

# The US Trotskyists and the Labor Party Question in the 1930s

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The US presidential election, due in November, provides a reminder of the failure of the US trade unions to break with the Democrats and create a labor party. This article, which examines the attitude of Trotsky and his supporters towards the labor party question, was published in *Cahiers Léon Trotsky* No.35, September 1988, as 'The "Socialist Workers Party" and the Question of Working Class Political Organisation in the USA in 1938'. The translation is an amended version of an original by John Archer.

FROM THE beginning of the 1930s, the American Trotskyists had opposed the slogan of a "Labor Party" for the United States.<sup>1</sup> In fact, even though this slogan had been adopted by the Workers Party<sup>2</sup> between 1920 and 1922 after discussion within the Communist International, the supporters of the Left Opposition had abandoned it before the crash of 1929. Thus a resolution of the National Committee of the SWP explained in 1938 that: "Before the crisis of 1929, and even later, until the appearance of the CIO, we could have hoped that the revolutionary, that is the Bolshevik Party would develop in the US parallel to the radicalization of the working class and succeed eventually in becoming the head of it."<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the 1920s, the trade unions of the AFL no longer represented a pole of mass organisation for the US working class. It could be expected that the latter would set itself in motion again on partially virgin ground, possibly reconstituting itself around the two axes, the economic and political. The leadership of the AFL had neither the will nor the ability to organise the class struggle. Consequently the workers' counterattack would seek new channels through which to express itself. It was possible that the reconstruction of the American trade union movement would be achieved in conjunction with the construction of a genuine party of socialism, of the revolutionary party, because only the adherents of Bolshevism were in a position to appear as an alternative leadership to that of Green.<sup>4</sup>

In 1932 Leon Trotsky drew the logical con-

clusion from this analysis. He wrote that, even in the United States, it was impossible to claim in advance that a "Labor Party" would be a step forward, a phenomenon of a progressive nature in the struggle of the proletariat. In fact, he wrote, it might well be that "the creation of a labor party could be provoked only by mighty revolutionary pressure from the working masses and by the growing threat of communism. It is absolutely clear that under these conditions the labor party would signify not a progressive step but a hindrance to the progressive evolution of the working class".<sup>5</sup> Labourism would arise as the final attempt on the part the trade union bureaucracy to preserve the gap between the workers and socialism and protect the ties between the workers' movement and bourgeois society.

Nothing is fixed in theory or in practice. If the International had supported the struggle for a party of a labourist type in the USA and in Canada at the beginning of the 1920s, it was precisely because the mass of the working class saw expressed itself through the trade unions. It sought to come together in them and it could very concretely have made use of them to effect its independent entrance onto the political scene. At the beginning of the 1930s, things were different. The initial actions of the working class upsurge were, moreover, to be carried out through the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and, later, the Trotskyist Communist League of America, the *Muste-ites* etc., outside "official" trade unionism. A political party based on the AFL, Trotsky explained at that time, would not serve in the first place to separate the American masses from the

Democrats and the Republicans, but to divert the American masses away from the adherents of socialism. In this sense it would be a matter of a supplementary obstacle to the political maturation of the working class.

Trotsky went on to advance the hypothesis that the AFL bureaucracy might even create a party of this kind before the revolutionary movement became too threatening. It might take the lead in order the better to control developments which it feared. This variant seemed to him to be improbable "given the groping empiricism and provincial narrowness of the American labor bureaucracy and the aristocracy of labor".<sup>6</sup> But they might acquire a certain insight from their social democratic and left Democratic advisers. From the first steps of a "Labor Party" of this kind, the duty of the revolutionaries would be to demonstrate its inadequacies, its ambiguities, as well as its true historical role, and not its supposedly "progressive" character.

This is why, at the beginning of the 1930s, the Trotskyists in the United States had not retained the slogan of a "Labor Party". They believed that the workers' party could be established directly in the form of the revolutionary vanguard party, the "Bolsheviks" being present as such from the beginning of the movement to reconstruct the workers' organisations. In 1933, with the call for the Fourth International and for new parties in every country, they undertook to build themselves without mediation as the revolutionary leadership. This was their aim when they fused with Muste's American Workers Party in December 1934. They themselves had recently led big strikes of the Teamsters, and the Musteites had sounded the awakening in the automobile industry. However, the explanation justifying opposition to the "Labor Party" became more and more dogmatic and undialectical. From then on, such a party was rejected because "revolutionaries cannot struggle for the creation of a reformist party", and because the position of a party of that kind on the question of the bourgeois state is never a Marxist one.<sup>7</sup> This repeated almost word for word the arguments rejected by Lenin and which had been current among the American Communists from 1919 to 1921. These arguments opposed in principle an intervention in favour of workers' parties based on the trade unions, whereas the Communist International had approached the question from the angle of tactics, in pursuit of the (principal) objective of creating the political organisation of the class. According to circumstances, one could either press for the formation of a "Labor Party" or not, participate in a party of this kind or not.

