

REMARKS ON THE DRAFT THESES OF THE WORKERS PARTY

Leon Trotsky

Trotsky received the Workers Party theses in exile and replied on 20 April 1935. Copies circulated in South Africa, and appeared later in the Workers Voice Theoretical Supplement, November 1944 and the Fourth International, November 1945.

A 'Slave Colony' for the Blacks

The theses are written without doubt on the basis of a serious study of both the economic and political conditions of South Africa as well as the literature of Marxism and Leninism, particularly that of the Bolshevik–Leninists. A serious scientific approach to all questions is one of the most important conditions for the success of a revolutionary organization. The example of our South African friends again confirms the fact that in the present epoch only the Bolshevik–Leninists, i.e., the consistent proletarian revolutionists, take a serious attitude to theory, analyze the realities, and are learning themselves before they teach others. The Stalinist bureaucracy has long ago substituted a combination of ignorance and impudence for Marxism.

In the following lines I wish to make certain remarks with regard to the draft theses which will serve as a programme for the Workers Party of South Africa. Under no circumstances do I bring forward these remarks in opposition to the text of the theses. I am too insufficiently acquainted with the conditions in South Africa to pretend to a full conclusive opinion on a series of practical questions. Only in certain places I am obliged to express my disagreement with certain aspects of the draft thesis. But here, also in so far as I can judge from afar we have no differences in principles with the authors of the theses. It is rather a matter of certain polemical exaggerations arising from the struggle with the pernicious national policy of Stalinism. But it is in the interest of the cause not to smooth over even slight inaccuracies in presentation, but, on the contrary, to expose them for open deliberations in order to arrive at the most clear and blameless text. Such is the aim of the following lines dictated by the desire to give some assistance to our South African Bolshevik–Leninists in this great and responsible work to which they have set themselves.

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The South African possessions of Great Britain form a Dominion only from the point of view of the white minority. From the point of view of the black majority South Africa is a Slave Colony.

No social upheaval (in the first instance, an agrarian revolution) is thinkable with the retention of British Imperialism in the South African Dominion. The overthrow of British Imperialism in South Africa is just as indispensable for the triumph of Socialism in South Africa as it is for Great Britain itself.

If, as it is possible to assume, the revolution will start first in Great Britain, the less support the British bourgeoisie will find in the Colonies and Dominions, including so important a possession as South Africa, the quicker will be their support at home. The struggle for the expulsion of British Imperialism, its tools and agents, thus enters as an indispensable part of the programme of the South African proletarian party.

The Black Republic

The overthrow of the hegemony of British Imperialism in South Africa can come about as the result of a military defeat of Great Britain and the disintegration of the Empire; in this case the South African whites can still for a certain period, hardly a considerable one, retain their domination over the blacks. Another possibility, which in practice could be connected with the first, is a revolution in Great Britain and her possessions. Three-quarters of the population of South Africa (almost six million of about eight million) is composed of non-Europeans. A victorious revolution is unthinkable without the awakening of the native masses; in its turn it will give them what they are so lacking today, confidence in their strength, a heightened personal consciousness, a cultural growth. Under these conditions the South African Republic will emerge first of all as a 'black' Republic; this does not exclude of course, either full equality for whites or brotherly relations between the two races (which depends mainly upon the conduct of the whites). But it is entirely obvious that the predominant majority of the population, liberated from slavish dependence, will put a certain imprint on the State.

In so far as a victorious revolution will radically change, not only the relation between the classes, but also between the races, and will assure to the blacks that place in the state which corresponds to their numbers, so far will the social revolution in South Africa also have a national character. We have not the slightest reason to close our eyes to this side of the question or to diminish its significance. On the contrary the proletarian party should in words and deeds openly and boldly take the solution of the national (racial) problem in its hands. Nevertheless the proletarian party can and must solve the national problem by its own methods.

The historical weapon of national liberation can be only the class struggle. The Comintern, beginning from 1924, transformed the programme of national liberation of colonial people into an empty democratic abstraction which is elevated above the reality of the class relations. In the struggle against

national oppression different classes liberate themselves (temporarily!) from material interests and become simple 'anti-imperialist' forces. In order that these spiritual 'forces' bravely fulfil the task assigned to them by the Comintern, they are promised, as a reward, a spiritual 'national-democratic' state (with the unavoidable reference to Lenin's formula, 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry')

The thesis points out that in 1917 Lenin openly and once and for all discarded the slogan of 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' as if it were a necessary condition for the solution of the agrarian question. This is entirely correct. But to avoid misunderstanding it should be added (a) Lenin always spoke of a revolutionary bourgeois democratic dictatorship and not about a spiritual 'peoples' state, (b) in the struggle for a bourgeois democratic dictatorship he offered not a bloc of all 'anti-czarist forces' but carried out an independent class policy of the proletariat. An 'anti-czarist' bloc was the idea of the Russian Social Revolutionist and the Left Cadets i.e., the parties of the petty and middle bourgeoisie. Against those parties the Bolsheviks always waged an irreconcilable struggle.

