

## Setting the Record Straight

# The Indian Trotskyists and the Constituent Assembly Demand

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In 2013 the International Communist League (ICL) published a long article in *Spartacist* to explain their decision, announced a year earlier, to repudiate a key transitional demand in the founding program of the Fourth International – the call for a popularly elected Constituent Assembly (CA) in Third World countries where the masses are fighting to topple autocratic regimes.<sup>1</sup> The ICL has decided that the slogan for a CA is not a transitional demand but “a call for a new capitalist government” and “cannot be a bridge to proletarian state power, but only to disaster and defeat.”

How does the ICL justify this assault on Trotsky? They say that in 2011 certain “leading comrades” of the ICL, having “distilled” the experience of the last two centuries of revolutions, concluded that Trotsky failed to realize that he was foisting a *counter-revolutionary* demand on his followers. Mind you, one year earlier these same “leading comrades” disgraced the ICL by defending the US military occupation of Haiti. Such is their superior “distillation” of Marxism.

The *Spartacist* article selectively cites historical examples to show that the CA slogan can result only in negative outcomes. But in the end the ICL can’t explain how the Bolsheviks made the only successful revolution in history using a counter-revolutionary demand as a key tactic! Nor do they offer an *alternative transitional demand* to fill the role that Lenin and Trotsky assigned to the CA slogan. The ICL doesn’t prove that the CA equals “a call for a capitalist government.” They just *assert* it as an *axiom* that doesn’t need proof. What the ICL has “distilled” is not a purified Trotskyism but another abstract rationale for abandoning the Transitional Program and abstaining from struggle.

## The case of the Indian Trotskyists

Despite a lot of digging in the archives of Trotskyism, the ICL has found only one case where Trotskyists waged a “clear-cut factional struggle” over the CA – the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the Indian section of the Fourth International from 1942 to 1948. The ICL claims that there were “deep divisions within the BLPI” from the very start and “a significant layer of the organization consistently opposed” the demand. Finally, in 1947, “the left-right division within the Indian section that began in 1940-42 came to a head” and the party was “racked by a deepgoing factional dispute.” According to the ICL, the minority that opposed the CA on principle represented this left wing. The ICL concludes that their arguments “have stood the test of time.”

In my book on Indian Trotskyism, published in 2006, I documented this debate in the BLPI.<sup>2</sup> In this article I will revisit the question of the CA more broadly and in greater detail. I will show that the narrative of the ICL is more fiction than fact. The program of the BLPI was adopted unanimously in 1941 and then ratified at the party’s first conference in 1944 with no opposition to the formulation of the CA. There is no evidence that anyone, much less a “significant layer,” opposed the demand before 1947. The question arose only when the British, contrary to what the BLPI had predicted all along, set up a quisling “Constituent Assembly” in Delhi. In response the BLPI raised the slogan for a Revolutionary Constituent Assembly (RCA). That triggered the debate at the BLPI’s conference in May 1947.

While the issue was important, the debate was too little, too late. At that point the main threat to a revolution was *reactionary communal civil war*, not the half-empty Constituent Assembly in Delhi, which had done nothing in seven months except vote on a national flag. The anti-CA minority that the ICL lionizes was hardly a “left opposition.” In 1948 they proposed that the BLPI merge with a centrist party (which was calling for Soviets and a “Peoples’ Constituent Assembly”). Their appetite for centrism soon found expression in *Pabloist liquidationism*. Starting in 1952, they called for a grand centrist regroupment, opposed the formation of a new Trotskyist party, and engineered an unprincipled merger with the same centrist party that they wanted to enter in 1948. In 1964 they made a suicidal attempt to enter the CP(M). Sadly, the bright young Trotskyists who in 1947 opposed the RCA in the name of defending the Permanent Revolution ended up cheering the Maoist Naxalites, who called for two-stage revolution and vilified Trotsky.

<sup>1</sup> “Marxism and Bourgeois Parliamentarism: Why We Reject the ‘Constituent Assembly’ Demand,” *Spartacist*, no. 63 (Winter 2012-13). The line change was first announced, abruptly, in the middle of an article on the Tunisian elections in the newspaper of the ICL’s French section (*Le Bolchévik*, no. 198, December 2011).

<sup>2</sup> C. W. Ervin, *Tomorrow is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement in India and Ceylon, 1935-1948* (2006), pp. 219-23.

### The origin of the Constituent Assembly demand in India

In Czarist Russia liberal reformers as well as the populists who took to terrorism started agitating for a Constituent Assembly in the nineteenth century. In India, however, the demand had a belated birth. The progressive Hindu Anglophiles who formed Congress in 1885 were content to merely supplicate the British for incremental constitutional reforms that hopefully, someday, would lead to parliamentary government on the British model.

The Muslim elite, on the other hand, viewed democracy more as a threat than a goal. Referring to the fact that Muslims were only 20 percent of the population, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan likened parliamentary government to “a game of dice, in which one man had four dice and the other only one.”<sup>3</sup> In 1906 he played a key role in forming the All-India Muslim League to protect the interests of upper-class Muslims and counter the growing influence of the Congress. The League convinced the British to introduce communal electorates and weighted representation that gave Muslims a disproportionate role in the legislative councils and local governing boards.

From that point on the separate electorates became a bone of contention between the Congress and the League. In 1916 they reached a compromise: Congress accepted the separate electorates and the League adopted the nationalist demand for *swaraj* [self-rule]. That pact lasted only six years. The rupture was followed by a period of communal violence. That became the pattern that was repeated again and again. The Congress, based as it was on a small industrial-financial capitalist class and a large body of landlords, was unable to unite the masses of India against the British overlord. In that regard they didn’t measure up to even the Russian Cadets, much less the radical French Jacobins.

In 1925 the Secretary of State for India and Burma, Lord Birkenhead, told Parliament that the Indians were incapable of writing a Constitution that they all could agree on. That infuriated the nationalists. Motilal Nehru, a leader of the Swaraj Party, convened a caricature of a constituent assembly in Delhi (an “all-parties conference”) to draft the blueprint for a democratic constitution. Much to the glee of British reactionaries, the Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh representatives bickered from the start. Muhammed Ali Jouhar, a veteran of the freedom struggle, bitterly commented to the British, “It is the old maxim of ‘divide and rule’. But there is a division of labor here. We divide and you rule.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1933 a Joint Parliamentary Committee in London stated that granting “constituent power” to authorities in India wasn’t “a practicable proposition.” That prompted the Congress Working Committee to finally take the leap.

“the only satisfactory alternative is a constitution drawn up by a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of adult suffrage or as near it as possible...with the power to important minorities to have their representatives elected exclusively by the electors belonging to such minorities.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, from the start the Congress compromised on the principles of universal suffrage and democratic representation. Moreover, they didn’t specify how such an assembly would be convened – only that it had to be non-violent. Jawaharlal Nehru, the disciple of Gandhi and darling of the British Fabians, insisted, “There is no other way short of revolution which can bring the needed result.”<sup>6</sup>

### The Congress demand and the growth of communal conflict

In 1937 the British government held direct elections to the provincial legislative assemblies on a narrow franchise. The Congress campaigned on the twin slogans of independence and a Constituent Assembly. They won a sweeping victory, forming ministries in six provinces. Having got its first taste of power, Congress proved to be just as dictatorial as the British. They invoked repressive British labor laws, shot striking workers, and rode roughshod over the Muslim League.

