



The Strategic Orientation of the Revolutionists in Latin America

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(November 1970)

From **International Information Bulletin**, No.2, January 1971,
pp.21-32. [1*]

Transcribed & marked up by [Einde O'Callaghan](#) for the **Marxists'
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The discussion on the strategic orientation for Latin America that has been taking place in the ranks of the international Trotskyist movement since before the last world congress and that is still continuing fits into the framework of a broad debate of like character developing throughout the entire anti-imperialist vanguard of the continent. This is an essential preliminary point to be borne in mind that immediately clarifies one vital fact. This debate is not the result of any revolutionary group accommodating to “pressure” from some “mystical” sect that lacks

political experience on behalf of some “surefire solution.” It is rather an outgrowth of the practical, living experience of all revolutionists and all mass struggles over the past ten to twelve years on this continent.

This experience can be summed up in a few words. Whatever the different starting points of the mass movements in the various countries of Latin America, everywhere they have come to the same conclusion – that is, *all* forms of struggle that revolutionists have attempted, in close liaison with the masses or in isolation from them, have culminated in armed confrontations with local or international reaction, or both at once, from the moment they began to show the slightest serious progress.

Whether it was militant peasant unionism (Hugo Blanco); militant working-class unionism (Córdoba, Rosario); whether it was mass urban uprisings (Santo Domingo) or mass rural uprisings (recently in Ecuador); whether it was urban guerrilla warfare (Uruguay, Brazil) or rural guerrilla warfare (Peru, Colombia); the armed confrontation with the state, imperialism or a direct representative of imperialism (like the counterinsurgency groups or Rangers), did not occur at the conclusion of a long period of building up forces by a gradual advance of mass mobilizations. In every case, this confrontation came in the initial stage of the ripening of each potentially revolutionary form of struggle.

The reasons for this state of things does not lie either in the relative weakness of the mass movement, as some claim; or in the “premature” adoption of violent forms of action by this movement, as others claim. It lies in a complex: combination of several factors:

- a. The hyperacute and explosive nature of the social contradictions, which make it impossible to channel the militant thrusts of the masses into reformist paths.
- b. The assimilation by the masses of the principal lessons of the Cuban Revolution, notably a loss of confidence in the traditional bourgeois and petty-bourgeois formations and an accentuated hostility toward imperialism.
- c. The assimilation by imperialism and by the Latin-American bourgeoisie of the principal lesson of the Cuban Revolution, that is, the tendency of any vast mass movement to exceed the limits of its initial objectives and enter into a process of permanent revolution.
- d. The capacity of the masses for rapid recovery, even after grave defeats, precisely because of the inability of the ruling classes to achieve real solutions, even temporarily, for the ills the people suffer. (Two striking examples of this are the revival of the Brazilian movement in 1968 in vast mass demonstrations and strike mobilizations, despite the crushing defeat suffered in 1964; and the recovery of the Bolivian mass movement in 1969, despite the no less crushing defeat it suffered in 1964, which was,

proportionately speaking, bloodier and more grave than the Brazilian one.)

- e. The considerable strength retained by the bourgeois repressive apparatus (constantly fueled, financed, and reinforced by imperialism itself). The strength of this apparatus stands in clear contradiction to the weakness and decay of the traditional bourgeois and petty-bourgeois political apparatuses (Peronism, Vargasism, Goulart populism, the AD in Venezuela, and APRA in Peru). The result of this is that the bourgeois army is becoming the bourgeoisie's principal political force in all the Latin-American countries.

We by no means draw the conclusion from this that imperialism and the bourgeoisie can no longer govern except under the hideous mask of "gorillas." To the contrary, we have explicitly warned the comrades against such a simplistic view of things at the Ninth World Congress. [1] But we do draw the conclusion that whatever the vicissitudes or maneuvers of the bourgeois, one variant seems extremely improbable, if not excluded; that is the one of a rather protracted period of 'bourgeois democracy' on the European or American model (with all the limitations of such democracy, it goes without saying) that would permit the increasing growth of the mass movement thereby permitting revolutionists to achieve a progressive

buildup of strength through slow and patient work in the unions or other mass organizations, thus making it possible to postpone a major armed confrontation until the revolutionary organization and mass movement have achieved sufficient experience and maturity to undertake this struggle in the “best possible conditions.

The possibility of such a development seems excluded, in our opinion, because the bourgeoisie wants to prevent it at all cost and *because it still has enough power to prevent it.*

Let us take the exceptional and *only case* in Latin America over the last decade where the workers movement has been able to develop and grow in conditions of more or less classical “bourgeois democracy” – Chile. What do we see the moment Allende has won his celebrated electoral victory? The entire vanguard is talking about the possibility of an armed confrontation with the bourgeoisie. No one seriously believes that it would be possible to “purge” or dismantle the bourgeois military apparatus, to say nothing of overthrowing capitalism in Chile, without the army acting.

The eventuality of going through an “Allende era” without an armed confrontation would be the worst of possibilities, it would mean a terrible defeat for the workers movement; that is, with Allende limiting himself to a “classical” popular-front policy, not modifying the capitalist structures of the economy and the state in any way, with the masses accepting this deception and betrayal without a violent reaction, and with the right returning triumphantly to power on the basis of a general decline in combativity, on the basis of a great demoralization.

If we rule out this highly pessimistic hypothesis, armed confrontation is on the order of the day in the relatively near

future even in Chile. And, we repeat, everyone is talking about it. Because under this variant, the masses, more and more outraged and exasperated by the hesitations, cowardice, and inevitable capitulations of the popular front to the class enemy will themselves move into extra-parliamentary action over Allende's head. And in that case, a violent reaction by the possessing classes and their army is not only possible but probable. (The only countries where such a confrontation is not on the order of the day obviously are those where the mass movement has been disorganized and on a very low level for long years, as in Mexico; that is, in those countries where there are no reasons to impel the bourgeois into such a conflict. But even in Mexico, all that was needed was the first timid efforts of an explosive student movement to influence sectors of the working class and poor peasantry and the government proceeded to stage the massacre of Tlatelolco.)