When the thesis says that the slogan of a 'Black Republic' is equally harmful for the revolutionary cause as is the slogan of a 'South Africa for the whites,' then we cannot agree with the form of the statement: whereas in the latter there is the case of supporting complete repression, in the former, there is the case of taking the first steps towards liberation. We must accept with all decisiveness and without any reservations the complete and unconditional rights of the blacks to independence. Only on the basis of a mutual struggle against the domination of the white exploiters, can be cultivated and strengthened the solidarity of black and white toilers. It is possible that the blacks will after victory find it unnecessary to form a separate black state in South Africa. Certainly we will not force them to establish a separate state; but let them make this admission freely, on the basis of their own experience, and not forced by the sjambok of the white oppressor. The proletarian revolutionaries must never forget the right of the oppressed nationalities of self-determination, including full separation, and of the duty of the proletariat of the oppressing nation to defend this right with arms in hand if necessary!

The thesis quite correctly underlines the fact that the solution of the national struggle in Russia was brought about by the October revolution. National democratic movements by themselves were powerless to cope with the national oppression of czarism. Only because of the fact that the movement of the oppressed nationalities, as well as the agrarian movement of the peasantry gave the proletariat the possibility of seizing power and establishing its dictatorship, the national question as well as the agrarian found a bold and decisive solution. But the very conjunction of the national movements with the struggle of the proletariat for power was made politically possible only thanks to the fact that the Bolsheviks during the whole of their history carried

on an irreconcilable struggle with the Great Russian oppressors, supporting always and without reservations the right of the oppressed nationalities to self-determination including separation from Russia.

Self-Determination and the Class Struggle

The policy of Lenin in regard to the oppressed nations did not, however, have anything in common with the policy of the (Stalinist) epigones. The Bolshevik Party defended the right of the oppressed nations to self-determination, with methods of proletarian class struggle, entirely rejecting the charlatan 'anti-imperialist' bloc with the numerous petty-bourgeois 'national' parties of czarist Russia (PPS, the party of Pilsudski in czarist Poland, Dashnaki in Armenia, the Ukrainian nationalists, the Jewish Zionists, etc., etc.). The Bolsheviks have always mercilessly unmasked these parties, as well as the Russian Social Revolutionists, their vacillations and adventurism, but especially their ideological lie of being above the class struggle. Lenin did not stop his intransigent criticism even when circumstances forced upon him this or that episodic, strictly practical agreement with them. There could be no question of any permanent alliance with them under the banner of 'anti-czarism.' Only thanks to an irreconcilable class policy was Bolshevism able to succeed in the time of the Revolution to throw aside the Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionists, the national petty-bourgeois parties, and gather around the proletariat the masses of the peasantry and the oppressed nationalities.

'We must not,' says the thesis, 'compete with the African National Congress in nationalist slogans in order to win the Native masses.' The idea is in itself correct, but it requires concrete amplification. Being insufficiently acquainted with the activities of the National Congress, I can only say on the basis of analogies outline our policy concerning it, stating beforehand my readiness to supplement my recommendations with all the necessary modifications.

- 1) The Bolshevik-Leninists put themselves in defense of the Congress as it is in all cases when it is being attacked by the white oppressors and their chauvinistic agents in the ranks of the workers' organizations.
- 2) The Bolshevik-Leninists place the progressive over against the reactionary tendencies in the programme of the Congress.
- 3) The Bolshevik-Leninists unmask before the Native masses the inability of the Congress to achieve the realisation of even its own demands, because of the superficial, conciliatory policy, and develop in contradistinction to the Congress a programme of class revolutionary struggle.

4) Separate, episodic agreements with the Congress, if they are forced by circumstances, are permissible only within the framework of strictly defined practical tasks, with the retention of full and complete independence of our own organization and freedom of political criticism.

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The thesis brings out as the main political slogan not a 'national democratic state,' but a South African 'October'. The thesis proves, and proves convincingly, (a) that the national and agrarian questions in South Africa coincide in their bases; (b) that both these questions can be solved only in a revolutionary way; (c) that the revolutionary solution of these questions leads inevitably to the dictatorship of the proletariat which guides the Native peasant masses; (d) that the dictatorship of the proletariat will open an era of a Soviet regime and socialist construction. This conclusion is the cornerstone of the whole structure of the programme. Here we are in complete agreement.