The formula now employed was of such rigidity that the discussion was a particularly difficult one when a re-examination became necessary. In 1936

the Workers Party of the US, born from the fusion of the Trotskyists and the Muste-ites, decided that it was not in a position to develop as a political pole of reference in the working class resurgence, and decided to enter the Socialist Party. It aimed at making the Socialist Party into a "revolutionary Socialist Party", whether that proved to be possible by a qualitative transformation of the party (unlikely, even though the Old Guard<sup>8</sup> had already departed), or by convincing as great a number as possible of its members of that necessity, and thus, ultimately, by envisaging the creation of a new party.

When the American Labor Party of New York appeared,<sup>9</sup> after the emergence of a multitude of other circles and groups called "Farmer-Labor", the orientation of this current seemed to the Trotskyists to confirm their earlier appreciation. In the situation of that particular time, a "Labor Party" could signify nothing but the maintenance of the ties with bourgeois society (with Roosevelt in this case) and a deliberate desire to avoid drawing nearer to socialism. The overall analysis seemed correct. The formation of the ALP aimed not only at aligning socialist electors in support of the New Deal, but more generally at preventing any candidature that would express, in one way or another, the political independence of the class. Precision is important here, especially for a clear assessment. The American Labor Party, despite its name and the organisational base from which it began, was not a workers' party, nor even a "bourgeois workers'" (reformist) party. It was a question of a bourgeois party, which presented bourgeois candidates (the very peculiar American electoral system facilitated this operation), and which was founded at the instigation of Roosevelt and under the aegis of the New Deal. Its existence and its activity surely justified the analyses which had been developed at the beginning of the 1930s concerning the trade union bureaucracy, but led to parties of different types being confused. For adherents of Marxism there is a qualitative difference between a workers' party, even if it is an ultra-reformist one, and a bourgeois party. Towards the end of 1937, this reality was finally recognised in an article by Shachtman in *Socialist Review*, a lively polemic against the Thomas wing and the Clarity Caucus in the Socialist Party.<sup>10</sup> But as the internal discussions in the SWP in 1938 proved, the explanation was not really assimilated. The majority of the Trotskyists tended to stick to the simplistic position according to which "revolutionaries do not fight for a reformist party", and to reject the ALP by confusing it with labourism.

But there was another element which prevented the Cannon group from fully grasping the meaning of the political developments. The

supporters of the Fourth International in the USA had since 1935 been incapable of evaluating correctly the creation of the CIO and the lightning speed at which it was being built. In the first place, this was because they did not believe Lewis was sincere when he said that he wanted a mass industrial organisation. Secondly because, logically, they had not regarded even the growth of the Committee of Industrial Organizations as being possible. They cannot be blamed for being sceptical about Lewis: this appeared to be justified and, in any case, was shared by the whole of the American left. But, from the moment when the framework of the CIO was effectively supplied to the renewed movement of the working class, all the evidence is that the theoretical work of the Trotskyists lagged behind events. If it had been possible to imagine after 1929 that the reconstruction of the workers' movement could be effected simultaneously on the political and economic levels,<sup>11</sup> the creation of the CIO determined that the first axis of this renewal would be that of trade union organisation. That did not mean that politics were automatically excluded from these developments. We know what measures Lewis had to take to avoid the emergence of a class party. But it meant that the question of political organisation was no longer posed, and could no longer be posed, in the same terms.

Lewis did not yet have a solidly established apparatus in the CIO, but it was he who imposed himself as the authentic leader of the working class upsurge, not the American revolutionaries. The principal centre of reconstruction of the workers' movement therefore became that of the industrial unions, under the (still precarious) leadership of Lewis. No perspective of a breakthrough on the political scene could ignore this development. Cannon was to say that his group was right to join the Socialist Party, but that, in the end, he gave too much attention to the internal debates and factional struggles in this party, while the CIO was being built. The movement of the working class passed first through the formation of the industrial unions. In our opinion this explains why the establishment of a real "Labor Party" in 1936-37, even if it had not led to the realisation of all the possibilities of the period, would not have had the particular significance envisaged by Trotsky before 1935. If Lewis's CIO, through which the social tempest sought to express itself, had been compelled to project onto the political scene an organisation appropriate to the workers' movement, the institutional equilibrium of the country would have been overthrown. The CIO of 1936-37 cannot in any way be compared to the decrepit AFL of 1927-35, all the more so because it did not have a solidly established leading apparatus. The movement of the working class

found its expression in the CIO. This is the reason why the ALP was not created as a party really independent of the Democrats and the Republicans. If that had been the case, despite the obvious desire to collaborate with the New Deal, the dynamic would have been likely to overflow the framework of traditional politics in the country. The American Trotskyists had maintained their 1932 analysis unchanged,<sup>12</sup> because after 1935 they had not correctly appreciated the impact of the CIO.

