

An exchange of letters on Stalinism, Trotskyism and the Communist Party of Canada

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Comrades,

I have just found your site. It is well organized and the articles are intelligent and well thought out. Your analysis is also compelling.

I am a member of the Communist Party of Canada and an organizer with my particular cell. However, I am an admirer of Trotsky and agree with his analysis of the Soviet Union and Stalin. I don't think he was correct about everything (a long complicated debate best left for another time), but it seems to me that whatever the historical reasons and perceived analytical differences which exist between the "communist" parties and the Trotskyists they are now an impediment to the international struggle to achieve communism. At a time when the world capitalist forces are bearing down on the working class with all their energy it is criminal for the socialist forces to be split. Not only does it weaken the movement as a whole but it confuses the working class who become disgusted with all the catcalls about who is more revolutionary or more democratic or who is to blame for this mistake or that.

There is no doubt that the Stalinist communist parties (that is those who decided to stay under the sway of the CPSU) made serious errors in internal party democracy and economic policy and held back revolutionary forces around the world in the attempt to spare the Soviet Union further attacks on its existence. But would Trotsky have done any better? Perhaps. We'll never know.

However, it is equally clear that the Trotskyist policy of deep entry into working class parties in Europe and elsewhere has completely failed. Ernst Mandel and Seymour of the Sparts in their debate in Manhattan a few years ago, ended up in a screaming match each accusing the other of being irrelevant. It seems to me they were both correct in that the world communist movement, whatever its particular tendencies are, must once again act in concert at least on a fundamental level.

Both the Trotskyists and the Communist parties see themselves as revolutionary communists. They both adhere to Lenin's principles of democratic centralism in the party and they both agree that any hope of working within the social-democratic parties is pointless.

The split is in my view now an anachronism. Stalin is gone and not just physically. Trotsky can now be talked about within my party without getting people's backs up. Yes, a few of the old timers still believe what they were told, that Trotsky was an anticommunist but the younger ones don't buy this and are willing to learn.

Instead of opposing one another we should be fostering united actions where possible and conferences about our supposed differences in approach. This is not to deny that there will be differences and suspicion. But as communists we have to act as real

revolutionaries and organize for the benefit of the working class. Does it really matter who leads them as long as the road to socialism is taken?

Hope to hear from you.

Comradely regards,

(name withheld for publication)

Dear Comrade,

Thank you for your appreciative remarks about the *World Socialist Web Site* and sorry for the long delay in getting you this reply.

Simply put, we cannot agree with your contention that the collapse of the Soviet Union has rendered the split between the supporters of Leon Trotsky and organizations like yours that for decades lauded Stalin and the politics of the Soviet state an "anachronism." This is not a party or factional question. At issue is how we assess the twentieth century and lay the political and ideological groundwork for the next wave of revolutionary working class struggle.

You concede that "the Stalinist communist parties ... held back revolutionary forces around the world," but then dismiss this as a mere mistake. Presumably, the Moscow trials, the assassination of Trotsky, and the extermination of countless Soviet socialists in the purges of the 1930s were likewise "mistakes."

As your profess familiarity with Trotsky's writings, you no doubt are aware that he held that under Stalin the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the other sections of the Third International were transformed from revolutionary parties into the political instruments of a privileged bureaucratic caste that had usurped power from the Soviet working class. A product of the delay in the world revolution, of the isolation and backwardness of the first workers state, the bureaucracy was in the final analysis an agency of imperialism.

You mention in passing some of the issues that were central to Trotsky's struggle against the bureaucratic degeneration of the October. But the crux of the dispute between Trotsky and the ruling faction within the CPSU was the question of "socialism in one country." In separating the fate of the October Revolution from the world struggle for socialism, Stalin repudiated not only the program and perspective upon which the Bolshevik revolution had been based; he abandoned one of the fundamental tenets of scientific socialism.