As long as the five factors mentioned above remain valid (and in this specific combination, they are valid for the moment only in Latin America and a few countries of Southeast Asia), *the important and intensely fought major armed confrontations will occur from the beginning and not in the culminating phase of every major resurgence of mass struggles*. This is the lesson of experienced. It is by no means contradicted by the establishment of "military-reformist" regimes in a certain number of Latin-American countries. To the contrary, the installation of such regimes completely confirms this lesson, which we are considering precisely in *isolation* from the specific form of the bourgeois governments in Latin America {with the sole partial exception of Chile, where the formal structure of bourgeois democracy has thus far been maintained). The regime of General Velasco has not had to suppress broad mass movements, not because he has tolerated them, or been

forced to tolerate them by “mass pressure,” but because none have yet developed. The limited movements that have occurred, notably a few spontaneous land occupations and hard-fought strikes have all encountered fierce repression which has claimed many lives. As for Bolivia, the first sign of a new rise in mass struggles provoked a coup d’état followed by a bloody armed confrontation. Those who think that because he came to power “with the support of the left” General Tórres will prove more “tolerant” have a few disagreeable surprises in store for them, as soon as he has restored the unity of the army, which is his primary aim.

We can regret that these things are so. We can say that this is not the best variant for the Latin-American revolution. But, nonetheless, it is the only realistic one. It will occur in any case, whether the revolutionists are prepared for it or not. Since the Cuban Revolution the Latin-American revolutionists have increasingly preferred to prepare for the armed confrontation instead of having to face it unprepared. We frankly believe that they are right. To state this, explain it, and draw the general conclusions from it was the fundamental function of the document presented by the majority of the United Secretariat to the Ninth World Congress and which was adopted by this congress.

The Influence of the Cuban Revolution on the Strategic Orientation of the Latin-American Revolutionists

When Comrade Joe Hansen referred in his last discussion document to the preponderant influence

exercised by the Cuban Revolution for ten years on the thought and action of the Latin-American revolutionists, he got entangled in a strange and significant contradiction. On the one hand, he proclaims as an absolute dogma that guerrilla warfare is not a strategy but a tactic. On the other hand, he states that the principal lesson the young revolutionary vanguard in Latin America drew from the Cuban experience was to engage in guerrilla warfare in its most primitive form – “*foquismo*” – and that the majority of the Fourth International is now succumbing to the same sin, at the very moment when the Cuban comrades themselves are in the process of correcting their errors. “These revolutionary-minded youth” (in Latin America), he writes, “did not understand the basic political reasons for the Cuban success; they sought for the explanation on the side of skillful technique in the use of arms.”

If the Cuban experience essentially meant “*foquismo*,” if guerrilla warfare is a tactical question, how did it happen that for ten years the entire revolutionary vanguard in Latin America crystallized around debates and passionate struggles centering on the Cuban experience? A few tendencies can always get disoriented. Still very small, the Fourth International could succumb to “the influence of ultra-leftism.” But for the *entire* revolutionary movement in Latin America (we repeat, the entire movement with only a few thoroughly minor and insignificant exceptions) to let its mind be clouded for *more than ten years* by a purely tactical problem – that would really be an inexplicable mystery. And

Comrade Hansen does not resolve it with a few passing references to “inexperienced youth.”

The mystery is very easily solved, because it exists only in the rather unreal construction of our friend Joe Hansen. The reality is much more complex. The revolutionists who let themselves be hypnotized by the question of “*foquismo*” and the purely tactical aspect of guerrilla warfare did not constitute all the revolutionary movement in Latin America but only a small minority. Of course among this minority were some of the most courageous elements that the Latin-American revolution has yet produced; The losses they suffered because of their tactical errors were heavy and painful. But the *principal* debate, the one which caught up almost all the revolutionary movement in Latin America, was not over a tactical question but over a strategic one. The essential contribution of the Cuban revolution to crystallizing and reinforcing the revolutionary current in Latin America was not involved with “*foquismo*” (which only Regis Debray really systematized) but with the question of which orientation to follow – *one toward taking power through armed struggle; or a reformist one toward collaborating with the “national” bourgeoisie and its army* (or a fraction of its army)?

The fundamental cleavage the Cuban revolution introduced into the anti-imperialist movement was the result of this *strategic* alternative. It was on this ground that the Cuban Revolution challenged and combated thirty years of Stalinist and neo-Stalinist verbiage about an “alliance of progressives,” the “electoral road to power,” the “democratic tradition of our army,” and so forth. It is because this question is a strategic one and not a tactical one that the debate has been so impassioned, the cleavage so profound, the crystallization so long drawn out. Otherwise, all that has occurred in the Latin-American left since 1959 would

become incomprehensible indeed. Even the October Revolution, whose historic impact is unquestionably greater, was not able to provoke cleavages in the workers movement for ten years over purely tactical questions (such as the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly; the Brest-Litovsk peace, etc.). On the other hand, it produced cleavages on strategic issues (on the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, soviet democracy or bourgeois parliamentary democracy) which still persist, and for good reason!

Let it be said, moreover, in passing that the nature of this cleavage reflected the nature of the Cuban experience itself and that it is a complete distortion to say, as Régis Debray and a few others have done, that Fidel and Che overthrew the Batista regime starting from some isolated “*foco*.” In reality, the July 26 Movement was an organization that developed out of the left wing of a *mass anti-imperialist movement in both the cities and the countryside*, that even before the landing of the *Granma* had a political and material infrastructure in the cities much more solid than anything possessed today by any revolutionary vanguard organization in Latin America, and that in conditions of extreme clandestinity, under a ferocious dictatorship, tried to establish a close liaison with the mass movement. It should be added to this that up until the end of the struggle against Batista the July 26 organization had a greater number of people fighting and falling victim to repression in the cities than in the Sierra Maestra. Moreover, the general strike of January 1, 1959, played a key role in unleashing the process of permanent revolution.