As communal tensions rose, bloody riots erupted in cities across northern India. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the secular leader of the Muslim League, played upon the legitimate anxieties of the Muslim masses: “The High Command of the Congress is determined, absolutely determined to crush all other communities and cultures in this country and establish Hindu Raj in the country.” Even Nehru privately worried that the Congress was encouraging Hindu

<sup>3</sup> Sir Syed Ahmad, *The Present State of Indian Politics* (1888), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Speech at the Round Table Conference in London, 1930. G. Allana, *Pakistan Movement Historical Documents* (1969), pp. 61-75. He was a founder of the Muslim League, a leader of the Khilafat Movement in 1919, and former president of the Congress.

<sup>5</sup> Congress Working Committee resolution on “White Paper and Communal Award,” June 18, 1934, in B.N. Pande and M.N. Das (eds.), *A Centenary History of the Indian National Congress* (1985), vol. 3, pp. 261-62.

<sup>6</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, “The Unity of India,” in *The Unity of India: Collected Writings 1937-40* (1940), p. 23.

communalism in the name of progressive democratic reform: “I fear we are rapidly heading for what might be called civil war in the real sense of the word.”<sup>7</sup>

In March, 1940 the League adopted the famous Pakistan resolution, which stated that “Hindus and Muslims brought together under a democratic system forced upon the minorities can only mean Hindu Raj.”<sup>8</sup> One month later the new Secretary of State for India warned the House of Lords that any concession to the Congress demand for a Constituent Assembly might ignite “a minority revolt leading to civil war in India.”<sup>9</sup> To underscore the danger, he added that “a minority of some 80,000,000 people is a very real thing, especially when religious passions are engaged.”

### The pioneer Trotskyists on the question of the CA

During this period Trotskyist groups sprouted in several cities in India, popping up independently of each other. The leaders came from very different backgrounds. None had any direct connection to the International Left Opposition. Given their isolation, it’s not surprising that they took different positions on the question of the CA.

The first Trotskyist group was formed in 1937 in Allahabad (United Provinces). The leader had learned his Marxism in the Communist Party of India (CPI) during the ultra-left period, when the CA demand was derided as “a slogan to deceive and delude the masses.”<sup>10</sup> In 1936 he left the CPI in protest against the new Popular Front line, which included support for the Congress slogan of the CA. He recognized that a strictly bourgeois-reformist CA would tend to exacerbate, rather than resolve the communal conflicts:

“[the Congress demand] means communal compromise of any kind for the sake of the independence struggle as it is being conducted under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. It means that India’s freedom fight *probably will not be able to overcome the power of communalism.*”<sup>11</sup> [my emphasis]

However, still carrying some ultra-left baggage, he threw the baby out with the bathwater: “We vigorously oppose the slogan of Constituent Assembly.”

A year later a Trotskyist group surfaced in Bombay. They argued that a CA was just a Congress pipe dream.

“Can anyone but a fool or a conscious deceiver tell the masses that the Indian capitalists would seriously contemplate swamping the voting booths with workers and hungry peasants and unemployed? It is unbelievable! Further it requires a revolution and the expulsion of the British army before such a Constituent Assembly could be called, and the bourgeoisie will long before that be inside the camp of the self-same imperialists, begging them to save private property and law and order. Only if the masses are organized in Soviets can a revolution be successful, in which case why should we call the constituent at all?”<sup>12</sup>

Shortly thereafter, they got a copy of the *Transitional Program*, and that changed their mind. They added the demand for a Revolutionary Constituent Assembly to their program.

In 1939 a third Trotskyist group was established in Ahmedabad. The founders had come out of the Communist League, a centrist party led by the maverick communist Saumyendranath Tagore. Though not a Trotskyist himself, he used Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism to criticize the CPI. Tagore wrote a treatise on the CA, drawing mainly from Lenin’s *Two Tactics*. He attacked the CPI for waffling on the key question of who would convene the assembly:

“The constituent assembly can never be convened so long as British imperialism is in India. It can only be convened and must be convened only after the seizure of power, after the final smash-up of imperialism.”<sup>13</sup>

When the Trotskyists came out of the Communist League, they published a manifesto that included the CA demand.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> S. Gopal (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (1976), vol. IX, pp.599-600.

<sup>8</sup> S.S. Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan: All-India Muslim League Documents, 1906-1947* (1970), vol. II, p. 338.

<sup>9</sup> Speech of the Marquess of Zetland on April 18, 1040, *Hansards*, vol. 116, April 18, 1940. Also: Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, *Essayez: The memoirs of Lawrence, second Marquess of Zetland* (1956), pp. 284-85.

<sup>10</sup> M. Muzaffar, “India’s fight against the India Bill,” *Labour Monthly*, May 1935, pp. 301-5.

<sup>11</sup> “Hindustan ke mazduro, kisano ka nara kya ho? Sanvidhana sabha wa mazdur rajya?” [What should be the slogan of the workers and peasants of India - Constituent Assembly or Workers’ State?], *Samaj* [Society], January 17, 1938, p. 7. My translation.

<sup>12</sup> *Bolshevik-Leninist-Trotskyist Draft Provisional Program* (1938), p. 45. Also: *Hindi mazdur tratskist parti. Karyakram* [Workers Trotskyist Party of India. Program] March, 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Saumyendranath Thakur, *Punjivadi Prajatantri Kranti aur Bharat* [Bourgeois Democratic Revolution and India] (1939), p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Samyavad ane Hind* [Socialism and India], 1939.

The Trotskyists in Calcutta emerged from a totally different milieu. The founders were brainy intellectuals from the elite colleges of Calcutta who were attracted to Trotskyism on a purely intellectual level. Unlike the other groups, they had a connection with a British Trotskyist group, the Revolutionary Socialist League, which provided them with guidance and literature from the Fourth International, which was launched in September 1938. They adopted the *Transitional Program* as their founding document.

### Drafting the BLPI program – facts versus fiction

During 1939-40 the four Indian groups started working towards unity. The Ceylonese Trotskyists in the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) played a critical role in facilitating this process. The LSSP had already concluded that a socialist revolution in insular, conservative Ceylon could succeed only as part of the larger revolution in India. The LSSP dispatched cadres to establish relations with the Indian Trotskyists.

In March 1941 the leaders of the Calcutta and Allahabad groups went to Ceylon for a clandestine meeting with leaders of the LSSP, which was now forced to operate underground. At this meeting it was decided to form a united Indo-Ceylonese party in solidarity with the FI. The participants outlined the program in five sections.<sup>15</sup> The program was drafted and circulated to all the groups for discussion. In November 1941 a follow-up meeting was convened in Calcutta to discuss the draft. No minutes or documents from this meeting or the previous meeting in March have survived.

The ICL states that while the program was being drafted there already was a factional struggle going on:

“The left wing around [the new Ceylonese leader] Doric de Souza was then dominant over [LSSP founder] Philip Gunawardena’s rightist minority, while the party’s general secretary, Leslie Goonewardene, played a mediating role. The Draft Programme was written by de Souza and Leslie Goonewardene while Philip Gunawardena was imprisoned by the British in Ceylon.”