Nonetheless, we must return to the fact that the perspective of the "Labor Party" did not, in this period, exhaust the possibilities which the developments raised. The teachings of Engels, and those of the Communist International between 1919 and 1922, showed that, under certain conditions, the formation of a party of a labourist type would constitute the most direct route towards socialism, even if the party in question did not immediately take its stand on a programme of the expropriation of capital. However, the objective remained always the rallying of the vanguard around the socialist programme, independently of the initiative that was judged to be the best for achieving it. This is the reason why the formation of the English Labour Party, which originally did not inscribe in its programme the collective appropriation of the means of production, signified despite that, in Lenin's view:

"... the first step on the part of the really proletarian organisations of Britain towards a conscious class policy and towards a *socialist* workers' party... the British trade unions, insular, aristocratic, philistinely selfish, and hostile to socialism, which have produced a number of outright traitors to the working class who have sold themselves to the bourgeoisie for ministerial posts ... have nevertheless been *moving towards* socialism, awkwardly, inconsistently, in zigzag fashion, but still moving towards socialism."<sup>13</sup>

Lenin explained that the formation of the Labour Party (on a non-socialist programme) could be the first step of the English workers' movement towards a real socialist workers' party. When the British trade unions, hostile to socialism, created the Labour Party, in fact and despite everything they were moving in the direction of socialism. The analysis sought to take account of the particular conditions in each country and in each period. For Marxism, the recognition by the working class of the socialist programme as the programme of the class is possible only within the framework of an independent political advance of the working masses. Even if the first steps of this advance are not realised on a basis of socialist consciousness, they can be necessary to the struggle for socialism.

It is in reference, however, to this necessity that we believe we can say that between 1935 and the

beginning of 1938 the struggle for a nationwide "Labor Party" in the United States did not exhaust the possibilities of the period. As far as adherents of Marxism were concerned, it did not permit them, in the conditions of the time, to go forward as quickly as possible towards the mass party of socialism. With the formation of the CIO, they could not claim to be building their own party without a transition and present themselves as the vanguard of the working class resurgence. That is to say, they could not envisage the creation of the workers' party in the USA in the direct form of the Marxist revolutionary party, without any mediating political slogans or poles of political regroupment. But we believe that this pole, the organisational form of evolution towards the party of socialism, could be more advanced and have a more developed political content than that of labourism.

The rise of the working class movement developed more and more clearly through the construction of trade union organisation. The road to a class party could not be conceived other than within this framework; to be real, it would have to appear in one way or another as a political projection of the forces which were coming together on the economic level. Moreover, the structures of the CIO were not sufficiently firmly established, or even put in place, to represent everywhere in themselves the only material avenue towards working class regroupment. From a Marxist point of view, the transitional form of an advance towards the party of socialism, in these circumstances, should (in our opinion) have been that of putting forward the slogan of "socialist-trade union" or "socialist-labor" candidates, such as James Weinstein suggests.<sup>14</sup> Certainly not before the creation of the CIO and even the first months of its significant existence, when the perspective would have led to errors. And certainly not from 1938 onwards, as we shall see. But between these two moments, the type of candidatures which tried to associate militant trade unionism (the dynamic of what was now the principal axis of the working class resurgence) with the programme of socialism (even if that programme could not have been completely defined) represented the most progressive form of evolution towards the class party. Not a "Labor Party", because the formation of the CIO was not completed and because such a perspective would have appeared to hand the matter over to Lewis, when numerous trade unionists who were members of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Workers Party ... were essential to the movement.<sup>15</sup> Nor, at the same time, the mere proclamation of the final object, which is the establishment of the revolutionary party, because these same trade unionists did not occupy by themselves a sufficient space for that claim to

have had any chance of being realised at the time.

In Weinstein's opinion, this type of candidature would have had every chance of success if it had been supported by the Communist Party. But the latter preferred to place itself on the side of the "liberal-labor" candidatures of "Labor's Non-Partisan League",<sup>16</sup> then directly in the Democratic Party. In fact, there remained no more than the members of the Clarity Caucus and the left (Trotskyist) of the Socialist Party to fight consciously for the emergence of a class party. The partisans of the Fourth International succeeded in rallying round themselves the majority of those members of the Socialist Party who did not follow Norman Thomas, but their slogan on the question of the workers' party did not achieve any important result, for example within the CIO. In the conditions of the time, it could only be expressed to the initiated: the American Trotskyists did not have a political perspective directed immediately towards the whole body of workers in the country. No one supported the objective of "socialist-labor" candidatures. That of the revolutionary party, advanced in opposition to the orientation of Lewis, inevitably took on a "fantastic" (Trotsky) and unrealisable appearance.

At the time of the Socialist Workers Party's formation, in early January 1938, the same positions were again adopted. The American Trotskyists once more contented themselves with stressing that "revolutionaries do not have to fight for the creation of a reformist party". They undertook the construction of their party as a vanguard revolutionary leadership, without any transitional slogan. However, they were soon to reassess the whole of their point of view and take the question up again in depth. The year 1938 was that of the proclamation of the Fourth International, of which the SWP was to be the section in the United States. We cannot go back over the history of the Fourth International, and will therefore content ourselves with explaining that the internal discussions in the SWP on how to construct the mass party of socialism in the United States surfaced again in the general discussion on the proposed programme of the Fourth International. This programme was called *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*; as a subtitle, it bore the name of "Transitional Programme". This programme does not specifically deal with the question of the workers' party in the United States. Nevertheless, Trotsky wanted to show that the adoption of the method which underlay its arguments meant that, in the conditions which then existed in the USA, the Marxists should fight for a party founded on the trade unions. There lay the means of leading the workers to break with the traditional parties.<sup>17</sup>

We have explained why the American Trotsky-

ists opposed the slogan of a “Labor Party” before 1938. We would like to review briefly the principal points in the analysis which at that time justified the proposed tactical change.