These facts do not have a purely anecdotal value. They enable us to illustrate another contradiction in Comrade Hansen’s document. He puts great stress on the heavy losses and disastrous defeats resulting from the guerrilla struggle in Latin America over the last ten years. What, then, is the

mysterious reason why so many revolutionists and revolutionary groups in Latin America remain partisans of armed struggle, despite these losses? Is this out of a pure death wish or blind romanticism? Still, grave losses usually force militants to react, even those most set in their ways. *Two years* after the 1933 defeat in Germany neither the Communist nor the Socialist party dared repeat the policy that led to the disaster. Isn't ten years time in Latin America enough for people to draw the minimum lessons from catastrophic errors?

Here again the mystery clears up as soon as you leave the arbitrary construction erected by Comrade Hansen (i.e. "for or against *foquismo*") and rejoin the real and actual debate of the Latin-American vanguard ("for or against the strategy of armed struggle"). As soon as you look at the problem in this way, the reason why the Latin-American revolutionists persist, and why they are right to do so, becomes plain. They have acquired the conviction by experience that *the losses suffered owing to hesitations or refusal to engage on the road of armed struggle have been, are, and will be infinitely greater than the losses of the guerrillas*, given the nature of the political systems that prevail and must prevail in Latin America.

Compare the losses in guerrillas with the number killed in the massacres of unarmed worker and peasant populations in countries like Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil, and you will understand why these losses do not alarm any of the revolutionists.

We had the same experience during the Nazi occupation. When a certain level of ferocity on the part of the enemy is reached, revolutionists (including, if possible, broader groups and masses) take up arms as a measure of self-defense, even in the physical sense of the term. There were more survivors among the Yugoslav, Polish, and Russian

partisans than among the unarmed sectors of the civil population exposed to the Nazi mass arrests (and we are not including the Jews exposed to total extermination). Many more of the armed partisans in all the countries occupied by the Nazis survived than the Communist, Trotskyist, Socialist, and trade-union leaders who let themselves be deported to concentration camps. Many more of the Vietnamese Communists who have been fighting arms in hand for *twenty-five years* have survived than of the Indonesian Communists who refused to engage in such a struggle. This is the historic *dilemma* confronting the revolutionists in many Latin-American countries.

Once you understand the great strategic debate that the Cuban Revolution launched in the Latin-American revolutionary movement in such terms, you have reason to evince much greater concern than Comrade Hansen does over the *revision of strategy* that is underway on the part of the Cuban leaders. If it were all a question of tactics it would obviously be an excellent thing to stop disseminating hundreds of thousands of copies of the “terrible simplifications” of the hapless Regis Debray. But, unfortunately for Comrade Hansen, much more is at stake than a simple change in tactics. The question is whether under the combined effect of the failures of “*foquismo*,” Soviet pressure, and the evolution within their own country, the Cuban leaders are not abandoning their strategic orientation toward overthrowing the bourgeois state in Latin America, which is the orientation of the *Second Declaration of Havana*, of the permanent revolution. The question is whether they are abandoning their most important strategic advance to return to a neo-reformist and neo-Stalinist variant of revolution by stages – first the “anti-imperialist revolution” in which socialists are supposed to give more or

less critical support to a still intact bourgeois state and army (or their “progressive wing”); then a properly socialist stage.

The great majority of Latin-American revolutionists have recognized this danger, beginning with Hugo Blanco, who emphasized it in excellent terms that we entirely approve of. Once again the fundamental explanation is not to be sought in the realm of psychology (a previous embellishment of the Cuban line now producing an abrupt rebound, and so forth). It lies in the political logic. Any refusal to envisage armed confrontations in the near or relatively near future in Latin America can mean only one of two things – either abandonment of all perspective for revolutionary transformation; or a return to the illusion that this transformation will be miraculously possible with the aid or benevolent neutrality of the bourgeois army (or a part of it). There is no need to say that much more than the death of Che or this or that guerrilla defeat in this or that country, it is the practical experience of the Velasco regime in Peru, the Ovando-Tórres regime in Bolivia, and the election of Allende in Chile that is encouraging the return to these neo-Stalinist conceptions. There is no need to point out, either, that Moscow’s international apparatus, which does not lack resources, is exerting every means to promote such a regression and not without success, unfortunately, in Havana also. Let us hope that there at least these successes will be strictly ephemeral, and let us work toward this end with all our strength. This is an essential contribution we must make to the defense of the Cuban Revolution.

Comrade Hansen is wrong when he suggests that the majority of the Ninth World Congress based its orientation on the contingency that the Cubans would continue to support guerrilla warfare in Latin America. We do not think that the destiny of the Latin-American revolution depends on the orientation of the Cuban leadership. We think, to the

contrary, that the rise and new victories of the Latin-American revolution will determine the destiny of Cuba (and subsidiary to this we think that they will profoundly influence the orientation of Fidel Castro). It is in this sense that our strategy of armed struggle in Latin America is an integral part of our defense of the Cuban Revolution.

The Historical Variants of Armed Struggle

In order to define more precisely the character of the strategic debate now underway in Latin America – and on Latin America within our movement – let us examine the principal variants of revolutionary struggle growing over into armed struggle that we have seen thus far in the history of the workers movement. (We are obviously leaving the minor variants out of the discussion.)

1. There is the variant that can be called classical – the mass movement undergoes a rapid expansion (after a long period of building up strength and experience) and goes over into arming the proletariat and confronting the bourgeois army at the moment when the revolutionary crisis reaches its fullest flowering, that is simultaneously with a general mass mobilization and emergence on a wide scale of organs of dual power. This is what happened, *grosso modo*, in Russia in 1917,

in Germany in 1918-19, in Spain in 1936, in Vietnam in 1945-46, to pick the most well-known examples. Such a confrontation can occur at the outset of the revolutionary crisis, which happened in Spain and Vietnam; or only when the revolutionary crisis itself nears its culmination, which was the case in Russia. We will come back to the significance of this subvariant.

