

How to Explain a “Transitional Program” to a Simple Worker

Workers League for a Revolutionary Party
1946

Published in the September-October 1946 issue of the Bulletin of the Workers League for a Revolutionary Party, formerly the Leninist League, who were also known as the “Marlenites” after their leader, George Marlen. They were virulently anti-Trotskyist even though they were a split from the Revolutionary Workers League, which itself had split from official Trotskyism. From <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/in-defense-bolshevism/v09n04-sep-oct-1946-Bulletin-of-Leninist-L-Spiro.pdf>.

A TROTSKYITE: I belong to the Socialist Workers Party, the Trotskyite Party.

A WORKER: I'm for the Democratic Party.

Trotskyite: You shouldn't be. The Democratic Party does not serve your interests.

Worker: What party should I be for?

Trotskyite: A Labor Party.

Worker: Are you also for a Labor Party?

Trotskyite: Yes, naturally.

Worker: But you just said you belong to the Trotskyite Party. Is that the Labor Party you mentioned?

Trotskyite: No, the Trotskyite Party is different, it stands for proletarian revolution and socialism.

Worker: Is a Labor Party also for what you call proletarian revolution and socialism?

Trotskyite: Well, no, not exactly.

Worker: But you are for proletarian revolution and socialism.

Trotskyite: Yes, of course,

Worker: Then why are **you** for a Labor Party?

Trotskyite: You see, I'm for a Labor Party because **you** are for the Democratic Party. You have to get promoted politically, so to speak. For you to be for a Labor Party would be an advance.

Worker: Let me get this straight. A Labor Party does not stand for the proletarian revolution and socialism you say you stand for, but for me it would be an advance to be for a Labor Party.

Trotskyite: That's about the size of it. We're trying to raise the political level of the working class in general by elevating the workers to being for a Labor Party.

Worker: Now, let me ask you this. Since this Labor Party is not for proletarian revolution and socialism, would you say that it is in my interests?

Trotskyite: Naturally, we're very critical toward the Labor Party. We don't say point blank that it would directly serve the workers' interests. But it would be a stage toward proletarian revolution and socialism.

Worker: Should I have been for a Labor Party government in the British elections last year?

Trotskyite: Yes, of course.

Worker: Then you would have wanted me, that is, the workers to vote for the British Labor Party.

Trotskyite: Definitely. We told the workers to vote for Attlee, Bevin and the other British Laborites.

Worker: Ah, now I understand. The British Labor Party is the kind of Labor Party you want me to be for.

Trotskyite: Oh, no! The British Labor Party is a rotten sell-out party, has been for years.

Worker: But still you wanted me to vote for it. Maybe I don't understand, after all.

Trotskyite: It's this way. When you're for the Democratic Party, then to change to being for a Labor Party is an advance for you, even though that Labor Party sells you down the river just the same as the Democratic Party.

Worker: Would you have voted for the British Labor Party?

Trotskyite: Yes, that's our line.

Worker: But you knew all along that the Labor Party sells out the workers and has been doing so for a long time.

Trotskyite: Naturally.

Worker: Still, you would have voted for it. Mighty peculiar. Wouldn't it be simpler just to tell me that the Labor Party is a sell-out party and that it would be foolish for me to support it?

Trotskyite: No, first we try to get you to support what is against your interests because it is in your interests to take that step.

Worker: By the way, what do you think of the British Labor Party government?

Trotskyite: It's betraying the workers all down the line. Look at the way the British imperialists are murdering the workers of India and Palestine. That scoundrel, Attlee, tries to justify such crimes.

Worker: But since the Labor Party government is betraying the workers all down the line, as you yourself say, I can't for the life of me understand why I should have voted for the Labor Party.

Trotskyite: Because you are not for a Labor Party yet. If you voted for it, that would be an advance for you.

Worker: But what about the workers of India and Palestine who are being murdered by the British Labor government troops? How would the workers in those places feel toward me if I helped to elect such a government? You say I have to get advanced to being for a Labor Party, but wouldn't the workers of India and Palestine have a sneaking suspicion that when I supported the Labor Party I was advancing over their dead bodies?

Trotskyite: Perhaps, but when you would see those workers being murdered by Attlee and Bevin's troops, then you would become disillusioned even with the Labor Party, you would move more to the Left, and that would be a still better advance for you.

Worker: Maybe so, but that wouldn't wash the blood of those workers off my hands which helped to elect the Labor government. I still say it would be simpler for you just to warn me beforehand that the Laborites are scoundrels and that I should **not** vote them into office.

Trotskyite: Politics are pretty complicated. We also advocate the formation of a Stalinist-Socialist coalition government in France, England, Italy, and so forth. That's our Trotskyite Transitional Program.

Worker: Is that a government in the interests of the workers?

Trotskyite: Well, it's on the basis of capitalism, and the Stalinist Communists and the Socialists certainly don't serve the interests of the workers.

Worker: Therefore I may assume that a Stalinist-Socialist coalition government will also sell me down the river.

Trotskyite: We don't say point blank that a Labor Party government or a Stalinist-Socialist coalition government would be against the interests of the workers. Concretely, such governments sell out the workers, but historically, they do them a lot of good because they expose themselves before the workers and so help them move more to the Left.

Worker: I may seem narrow-minded, but it's very queer to advocate the formation of any government which would sell out the workers, as you say these governments would.

Trotskyite: Mass pressure might compel the Laborites, Stalinists and Socialists who form a government to pass acts benefiting the workers, though I'll admit there's not too much chance of this.

