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Trotskyism

# The transitional program and the tools to overthrow capitalism

- Features -

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**This article is a slightly adapted version of a presentation in an educational session that took place in the context of the 30rth revolutionary youth camp of the Fourth International. Throughout the text, where the Transitional Program is written with capital letters, the term refers to the original text of 1938.**

## Introduction

When we say that we are in the middle of a deep historical crisis of capitalism, we have to take it seriously. We have entered a completely new period, so it should be clear that we cannot go on doing “business as usual”:

– we have already experienced massive strikes, revolts, even revolutionary situations in various countries: in the Arab world, in Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Thailand etc), in Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria, in the core of the developed countries (like the riot in London in 2011), but also in the so-called emerging economies, which were supposed to be the new miracles of capitalist development (Brazil, S.Africa). On the other hand, the left, in practically every case, has proved unable to offer a solid perspective on how to overthrow capitalism. Nevertheless, this is exactly what anticapitalist organizations and revolutionary Marxists should be prepared for, not in the distant future, but now.

– this brings to the forefront the urgent question of what a contemporary revolutionary strategy should be like. What kind of party, what type of program, what means of struggle, what attitude towards bourgeois institutions and the state?

I will try to point out that the transitional program is an important tool in this project, a tool which is interconnected to many other key strategic issues.

So, what is a transitional program? It is a set of demands supposed to be a bridge between the present level of workers' consciousness and the revolution, i.e. the seizure of power by the working class. A series of demands or tasks that is necessary in order to meet the needs of the working class, but at the same time it is incompatible with capitalism in its development. Starting from simple, elementary needs, one demand leads to the other. For example, if the working class refuses to pay off the public debt, this can only mean that the debt has to be canceled (no matter what “renegotiating” illusions may still exist). In its turn, this means that banks should be nationalized under workers control, so as to prevent big investors from withdrawing their money and provoking a massive crackdown. This would already be a challenge to private property, which the bourgeois class would not tolerate, most likely boycotting production. In order to confront such a situation and meet the needs of the masses, nationalization of key sectors of the economy, without compensation, and a democratically planned economy would be needed. But this would not be capitalism any more. This reflection may be still too much schematic and abstract, but it is nevertheless indicative of the transitional program method. In other words, a transitional program is a way to link the existing, partial struggles to an actual revolution.

## ?. A historical retrospect

1. The first time that we have something like a transitional program is probably in the Communist Manifesto, issued by Marx and Engels in 1948. In the chapter Proletarians and communists, the authors of the manifesto propose a set of 10 demands:

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- Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
  
- A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
  
- Abolition of all right of inheritance.
  
- Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
  
- Centralization of credit in the hands of the State, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
  
- Centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State.
  
- Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of wastelands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
  
- Equal liability of all to labor. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
  
- Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of the population over the country.
  
- Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labor in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production

These demands are not defined by the term transitional, however they are meant to start from the immediate needs of the exploited and the oppressed and end up to workers' power, although Marx and Engels had not made it clear yet what workers' power and a workers' state would be like (they would be able to tell only after the experience of the Commune of Paris in 1871).

2. In the following years, the program of Marxist parties gradually degenerated. This is reflected in the critique that Marx and Engels wrote against the German social democratic programs of *Gotha* (1875) and *Erfurt* (1891) respectively. The Erfurt program, actually, introduced the distinction between a "political program" for socialism and an economical one, for immediate use.

3. Despite Marx's and Engels's warnings, the program of the leading parties of the Second International eventually split into 2 parts, with a very loose or no connection to each other: a minimum program of immediate demands, which is supposed to be what workers can achieve at this stage, and a maximum program for socialism, which was something to be postponed for the far future, when conditions mature. This also meant a split between economic struggles, i.e. struggles for the every day life conditions of the working class under capitalism, which were meant to be addressed by unions, and political struggles that were the responsibility of the party. According to social democracy, those 2 tasks shouldn't be mixed. Starting from the polemic of Rosa Luxemburg against the leadership of the German social democracy (mainly Bernstein), the communists of the 3rd international fiercely contested this idea, which has been repeated many times since by various currents and is still today quite common.

4. In his *April theses*, Lenin proposes a draft program, adapted to the specific conditions in Russia in the context of the World War. Apart from taking a clear position about the key issues of the war (fraternization, not the slightest

concession to “revolutionary defencism”) and of the provisional governments (no support), the program also includes measures such as: abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy, equalization of the salaries of all officials, all of whom are elective and displaceable at any time, with the average wage of a competent worker, nationalization of all lands, union of all banks into a single national bank controlled by the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies etc. According to the author, these measures were meant to promote the “transition” to a second revolutionary stage, “which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants”.