2. There is the variant that could be called “ultra-left” – a revolutionary party, already strong but clearly a minority, provokes a premature confrontation between its forces, in isolation, and the enemy army, The struggle invariably ends in defeat, a useless defeat. This is the case of the 1921 “March Action” in Germany by the young German CP; it was the case of the 1927 Canton putsch unleashed by the Chinese CP, and so forth.
3. There is a variant intermediate between the first and second, that is the case of an armed confrontation with the enemy which results from the advance and maturing of the mass struggle itself before the revolutionary party has won sufficient national influence to be able to defeat the bourgeois state. This was the case of the Paris Commune, the December 1905 insurrection in Russia, the armed

struggles resulting from the general strike against General Kapp's 1920 putsch in Germany, and the Asturias insurrection in 1934. The outcome of such struggles is uncertain. Although they generally end in a defeat, such defeat is not inevitable. Above all, it is not useless because it enables the masses and the revolutionists to acquire the practical experience indispensable for a victorious insurrection in the future. This, in any case, was Lenin and Trotsky's opinion on the December 1905 insurrection in Russia. (In the chapter on *The Art of Insurrection* in Volume II of the **History of the Russian Revolution**, Trotsky explains that the Red Guard could be formed so easily in Petrograd at the time of the February 1917 revolution because the proletariat of the city had retained the tradition of the armed struggles in 1905.) We, for our part, are convinced that the Spanish workers would never have broken the assault of the fascists in almost all the big cities of the country in July 1936 if they had not gone through the experience of the 1934 insurrection and several minor armed uprisings between 1931 and 1936.

4. There is finally the instance of autonomous armed detachments of the mass movement which launch a struggle

for one of the following reasons: to extend the fight being waged by the mass movement, with the aim of forcing the counterrevolutionary army to disperse its forces and relax its pressure on the centers of working-class agitation; to facilitate resumption of the mass struggle after a grave but not definitive defeat. (A subvariant is that of a rise of peasant insurrections coming as a delayed response to a working-class upsurge in the cities, after it has been defeated. This, in general, was the case of the Chinese guerrilla struggle after 1928. The aim of saving the cadres persecuted in the cities can play an important part in rapidly unleashing such a fight.) The guerrilla war in Russia in 1906, in China after 1928, in Yugoslavia under the Nazi occupation, and in Vietnam after the start of the imperialist reconquest all fall under this category.

Why this classification? Because it enables us to narrow the debate. We will not insult Comrade Hansen by claiming that he is opposed to the first category of armed struggle. No doubt he will not insult us by claiming that, turning our backs on all the experience of the international communist movement, we are deliberately seeking to provoke putsches. The debate is thus focused on the problems of the third and fourth category of armed struggle.

Now, we must highlight an extremely important distinction between the different cases that fall under the first category. Why were the Bolsheviks able to avoid (and were a thousand times right to do so) a full and deliberate armed confrontation with the bourgeois army at the time of the February Revolution? Why could such a confrontation not be avoided in Germany or Spain? Was it owing exclusively or principally to the presence of the Bolshevik party in Russia and its absence in Germany and Spain? Frankly, we do not think so. We think so still less because in February and March 1917 the Bolshevik party was not the party of Lenin or of Lenin and Trotsky but the party of Stalin-Kamenev-Molotov, with a policy not fundamentally different from that of the German Independents in November-December 1918 to January 1919.

The reason for the difference between the Russian and German and Spanish cases seems to us to be an *objective* one. In Russia, the army had been broken up to such a degree by *an external factor prior* to the revolutionary process – the world war – and was moreover so rent by internal social contradictions (between landlord officers and land-hungry peasants), that it had virtually ceased being an adequate counterrevolutionary instrument. In fact, it *never* became such an instrument. After the conquest of power by the Bolsheviks, the counterrevolutionary officers had to recreate a new army from scratch in order to be able to unleash the civil war. This was, moreover, one of the reasons for their final defeat.

In Spain, the situation presented itself in a totally different way. There had been no war with a foreign power. The army was materially intact. It was shot through with unquestionable political and social contradictions, which a revolutionary party of the stature of the Bolshevik party would certainly have exploited, widened, and made more

explosive by tenacious work among the soldiers; but it is extremely improbable that even the best revolutionary policy could have kept the reactionary officer corps, gathering around it the most politically primitive and backward section of the population, from constituting a counter-revolutionary striking force that would have acted as soon as the mass movement reached a certain level of revolutionary initiative.

What is the reason for this capacity for action on the part of the bourgeois army in the first phase of the revolutionary process? It derives from the *uneven development of the revolutionary process*, from the uneven development of consciousness in the various segments of the population, from the uneven development of the break up of capitalist society and the bourgeois state.

It is normal and virtually inevitable that the conscious industrial proletariat, the vanguard of the agricultural and plantation proletariat, and the vanguard of the poor landless peasantry will reach the level of revolutionary initiative, going over into revolutionary action and constituting Soviets, well before the working population of petty-bourgeois origin and the strata of workers still influenced by reactionary political formations begin to break with bourgeois society. A revolutionary party enjoying great political authority can seek, by its action, to *reduce* this uneven development; it cannot eliminate it. If the party tries to eliminate this unevenness by deliberately curbing the enthusiasm of the most revolutionary strata it risks producing the opposite result. Not only because the most advanced strata may become demoralized and withdraw from the struggle, but because the *essential* element for convincing or neutralizing the hesitant strata may disappear, this element being less the *propaganda* of the

party or the Soviets than the resolute *action* of the proletariat.

Save in exceptional cases, which a revolutionary party cannot count on without risking falling victim to disastrous illusions, it is unlikely that a revolutionary situation will coincide with a breakup of the army. Furthermore, the *start* of disintegration in the armed forces, coinciding with a general mobilization of the masses, will certainly provoke a move by the army. The military chiefs will feel that if they let the revolutionary process proceed a few weeks more, the ground might sink under their feet. One of the factors which no doubt precipitated the military coup d'état in Brazil in 1964 was precisely the "mad sergeants" mutiny, which indicated that the seed of dissolution was beginning to take root in the army.