Tactical Slogans

But the masses must be brought to this general 'strategic' formula through the medium of a series of tactical slogans. It is possible to work out these slogans, at every given stage, only on the basis of an analysis of the concrete circumstances of the life and struggle of the proletariat and peasantry and the whole internal and international situation. Without going deeply into this matter, I would like briefly to deal with the mutual relations of the national and agrarian slogans.

The thesis several times underlines that the agrarian and not the national demands must be put in the first place. This is a very important question which deserves serious attention. To push aside or to weaken the national slogans with the object of not antagonizing the white chauvinists in the ranks of the working class would be, of course, criminal opportunism, which is absolutely alien to the authors and supporters of the thesis: this flows quite clearly from the text of the thesis, which is permeated with the spirit of revolutionary internationalism. The thesis admirably says of those 'socialists' who are fighting for the privileges of the whites that 'we must recognise them as the greatest enemies of the revolution.' Thus we must seek for another explanation, which is briefly indicated in the very text: the backward Native peasant masses directly feel the agrarian oppression much more than they do the national oppression. It is quite possible; the majority of the Natives are peasants; the bulk of the land is in the hands of a white minority. The Russian peasants during their struggle for land had for long put their faith in the czar and stubbornly refused to draw political conclusions. For the revolutionary intelligentsia's traditional slogan, 'Land and Liberty,' the peasants for a long time accepted only the first part. It required decades of agrarian unrest and the influence and action of the town workers to enable the peasantry to connect both slogans.

The poor enslaved Bantu hardly entertains more hope in the British king or in MacDonald. But his extreme political backwardness is also expressed in his lack of national self-consciousness. At the same time he feels very sharply the land and fiscal bondage. Given these conditions, propaganda can and must first of all flow from the slogans of the agrarian revolution, in order that, step by step, on the basis of the experiences of the struggle, the peasantry may be brought to the necessary political and national conclusions. If these hypothetical considerations are correct, then we are not concerned here with the programme itself, but rather with the ways and means of carrying this programme to the consciousness of the Native masses.

Considering the small number of the revolutionary cadres and the extreme diffusion of the peasantry, it will be possible to influence the peasantry, at least in the immediate future, mainly if not exclusively, through the medium of the advanced workers. Therefore it is of the utmost importance to train the advanced workers in the spirit of a clear understanding of the significance of the agrarian revolution for the historic fate of South Africa.

Through the Advanced Workers

The proletariat of the country consists of backward black pariahs and a privileged arrogant caste of whites. In this lies the greatest difficulty of the whole situation. As the thesis correctly states, the economic convulsions of rotting capitalism most strongly shape the old barriers and facilitate the work of revolutionary coalescence. In any case, the worst crime on the part of the revolutionists would be to give the smallest concessions to the privileges and prejudices of the whites. Whoever gives his little finger to the devil of chauvinism is lost. The revolutionary party must put before every white worker the following alternative: either with British Imperialism and with the white bourgeoisie of South Africa, or, with the black workers and peasants against the white feudalists and slave-owners and their agents of the working class itself.

The overthrow of the British domination over the black population of South Africa will not, of course, mean an economic and cultural break with the previous mother-country. If the latter will liberate itself from the oppression of its imperialist plunderers. A Soviet England will be able to exercise a powerful economic and cultural influence on South Africa through the medium of those whites who in deed, in actual struggle, will have bound up their fate with that of the present colonial slaves. This influence will be based, not on domination, but on proletarian mutual co-operation.

But more important in all probability will be the influence which a Soviet South Africa will exercise over the whole black continent. To help the negroes to catch up to the white race, in order to ascend hand in hand with them to new cultural heights, this will be one of the grand and noble tasks of a victorious socialism.

On Organization

In conclusion I want to say a few words on the question of legal and illegal organization. (Concerning the constitution of the Party).

The thesis correctly underlines the inseparable connection between organization, revolutionary tasks, supplementing the legal apparatus with an illegal one. Nobody, of course, is proposing to create an illegal apparatus for such functions as in the given conditions can be executed by legal organs. But in conditions of an approaching political crisis, there must be created special illegal nuclei of the party apparatus which will develop as need arises. A certain part, and by the way a very important part, of the work cannot under any circumstances be carried out openly, that is, before the eyes of the class enemies.

Nevertheless, for the given period, the most important form of the illegal or semi-legal work of revolutionaries is the work of mass organizations, not falling under the blows of the reactionary apparatus. This is a very important, for the given period most important, part of the illegal work. A revolutionary group in a trade union which has learnt in practice all the necessary rules of conspiracy will be able to transform its work to an illegal status when circumstances require this.