In September 1917, in his article *The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, Lenin puts forward a five point program:

- Amalgamation of all banks into a single bank, and state control over its operations, or nationalization of the banks
- Nationalization of the syndicates, i.e., the largest, monopolistic capitalist associations (sugar, oil, coal, iron and steel, and other syndicates)
- Abolition of commercial secrecy
- Compulsory amalgamation into associations of industrialists, merchants and employers generally.
- Compulsory organization of the population into consumers’ societies, or encouragement of such organization, and the exercise of control over it

5. Trying to completely break with the reformist tradition of the Second international, and also based on the experience of the Russian Revolution, the Third (Communist) International tried to elaborate a program that would overcome the distinction between minimum and maximum demands. The Third Congress stated:

*The Communist Parties do not put forward minimum programs which could serve to strengthen and improve the tottering foundations of capitalism. [...]If the demands put forward by the Communists correspond to the immediate needs of the broad proletarian masses, and if the masses are convinced that they cannot go on living unless their demands are met, then the struggle around these issues becomes the starting-point of the struggle for power. In place of the minimum program of the centrists and reformists, the Communist International offers a struggle for the concrete demands of the proletariat which, in their totality, challenge the power of the bourgeoisie, organize the proletariat and mark out the different stages of the struggle for its dictatorship.*

Again, this program was not called transitional, however it was defined as a program suitable for the transitional period that humanity had entered.

6. After its 5th Congress (1924), in the Third International, under the ever-strengthening control of Stalin's bureaucratic faction, the transitional method faded away once again. The corollary of this process has been the shift to the popular front strategy after the 7th Congress (1934), i.e. the call for political alliances between workers and the so called democratic bourgeoisie against fascism, including even participation in bourgeois governments.

7. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the founding document of our current, the Fourth International, written by Trotsky in 1938, was called *The Transitional Program, or The death agony of capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*. The second title is also not a coincidence, as Trotsky's methodology started with the conception of capitalism as a historically bankrupt mode of production that was about to die. Trotsky thought that we were facing a final battle between capitalism and socialism-an idea bitterly criticized afterwards. But was this criticism correct or

not? We will come back to this later.

## B. Transitional methodology

1. More than a given set of demands, the Transitional Program is a certain methodology to “overcome the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard”, in Trotsky's own words. What makes a demand or task transitional is its ability to revolutionize class consciousness under the given class struggle circumstances.

2. The concept is that, on one hand, in order to challenge the bourgeois power, the working class has to start from its actual struggles and experiences and, on the other, vice versa, in order to achieve even a small conquest within capitalism, especially in periods of crisis, the bourgeois class must fear that they will lose everything (so, a transitional program is even more effective in fighting for immediate needs).

3. In this framework, the program consists of 3 types of demands or, even better, tasks:

a. immediate (e.g. stop buying military equipment)

b. democratic (e.g. independence of all workers' organizations from the police and the army)

c. transitional to workers' power (e.g. substitution of the army by peoples' militia, confiscating capital etc).

4. Here we have to make an important remark: a transitional program can be such, transitional, only if it raises the question of power from a class viewpoint. So, the corollary of the program has been the slogans for a workers' and peasants' government and for soviets and dual power.

a. The second one refers to the matrix of a workers' state, which is the objective goal of the program. As Lenin pointed out in 1917, in the *The state and revolution*, the quintessence of a revolutionary communist project is not just to change the head of the bourgeois state, but to destroy its whole structure. Nowadays, it is even more important to be clear that strategically it is not possible to reform the bourgeois state, nor can we conquer it from the inside, but we have to build our own means of self-organization and dual power outside and against it

b. The first slogan is more complicated, as its content has not always been the same

i. in the case of the Bolsheviks, according to Trotsky, it was practically a synonym for the dictatorship of the proletariat

ii. later, in the early 20's, there seemed to be a real possibility for short-lived governments of workers' parties coalitions, in various combinations and of different types, still within capitalism. Communists could consider differentiated tactics towards different possible versions of such governments, including also support or participation, provided, though, that a workers' government would be a concrete path to workers' power, and not a substitute for it.

iii. In the hands of Stalinists in the 1930's, the same slogan turned out to be a synonym of class collaborationist governments.

iv. By the time of the creation of the Fourth International, the real revolutionary currents were too small to determine any alliance for a real workers' government, i.e. a government actually defending workers' rights. Even the possibility was almost totally excluded. So, in the Transitional Program, the "workers' and peasants' government" was mainly a slogan of agitation, meant to unveil that social-democracy and the Communist Parties would rather ally with the so called democratic bourgeoisie than fight for an independent worker's government.

v. Today, the slogan for a workers' government is still important when the question "what government" is raised by people, although it is interpreted in various and contradictory ways and despite its common abuse, which tends to assimilate it with a reformist stageist demand, restoring the illusion that capitalism may be reformed or overthrown by conquering the bourgeois state, and not challenging it itself.