Once we have understood this *uneven* process of the decay of bourgeois society, of which the army clearly remains one of the last intact "hard kernels," once we have understood this uneven process of the revolutionary mass mobilization which clearly leaves a backward layer of the population as a base for the army, even when the majority of the proletariat is already engaged on the road of revolutionary struggle, then, we understand that there is no Chinese wall between armed struggles of category number 1 and categories number 3 and number 4. And we also understand that the more the industrial and agricultural proletariat is in a minority in the nation – that is, the more backward the country – the more this relative weakness *coincides* with an extreme explosiveness of the objective situation, with a potentially revolutionary lightning mobilization of the masses, then, the more virtually inevitable is the intervention of the army in the first phases of a broad mobilization, if only for the purposes of self-defense and self-preservation of the officer corps.

We have taken a long historical detour to return to the initial strategic conclusion concerning Latin America, let us reinforce this conclusion by two clarifications on armed struggle, in the light of the general experience of the workers movement.

Can the struggle of armed detachments autonomous from the mass movement be equated with putschism or with terrorism? It would be strange, to say the least, if Lenin, who had struggled his entire life against putschism and populist terrorism should suddenly become an advocate of such methods in 1906 and maintain this position until the end of his days. What characterizes putschism is the attempt *to win power* – or sometimes to bring a radical reversal in the political situation of a country – by means of the violent armed action of a small minority. We reject this conception and everything that flows from it, just as Lenin and Trotsky always rejected it. For us the conquest of power is inconceivable without action by the broad masses – the emancipation of the workers will be the deed of the workers themselves.

But this by no means implies that we reject *all* violent armed action by autonomous detachments separate from a broad mass movement in every situation and for no matter what immediate tactical objectives. The theses *The Fourth International and the War*, which Trotsky drew up in 1934, explicitly anticipated the need for such actions in defense of the USSR, in the event of an imperialist aggression against the first workers state. The experience of the second world war showed that such actions were possible and useful and by no means conflicted with the task – a more protracted one – of reorganizing and reviving the mass movement defeated by fascism.

In the struggle against rising fascism, exemplary actions by autonomous armed detachments may be useful and

indispensable to convince the masses that such a struggle is possible – before the masses themselves enter into it. This was confirmed both by the German experience (negatively) and by the Austrian (positively – the Schutzbund uprising in Vienna in February 1934 was an insurrection by a small minority, but neither Trotsky nor the Trotskyist movement would for an instant have considered condemning it as “putschist”; it was the right-wing Social Democracy that utilized this argument, completely misunderstanding the nature of fascism). It was confirmed above all by the Spanish experience, where the *first initiative* in fighting back arms in hand against the fascist insurrection did not come from the “broad masses” but from small detachments of the vanguard of the workers parties and trade-unions, who, *by their example* drew the broad masses into the struggle later.

While we are resolute opponents of any isolated action incomprehensible to the masses; we are by no means advocates solely of armed actions *organized by the masses themselves* within the framework of their organizations. This variant is not always possible. In this respect Lenin employed a formula which summed up perfectly the historical experience of his time and the epoch following his death. In periods of a partial ebb of the mass movement in the wake of a defeated mass uprising, as well as in periods of a rising mass movement before the development of a generalized insurrection, actions by autonomous armed detachments are useful and essential to “disorganize the enemy’s force and pave the way for future open and mass armed operations ...” (Lenin, **Werke**, Vol.10, pp.146-147, Dietz-Verlag 1958, the resolution on *Fighting Guerrilla Operations* prepared for the reunification congress in March 1906 [**Collected Works**, Vol.10, p.153, Foreign Language Publishers, Moscow 1962.]). This is true, however, only if

these actions *are understood by the masses and correspond to their*” feelings and concerns.

Let us repeat again, to avoid any misunderstanding, that these considerations apply only to pre-revolutionary conditions and in a precise political context (the absence of democratic liberties, the impossibility of a gradual ascent in the mass movement, etc.). There is *no question* of mechanically extending this reasoning to all countries in the world, least of all the United States, Japan, Great Britain, Germany, etc. In this regard likewise Lenin said all that needed to be said in *Guerrilla Warfare*:

“Marxism demands an absolutely historical examination of the question of the forms of struggle. To treat this question apart from the concrete historical situation betrays a failure to understand the rudiments of dialectical materialism. At different stages of economic evolution, depending on differences in political, national-cultural, living and other conditions, different forms of struggle come to the fore and become the principal forms of struggle; and in connection with this, the secondary, auxiliary forms of struggle undergo change in their turn. To attempt to answer yes or no to the question whether any particular means of struggle should be used, without making a detailed examination of the concrete situation of the given movement at the given stage of its development, means completely to abandon the Marxist position.” (**Oeuvres**, Volume 11, Editions Sociales, Paris 1966, p.216 [**Collected Works**, Foreign Language Publications, Moscow 1962, p.214].)

The document adopted by the Ninth World Congress did not establish universal rules, either for all continents or for all time to come in Latin America. It drew a certain number of strategic conclusions from a body of “concrete historical circumstances,” for as long as these circumstances last. It is on this basis that

we must be answered, not one of proclaiming abstract principles valid at all times and places.

A Polemic Leading Nowhere

In this respect, we are left perplexed by the vigorous polemic against the Ninth World Congress document which Comrade Hansen resumes in his *A Contribution to the Discussion on Revolutionary Strategy in Latin America*. There are two possible explanations for this polemic, based on Comrade Hansen's document as well as the discussion article he wrote before the world congress.

1. Comrade Hansen may consider that the majority of the international leadership has abruptly gone over to Debrayist, foquista positions. In this case, he is engaging in a war to defeat the ultra-left phantom of *foquismo*.