Farrell Dobbs, in his book *Teamster Politics*, adequately summarises this analysis.<sup>18</sup> First, he explains that the setting up of the CIO was due to a wave of social conflicts unprecedented in American history. But, for various reasons, bureaucrats who had come out of the AFL succeeded in ensuring that they dominated these developments. A little less so, he says, in the automobile industry in 1936-37, which made possible the great victory of which we know. Completely so in the steel industry, which led, among other things, to the bloody defeat of “Little Steel”.<sup>19</sup> The revolutionary militants were not numerous enough to capitalise on these events in order to advance the construction of the vanguard party, while Lewis’s apparatus succeeded in establishing itself as a bureaucracy within the CIO. On the one hand, the domination of this apparatus explains the Little Steel defeat. On the other hand, this defeat, precisely because of the limited presence of revolutionary militants, led to an ebb of the workers’ movement which as a reaction consolidated the Lewis leadership.

Dobbs goes on to show how the opportunities which were lost in Spain and in France contributed to accentuating this ebb. Moreover, even when these other factors are allowed for, the capacity of the American economy to yield concessions helped to retard the rhythm of the working class resurgence.

In a general way it was necessary to understand that despite everything the CIO was formed very quickly, at an “American speed”, as Trotsky said. The members of the Fourth International did not have a sufficient presence there to construct their party as the political expression of the living movement. Once the CIO was created, the situation was new and entirely different. From then on, the first step to encourage was that of a break from the capitalist parties through the formation of a “Labor Party”, because the mass workers’ movement existed again in the USA and at first took the shape of trade union organisation (in the first place that of the CIO). It was through the trade unions, now, that the class regroupments of the American workers, including that on the political plane, could be concretely envisaged. Consequently the Socialist Workers Party soon decided to adopt the slogan of the “Labor Party”, while ensuring that the question of political programme was posed within this framework. But it had no intention of making this programme a precondition for supporting a possible party launched by the trade unions. For the creation of such a party “would in itself represent implicitly

an anti-capitalist development”<sup>20</sup> – in the new conditions.

In a concentrated way Dobbs thus sums up the essential reasons for changing the tactical line, as the discussions with Trotsky and the internal debates in the SWP had brought them out.

Trotsky added some supplementary considerations. “No one in our ranks”, he said, “foresaw during that period the appearance of the CIO with this rapidity and this power.” We had overestimated the possibility of development of our party “at the expense of the Stalinists ... we didn’t see ... the rapid decline of American capitalism”.<sup>21</sup> He was to return at length to this last subject in May and June 1938, and take upon himself the main responsibility for this incorrect appreciation. In fact, the analysis of the economic and political situation directly conditions the elaboration of the slogans:

“As to the strength of American capitalism, some of us, and myself in particular, believed that the capacity of American capitalism to resist its own destructive contradictions ... would be greater, and that, during a certain period, American capitalism would utilise the decline of European capitalism in order to enjoy a period of prosperity, before its own decline. How long would this period last? Some people could have said ten or thirty years. That matters little. I did not personally take into account that this acute crisis or series of crises would begin in the next period and would get deeper and deeper.

“... in view of the strength of American capitalism, some of us, and myself among them, imagined that the ability of American capitalism to resist against the destructive inner contradictions would be greater and that for a certain period American capitalism might use the decline of European capital to cover a period of prosperity before its own decline. How long a period? Ten to thirty years one could say? Anyway I, personally, didn’t see that this sharp crisis, or series of crises, would begin in the next period and become deeper and deeper. That is why, eight years ago ... I was very cautious.... If this critical period started in ten to fifteen years, then we, the revolutionary organization, could become a great power directly influencing the trade unions and becoming the leading force. That is why it would have been absolutely pedantic, abstract, artificial, to proclaim the necessity for the labor party in 1930, and this abstract slogan would have been a handicap to our own party....