## C. Criticism

We should now pose the following question: is the idea of a transitional program still relevant today? Is it really a useful tool in our struggle against capitalism? We will try to answer though examining some popular objections against the whole concept.

1. There are currents, such as eurocommunists or the late stalinist Communist Parties, who claim that the transitional demands are invented, something like lab experiments with no connection to the actual needs of workers. Instead, they promote only those claims already adopted or easy to adopt by social movements.

2. On the other hand, there are others (anarchists, some maoists) who claim that putting forward such specific demands, like for example a sliding scale of wages and hours, will inevitably lead to incorporation into a project to manage capitalism. How can we ask the bourgeois state to do something against its own interests?

Both arguments reveal a misunderstanding not only of the transitional program methodology, but also of the role that a revolutionary anticapitalist organization has to accomplish. It is neither to just reflect what workers and the oppressed think right now (in this case, then why not simply dissolve ourselves in the mass movement?), nor to ignore the present state of the class consciousness, avoiding the crucial question: how to help it improve towards a revolutionary direction? In both cases, though, as much as they may seem opposite, the result is the same: a return to the old social-democratic concept of dividing the program into two irrelevant parts: a minimum and a maximum one.

3. Another type of criticism is the argument that the *Transitional Program* is not timely any more. It is absolutely true that any program has to be updated, that it is not a doctrine for all times and that there is no eternal recipe. In the original of 1938, the program was already differentiated in three different versions, regarding bourgeois democracies, backward countries and fascist regimes respectively. Conditions have changed since that time. But are the fundamental idea or the general outline of the Transitional Program also outdated?

4. Actually this question was raised from the very beginning. Fighting against comrades who thought that to raise all those demands was premature in the US, in his well-known discussion with some members of the American SWP, Trotsky explained that the Transitional Program is not to adapt to the consciousness of the working class as it is, but to promote the objective interests of workers, even if the latter are not fully aware of them. He rejected excluding the task of equipping a workers militia, because for him the fundamental criterion was not whether the whole working class was ready to adopt it or not, but the fact that fascism was objectively threatening the American working class, and at least a vanguard minority of the latter should be aware of this. Just after the World War II, Tony Cliff supported that the Transitional Program was founded on the hypothesis that the crisis in the 1930's would be the final crisis of

capitalism, which proved to be wrong, as capitalism entered a new upward phase. So, since we are not in a revolutionary period any more, we have to replace the Transitional Program with a list of radical immediate demands, not meant to question capitalism at once.

It is maybe true that there are some fatalistic elements in the articulations of Trotsky (revealed also in the title itself). However, in his work *The Third International after Lenin*, Trotsky clarified that by speaking about a revolutionary period he did not mean that a revolution would inevitably happen or that a counter-revolutionary victory was impossible, but that in the period to come we have to anticipate abrupt shifts of both the objective situation and the class consciousness. Regardless of our estimation about previous periods, I think that this is exactly the case nowadays.

## D. Misinterpretations

In order to better conceptualize the transitional method, maybe it is helpful to examine also some frequent misinterpretations of it.

1. Firstly, a program split into different stages is not at all transitional. We can't and shouldn't fight for democracy now and just put aside the social question, to deal with it in the future. Nowadays, this is a key issue in the Arab Spring revolutions, but it is also raised in Greece. Let's recall the "emergency plan" of SYRIZA, that is to say renegotiating the debt in order to "save the country" now and postpone the debate for socialism for another time, or even the illusion of more radical trends that a progressive, national economic development against the omnivorous imperialism but without confronting capitalism itself is feasible.

The transitional methodology is based exactly on the liquidity of the social consciousness and of the real course of the class struggle, which proceeds with leaps and gaps, and not in a linear way that can be divided into distinct phases. A country that today has only a weak workers' movement may experience monumental struggles tomorrow – and vice versa. Who could tell some years ago that we could have a revolt in Bahrain? In the 1980's, this was the main argument of Ernest Mandel in his polemic against Doug Lorimer of the Australian SWP, who questioned the idea of the permanent revolution and endorsed the older "Third Worldist" argument that a revolution in the developed capitalist countries was extremely unlikely because their working class had turned into "labor aristocracy" (Lorimer, unfortunately, passed away recently).