If this is really the case, we can set his mind at rest immediately. Both the Reunification Congress documents and the Eighth World Congress documents, as well as the resolution on Latin America voted by the Ninth World Congress clearly and unequivocally *opposed foquismo*. There is really no danger of seeing the Fourth International take up the ball dropped by the Fidelista team in advocating "*foquismo*" in Latin America. The leading cadres of our movement have conducted a systematic polemic against "*foquismo*" for long years. You need only read Comrade Livio Maitan's article on Régis Debray's book to realize this.

Let us add that an objective reading, without preconceptions, of the Ninth Congress document makes it possible to conclude that it by no means advocates “a strategy of rural guerrilla warfare” (to say nothing of “a strategy of the ‘*foco guerrillero*’”), but the strategy of armed struggle, which is an entirely different thing. To try to give the opposite impression, Comrade Hansen has been forced to single out *a single sentence* in the document adopted by the Ninth World Congress and polemicize against it instead of analyzing the document as a whole and polemicizing against its general line. The least that can be said is that this is not a very fruitful method of argument and will not advance the movement.

2. The other possibility is that Comrade Hansen considers that by putting “excessive” stress on the strategy of armed struggle, the World Congress document might “inspire” the sections to launch into premature actions. The heavy way he emphasises the “defeat in Bolivia” seems to support this hypothesis. Therefore, this second one warrants a longer refutation.

The adoption of any strategy, even with the greatest unanimity and lack of dispute, always involves the risk of erroneous tactical applications. No guarantee whatever exists against such errors – and their appearance cannot in any way be considered an argument against the correctness of the strategy. In every period, participating in broad mass movements (and *a fortiori* in temporary united fronts with reformist organizations) has led some elements to make an *opportunistic adaptation* to the more backward layers of the masses. This is what is called “tail-endism.” Revolutionary Marxists combat such opportunistic adaptations but they

hold no less obstinately to the line of participating in mass movements and organizations (above all, the unions), which is a correct strategic line. Only sectarians on the model of the KAPD [Kommunistische Arbeiter Partei Deutschlands – Communist Workers Party of Germany] and Gorter have taken the pretext of the danger of opportunist adaptation to reject struggling inside mass organizations.

The adoption of the strategy of armed struggle in Latin America corresponds to an analysis of the objective conditions and their general tendencies of development, to the concerns and needs of the vanguard. This does not imply that it safeguards the revolutionary Marxist organizations against tactical errors in applying it. But it does imply one thing: as long as the conditions apply which we outlined above, conditions which make armed confrontations inevitable in an early phase of the advance of the mass movement, *every revolutionary organization, even relatively small ones, that have passed a minimum threshold of organizational solidity, are condemned to periodic crises if they fail to take a correct position on this question* (and by correct position we do not mean a purely literary and propagandistic position but also a minimum of practical application).

To explain the successive crises of the Argentinian organization simply by “Debrayist,” or “*foquista*” pressure means substituting a fundamentally idealist explanation for a materialist one. It means failing to understand that the roots of these crises lie in the irresistible pressure for armed struggle resulting from the *objective situation* – the pressure of the masses as much as the vanguard. It means believing that it is “*foquista* false consciousness” that determines being – not being, that is the systematic strangling of the liberties of the workers in a climate of

explosive contradictions, that determines the consciousness of the necessity of armed struggle.

On this question Comrade Hansen would do well to reflect on Lenin's words devoted to this very subject of guerrilla warfare:

“It is not guerrilla actions which disorganise the movement, but the weakness of a party which is incapable of taking such actions *under its control*. That is why the anathemas which we Russians usually hurl against guerrilla actions go hand in hand with secret, casual, unorganised guerrilla actions which really do disorganise the Party. Being incapable of understanding what historical conditions give rise to this struggle, we are incapable of neutralising its deleterious aspects. Yet the struggle is going on. It is engendered by powerful economic and political causes. It is not in our power to eliminate these causes or to eliminate this struggle. Our complaints against guerrilla warfare are complaints against our Party weakness in the matter of an uprising.” (Lénine, **Oeuvres**, tome 11, Editions Sociales, Paris 1966, p. 221-2 [V.I. Lenin, **Collected Works**, Vol.11, Foreign Language Publishers, Moscow 1962, p.219])

This quotation admirably expresses the problem confronting our movement with regard to guerrilla warfare and armed struggle in Latin America. It ought to convince Comrade Hansen that he is on the wrong road and is leading us to an impasse by his polemic.

If Comrade Hansen's fear were limited only to seeing sections of too small a size engage prematurely in organizing autonomous armed detachments, we would obviously be in complete agreement with him. We are keenly aware that a primitive accumulation of forces must precede the formation of these detachments. Without this there could not be the indispensable coordination between mass work and the work of armed detachments, between paving the

way for the mass insurrection and the preliminary “disorganizing the enemy forces.” We are determined opponents of the spontaneist idea that “the party is built as the armed struggle extends.” For the same reason, we are likewise opponents of the no less spontaneist idea that “the methods of armed struggle are learned as the mass movement rises to its peak.” We are in favor of conscious, that is, planned and far-sighted, intervention by the revolutionary leadership at every stage of the struggle. And this implies the necessity of preparing for armed struggle when you expect it in the next stage.

But all these obvious truths would not justify Comrade Hansen’s polemical heat, because they *are already incorporated in the Ninth World Congress*. What was and still is necessary is to clarify the position of the Fourth International toward the great strategic debate on the “revolutionary or reformist road” in Latin America. And – whether Comrade Hansen likes it or not – this debate is very largely (not entirely but in very large part) expressed in terms of “for or against the armed struggle in the near or relatively near future.”