“Now we must reckon not by our prognosis of yesterday but by the situation of today. American capitalism is very strong, but its contradictions are stronger than capitalism itself. The decline came at American speed, and this created a new situation for the new trade unions, the CIO,

even more than the AFL... because the AFL is more capable of resistance, because of its aristocratic base. We must change our program because the objective situation is totally different from our former prognosis.... the decline of capitalism develops ten, a hundred times faster than does our party. It is a new discrepancy. The necessity of a political party for the workers is given by the objective conditions, but our party is too small, with too little authority to organize the workers into its own ranks. That is why we must say to the workers, the masses, you must have a party. But we cannot say immediately to these masses, you must join our party.”<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the gap between the requirements of the objective situation and the state of political organisation of the working class was enormous, gaping. The same conclusion applied to the difference between the extremely tough methods of economic struggle (which the SWP called revolutionary) and political back-wardness, the fact that the American workers still divided their votes between the bourgeois parties alone. To borrow Trotsky’s image, it was necessary to construct a bridge that would enable the working masses to cross this gulf. This bridge could be perfectly well expressed (because it could be realised concretely in the short term) by the slogan of independent political organisation by the trade unions. It was necessary that the combativity which was displayed at the economic level be expressed on the political plane, and find an outlet and a corollary there. This could be expected to happen thanks to the activity of the trade unions and to massive class regroupments of the American workers.<sup>23</sup>

However, Trotsky had to go much further with the explanation. The completely metaphysical way in which the earlier position had been understood prepared the ground badly for the discussion on the proposed slogan. Those who declared themselves hostile to it explained straight out that a “Labor Party” should be rejected because the crisis of capitalism called for revolutionary solutions. Such a party would necessarily be opportunist and reformist. Others, some of whom opposed and some of whom supported the proposed turn, believed that, if they adopted this new slogan, it would mean supporting parties like the American Labor Party in New York. The majority of the leadership of the SWP explained, without going into the question any further, that the formation of the LNPL was “symptomatic” of the pressure of the masses in favour of a “Labor Party”; to which the minority replied that this type of organisation had the specific object of diverting the progress towards a class party. Within this framework, some supporters of the majority resolution said that a distinction had to

be drawn between the “mass movement” in favour of such a party and the leaderships of the existing currents that presented themselves as “Labor” or “Farmer-Labor”. The minority on the other hand insisted on stressing that the significance of these currents was shown by their official orientation, which was a pro-New Deal orientation. Etc.<sup>24</sup>

Albert Goldman, for example, wrote in the theoretical journal *New Internationalist* that the formulation which had served to justify the former position was incorrect, “too rigid”: “Our statement that it is not the business of a revolutionary party to help in the formation of a labor party could result in a correct tactic only in a period when there was no serious movement for the formation of a labor party. But that formulation applies to all times and under all circumstances.”<sup>25</sup> Now, according to Goldman, things had changed. A movement at the base really existed for the formation of a party of a labourist type. The Trotskyists must therefore make this aspiration their own. The minority then employed themselves in showing that such a movement was, on the contrary, practically non-existent in the trade unions, apart from very limited places and most often in connection with the New Deal.

In fact, from a Marxist point of view, this kind of discussion could produce nothing. For example, in 1922, the Communist International had precisely led the American Communists to adopt a resolution stating that they would use all their energies “to create such a sentiment” where it did not exist. The question of whether or not a mass movement in favour of a “Labor Party” existed was not, in the final analysis, the determining factor in choosing this slogan. Trotsky returned to this question by going back to the teachings which the CI had developed in the early 1920s.

He sought first of all to situate the discussions better. Marx had already established that, on the international and historical plane, it is the union of the forces resulting from economic struggles that has enabled the proletariat to develop towards constituting itself as a political power.<sup>26</sup> Trotsky, for his part, drew attention to some specific national examples of the relations between trade unions and parties. He put forward the following basic explanation:

“... we find different types of development of the working class in different countries.... In Austria and in Russia especially, the workers’ movement began as a political movement, as a party movement. That was the first step.... There was a long period of prosperity, and the Social Democracy was forced to organize trade unions. In such countries as Germany, Austria, and especially Russia, where trade unions were unknown, they were initiated, constructed, and guided by a political party, the Social Democracy.

“Another kind of development is that disclosed in the Latin countries – in France and especially in Spain. Here the party movement and the trade union movement are almost independent of one another. The party is a parliamentary machine. The unions are to a certain degree in France – more in Spain – under the leadership of anarchists.

“The third type is provided by Great Britain, the United States, and more or less by the dominions. England is the classic country of trade unions. They began to build trade unions at the end of the eighteenth century.... Only after a hundred years did the trade unions begin to build up a political party. This is absolutely contrary to Germany and Austria. There the party awakened the working class and built up the trade unions. In England the trade unions ... were forced to build up a political party.”<sup>27</sup>

They were obliged to do so because the sharp decline of English capitalism at the end of the 19th century restricted the concessions which the bourgeoisie was able to make to the trade unions, and led it to try to diminish their social power. Political action, said Trotsky, following Lenin, is the generalisation of economic action. The English trade unions were drawn onto the road of political action because they had no longer any way to improve the position of the workers by the traditional methods alone. To these general problems corresponded the desire for a general response. It was possible to establish a parallel with what would happen from now on in the USA. The beginning of the decline of US capitalism had led to the birth of the CIO; before that genuine trade unionism did not exist in the USA. But as soon as the industrial unions were created they had to face up to a new phase of capitalist decline. Logically they would follow the same evolution as the English trade unions and would be obliged to resort to political action. The situation “is that the working class needs a party – its own party. It is the first step in political education”.<sup>28</sup> Now the CIO existed, that would tend to happen, as it happened in Britain, on the basis of the organisations that already constituted the workers as a distinct social force, on the basis of the trade unions.