Nonsense. In 1941 there were no factions in the LSSP.<sup>16</sup> While Doric de Souza and Leslie Goonewardene certainly had a hand in developing the program, it was a *collective* effort, involving the Indian groups and all the senior LSSP leaders, including Philip Gunawardena and the others who were in jail at that point. The factionalism in Ceylon developed later, after the jail break of the party leaders in April 1942, and had nothing to do with the new program.<sup>17</sup> We have conclusive evidence that there were *no principled differences over the program*. In May 1942, when the BLPI was established, the draft program was adopted *unanimously*. Even the leader of the Allahabad group, who had originally “vigorously opposed” the CA demand, accepted the program.<sup>18</sup> One month later the new Provisional Central Committee reported to the International Secretariat that “theoretical agreement was reached on all fundamental issues.”<sup>19</sup>

### A ground-breaking Marxist analysis of India

At the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, Lenin distilled the Bolshevik experience with the CA:

“We were obliged to convene the Constituent Assembly even after the victory of the proletariat, so as to prove to the backward proletarians that they had nothing to gain from that Assembly. To bring home the difference between the two, we had to concretely counterpose the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly and to show the Soviets as the only solution... In this way the conflict between Soviet and bourgeois government became quite clear, not only to us, the vanguard of the working class, but also to the vast majority of the peasantry, to the petty office employees, the petty bourgeoisie, etc....The history of the Russian revolution has clearly shown that the masses of the working class, the peasantry, and petty office employees could not have been convinced by any arguments, unless their own experience had convinced them.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Carlo [V. Karalasingham], “Report of the Provisional Central Committee of the BLPI,” September 20, 1944, typescript; subsequently published in *News Commentary* [Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain], vol. 1 (August 4, 1945), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> For a factual rather than fictional account of the split in the LSSP see *Tomorrow is Ours*, chapter 6. The ICL has added not one iota of new evidence.

<sup>17</sup> See “Report of the Provisional Central Committee of the BLPI,” September 20, 1944.

<sup>18</sup> “We do not oppose the slogan of the Constituent Assembly. It has become a part of our Transitional Program.” “Bharatiya krantikari mazdoor parti (Tratskivadi) ke vichar, mangom aur karyakram” [Views, demands, and program of the Revolutionary Workers Party (Trotskyist)], *Jivan* [Life], February 6, 1948, p. 5. My translation.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from C.P.S. [Chandravadan Shukla], L.S.G. [Leslie Goonewardene], and E.B.S. [Bernard Soysa] to Bureau of the FI, June 29, 1942, p. 1. The report of the Provisional Central Committee to the first BLPI conference in 1944 also states that “full agreement was reached on all programmatic and organizational questions.”

<sup>20</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Speech on Parliamentarianism” (August 2, 1920), in *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, (1966), pp. 255-56.

The Marxist intellectuals who drafted the BLPI program thought that the Indian revolution might bypass the necessity for a CA. Like Czarist Russia, India was a predominantly agrarian country where an autocratic government ruled over a vast subject population teeming with class, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and national divisions. The BLPI program concluded that the theory of Permanent Revolution was fully applicable to British India as well as the more than 500 Princely States that were embedded. But Indian society had unique features that would affect *how* the revolution might progress.

First, Indian society was deeply rooted in an ancient and rigid hierarchical caste system that had no parallel in Russia or anywhere in Europe. In British India alone there were more than 60 million “untouchables” who had nothing to lose but their chains. Second, in India there was no party representing the peasantry as a whole, comparable to the Socialist Revolutionaries in Czarist Russia. Without that obstacle, the class polarization among the peasantry would likely develop more quickly.

Third, the economic crisis in the Indian countryside was even more acute than it had been in Russia.

“The creation of a vast army of landless peasants, share-croppers and wage-laborers on the land has immensely complicated the agrarian problem, and rendered necessary *revolutionary measures of the most far-reaching character*...the landlord-peasant antagonism has been given a sharper emphasis by the extension of parasitic claims on the land, and the overthrow of landlordism by the transference of the land to the cultivator remains the primary task of the agrarian revolution. Nevertheless, this basic antagonism has been supplemented by a new one, which is reflected in the growth of an agricultural proletariat in the strict sense of the word. Besides this, the invasion of finance capital has made the problems of mortgage and of rural debt more pressing in some parts of India than in others, and *these facts taken together will probably give to the agrarian revolution, at least in some areas, an anti-capitalist character at a very early stage ...Thus, though the Indian revolution will be bourgeois in its immediate aims, the tasks of the proletarian revolution will be posed from the outset.*”<sup>21</sup> (my emphasis)

If that prediction proved true, then the bourgeoisie would surely seek refuge in the protective arms of the British imperialists, rather than try to re-play the role of the Cadets or even the Mensheviks. Thus the program concluded:

“This slogan, conceiving of an intermediate democratic stage in the Indian revolution, when a democratically elected parliament will have the power, is illusive and deceptive. It is destined in the later phases of the revolution to be utilized by the bourgeoisie and its agents as a slogan in opposition to and for the sabotaging of the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship in the Soviet form. Hence the Bolshevik Leninist Party cannot under any circumstances give it unqualified support.

### The tactic of Critical Support

Though the program didn’t *advocate* the CA as a fighting transitional demand for India, the BLPI leaders recognized that situations could arise where the call for a CA might be taken up by the masses in their struggle against imperialism or where it might be posed as a “referendum” on imperialist rule. In such cases the demand for a CA could assume a transitional character:

“However, the slogan of Constituent Assembly, advanced as a fighting slogan to overthrow imperialism, is capable of assuming a progressive character in the early stages of the revolutionary struggle. In such circumstances, the Bolshevik Leninist Party will lend its critical support to the slogan, not as one capable of objective fulfillment even for a successful revolution, but as a rallying cry in the specific stage of the struggle. At the same time the Bolshevik Leninist Party must advance and popularize its own slogan of Soviets.”<sup>22</sup>

One such situation had already arisen during the period of the provincial Congress governments (1937-39). The Congress raised resolutions in the assemblies calling for a CA. Their speeches generated considerable popular enthusiasm. If any of the Trotskyist groups had representatives in these assemblies, what position would they take on these resolutions? They would have no choice but to give them their critical support. If they had the ICL line, they would have to vote *against* these resolutions – since they were a “call for a new capitalist government.” That would put them in the same camp as Winston Churchill, the Native princes, and the reactionary Hindu Mahasabha. The *Spartacist* article studiously avoids drawing out the *tactical implications* of their new line.

<sup>21</sup> *Draft Programme of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India. Indian Section of the Fourth International* (Bombay, 1942), pp. 20 and 32.  
<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 36.

In short the BLPI regarded the call for a Revolutionary Constituent Assembly (RCA) as a *tactic* that the party may advance, or withdraw, at any particular moment in the struggle for power, depending on whether or not it could be used to expose the misleaders and help the masses shed their illusions and communal consciousness.

### A confirmation of the prediction

In 1942 the British coalition government dispatched the hapless Sir Stafford Cripps to India with the mandate to secure full Indian cooperation with their war effort. He offered a deal: support us now in the war, and we'll give you "full-self government" when we win. Both the Congress and the Muslim League politely told him to shove his proposal. Churchill responded in kind, declaring that there would be no more offers to the "beastly Indians." Gandhi threatened to launch "mass civil disobedience." At its historic open-air mass meeting in Bombay in August 1942 the Congress leaders passed the "Quit India" resolution. The British arrested the entire Congress high command before dawn the next day.