Worker: What does it all boil down to? If these parties in the government improved my living conditions, I would support **them**. If they did me harm, then **you** would be in the position of having advocated a government which acted against my interests, and I would hold you responsible. In any case, your Trotskyite Party wouldn't cut much ice with me. Anybody who helps put a government which injures me is no friend of mine.

Trotskyite: Our Transitional Program will get clearer to you when you think it over. Take a simpler case. We supported the Stalinist bureaucrat, Ben Davis, in New York in the election same time back,

Worker: I don't believe it!

Trotskyite: I can prove it. Here's our paper, THE MILITANT, where it says that the workers should vote for Ben Davis "because he is a Negro candidate on the ticket of a working class party."

Worker: Wasn't he on the ticket of the Communist Party, the Stalinists, as you call them, the betrayers of labor?

Trotskyite: Yes.

Worker: And the Stalinist Communist Party is also a working class party?

Trotskyite: Yes, our paper, THE MILITANT, says so here, black on white.

Worker: Just a moment, I'm getting pretty dizzy. In the few minutes we've been talking, you've thrown no fewer than three working class parties at me, the Trotskyite Party, the Labor Party and the Stalinist Party. Two of these you already have told me betray the interests of the workers. I take it that you consider your Trotskyite Party is loyal to the

workers. Yet the two betrayers and the one faithful all seem to be working class parties, according to your reckoning. Do you want me to be for the Stalinist Party, also? Do you want me to be for all three working class parties at once?

Trotskyite: No, we don't want you to be for the Stalinist Party, we just wanted the workers to vote for its candidate.

Worker: Is there a difference? If I vote for a candidate, it's because I'm for his party, and if I'm for a party, I vote for its candidates. I don't do any fancy bookkeeping in these matters.

Trotskyite: Of course, there's the point that Davis was a NEGRO candidate, and –

Worker: Now don't go bringing up the man's race. I'm not so stupid that I'd vote for a man because of the color of his skin. You yourself just told me this Davis was a Stalinist candidate. I should guess from that you don't consider him exactly an angel.

Trotskyite: Oh, he's a Stalinist rat, no doubt.

Worker: Still, I should have voted for him.

Trotskyite: Yes, definitely, as a NEGRO candidate of a working class party.

Worker: You know, if I actually voted for this list of rats, scoundrels and betrayers you've been pushing at me, I'd have to take out my conscience and fumigate it. You look like a nice fellow, but you certainly have a queer way of going about urging people to keep company at the polls with the smelliest assortment of human tripe.

Trotskyite: It's part of our campaign to raise the level of the workers.

Worker: What makes THE MILITANT say the Stalinist Party is a working class party? Is it for the workers?

Trotskyite: Oh, no, it's against the interests of the workers.

Worker: Here we go again. If the Stalinist Party is against the interests of the workers, how is it a working class party?

Trotskyite: We mean that many workers support it.

Worker: Well, I'm sure that more workers support the Democratic Party than the Stalinist Party; that makes the Democratic Party also a working class party. That would be four working class parties in one afternoon.

Trotskyite: No, of course, the Democratic Party is not a working class party. The fact that many workers support it is not the point. The Stalinist Party pretends to be a working class party, and many workers fall for it.

Worker: Don't tell me its **pretenses** make it a working class party.

Trotskyite: Naturally not. The point is that many workers **think** it's a working class party.

Worker: I see, you mean that the workers' **confusion** makes it a working class party.

Trotskyite: In a strictly scientific sense, the Stalinist Party is not a working class party because its policies betray the workers. Fundamentally, it's an anti-working class Party.

Worker: But your paper, THE MILITANT, said plainly that the workers should vote for Davis because he was a Negro candidate of a working class party. That was one of the reasons your paper gave for voting for Davis. Well, anyway, it's clear the workers wouldn't vote for Davis if they were convinced he represents an anti-working class Party. That would certainly be stupid electioneering, from Davis' standpoint. I'll bet he also told the workers he's the candidate of a working class party.

Trotskyite: Well, of course, he's a liar. That is, I mean –

Worker: I see what you mean. He's a liar, but THE MILITANT has a Transitional Program. Are there any more working class parties?

Trotskyite: Well, the Trotskyite Party was discussing uniting with Shachtman's Workers Party.

Worker: What, another one! Who are these guys?

Trotskyite: Oh, a gang of petty-bourgeois revisionists, we call them. Their outfit is strictly no good.

Worker: But you were discussing uniting with them? I don't get it.

Trotskyite: There was nothing definite. We were just discussing. Our leader, Comrade Cannon, was communicating with them about it.

Worker: If they're no good, why talk about uniting with them? I wouldn't unite with a bunch of no-goods. I wouldn't even discuss it.

Trotskyite: In politics it's very complicated. Today you break with people because they're rotten renegades, but tomorrow you may unite with them. That's the dialectical development of history.

Worker: Very interesting. I wouldn't have thought it possible.

Trotskyite: Yes, as Comrade Cannon said in his history of our Party – with us, nothing is impossible.

Worker: I must admit your Transitional Program is quite beyond me. A fellow like me would never support anybody he knows are a pack of fakers, like you know the Stalinist leaders are, and he would never tell others to vote for them. When I know any party is my enemy, I'm against it, plain and simple. However, as they say, where there's life, there's hope. Maybe some day I'll learn to support my known enemies. In that case I'll join up with your Trotskyite Party. I want to thank you for a very interesting discussion.

Trotskyite: Don't mention it. Always glad to spread Trotskyite enlightenment.