To summarise, the decline of American capitalism had led first to the CIO and then to the necessity for independent political organisation. Since the mass trade unions had now been formed, it could be envisaged that the move to a workers’ party would take place under their influence, thanks to the pole of (concrete) regroupment that they represented. It was not a question of a choice or a decision on the part of the revolutionaries. It was necessary to see how the workers’ movement had really developed, and, starting from there and on the basis of historical experience, to see how

its future evolution could be envisaged. The SWP could not present itself today as the centre of political opposition to the regime. Its members still had to explain that they regarded the construction of the revolutionary party as essential, and the expropriation of capital and the establishment of the soviet state as obligatory. But the way to get there was to be present with their class in the steps that it was materially able to accomplish in that direction. Today there existed the basis of economic organisation which allowed the class to set itself in motion. From this flowed the slogan of a “Labor Party”, of the fight for the formation of a party founded on this basis.

In this sense, Trotsky continued, it is not decisive in the last analysis to know “how far the leaders of the unions or the members are ready or are tending to construct a political party”: “It is very difficult to establish objective information. We have no machine to take a referendum. We can measure the mood by action only if the slogan is put on the agenda. But what we can say is that the objective situation is absolutely decisive ... and our job is to confront the backward material of the masses with the tasks which are determined by objective facts and not by psychology.”<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, it was false to claim in advance that the “Labor Party” would be reformist or opportunist. That could happen. But everything depends on developments in the living class struggle, said Trotsky. It is necessary to understand that, in working to create a party based on the trade unions, we shall not be seeking to form a reformist party. We shall be intervening so that the American working class can realise this fundamental step of appearing on the political scene as an autonomous force, in the forms in which it can do so, and through which, today, it can come to understand what that signifies. It would be sectarianism to oppose the concrete advance that it could accomplish.

Nor was the “Labor Party” slogan seen, let us add, as a “stage-ist” slogan. As will be recalled, Trotsky had explained that this slogan proceeded in America from the method which underlay the whole of the Transitional Programme. So, what is this method? In the period in which capitalism still contained possibilities of progress, the 19th century, socialists divided their objectives into a Minimum Programme (a series of reforms that could be realised under capitalism) and a Maximum Programme (the ultimate establishment of socialism). This method of proceeding corresponded to a real situation. Workers’ victories and major reforms were possible within the framework of an expanded reproduction of capitalism. The situation was radically different in 1938. The capitalist economy, including that of the United States, had entered definitively into its phase of

decline. Its survival no longer permitted real concessions or lasting reforms. The bourgeoisie seeks continually to take back twice with the right hand what it has had to give with the left, said Trotsky. In such a situation the struggle for jobs, strikes and demands tend, by their own movement, to pose the question of the economic and political regime. It would not, therefore, be logical to proceed on the basis of the Minimum Programme and Maximum Programme.

On the one hand, demands could not be satisfied in a lasting form outside of socialism. On the other hand, it was true that the workers had not yet all been won to the necessity for socialism when they mobilised in favour of these demands. Therefore there was the need to advance demands – known as transitional demands – which allowed a bridge to be built between the existing state of consciousness and the question of the regime and the government. This was the method of the Transitional Programme.

Trotsky gave as an example of a transitional demand that of the sliding scale of hours of work to struggle against unemployment; also, the opening of the books of account of companies to the inspection of the workers' organisations,<sup>30</sup> the formation of workers' defence committees (workers' militia) to counteract the police of the employers and the extreme right gangs which were appearing; etc. These are demands which build a bridge between socialism and the way in which the problems and the solutions can be grasped today. But these demands, Trotsky continued, require that the working class be equipped with its own organisation for political struggle, its class party. At that time such an organisation could best be envisaged as the creation of the economic organisations of the American workers.

This is why the adoption of the Transitional Programme likewise meant, in the conditions of 1938, the adoption of the slogan of a "Labor Party". This slogan would thus be not reformist but transitional. It would enable the bridge to be built between the present situation and socialism, between the existing lack of political organisation and conscious organisation in the party of socialism. It was not a question of a "stage", but of consciously articulating the advance to political independence of the class.

The summit of the programme of transitional demands is the formation of the workers' government. In the new American context, this formation could be thought of as starting from the political party of labour launched by the trade unions. The most advanced expression and physical manifestation of the "Labor Party" slogan were those of the workers' government under the control of that party. The Communist International had shown what such a government

could be. It was not yet the dictatorship of the proletariat but led towards it.<sup>31</sup> That became a supplementary reason for stating that the "Labor Party" perspective was not "reformist". The government of the said party could be a "workers' government", according to the definition developed by the Communist International. Accordingly, it could lead to socialism.