The next morning angry crowds surged through the streets of Bombay, violently lashing out at anything British. Within days the revolt spread far and wide, not only to the major cities and provincial towns but also deep into the countryside. With the Congress leaders in jail, the masses broke loose from the straightjacket of non-violence.

In Bombay the BLPI, formed only three months earlier, distributed leaflets that called for a "mass general political strike against British imperialism" and the immediate formation of peasant committees to fight for the abolition of landlordism without compensation, cancellation of peasant debt, and other transitional demands.

The Quit India revolt seemed to confirm that the BLPI prognosis was correct. Although the CPI and the Royists were able to keep many of the urban workers on the job and away from the nationalist demonstrations, millions of peasants all over India refused to pay rent, demanded debt relief, looted granaries, and in some areas drove out the police and formed their own *panchayats* (local governing committees).

In 1992 the ICL published a retrospective article on the Quit India struggle in which they hailed the "exemplary work, programmatic soundness and significant local successes" of the BLPI.<sup>23</sup> Quite true. The BLPI leader who directed that work, wrote many of the leaflets, and then drew the lessons of the revolt was Philip Gunawardena - the man whom the ICL now loves to hate as the Doctor Evil of the BLPI.

### The fiction of "consistent opposition" to the CA demand

The ICL states that a "significant layer" of the party "consistently opposed" the CA slogan. That is another ICL fabrication.

In 1942 the International Secretariat of the Fourth International published a manifesto in solidarity with the Quit India revolt. The manifesto advanced the demands of the Transitional Program, including the call for a CA. The BLPI reprinted the manifesto in the party journal, *Permanent Revolution*, which was produced by the Calcutta branch of the party. In an introduction the editors stated, "without the revolutionary social program outlined in this thoroughly Marxist document, any talk of victory over British imperialism is either sheer deception or pure nonsense."<sup>24</sup> I would add that the editors of *Permanent Revolution* subsequently formed the core of the minority faction that the ICL rhapsodizes.

In 1944 the BLPI was finally able to convene its first national conference. One of the items on the agenda was ratification of the party program. Doric de Souza – the hero of the ICL - chaired the session. He pointed out that some of the statistics in the original draft of 1941 needed to be updated. But neither he nor anyone else at the conference raised the issue of the CA. The program was duly ratified.<sup>25</sup>

In 1945 the BLPI convened a Regional Conference in Calcutta. The main point on the agenda was to review the party program in light of events since the 1944 conference. Two leading comrades in the branch submitted a report. There was no mention in the report, or in the floor discussion that followed, about the CA section of the BLPI program.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> "The 1940s 'Quit India' Movement: Stalinist Alliance with Churchill Betrayed Indian Revolution," *Workers Vanguard*, no. 970, December 3, 2010, reprinted from *Workers Hammer*, nos. 131 and 132, September/November 1992.

<sup>24</sup> "To the Workers and Peasants of India," *Permanent Revolution*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1943), pp. 23-33. The BLPI also reprinted the manifesto as a pamphlet: *Fourth Internationalist Library*, vol. 1, May 1943.

<sup>25</sup> "Minutes of the First Representative Conference of the BLPI," typescript [1944], p. 10. According to the minutes, "Comrade Livera [Doric de Souza] initiated the general discussion and said that as far as possible an attempt had been made to bring the figures [in the original draft of 1941] to the latest year for which the statistics were available." After some discussion, "The party program as amended was accepted."

<sup>26</sup> "Discussion on the Political Report on Present Political Situation in India," *Internal Bulletin*, no. 2 (September 1945), pp. 1-6.

If there had been “significant opposition,” then these two comrades would surely have raised it. They were leaders of what became the anti-CA minority in 1947!

### Warning signs of centrism

With the end of the war in sight the Congress leaders started an unofficial campaign for a return to office. The BLPI sharply criticized the leftist parties in Congress who refused to fight the leadership on this question; the BLPI pledged “full support” to any rank-and-file militants who resisted. But they went one step farther. the BLPI put forward the slogan, “Consolidate the left forces in Congress through these struggles.”<sup>27</sup>

That was a significant change in line. The BLPI had always polemicized against leftists who thought they could build up a revolutionary left wing inside the Congress.<sup>28</sup> This call to “consolidate the left” in a *bourgeois* party was in essence no different than Stalin-Bukharin’s line on the Kuomintang in 1927. The ICL can’t blame the “rightist faction” for this centrist wobble. Philip Gunawardena and his entire faction had been arrested in 1943 and were serving jail terms in Ceylon. The leadership of the BLPI was in the hands of what the ICL calls the “left faction.”

### Crossing the class line

After the war the BLPI faced an unexpected situation. Britain was bankrupt, and the new Labour government was under tremendous pressure from its American banker to reach a “settlement” in India if it wanted to get more loans and food to feed its hungry working classes. Hence, in 1945 the British decided to hold new elections in India and promised to convene a “Constituent Assembly” to establish an independent Indian Dominion within the Commonwealth. The Attlee administration’s goal was to “transfer power” to a coalition government in India while maintaining control over its military bases and the huge Indian Army, which the British needed to put down the nationalist-Communist insurgencies in South East Asia.

At that point the issue of the CA became a focal point of Indian politics. The Congress and Muslim League mobilized huge election campaigns. The League ran on the slogan for Pakistan, while Congress stumped for their version of a CA. The policy for a Trotskyist party in these elections should have been crystal clear. No support to the candidates of the bourgeois Congress and Muslim League. As for the Congress Socialists and CPI, neither warranted critical support. The Socialists were running merely as Congressmen, while the Stalinists were calling for votes to both the Congress and the League.

These elections provided the BLPI with an opportunity to unmask the nationalists and reformists and explain to the masses why a revolution was needed to resolve the communal conflicts that were slowly tearing the country apart. *The BLPI should have recognized the change and independently raised the demand for a genuine CA.*

The BLPI Central Committee, however, couldn’t agree on a line for the elections. So they circulated two documents for internal discussion. One argued for supporting any *individual* candidate, regardless of party affiliation, on the basis of a single criterion: “What part did he take in, what attitude did he take to the August Struggle?” The other accepted that approach but added that CPI candidates who ran in the labor constituencies should be supported, too.<sup>29</sup> The authors of both position papers were allied to the Doric de Souza faction in Ceylon.

In October 1945 the CC convened an expanded meeting, including representatives from the party branches, to resolve the question. After two days of debate, a majority adopted the following position:

“We oppose Congress, but are ready in token of our solidarity with the real uprising of the masses in 1942 and of our aim to unremitting struggle today to support any candidate of any political affiliation, even if he is a Congressman, who (in the judgment of the party) really identifies himself with and gives full support to the mass uprising of 1942... We support and vote for such a candidate, even if he is a Congressman.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ministry-Makers and ‘Leftist’ Fakers, BLPI pamphlet (April, 1945), p.8.

