaced by tactic B tomorrow morning, or tactic C tomorrow night. Meanwhile, the principle remains unchanged.

Principle tells us to oppose pacifism, but it does not tell us whether or not to participate in a certain mass movement; it only tells us that under all circumstances, whether participating or not, we should so function as to counterpose revolutionary ideas and influence to those of the pacifists. There is not a single tactic that follows from any principle; after understanding and grasping the principle, we still have to consider tactics; and tactics, although they are

subordinate to principles, have laws, logic, and a domain of their own. Tactics must not, cannot, be in violation of principle (no tactical considerations could even get us to say that we think war can be abolished through a referendum vote), but tactics are not limited to formal reaffirmations of our principles– they are not worth much if that is all they are.

What was the nature of the Ludlow amendment problem? Was it for us a matter of principle or a matter of tactics? If the SWP in 1938 had had any doubts about pacifism, any ambiguity about it, then the matter of principle would properly have been foremost. But if ever there was any party whose members had been trained, indoctrinated, drilled, and virtually bred on a hostility to pacifism, surely it was the SWP. I can testify to that personally; long before I knew some of the most elementary ideas of Marxism, I had been taught about the dangers of pacifism.

Let me try to suggest an analogy: Comrade Smith takes the floor to propose that the branch should participate in a local election campaign by running our own candidates, and explains not only the benefits that would accrue to us from such a campaign but also the facts demonstrating that we have the forces and the resources to run such a campaign effectively, etc. But I take the floor to oppose Comrade Smith's proposal on the grounds that the workers have electoral illusions and that these illusions can only be reinforced and perpetuated if we, the revolutionary opponents of bourgeois electoralism, take part in these fraudulent elections. No, I say, our revolutionary principles forbid our participation in bourgeois elections and require that we call on the workers to boycott the elections; any other course would be in violation of our principled opposition to bourgeois parliamentarism.

Such a scene has never occurred at any SWP branch meeting, although it could occur and probably does in some of the Maoist and other sectarian groups in this country. Something not too different occurred in the Fourth International as

recently as five years ago, when the French Communist League ran a presidential campaign dominated by the theme that its main task was to combat the electoralist illusions of the French workers. Such a scene has not occurred at any SWP meetings, but if it did occur, there would not be any lack of comrades, new as well as old, who would point out that Comrade Smith had raised a tactical question and that instead of answering him on the level of tactics I had switched the discussion to the level of principles, leaving aside the question of whether the principles I had invoked were at all relevant to the point at issue.

Nobody in the SWP has ever done this– mix up principles and tactics– in relation to elections and our participation in them. But isn't that precisely what happened in connection with the Ludlow amendment?

From the very beginning of the discussion in January, when Burnham proposed support for the amendment, all that was needed was an answer on the level of tactics, assuming that there were no differences on the level of principle. But Shachtman, instead of giving a tactical answer, replied with a motion to criticize the amendment "from a principled revolutionary standpoint." And even at the end of the discussion, at the plenum in April, Cannon's initial motion, later withdrawn, wanted to affirm that the Political Committee had taken "a correct principled position" on the amendment "but made a tactical error" by not giving the movement critical support.

But it was even worse than that, methodologically, in my opinion. When we are confronted with the need for a tactical decision, to be offered instead "a correct principled position" is to be offered at best an irrelevancy, and at worst an evasion, but in all cases not what the situation calls for politically. Pointing in such circumstances to the correctness of the principled position may provide us a measure of psychological consolation – "see, we were only 50

percent wrong”– but how much correctness can a principled position provide in read life if it is given as a substitute for a tactical position?

I think that I have been justified in devoting so much time to the Ludlow dispute for at least three reasons. First, I think that the details were needed, because without them, you would have only some generalizations and would lack the data through which to judge my conclusions.

Second is that the problems posed in that dispute related rather closely to other questions of importance. For example, there was the slogan of the workers’ and farmers’ government in the Transitional Program (which more recently we have shortened to the slogan of the workers’ government in this country). The stenograms show that the SWPers kept putting questions about this to Trotsky– did he mean by the workers’ and farmers’ government the same thing that we meant by the dictatorship of the proletariat?– lurking behind which was the implied question: if the workers, and farmers’ government means something different from dictatorship of the proletariat, don’t we have the obligation to state this very forcibly, to emphasize it, in order to counteract the illusions that the workers may have in anything less than the dictatorship of the proletariat?