Likewise, in seeking to *counterpose* party building to the strategy of armed struggle, Comrade Hansen is leading the discussion into a blind alley. In the same way, party building could be counterposed to any strategy, for example participating in mass demonstrations. This is the error Healy and other sectarians make who have reproached the SWP for participating in the antiwar movement, the Black nationalist movement, and the women’s liberation movement rather than “building the revolutionary party.” The SWP has replied correctly to these infantile objections that there is no other way to build a revolutionary *party* – as opposed to a sect or religious-type cult – than formulating a

correct strategy corresponding to the concerns and needs of the masses themselves.

The fact is that the strategy of preparing for armed struggle, in most Latin-American countries, corresponds in precisely this way to the needs and preoccupations of the masses, to all their fighting experience over the last ten years. In these conditions, we will answer Comrade Hansen as the SWP answered Healy, that there is no way to build revolutionary parties in Latin America without adopting a correct position on one of the key strategic questions posed by the vanguard and the masses – preparation for the armed struggle. Far from being mutually contradictory, party building, propaganda and agitation for transitional demands, and public defense of the strategy of armed struggle are inseparable and complementary in the present conditions in Latin America.

The Function of the Ninth Congress Document

The function of the document adopted by the world congress is precisely to clarify this *strategic* question. It does not attempt to determine when and in what precise conditions each section must “unleash” armed struggle. That is a question that depends on the circumstances in the various countries, on the development of the objective situation, on the level of consciousness of the masses and the mass struggle, on the preparedness and extent of our own forces, and other such factors. It is, in other words, a purely tactical question and must be left to the judgment of

each section (with a minimum of coordination among neighboring sections, insofar as we take seriously our own postulates about “continent-wide revolution,” building a “world party,” opposition to “national communism,” etc.). Not for a moment did the world congress have the intention of bringing pressure to bear on this or that section to make such decisions. Where they have been made, they have been made by the section and the section alone. (This puts Comrade Hansen, moreover, in the disagreeable position of initiating an international polemic against tactical decisions reserved to the competence of the national sections. You can’t have it both ways, Comrade Hansen!)

The world congress document had a different objective – a strategic and not a tactical one. It’s purpose was to define the position of the Fourth International in the great ideological debate that is polarizing the revolutionary vanguard in Latin America. In order to illustrate the meaning of this intervention and its intimate connections with party building and defending transitional demands, we would like to give a few examples drawn from the still fresh experience of the revolutionary movement in Latin America.

During the congress of the miners union in Bolivia and the congress of the COB [Central Obrera Boliviana – Bolivian Workers Federation] which followed it, there were many discussions on the demands taken from our transitional program – nationalization without indemnity or compensation (the question of compensating Gulf Oil is at the center of political polarization in Bolivia), reestablishing workers control over the mining industry, etc. Does

Comrade Hansen think that after the experience accumulated by the Bolivian miners you can stop at that, and top it off with a fancy governmental formula or even a propaganda campaign for a “socialist revolution?” Thousands of miners and other vanguard Bolivian workers will surely answer:

“Dear comrade, completely agree on workers control, eliminating indemnities to Gulf Oil, and the workers-and-peasants-government formula. We would point out, however, that we already partially achieved workers control fifteen years ago. All well and good. But in fighting for your nice program, which we already adopted almost twenty years ago, we ran up increasingly against the army. First it harassed us; then encircled us; then repressed us; and finally massacred us, our wives, and our children. Today it has ‘generously’ withdrawn fifteen kilometers away from our mining centers, but no further. Are you proposing a mere repetition of what happened in the 1950s? How then can we prevent the massacre of our wives and children? Are you proposing nothing more than building the party? But how can this organization defend itself from intervention by the army, in a year, two years, three years? Isn’t it irresponsible to urge us on the one hand to engage in widening mobilizations and struggles which must inevitably and in very short order provoke a violent clash with the army; and at the same time say nothing and do nothing to prevent this clash from being one between reaction armed to the teeth and the virtually unarmed masses?”

Our Bolivian comrades were entirely right to raise the question of arming the proletariat and preparing for armed struggle at the congress of the COB. It will be the historic shame of the Communist party and a pseudo-Trotskyist like Lora that they deliberately removed this question from the agenda, when all the experience of the proletariat and all the logic of the

situation in Bolivia put it at the center of the strategic thinking of any half-way perceptive worker militant. The events that occurred a few weeks later have entirely confirmed the *urgent immediacy* of this question.

Let us take another example. In Argentina, the military dictatorship is compelled by the relationship of forces to tolerate a not entirely state-controlled trade-union movement. But every time any union leaders become too radical, the army intervenes to remove them. Like any reformist bureaucracy, the union apparatus in control displays an abject servility toward capital and its military flunkies. Obviously, the Argentinian revolutionists are striving to weaken the grip of this bureaucracy on the working class. To this end, with only a few exceptions, they defend the idea of extending and generalizing struggles (a few even use and abuse the slogan of a general strike). To every appeal by a Trotskyist journal for extending and generalizing struggles, the vanguard workers would have the right to answer: "Hold on! Hold on! You say that partial struggles, purely economic ones, are not enough. But as soon as the struggle widens, the army intervenes, as in Córdoba and Rosario. Do you want to send us into a massacre?" And if Comrade Hansen thinks that it is enough to answer them. "Build a revolutionary party before thinking about military self defense," they would be still more justified in replying: "But before you have built your party, stop calling for a generalized struggle which threatens to end in a massacre. At least be consistent with your own logic!" ... It is apparent where such logic would lead, in the absence of a clearly advertised strategy of preparing for armed struggle

...

Contrary to the impression Comrade Hansen leaves, we did not state in the world congress document that preparing for armed struggle was synonymous everywhere with making preparations for guerrilla warfare, or even rural guerrilla warfare. The situation is very complex in this respect. It would have been useless and out of place for a world congress to want to establish a single variant for the future. We note in passing that even an organization entirely committed to rural guerrilla warfare like the Brazilian VPR [Vanguarda Popular Revolucionaria – Revolutionary People’s Vanguard] has come to the conclusion that urban guerrilla warfare is the best means for preparing for rural guerrilla warfare because it enables them more effectively to accumulate cadres and experience for this objective than isolated operations launched from the beginning in the countryside.