<sup>28</sup> The BLPI’s 1944 conference resolution stated that the only choice facing the Congress Socialists was “either to surrender to the reactionary Congress Right Wing or to leave Congress altogether.” “The Present Political Situation in India,” Resolution adopted at the First Representative Conference of the BLPI, 20-25 September 1944, *Permanent Revolution*, vol. 2, nos. 2-4 (April-December 1944), p. 24; also: “The Future of the CSP,” *Permanent Revolution*, vol. 3, no. 1 (January-April 1945), p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> Leslie Goonewardene and Colvin de Silva wrote the document calling for votes to candidates who upheld the Quit India movement. Indra Sen advocated voting for CPI candidates.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in D.G. [Douglas Garbutt], “Report on the Fourth International Movement in India,” [1946], typescript, p.17. This line was subsequently elaborated in the party’s election manifesto, *Vote for August, Vote for Struggle*.

The BLPI swore that they weren't supporting Congress – only the Quit India movement. But they were fooling only themselves. Bottom line, the BLPI was calling for *votes to candidates of a bourgeois party* – a party *whom the Muslim masses quite legitimately despised and feared*. This line was a formula for exacerbating the communal conflict and driving both sides deeper into the arms of their misleaders.

The ICL can't pin this rightist deviation on the Gunawardena faction. Doric de Souza chaired the CC meeting where this line was adopted. Philip Gunawardena, who had just been released from jail in Ceylon, quite rightly denounced the election line as "opportunist through and through" for "virtually supporting Congress candidates."<sup>31</sup>

### The critical turning point

In 1946 the Cabinet Mission announced their plan for establishing an "interim national government" and a "constituent assembly" that would draft a Constitution, subject to ratification by Parliament. The BLPI Central Committee met and decided that "(1) there was nothing in the programme to prevent our advancing the slogan of Constituent Assembly in suitable circumstances and (2) the development of events thus far in relation to the Cabinet Mission negotiations do not necessitate this slogan being advanced."<sup>32</sup>

The BLPI called a press conference in Bombay and blasted the plan:

"What is being set up is merely a constitution drafting agency of British imperialism, working to imperialism's mandate and subject to imperialism's self-interested decisions. It is not even a fake Constituent Assembly for a fake transfer of power. It is a carefully designed instrument for negotiating the permanent framework of a long-term imperialist-bourgeois-feudalist alliance... Down with the Cabinet Mission! Down with the Collaborationist parties! Down with imperialism's fake Constituent Assembly! On with the struggle for India's independence!"<sup>33</sup>

They BLPI rightly called the proposed CA a fraud – so did Congress – but they didn't put forward any revolutionary alternative. They simply called on Congress to resume "struggle."

Worse, the BLPI press continued to trash the very idea of Muslim self-determination as a "pipe dream of the Muslim feudalists." *These were exactly the same arguments that the Congress ideologues used.*

### The fuse of civil war

Jinnah, fed up with the British bias towards Congress, announced that the League was bidding farewell to constitutional methods. He called on Muslims to take "direct action" on August 16<sup>th</sup> to force the British and Congress to accept Pakistan. This was no idle threat. The League had just won a resounding victory in the elections with the promise of Pakistan. The communalist Hindu Mahasabha called on Hindus to "break" the Muslim *hartals*. The paramilitary squads on both sides prepared for a fight. British military intelligence estimated that these squads, taken all together, numbered *half a million men*.

In Calcutta, where Muslims and Hindus were almost equally divided, the sectarian violence raged for four days, leaving more than 5,000 dead and 15,000 wounded. The violence spread into eastern Bengal and westward into Bihar. The historian Anita Inder Singh argues that this was the decisive turning point:

"Rape, forced marriages, conversions...meant that stories and rumors spread like wildfire, arousing the deepest hatred and the fiercest desire for revenge; and stirred Hindus into waging the most bloody and brutal vengeance on Muslims in Bihar and the UP. *This was the breaking point.* A handful of riots in a few cities would not have led to it. But atrocities committed on a mass scale could not be forgotten on either side, and they lent the most sinister definition to Pakistan and Hindustan."<sup>34</sup>

The BLPI condemned the violence, blamed both the Congress and the League for fomenting communalism, and called for class solidarity. But the party didn't seem to fully grasp what was happening. The BLPI continued to dismiss the Pakistan slogan as just a "pipe dream of the Muslim feudalists." Yet Muslims and Hindus were killing each other every day in the name of their two counterposed ideals – Pakistan versus Akhand Bharat [Undivided India]. India was becoming Palestine writ very large.

<sup>31</sup> Internal Bulletin [LSSP], vol. 1, no. 2 (March 1947), p. 2. Reprinted in *Samasamajist*, October 20, 1948.

<sup>32</sup> "Report Presented to Party Convention beginning May 21, 1947," *Internal Bulletin*, vol.2, no. 1 [May 1947], p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> "Bolshevik-Leninist Party on Cabinet Proposals," *Spark*, vol. 1, no. 9 (Mid July 1946), p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India 1936-1947* (1987), p. 249.

## A belated recognition of reality

After the League rejected the fake Constituent Assembly, and sealed that decision in blood, the Congress suddenly dropped its boycott and took their seats. That prompted the BLPI Central Committee to reconsider its previous decision. The BLPI, under the leadership of what the ICL calls the “left faction,” raised the call for “a relentless struggle for the dissolution of the fake Constituent Assembly, the overthrow of British Imperialism and the summoning of a Revolutionary Constituent Assembly.”<sup>35</sup> What had changed?

According to a subsequent CC report to the party:

“This attitude of the Congress [to boycott the CA] changed subsequently, however, and the CC meeting of December, 1946 felt it necessary to put forward the slogan of a Revolutionary Constituent Assembly, elected on universal franchise and outside the orbit of British imperialism, as a propaganda slogan in order to expose the fake character of the ‘Constituent Assembly’ that was in session.”<sup>36</sup>

The BLPI leadership, having until then pooh-poohed the idea of a Constituent Assembly, now bent the stick in the opposite direction. In their draft resolution, circulated prior to the May 1947 conference, they advanced the demand for a Revolutionary Constituent Assembly as the centerpiece of the party’s program for the coming period. That drastic change provoked opposition. Some leading comrades in the Calcutta branch thought the new slogan misguided. In their view the CA “has been absolutely unreal to the Indian people, 90% of whom are shoved aside, the representation of the rest being indirect at that.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the BLPI should just “expose it in the way we had been doing in the past.”

The BLPI should have raised the slogan of the RCA when the Cabinet Mission first landed in India. The ministers spent three months floating one scheme after another for the transfer of power – a federation with a weak central government and lots of provincial autonomy, groupings of provinces that could opt out of a union if they wished, etc. Instead of vague exhortations to “continue the struggle” (the mantra of the petty bourgeois Congress left), the BLPI should have raised the demand for immediate elections on a universal suffrage to freely debate and decide the issues of provincial autonomy, federation, or partition.

Absent Soviets, a democratically elected CA, like the Duma in Czarist Russia, would have at least provided an arena – for the first time in India - where the political parties could fight out their respective programs for the future of 400 million people. Neither the Congress nor the Muslim League wanted that. The fight for a CA would have given a propaganda league like the BLPI at least the opportunity to hammer home the message that *the Congress and Muslim League were just as determined as Mountbatten that the masses should have no voice in their future.*

## The debate over the Constituent Assembly at the 1947 and 1948 conferences

At the May 1947 national conference three positions on the CA were advanced. The party’s general secretary, Leslie Goonewardene, held that (a) the slogan as formulated in the BLPI program was valid, (b) the party had been right to raise the slogan when Congress decided to join the assembly, and (c) since popular enthusiasm for the assembly had since waned, the slogan should be withdrawn.<sup>38</sup> This methodology smacks of tailism and negates the whole purpose of a transitional demand, which is to *rouse* popular enthusiasm and support for a line of action.