That is one aspect which must not pass unnoticed. The American Trotskyists had clearly had a tendency to counterpose, on principle, different categories of political organisation, notably those of the "Labor Party" and the revolutionary party. One of the difficulties of the discussion in 1938 arose precisely from the absolute opposition posed between these categories. Trotsky wanted to show that the construction of the "vanguard party of the revolutionary class" (Lenin) could not be envisaged outside that class's own movement and the concrete determinations of this movement. If the formation of a party founded on the trade unions proved necessary to the working class, it was equally so to the development of the vanguard. It was, for example, by making themselves the best promoters of the "Labor Party" that the revolutionaries could work most directly to convince others of their programme. It was also in this way that their struggle against the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy with the bourgeoisie becomes easiest (because the alternative policy can be understood immediately). Not only would the "Labor Party" no longer be counterposed to the work of constructing the "revolutionary socialist party", but it would become the best tactical road to take.

In 1938, in the face of the new conditions of class organisation in the United States, Trotsky revived the slogan of the "Labor Party". It was, in our opinion, an extremely important orientation, in practice the only possible one, as he now reminded the SWP. But it was also the recognition, the admission, the first to date, that a whole period had come to an end: that of the reconstruction of the American workers' movement. This reconstruction had taken place on a new economic basis, that of industrial unionism. At the same time it had taken place on the traditional political basis of trade unionism in the United States, that of the link with the bourgeois parties, and with the established bipartisanship. Nothing was set. But Trotsky drew the conclusion that a process of evolution had ended, without the vanguard having been able to develop into the recognised leadership. A page in the social history of the United States had been turned.

From that time on, the modern trade union movement existed and it was led by an apparatus



linked to the dominant political groups. The way to progress towards independent political organisation could no longer be the same as had been worked out after 1929 and even, let us add, as that envisaged by us for the years 1935-7. A new phase was opening, in which the most advanced capitalist country had given birth to mass trade unions, but not to a class party. The latter would perhaps be built like the unions, at "American speed", but for the moment it did not exist. In future, each resurgence of the working class would no longer develop on "open" ground. It would begin from what had already been gained, from the industrial unions.

On that level, the crisis had given birth to a radical social upheaval, which the passing of the years should not lead us to underestimate. But this upheaval, at the end of the decade, appeared to have been integrated into American society. The 1930s – years of traditional values being called into question, of the material and ideological disintegration of capitalism, of repeated mass actions of great extent – ended without any working class political alternative to the old parties having appeared. There was something surprising in this, which could not be explained as being due primarily to particular objective conditions. Conditions in the USA were different from those in other countries. But it was not this which principally accounts for the events that we know. The conditions favoured these developments, but were not their determining causes.

In 1938, not only had the trade unions broken through into the great enterprises, but the CIO found itself controlled by a fully-formed leading apparatus. The situation was entirely new; Lewis's gamble, which had appeared to everyone to be so risky, had paid off. The trade union movement of the United States, well into the 20th century, had been reconstructed outside the political framework of socialism or even that of labourism. At that point in time, the situation opened up the paradox which everyone can observe today. The American proletariat is the most numerous proletariat in the capitalist world. In 1987 it possessed, in absolute figures, the biggest economic organisations. How does it come about that it is unable, despite this power, to make its independent entry onto the political scene? To answer this question is at the same time to indicate the origin and the explanation of the relatively stable social basis for the Democratic vote today. We find the answer to this question in the course of events in the 1930s, especially in the second half of the decade, and, we believe, essentially in the joint activity of President Roosevelt and especially of John L. Lewis and of the organisations which the latter set up. We find it also in the complementary activity of all the "progressive" currents, the right of the Social-

Democracy, "Farmer-Laborite" and, above all, the "Popular Front" orientation of the Communist Party.

The multitude of theoretical and ideological schemes, like the numerous temporary structures (such as the ALP and the LNPL) served as the material channels for the formation of this electoral base of the Democratic Party, and, therefore, for the failure of an independent political organisation of the working class to be born. Still in 1976, when Jimmy Carter was elected to the White House, 80% of the Democratic voters were trade unionists, blacks and the poor in the cities of the North. We may see empirically that there is the target-clientele for any workers' party in the USA.

## Notes

1. This article is based on Chapter XXIII of our thesis "Le mouvement ouvrier américain et l'action politique, de 1929 à 1938", supervised by Pierre Broué and submitted at Grenoble in 1981; a shortened and amended version can be found in chapter XXI of *Un syndicalisme pur et simple: mouvements ouvriers et pouvoir politique aux États-Unis, 1919-1939*, Boréal, Montréal, 1986.
2. This means the party of the American Communists at the beginning of the 1920s.
3. SWP Internal Bulletin No.7, 1938, p.30. [Thanks to Al Richardson for providing the original text.]
4. William Green, 1873-1952, president of the American Federation of Labor from the death of Gompers in 1924 to his own death.
5. Leon Trotsky, *On the Labor Party*, Merit, 1969, p.7. [Also in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1932, 1973*, p.95. The article is entitled, "The Labor Party Question in the United States". It was originally published in *The Militant*, 11 June 1932.]
6. Ibid. [*Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1932*, p.96.]
7. James Burnham, 'For a Revolutionary Party', *Socialist Appeal*, September 1936.
8. The "Old Guard" is the name given to the right wing of the Socialist Party, led by those who had opposed entry into the Communist International in 1919-20. With the development of left-wing currents in the Socialist Party during the 1930s, the opposition of the Old Guard to its young adversaries became ferocious. The Old Guard, who had lost the majority, split away in May 1936 to form the Social Democratic Federation, which supported Roosevelt.
9. The American Labor Party (ALP) of New York was formed in July 1936 by important sections of the trade unions in New York, notably by the garment workers' unions which were traditionally under socialist leadership. This party was pro-New Deal and presented in its lists a majority of Democrat and Republican candidates, the votes for