2. Secondly, the transitional program is often treated as a list of demands, proposed to reformist or/and social-democratic parties by small revolutionary groups. In my opinion, this has been, for example, the methodology of the Militant (Ted Grant) current all the time (as well as of the Pabloite current, in a different form). According to this conception, the revolutionary Marxists' role is to carry this genuine program and fight for its adoption in the congresses of mass reformist parties. This concept has led to picturesque small groups that claim extreme orthodoxy, but in practice always spin around reformism. Of course it is important to fight for your position when being part of a broader party or front, but the main aim is for the transitional program to be adopted by the mass movement itself, including radical trade unions. It is more of an action plan for the working class, than a plan proposed with the illusion that it could be adopted by reformist left governments. Besides, in his work *Where is France going?*, Trotsky already remarked that a transitional program means nothing if adopted by parties that are not willing to do anything about its implementation.

In general, we have to avoid what we could call "objectivism", i.e. the idea that any program, even the best one, has an automatic effect in itself. On the contrary, the transitional program, as part of an overall revolutionary program to overthrow capitalism, is tightly connected to the subjective factor, i.e. to a conscious and voluntarily disciplined

political instrument. This cannot be but a party, a workers' party, and, moreover, a party independent from reformism. A revolutionary program cannot exist without a revolutionary party and vice versa. Therefore, rather than trying to reform the old workers' party bureaucracies, we have to consider what revolutionary anticapitalist parties have to be like nowadays. How can they be prepared to challenge capitalism in deed? How can we use our historic experience? How can we actually build such parties?

## E. The Transitional Program today

What is the actual relevance of this discussion today? In the context of the crisis, the need for a transitional program becomes obvious even to currents who had nothing to do with it before. This is, for example, the case of ANTARSYA in Greece. The biggest organizations that form the front used to be hostile to the transitional methodology, more or less on the basis of the objections described above. However, nowadays everybody in ANTARSYA speaks in the name of a contemporary transitional program. No matter how different the interpretations of such a program may be, it is still a fact that actually ANTARSYA is the only visible left force in Greece that put forward a transitional program, even incomplete, and call it by this name.

Even if it is rather impossible to make a list of demands suitable for all cases, it is crucial to engage ourselves in an attempt to form a new transitional program, in the framework of a broader revolutionary program which will be suitable for our time and constitute a real bridge to the workers' power. We can think of some universal demands, like the cancellation of the debt, the nationalization of banks and key sectors of the economy without compensation and under workers control, the prohibition of lay-offs etc. In certain countries there are other, more specific key issues: in European countries, especially in the periphery, a rupture with the EU and an internationalist struggle to destroy it and replace it by the free right of the peoples to unite in federations. For the Arab world, the dissolution of all institutions connected to the dictatorial parties. In Greece and other countries, the need for massive self-defense structures against fascists etc.

Apart from underlining the need to formulate a timely list of remarks and tasks, though, it is important to make three concluding remarks:

1. The role of the working class and its organizations in the battle against capitalism is indispensable. We have to help the working class unite in action, by bringing different working class layers together: private along with public sector workers, domestic workers along with immigrants, women along with men. This means including the fight for the special needs of all oppressed groups. An objective of the transitional program is also to provide the political ground for a united front, a front meant to promote class self-confidence by joining its scattered forces, not by tailing everybody behind reformists, though.
2. We have to find the means to make the transitional program a really useful tool in the hands of the oppressed, and not just put it on a shelf and leave it there. We have already underlined that no demand is transitional in itself, regardless its actual function in the class struggle. People usually learn by their own experience, through their own actions. Therefore, means of struggle like the general political strike can be a strategic element of great importance in this direction.
3. To say that the working class and the oppressed strata are not militant or conscious enough is not an excuse for our inertia. The recent experience shows the contrary: there are more and more struggles. If they are not always conscious enough, it is also our fault. Besides, we cannot postpone our answer to the challenges that the crisis brings with it until the class matures – the concrete task is to prepare for revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situations on the specific ground that the current state of class consciousness, even if quite low, offers. How to build parties



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able to do that is something to discuss (through radical trade unions? by regrouping revolutionary groups and anticapitalist currents? by independently building our own section where possible? by taking advantage of splits from reformism?). But the need for such parties and for such an International is not.

Let's do as the slogan says: from Sao Paolo to Istanbul, from Athens to Cairo, from Revolt to Revolution.