A delegate from Bombay proposed that the RCA “should be the central slogan of the Transitional Program.”<sup>39</sup> The rationale was that “owing to the unique situation in India a temporary bourgeois-democratic regime might come about.” A British Trotskyist who attended the conference aptly noted that this position was “inspired by a schematic conception of the *inevitability* of a ‘Kerensky stage’ in the Indian revolution.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> “What we stand for,” *New Spark*, April 26, 1947.

<sup>36</sup> “Report Presented to Party Convention beginning May 21, 1947,” *Internal Bulletin*, vol.2, no. 1 [May 1947], p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Roby, Chester, and Bibhutu, “A Criticism of the Draft Resolution as Submitted by the CC,” *Internal Bulletin* (1 April 1947), pp. 6-7. “Roby,” “Chester,” and “Bibhutu” were definitely pseudonyms. My educated guess is that they were among the leading lights of the anti-CA faction. If so, likely candidates would be P.K. Roy, Hiranand Mishra, Dulal Bose, and Z.H. Khan.

<sup>38</sup> The sponsors of that proposal included Leslie Goonewardene, Colvin de Silva, and Indra Sen. “Report of the First Party Convention Held May 21-24, 1947,” p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Hector Abhayavardhana, V.S.S. Sastry, Anthony Pillai, V. Karalasingham, and Raj Narayan Arya advocated this position. H.A. Vardhan [Hector Abhayavardhana], “Convention Discussion on the Constituent Assembly: A Summing Up,” *Internal Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 3 (September 25, 1947), p. 4-12. See also Raj Narain, “The Slogan of R.C.A. Why Should We Retain It?,” *Internal Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1 March 1948), pp. 1-3.

<sup>40</sup> J.F., “Report on the activities of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India during 1947,” December 18, 1947, p. 6-7.

The Calcutta minority took the inverted position, arguing that there could be *no intermediary stage* in the revolution.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the call for a CA, which allegedly “implied” and “visualized” such a stage, “was a departure from the theory of Permanent Revolution.” The same British observer regarded this position as “an equally wooden conception of the *impossibility* of a ‘Kerensky stage.’”

The abstract quality of this position wasn’t accidental. The proponents – P.K. Roy (1925-75), Arun Bose (1919-2002), and Doric de Souza (1914-87) – were all academic Marxists, and their base of support was the BLPI’s student group at elite Presidency College in Calcutta, the Indian equivalent of Cambridge or Harvard. In one of its reports the British Intelligence service described the Calcutta branch of the BLPI as a “band of academic votaries of Trotskyism.”<sup>42</sup>

P.K. Roy was a mathematical prodigy. In 1945, when he was only 20, he became a protégé of the famous physicist Satyendra Nath Bose, who had collaborated with Einstein to formulate what became known as the Bose-Einstein Statistics. Roy regarded the theory of permanent revolution like an elegant equation that defined the most direct, efficient way to go from point A (democratic phase) to point B (socialist overturn). The CA was an irrational detour.

Arun Bose, a wunderkind from an old elite Calcutta family, had gone to Cambridge on a scholarship, wowed his Economics professor, the Stalinist Maurice Dobb, and returned to India in 1940 with letters of recommendation from the British CP that catapulted him into the CC of the CPI. But his academic view of Marxism rankled his stodgy Stalinist comrades, and in 1947 he defected to the BLPI in Calcutta, which was a super-stimulating intellectual debating society more to his liking. The BLPI considered him such a “good catch” that he was voted to chair the 1947 conference.

Doric de Souza, another precocious academic superstar from a distinguished family in Ceylon, likewise went to London on a scholarship and when he returned to Ceylon in 1937, he was offered a position in the English Department of the University College, Colombo, even though he hadn’t completed his PhD.

### **The Calcutta minority and the debate over independence**

At the 1947 conference the other hot debate revolved around whether or not the British were actually going to “transfer power” on August 15. Some took the view that British imperialism would switch from “direct rule” to “indirect rule.”<sup>43</sup> Others argued that the transfer of power would be more or less real.<sup>44</sup>

P.K. Roy, on the other hand, argued that since the tasks of the democratic revolution can be carried out only by a Soviet socialist regime, the British exodus could not possibly result in independence. He characterized the Mountbatten plan as a big fraud and held that Britain would “work a political alliance within the *existing framework of direct rule*.” (my emphasis) Doric de Souza softened that position. He argued that India would become a “semi-colony” of Britain. But he emphasized, “*in no case* does the loosening of political ties mean the liquidation of British Imperialism, or the freedom of the colonies.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, the opponents of the CA showed the same rigid, scholastic thinking on the question of how Britain would extricate itself from the mess in India. Their sterile, academic understanding of Marxism blinkered them from seeing what was really happening. Even after the transfer of power, the Calcutta minority around P.K. Roy continued to maintain that nothing qualitative had happened. At the next BLPI conference, held in Calcutta in 1948, Roy and his followers voted against the majority line that India now had “political independence.” While this might sound very leftist, the implications were actually quite the opposite: if India was still essentially a colony, then the Indian bourgeoisie still had an anti-imperialist role to play. P.K. Roy in fact advanced an amendment that “the oppositional role of the bourgeoisie had not been exhausted since the basic needs of the bourgeoisie have not been satisfied.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The main proponents of this position were P.K. Roy, Hiranand Mishra, and Doric de Souza. “Report of the First Party Convention Held May 21-24, 1947,” *Internal Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 1 [May 1947], p. 5; Arun Bose, “Programme and Reality,” *Internal Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 3 (25 September 1947), pp. 13-16; P.K. Roy, “Opportunism on the Question of the Constituent Assembly,” *Internal Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 3 (25 September 1947), pp. 17-21.

<sup>42</sup> “The Communist Survey No. 3 of 1944,” Section II: The Fourth International or Trotskyist Movement in India, p. 5. India Office Library: Folder L/P&J/12/431, File Pol. (S) 2002/1944.

<sup>43</sup> “Report of First Party Convention Held May 21-24, 1947,” pp. 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Tilak [Leslie Goonewardene] ventured that Britain might have to “grant sovereignty to her colonies” in order to “salvage her empire.” Gupta [Indra Sen] thought that there’d be a “transfer of a certain quantum of power.” Menon [S.C.C. Anthony Pillai] opined that there would be “some degree of political independence.”

<sup>45</sup> Doric de Souza, “The Crisis of British Imperialism,” *Fourth International*, July-August 1947, p. 204.

<sup>46</sup> “Summary of minutes of the Calcutta Convention of the BLPI, 1948,” *Internal Bulletin*, August 31, 1948, p. 4.