In tomorrow’s talk I shall show additional evidence of the prominence in the thinking of the SWP leadership of the illusion factor, as well as more about the confusion over tactics and principles. But my point is that clarification of the issues involved in the Ludlow dispute helped the SWP to better understand the Transitional Program and its method as a whole. And without that clarification, if we had continued to cling to the SWP’s first and second positions on the Ludlow amendment, what do you think would have happened decades later when a mass movement against the Vietnam War began to develop in this country? One thing you can be sure of is that we could never have played the role we did in that movement if we had

not previously learned the lessons of the Ludlow question through the Transitional Program discussion. In that case the SWP would be considerably different from what it is today, and I don't mean better.

The other reason I feel justified in giving so much time to the Ludlow dispute is because it helps us to view our party, its cadres, its program, and its method the same way we try to view everything else– historically. Sometimes there is a tendency to think that they suddenly developed out of nowhere, fully formed and finished, with results and acquisitions that can be taken for granted. But it wasn't like that at all. We got where we are ideologically, politically, and organizationally as the result of a good deal of sweat, heart's blood, sleepless nights, trial and error– and struggle.

And that's how it will be as we continue to develop further. We have the advantage over our predecessors of not having to plow up the same ideological and methodological ground that they covered. If we really absorb the lessons they learned and the methods they pioneered, then we should be able to go beyond them and plow up new ground. And we certainly can do that better, the more realistically we understand how they did their work.

Two comrades whose opinions I respect made some suggestions after seeing the first draft of the notes for this talk a couple of weeks ago. I didn't succeed in incorporating most of their suggestions into the talk, mainly because it got so long without them, but I would like to take them up now.

One comrade thought that the emphasis of my talk might be misleading, especially for those who were not familiar with the early years of our movement. After all, he pointed out, we were not on the whole sectarians or abstentionists before 1938; even with our small forces and limited resources, we did some very good work when the opportunity came along.

Furthermore, he added, although we didn't have the words "transitional method" or "transitional demands" in our vocabulary then, we did frequently and even effectively use that method and raise such demands in our work, especially after the big turn in 1933. Otherwise, he said, some of our most important work of that period— such as the Minneapolis experience— is inexplicable.

I must say that I agree with his concern, and if I did, or to the extent that I did, derogate or seem to derogate the party or its leadership in the pre-Transitional Program period of our existence, I certainly want to correct that now. There isn't any trace of muckraking or debunking in my motives for giving these talks. I don't know anyone who has a higher regard than I have for the pre-1938 party and its leadership. I said that it was a remarkable organization, and the more I think about the conditions of that period, the more strongly I hold this opinion. From my own extensive activity in the three years before 1938, I know that the party was not at all sectarian, and it was not abstentionist or dogmatic or doctrinaire, on the whole by at least 95 percent.

If it had been, it could never have accepted the Transitional Program, it could never have absorbed the transitional method so fast. Certainly no other organization in this country ever understood them at all.

So please understand what I have been speaking about in that context. We were not abstentionists, but sometimes we made abstentionist errors, and the transitional method helped us to overcome them once we understood it and incorporated it into our arsenal. Does telling this story discredit the comrades of that time? Not at all. On the contrary, it seems to me greatly to their credit that they were able to correct their errors and lift the whole movement onto higher ground.

The other comrade's criticism was that in my discussion of principles and tactics, I entirely omitted the question of

strategy, which he feels is the area where the Transitional Program makes its central contribution. I think that he is completely correct on this latter point: the Transitional Program did provide us with a coherent and viable strategy or set of strategic concepts, perhaps for the first time in this country, and certainly on a scale we had never known before.