Armed struggle can develop out of self-defense in strikes as well as self-defense in peasant land-occupations movements. It can be closely combined with continuing the mass movement – which is obviously the most favorable case, as Comrade Maitan has already emphasized – as well as prolong such a movement after a partial defeat, with the objective notably of protecting the cadres or freeing the victims of repression. It can take place in the cities, in the countryside, or in both environments at the same time in varying proportions depending on the specific conditions of the moment and the country and the available forces. It must *always* be sought to integrate armed struggle closely with mass work, which must be pursued without letup through building the party, which remains the No.1 overall task. It would be necessary to avoid stripping the plants and unions of experienced activists who have already gained experience in mass work, except to save them from repression. It would be profoundly irresponsible to want to

set any general rules, since for the entire continent as well as each country changes in the objective conditions may call for changing tactics, as the Bolivian section has correctly done.

But the essential thing, in this regard, is to tell the masses openly that armed confrontations are inevitable as soon as the mass movement attains any serious breadth at all *and that they must prepare for this*. The essential thing is not to think that it is enough to declare this on paper, *but also to prepare yourself for it* as soon as you have assembled a minimum of forces. The future of our movement in Latin America, the future of every revolutionary organization on that continent depends in large part on the frankness and seriousness with which they approach this body of questions now and in the future.

So that the discussion can make real progress and not harden into a dialogue of the deaf, we would like to pose four questions to Comrade Hansen.

1. Does he believe that, as a general rule (with only a few minor exceptions) in the stage immediately ahead of us in Latin America it is improbable if not impossible that we will see a peaceful advance of the mass movement, broadening out in successive waves within an essentially bourgeois-democratic framework?
2. Does he believe that, as a general rule, it is improbable that the breakup of the reactionary bourgeois armies in Latin America will proceed at the same rate as the rise of the mass movement, and that therefore these armies, will lose their

capacity for carrying out a bloody repression of the movement?

3. Does he think, on the basis of the two preceding considerations, that it is the duty of the Latin-American revolutionists to carry out a propaganda campaign to prepare the masses, and above all the vanguard, for the military confrontations inevitable in the near and relatively near future in most of the Latin-American countries? Does he think that the revolutionary strategy on whose basis the sections of the Fourth International are built must include a clear, unmistakable answer to this question, which in any case is being discussed by the entire vanguard?
4. Does he think that once our own organizations have accumulated a minimum of forces they must, in their turn, prepare for these confrontations or risk very heavy losses, both in physical terms (inflicted by the class enemy) and political terms (inflicted by the other tendencies in the revolutionary movement)?

If Comrade Hansen answers “no” to these questions, then the differences separating us would clearly be serious and would require a thoroughgoing discussion. But in this case, for heaven’s sake, *let us discuss these differences*, and not “*foquismo*” which

no one in our ranks is defending, or immediate and universal organization of “rural guerrilla warfare,” which is a completely twisted interpretation of the document voted on by the world congress.

If, as we firmly hope and as we expect from all his own revolutionary background and the revolutionary tradition of his party, Comrade Hansen, in general, answers “yes” to these questions (perhaps with a few nuances), then there are no differences over strategy, then the debate as it has developed thus far has been based on misunderstandings and divergent interpretations of texts, Then all that remains would be a debate over the tactical question of whether one or another section was right or wrong to draw this or that tactical conclusion from our *common* strategy. Such a debate would not be without interest. But it would support none of the dark apprehensions Comrade Hansen manifests about an ultraleft danger threatening us. And such a debate would be severely limited in extent, because Comrade Hansen would be the first

to proclaim that the decision in these tactical matters lies within the competence of the national sections and not the world movement ...

November 1970

Footnote

1. In a recent polemical document, Comrade Hansen wrote:

“To justify converting rural guerrilla war into a strategy, it was argued [in the majority resolution – *E.M. & M.K.*] that the Latin-American ruling class, operating hand in glove with US

imperialism, left no other alternative open. Against the ferocious violence of the ruling class, nothing could be done except to turn to guerrilla struggle.” (Page 4 of *A Contribution to the Discussion on Revolutionary Strategy in Latin America*)

To prove this peremptory claim, Comrade Hansen quotes a passage from the resolution which declares that the class enemy will not permit legal organization of a mass movement that progressively develops and grows without trying to repress it by violence. Then he exclaims triumphantly that Bolivia and Peru prove the contrary! Really, Comrade Hansen? Where, then is the revolutionary mass movement tolerated by General Velasco in Peru? Where then is the revolutionary mass movement that the army has not sought to repress by force, far from tolerating it, in Bolivia? It is clear that Comrade Hansen is confusing the alternative “military dictatorship of the gorilla type or military dictatorship of the reformist type,” with the alternative “military dictatorship or bourgeois democracy.” It is this last alternative the resolution excludes, save in exceptional cases; and we will continue to exclude it. As for the first alternative, the majority document anticipated it in so many words, as is evident from the following passage:

“This does not exclude possible oscillations in the most disparate directions, including new ephemeral pseudo-reformist attempts, political gambles, and even variants within the framework of military regimes (groups of officers are continually playing at ‘Nasserism’ in several countries and the immediate import of military coups is not always the same in every given situation). But this will change nothing in the general, deep-seated tendency: in a situation of chronic crisis and pre-revolutionary tensions, the ruling classes will inevitably be impelled to adopt brutal repressive measures and utilize despotic and terrorist political regimes. Since these classes often are not very solid as social forces and cannot realistically contemplate solving their problems with popularly based reactionary regimes on the fascist model, military regimes remain the most likely recourse.” (**Intercontinental Press**, July 14, 1969, p.718)

The least one can say is that this analysis has not yet been contradicted by the evolution in Latin America except – temporarily – in Chile.

Note by ETOL

1*. Martine Knoeller was the pseudonym of Gisela Scholtz, Mandel's first wife, who died in 1982.