### The CA and “entryism”

At the 1947 convention the delegates from Bombay proposed that the BLPI carry out a Trotskyist “entry tactic” in the Socialist Party, which at that point was preparing to exit the Congress. Some of the delegates who supported this proposal also supported the majority on the RCA. But while the RCA resolution was passed, the proposal for entry was defeated. The ICL, however, makes a big deal out of the overlap. They argue that the *political* line on the RCA and the *organizational* tactic for entryism were two sides of the same “rightist” coin:

“The lines of division on this question [the RCA] were almost identical to those over the proposed liquidationist entry of the BLPI into the Socialist Party, which was debated at the same time... the result was entirely negative: the party came to embrace the constituent assembly slogan, which it had formerly rejected, and then collapsed into the social democracy. It appears that the Calcutta-based left wing was worn down until it finally offered little resistance to these disastrous moves, which led to the disappearance of the BLPI.”

This argument is specious. The Calcutta minority did *not* oppose the entry tactic – they objected to the *target*. In Calcutta, unlike Bombay, the Socialist Party had little heft. The Forward Block of Subhas Bose, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, and a bevy of smaller parties played the role of Congress Left. The Calcutta minority proposed that the BLPI seek a merger with the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCPI), a centrist hodgepodge of radical nationalists, former terrorists, and proto-Shachtmanites. After the British set up their fake CA, the RCPI called upon the Left to join together to form Soviets and a “People’s Constituent Assembly,” so that they’d be ready when the masses rose up.<sup>47</sup>

At the 1948 BLPI conference the Calcutta minority insisted that no entry decision be made until the party leadership had concluded negotiations with both the SP and the RCPI. The discussions with the RCPI hit a wall on the Russian Question. The RCPI majority was embracing Shachtman’s position. With that, the Calcutta minority reluctantly voted in favor of entering the SP.

The two debates – the CA and entryism – were more like the opposite ends of a see-saw than the two sides of a coin. At the 1947 conference the RCA was adopted and the entry tactic rejected. At the 1948 conference the RCA was rejected and the entry tactic adopted.<sup>48</sup>

### What really happened to the “left wing” minority

After the 1947 conference Doric de Souza, who represented the Ceylon unit of the BLPI, returned home, where the Ceylon unit was busy campaigning for the first general election to Parliament. When the United National Party failed to win a majority of the vote, the Ceylon unit of the BLPI – led by Doric de Souza – issued a statement saying that it would support the formation of an anti-UNP opposition government which would include *bourgeois* parties such as the Ceylon Indian Congress, the Indian National Congress, and the Ceylon National Congress. A representative of the British section of the FI who was visiting India was taken aback:

“Although our comrades made it quite clear that they would not support the actions, but only the formation, of such a government, this statement must nevertheless, in the opinion of the reporter, be regarded as an opportunist deviation... the action of our comrades in calling upon the working class to support the formation of such a government must, in my opinion, rank as an error similar to that of the PCI minority in calling upon the workers to vote for a bourgeois constitution for France.”<sup>49</sup> [emphasis in original]

In his polemics Doric could sound very left, but back on his home turf he took the same rightist position as the rival LSSP. The “deep divide” between the Ceylonese factions wasn’t as deep as the ICL thinks. Doric de Souza helped write the centrist program that formed the basis for the reunification with the LSSP in 1950.

The role of Arun Bose – another “leftist” lionized by the ICL – was even worse. Not long after the 1947 BLPI conference he defected from the BLPI and rejoined the CPI, which hailed the Constituent Assembly as “the strategic

<sup>47</sup> S.N. Tagore, “Forward to the People’s Constituent Assembly,” February 17, 1947, reprinted in *The Hour Has Struck* (1949), p.15.

<sup>48</sup> At the 1948 conference the majority adopted the line that Leslie Goonewardene had put forward at the 1947 conference. “This Convention directs the re-drafting of the programme along the line that the Party is entitled to raise the Constituent Assembly slogan independently, when circumstances warrant it, and in a suitable form and manner.” “Resolution on Constituent Assembly,” *Internal Bulletin*, July 1948, p. 1; and “Summary of Minutes of the Calcutta Convention of the BLPI,” *Internal Bulletin*, August 31, 1948, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> “Report by JF on the Activities of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India during 1947,” typescript, December 18, 1947.

weapon in the hands of the national leadership.”<sup>50</sup> In around 1951 he left the CPI and pursued an academic career, becoming well known for his attempt to expunge the Labor Theory of Value from Marxist economics.<sup>51</sup>

In 1948 the remainder of the Calcutta minority entered the SP with the rest of their comrades. The leading lights were P.K. Roy, Dusal Bose (1918-2001), Keshav Bhattacharyya (1925-2013), and Hiranand Mishra, the former editor of *Spark*. They essentially boycotted party work. But they did circulate amongst their former BLPI comrades several critiques of the entry that quite rightly criticized the fraction’s leaders for failing to keep the Trotskyist ranks together.<sup>52</sup> Getting no response, they pulled out of the SP in 1951.

### The Genesis of Indian Pabloism

The former Calcutta minority revived the BLPI’s newspaper, *Inquilab* [Revolution], but consciously refrained from calling themselves “Trotskyist.” They believed that “waving the flag of Trotskyism” would just alienate the centrist parties in Bengal that they deemed to be “moving in the direction of Trotskyism.”<sup>53</sup>

In late 1952 they called for a grand merger of centrist parties. That was precisely the line that Michel Pablo and the International Secretariat had just adopted.<sup>54</sup> The theoreticians of the Calcutta group went so far as to write and publish a centrist program for this regroupment that avoided any mention of Trotskyism.<sup>55</sup> They stopped publishing *Inquilab* (too much of a Trotskyist pedigree) and started *Hatiar* [The Weapon]. Their mantra was “unite the Marxist forces.” In 1954 they merged with two small centrist groups in Bengal - the Samyabadi Samastha [Communist Consolidation] and the United Marxist League – to form the Communist League (CL). The program of the CL included the revisionist “war-revolution thesis” of Pablo, which provided a theoretical rationalization for their appetites to get into a big centrist party and thereby become “relevant” at last.<sup>56</sup>

By the mid-1950s the CL was clearly on the Pabloist line. Hiranand Mishra wrote two books on the anti-bureaucratic upheavals in Eastern Europe that promoted the revisionist thesis that the Stalinist governments could be pressured to the left without the intervention of a Trotskyist party. He wrote, for example, that a “new leadership,” committed to “removing social inequality and political oppression” is needed. “To place hope in the rise of such a leadership is revolutionary optimism.”<sup>57</sup>

Their main conduit to the International Secretariat in Paris seems to have been through the British Pabloist, Jimmy Deane, who came to India in 1956 and worked at an engineering firm near Calcutta. He met often with the Calcutta group and tried to get them to affiliate with Pablo’s wing of the FI. But in a sense the Calcutta group was more Pabloist than Pablo himself; they thought that any international affiliation would “taint” them with Trotskyism.

Thus, when the Bombay Trotskyists initiated a move to regroup in 1957, the CL argued that a revived Trotskyist party in India would be a *barrier*, rather than a boon:

“The course of events, especially the international events, will more and more compel the more conscious elements [in other left parties] as well as the different honest revolutionary groupings to adopt a fundamentally Trotskyist position...let us not close the door against them by insisting that they must openly swear by Trotskyism here and now....to swallow the whole thing hook, line and sinker. ...On the contrary, by making unreasonable demands in the initial period we will be spoiling these excellent opportunities and in reality, hampering the growth of a vigorous and healthy Trotskyist movement in India.”<sup>58</sup>

When their discussions with the centrists went nowhere, the CL reluctantly agreed to join the unification, provided the new party would accept “the principle of a bigger unity” and refrain from “associating openly with the

<sup>50</sup> Resolution of the CC, CPI, June 1947.