(Strategy, I should say parenthetically, was explained by Trotsky as follows in 1928: “Prior to the war [World War I] we spoke only of the tactics of the proletarian party; this conception conformed adequately enough to the then prevailing trade union, parliamentary methods which did not transcend the limits of day-to-day demands and tasks. By the conception of tactics is understood the system of measures that serves a single current task or a single branch of the class struggle. Revolutionary strategy on the contrary embraces a combined system of actions which by their association, consistency, and growth must lead the proletariat to the conquest of power.” Tactics are subordinate to strategy, and strategy serves a mediating role between principle and tactics.)

But I did not go into the question of strategy in my talk deliberately: because it was virtually omitted from the 1938 discussion in the SWP; the focus was almost entirely on the principle-tactic relationship. The stimulus given to strategical thinking instead also marked an important step forward, thanks again to the Transitional Program. My not going into that aspect was not intended to deny that or minimize it. Anyhow, I hope that the comrade who made this criticism will, as I suggested, someday himself speak about the danger of what he calls “tactical thinking that is not rooted in strategical thinking,” and how the Transitional Program relates to this.

Tomorrow I shall resume the narrative, concluding my account of the chaotic plenum of the National Committee held in April 1938 after the return of the SWP delegation from Mexico, with major attention on the dispute over the labor party question.

The following day, I shall make some comparisons between the SWP of then and the SWP of today, based upon a recent reading for the first time of the 1938 minutes of the Political Committee.

How Can Socialists Run Cities – will Mamdani show us the way?

Zohran Mamdani's election to Mayor of New York has been a badly-needed boost to the confidence of the left in the U.S. and beyond. It has also reignited debate about the strategic choices facing socialists elected to local government, and eventually to national governments too. A special, end-of-year issue of *Jacobin*, the U.S. left magazine, was devoted to lessons of municipal socialism, from Red Vienna and Milwaukee's 'sewer socialists' in the first half of the 20th century, to Communist-run cities in Italy or France after the defeat of fascism and Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council in the 1980s, facing off, quite literally across the River Thames, against what was then the far-right, Margaret Thatcher, in government.

These are debates that we, too, need to take seriously, as we seek to build Your Party Scotland as a real, socialist alternative, here in Glasgow and across the country.

One of the most suggestive contributions to the discussion draws on experiences of participatory democracy in Latin America and elsewhere, to argue that as mayor, 'Zohran Needs to Create Popular Assemblies' (*Jacobin* 12.22.2025.

https://jacobin.com/2025/12/mamdani-popular-assemblies-democratic-socialism) to build a bottom-up political culture that empowers working people. In this article, Gabriel Hetland, who has done a lot of work with social movements in Venezuela and Bolivia, and Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of *Jacobin*, point to the positives of governing with such assemblies. In the short term, it enables the social base to keep mobilising, which is vital to sustain a progressive administration that will inevitably be hemmed in by hostile elites and procedural roadblocks, hindering its attempts to implement even its core, immediate, 'affordability' policies. In the process of these fights over housing and transport, childcare and the cost of groceries, it also begins to create new structures of power, increasing "the capacity of workers to collectively shape the decisions that shape their lives", and "to lay the basis for a society beyond capitalism".

Even without the aid of a crystal ball, it is not hard to see how a socialist administration in Glasgow City Council, or even in Holyrood, would confront many of the same obstacles, and need similar solutions, as it sought to seize back the cost-of-living agenda hijacked by Reform in Scotland, or even confront a far-right, Reform government in Westminster.

As Hetland and Sunkara make clear, the key point of assemblies or other forms of mass, participatory democracy, is to change the relationship between the governed and their government, shifting power back to the former. The forms this can take vary greatly. Even within Latin America, the early participatory budgets (PBs) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the 1990s and early 2000s – cited here as one of the most successful examples – were very different from the communal councils and communes developed in Venezuela, or the more sporadic assemblies used in Bolivia, a few years later. Although not part of a wider revolutionary process, the scope of the powers in Porto Alegre was in fact much greater.

It would be foolish, from so far away, to pretend to offer

much of an opinion on exactly what might work best in New York City. As these authors point out, it is more important to identify the underlying principles. It is these that will determine whether a given form of assembly democracy can effectively change the relations of power, and whether it really can, or even wants to, open up possible paths to a different kind of society.