- whom obtained in this way were added to those which they got on the lists of their own parties, according to the electoral law then in operation.
10. Shachtman's article appeared in *Socialist Review*, Vol.6, No.2, September 1937. Norman Thomas (1884-1968) was then the principal leader of the Socialist Party and its candidate in Presidential elections. He had fought against the Old Guard, but was developing towards positions that came close to theirs; the Clarity Caucus occupied an intermediate position between the Thomas wing and the Trotskyists in the party.
  11. By the political regroupment of the vanguard in conjunction with the (re-)establishment of mass trade unions.
  12. Especially in their attitude to the new American Labor Party, which they regarded as a reformist workers' "Labor Party".
  13. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol.15, Progress, 1973, pp.235, 237.
  14. James Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy*, New Viewpoints, 1975, pp.83-4.
  15. And recognised as such.
  16. Labor's Non-Partisan League (LNPL) was formed in April 1936 by the principal leaders of the CIO as a vehicle for political activity by the unions. It did not aim at the creation of an independent party, but rather at harnessing the energies of militants in an enterprise to exert pressure on the traditional two-party system, first by intervening in the Democratic Party, particularly by seeking to get the party to endorse trade union candidates in the primaries. Hence the title of "liberal-labor", which Weinstein also uses. The American Labor Party was the section of the LNPL in the State of New York.
  17. SWP Internal Bulletin No.7, 1938, p.4.
  18. Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, Monad, 1975, pp.114-26, 163.
  19. In May 1937 the steelworkers' union of the CIO, which was in the process of being formed, after the achievement of having signed a contract for the first time with United Steel (known as "Big Steel"), the largest steel works in the USA, then confronted the refusal of five of its smaller competitors ("Little Steel") to negotiate. The unanimous strike of 75,000 workers in the four "Little Steel" firms was defeated by violent repression on the part of the employers and the state, against which the union leaders were unable to organise any effective counterattack, according to Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, Pathfinder, 1964, pp.66-71.
  20. Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, p.123.
  21. Conversation of April 1938 between the leaders of the SWP and Trotsky in Mexico, reproduced in Trotsky, *On the Labor Party in the US*, p.14. [Also in Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Social Revolution*, 1977, p.82; the discussion in fact took place on 21 March 1938.]
  22. Conversation of 31 May 1938, *ibid.*, p.25. [Trotsky, *The Transitional Program ...*, pp.164-5.]
  23. Conversation of 20 July 1938, *ibid.*, pp.29-30.
  24. See the discussion in the SWP Internal Bulletins No.2 and No.7, 1938.
  25. Albert Goldman, 'Labor Party and Progress', in *New Internationalist*, Vol.4, No.9, September 1938.
  26. See particularly the arguments in the proposal of Marx and Engels to the Conference in London in 1871 of the International Workingmen's Association,
  27. SWP Internal Bulletin No.2, 1938, pp.40-1. [Trotsky, *The Transitional Program ...*, pp.161-2.]
  28. SWP Internal Bulletin No.7, 1938, p.3. [*The Transitional Program ...*, p.190.] The expression "new phase of capitalist decline" refers to the economic slump in 1937-8, after the partial recovery of 1933-7.
  29. SWP Internal Bulletin No.2, 1938, p.42. [*The Transitional Program ...*, p.163.]
  30. In order that the workers should be able to check the secret finances of the regime in this period of crisis. Trotsky regarded this demand as concretely tracing out the way to workers' control of industry and the economy, as well as to the expropriation of capital.
  31. In the resolution on tactics of 1922 it had specifically explained: "In place of a bourgeois/social-democratic coalition, whether open or disguised, Communists propose a united front involving all workers, and a coalition of all workers' parties around economic and political issues, which will fight and finally overthrow bourgeois power. Following a united struggle of all workers against the bourgeoisie, the entire state apparatus must pass into the hands of a workers' government, so strengthening the position of power held by the working class. The most elementary tasks of a workers' government must be to arm the proletariat, disarm the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organizations, bring in control over production, shift the main burden of taxation onto the propertied classes and break the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. Such a workers' government is possible only if it is born out of the struggle of the masses and is supported by combative workers' organizations formed by the most oppressed sections of workers at grass-roots level. However, even a workers' government that comes about through an alignment of parliamentary forces, i.e., a government of purely parliamentary origin, can give rise to an upsurge of the revolutionary workers' movement." (Resolution on Tactics of the CI, *IV<sup>e</sup> Congrès de l'Internationale Communiste*, p.168.) [*Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, Ink Links, 1980, pp.397-8.]