<sup>51</sup> Arun Bose, *Marxian and Post-Marxian Political Economy* (1975).

<sup>52</sup> “Entryism in Bengal,” unsigned document, July 9, 1949; “Bureau Draft,” unsigned document [late 1949]; “On the Question of Revitalisation of the Ranks,” Calcutta District Committee resolution, April 6, 1950.

<sup>53</sup> Interviews with Purnangshu K. Roy and Dusal Bose (Calcutta), February 2, 1974; Hiranand Mishra (Calcutta), February 7, 1974; Basanta Dev Mukherjee (Calcutta), February 9, 1974; and Keshav Bhattacharya (London), July 16 and July 24, 1974.

<sup>54</sup> In his report to the IEC, adopted at the Tenth Plenum in February 1952, Pablo stated that in India, the US, the Middle East and the African colonies “the Trotskyists must from now on act as the revolutionary leadership of the masses even though it may be necessary in some of these countries to go through an experience with certain reformist, centrist or simply national currents of formations.”

<sup>55</sup> *Draft Programme for the “All-India Marxist Party.”* Prepared for Discussion by Inquilab Group. Calcutta, November 1952.

<sup>56</sup> *Program of the Communist League* (February 1954), p. 37.

<sup>57</sup> Hiranand Mishra, *Stalinism – what it means* (1956), p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> Keshav Bhattacharyya, Acting Secretary of the Communist League, “Letter to Members of the P.C.C. [Provisional Central Committee],” March 22, 1958.

international Trotskyist movement.”<sup>59</sup> Shortly after the founding conference, the Calcutta group suddenly announced that they had reached “basic agreement” with a remnant of the old RCPI – the party they wanted to join in 1948. The RCPI still had basic programmatic differences with Trotskyism, especially on the Russian question.<sup>60</sup> The Calcutta Pabloists finally pushed their comrades into an unprincipled merger with the RCPI on a program that pledged to support “those efforts of the leading parties of the Workers States” that were “ensuring continued better living conditions and wider democracy for the masses, wider socialization and complete elimination of bureaucracy.”<sup>61</sup> Not surprisingly, the Pabloist International Secretariat called the program “a revolutionary Marxist one.”<sup>62</sup>

When the border war between India and Peoples’ China broke out in 1962, the Trotskyist wing of the RCPI came out for the military defense of China, while the historic leader of the RCPI publicly supported the Nehru government. The Trotskyists resigned in disarray. Many were so demoralized they left politics.

The India-China war produced a factional polarization in the CPI that led to the split in 1964. The Pabloists in Paris got all excited. Pierre Frank came to India and recommended that

“all comrades who can do it should, in my view, enter the Left CP [CP(M)]. The Left CP will be the real force in the left for a whole period, and we should make all our best [efforts] to work in it, or to associate or build it where it does not exist.”<sup>63</sup>

A French Trotskyist, Gilbert Dalgalian, who worked at the Alliance Francaise in Calcutta from 1963-65, recalls, “P. K. Roy and his comrades were on the Pablo line, as I was.”<sup>64</sup> The Calcutta Pabloists advocated “total entry” into the CP(M). They argued that these Stalinists would “crystallize as a whole into a genuine revolutionary party or just provide the necessary cadres for forging such an organization.”<sup>65</sup> The Calcutta group applied individually for membership in the CP(M).<sup>66</sup> The savvy Stalinists accepted their established trade unionists in Titagarh and Baranagar and ignored the applications of the rest. That reduced the Pabloist group to a handful of demoralized intellectuals.

Rebuffed by the CP(M), they subsequently pinned their hopes on the Maoist faction in the CP(M), which split to form the Naxalite party. The Calcutta group started a journal, *Jana Ganatantra* [“Peoples Democracy”], to try to influence the Maoists. That was their last gasp.

### **The relationship between the CA and Pabloism**

The rejection of the CA is usually associated with ultra-leftism of a Bordigist or Stalinist variety. The India case shows that it can also be the prelude to Pabloism. What is the connection?

In 1947 the young brainy intellectuals in the Calcutta branch rejected the CA with *objectivist* arguments that basically ignored the whole question of how the *revolutionary party* was the agency that made all the difference in the outcome of the struggle. Well, when things didn’t work out according to their mental roadmaps, they were vulnerable to the siren song of the Pabloists, who had their own brainy theories about how objective forces would enable even small Trotskyist groups like them to influence the course of history.

Since the collapse of the USSR the ICL has replayed this scenario in reverse. While the Pabloists had theorized that the militant working class parties of Europe could pressure the Stalinists to pursue a revolutionary role, the “leading comrades” of ICL concluded that the collapse of those Stalinist regimes basically asphyxiated the class consciousness of the working class on a global scale. Pablo denied the basic proposition of the Transitional Program – that the crisis of humankind is the crisis of revolutionary leadership. The ICL has drawn the same conclusion.

No doubt, this line change has a lot to do with trying to refurbish the revolutionary credentials of certain very senior ICL leaders. In their prime, in the 1960s and 1970s, they made many valuable contributions to the Trotskyist program. Sadly, it is they who have regressed in consciousness.

<sup>59</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of the Coordinating Committee of the SP(M), M.C.P. and C.L. Held at Calcutta from November 16 to 18, 1957.” Mimeographed document, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> “Further Unity Talks with the RCPI,” *Internal Bulletin* [RWPI], vol. 2, no. 3 (September-October 1958), p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> “Basis of Merger of RCPI-RWPI,” *Militant* [RWPI], February 5, 1960.

<sup>62</sup> “FI on RCP-RWP Merger,” *Militant* [RWPI], March 5, 1960, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from P[ierre Frank] to Bombay Trotskyists, July 10, 1964.

<sup>64</sup> Email from G. Dalgalian to the author, March 24, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> “On Organizational Perspective,” *Internal Bulletin*, no. 4 (July 1964), p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from G.C. [Guiding Committee] of West Bengal Trotskyist Group to Bombay Trotskyists, July 9, 1965.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have tried to offer an explanation, based on primary sources of that period and the many interviews that I have held with key participants, why the BLPI adopted a line on the Constituent Assembly that differed from the formulation in the *Transitional Program* of 1938. In reviewing all the documentation once again I saw weaknesses that I didn't fully explore in my book. I have presented those facts and my own interpretations in this article. This in no way changes my overall assessment of the Indian Trotskyists.

The ICL article does the Indian Trotskyists a great disservice. Their narrative is built on factual errors, misrepresentations, and a theory that doesn't hold water. If there is any integrity left in the ICL, they should repudiate this attack on a party that tried to make a revolution in conditions that were far more challenging and dangerous than anything the aging "leading comrades" of the ICL have ever had to face.

## **About the author**

Charles Wesley Ervin is the author of *Tomorrow Is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement in India and Ceylon, 1935-1948* (2006) and *Philip Gunawardena: the Making of a Revolutionary* (2001). He is currently writing a biography of the Bengali nuclear physicist and Marxist intellectual, Purnangshu Kumar Roy. Email: wes\_ervin@bellsouth.net

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