The problem is that the principles they do identify are quite slight and could lead in a rather different direction. This is not semantic quibbling: the gap between 'affecting decisions' and exercising sovereign power is the gap between supplicants and rulers, between consultation theatre and the embryo of workers' self-government. They are significantly weaker than the four core principles adopted by the founders of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting. For example, Hetland and Sunkara talk about ordinary people having "real and meaningful opportunities to affect the decisions that shape their lives", and counterpose this to the "participation without influence" that breeds cynicism about many exercises in participation that are merely consultative. This distinction is important, because many later versions of participatory budgeting were indeed consultations without real power. But the original Porto Alegre version was stronger still. Its second and third core principles were that (2) the PB should have *sovereign decision-making power*, and (3) that it should discuss *the whole budget*, not just a sliver of it. This sounds like a lot more than just 'affecting' decisions.

The first of the Porto Alegre core principles was that (1) the PB should be based on *direct, universal participation*. The basic building block was mass, local assemblies, where *all* citizens could take part – there were no delegates at this level of the process, and certainly no algorithms performing random selection or sortition – and where they could debate and decide on the main priorities. An elected PB Council would then work out the nuts and bolts. This partly overlaps with

Hetland and Sunkara's second principle, where they talk about creating spaces "to foster meaningful deliberation". As they rightly observe, this "is how non-elites learn to govern themselves", bringing working-class communities together across the divides of race, gender and language that often separate them. This is the essence of collective action, and it upends the isolation and atomisation that underpins most of our capitalist societies.

The fourth Porto Alegre principle was that (4) the PB process should be *self-regulating*. Its shape and procedures, its rules, would not be decided by anyone else or laid down in legislation by some other body. The assemblies and their elected council would work out the rules and keep changing them along the way as needed. There is at least a potential contradiction between this fundamental autonomy and the third principle our authors suggest for the new Mamdani administration. They talk about the need for a "deliberate design" to avoid the participatory space reproducing inequalities of confidence and political experience, or becoming dominated by existing activists.

These are issues that have drawn attention within our own process of launching Your Party. Certainly, most would agree on the importance of taking steps to make political spaces – in this case the assemblies of participatory democracy – as accessible as possible, in relation to physical accessibility, child care, procedures, language, tone and so on. The problem is that these needs have also been used to justify a 'deliberate design' drawn up somewhere else according to criteria decided by no-one quite knows who. And this in turn raises suspicions of algorithms shaping representative samples, sortition and digital plebiscites. Such instruments, whose roots lie more in marketing and management studies, tend to reproduce the prevailing isolation of individuals, rather than foster the kinds of collective action that alone can begin to reverse the relations of power.

It is worth remembering that most of the core group that ‘invented’ the Porto Alegre experience saw themselves as revolutionary socialists. They were members of the *Democracia Socialista* current in the Workers Party (PT), which was then the Brazilian section of the Fourth International. When they suddenly found themselves at the head of the city hall administration in a medium-sized state capital, they asked themselves how they could use this to move towards a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state. And the first experience they turned to for possible inspiration was the Paris Commune.

Their conception of the participatory budget, and more broadly of direct, assembly-based democracy, was developed with this in mind. As a co-thinker of theirs in France, Catherine Samary, later put it, participatory democracy can be revolutionary if it permanently challenges the existing structures of the bourgeois state. If it ceases to challenge them, if it merely complements or ‘extends’ the processes of existing representative democracy, it becomes merely reformist and can easily be co-opted as a block to radical change and in effect a prop for the status quo.

Anyone who has endured a local council’s ‘community engagement’ session already knows where this leads: sticky notes on flip charts, facilitators with lanyards, and outcomes decided months ago by officers now nodding gravely at your contributions. That is why, not long after the successes of the early, radical participatory budget in Porto Alegre, the World Bank was soon promoting a watered-down, consultative version as a pillar of ‘good governance’ in the Global South. Although the situation in New York today may be very different, similar dilemmas, and dangers, are likely face any attempts by the new mayor to open up popular assemblies and spaces for participatory democracy. We should pay close attention because, with a bit of luck, we might later have to deal with parallel problems here in Glasgow.

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