Soon after its promulgation by Stalin in the fall of 1924, Trotsky warned that the credo of "socialism in one country" reflected the material interests of a rising bureaucratic layer rooted in the party and state apparatus. Having secured a privileged position within the workers state, this bureaucracy was now seeking to preserve its position by arriving at a new *modus vivendi* with imperialism. By asserting that "socialism" could be built within the national frontiers

of the Soviet state, the bureaucracy was in effect offering imperialism a guarantee that the October Revolution would not be extended in hopes of convincing the international bourgeoisie to forsake its efforts to overthrow the Soviet state, the source of its privileges.

At least from the German Communist Party's ignominious capitulation to Hitler in 1933 on, the CPSU and Comintern sought not just to constrain the struggles of the working class, but to sabotage and suppress them. The defence of the Soviet Union, a tactic that in Lenin's day had always been viewed as subordinate to the program of world socialist revolution, was transformed by the bureaucracy into a mechanism for reconciling with their "own" national bourgeoisie the revolutionary elements who had rallied to the banner of the October Revolution and founded the various Communist parties. A nationalist deviation from the program of Marxism, "socialism in one country" thus inevitably nurtured nationalist orientations in all the Stalinist parties--but more on that later when I come to analyzing the legacy of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC).

As for your contrast between the Communist Parties' "mistake" of holding back world revolution and the alleged failure of the Trotskyist "policy" of entryism, forgive me if I'm blunt, but it is absurd. Entry of Trotskyists into rival centrist and social-democratic parties was a limited tactic advocated by Trotsky under very specific conditions in the 1930s. Moreover, when debating the utility of "entry" it is necessary to recall that Trotsky and his supporters were subjected by the Soviet state and the Stalinist parties to persecution on a scale and of an intensity never before witnessed in the history of the workers movement.

Trotsky's struggle to defend and enrich the conception of a world revolutionary strategy in opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy is of burning relevance to the struggle to resuscitate the world socialist movement. Here is not the place to recapitulate at length the analysis of the ICFI, but we contend that the crisis of the working class is rooted in its domination for many decades by alien class forces--the Stalinist, social-democratic and trade union bureaucracies, and, in the oppressed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, sections of the national bourgeoisie--all of which claimed that imperialism could be fought on the basis of a national program. With the break-up of the postwar boom, the bourgeoisie's repudiation of national-economic regulation, and the globalization of production, these organizations have proven utterly incapable of defending even the most elementary interests of the working class. If the working class is to successfully combat globally-organized capital, it needs as never before to conceive itself as an international class and proceed from a world revolutionary strategy.

Clearly you believe the CPC, its association with Stalin and Stalinism notwithstanding, can still contribute to the building of a mass socialist workers party. I would be interested in learning what precisely you think is positive in the CPC's legacy. For our part, we believe the while "Stalin is gone," the CPC by virtue of its history, international affiliations and program remains Stalinist. Above all, it remains true to Stalinism's nationalist opposition to the Trotskyist program of world socialist revolution.

Today the CPC boasts of its ties with the French Communist Party, currently part of the Socialist Party-led government of Jospin. The CPC is also allied with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). The direct successor to Stalin's CPSU, the CPRF oscillates between supporting the Yeltsin-Primakov government and conniving with Yeltsin's Great Russian chauvinist opponents.

The CPC prides itself on being the foremost proponent of Canadian

nationalism in the working class. During the Cold War, the "struggle for Canadian independence" corresponded with the foreign policy aims of the Kremlin, which hoped to prevail on the Canadian bourgeoisie to detach itself from the US-led, anti-Soviet military and political alliances. But Canadian nationalism also articulates the needs of sections of the Canadian bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie that resent foreign, particularly US, competition and domination. The CPC has an explicit orientation to these forces. The main policy resolution of the 32nd CPC convention, held in December 1997, urged that the "the labour movement and other democratic forces take skillful advantage" of the opposition of "small and medium-sized non-monopoly businesses" to NAFTA, the increasing "foreign ownership of the Canadian economy," and other threats to "Canada's sovereignty." Genuine socialists oppose NAFTA and other initiatives aimed at strengthening the stranglehold of the most powerful sections of Canadian and international capital from the standpoint of fighting to unite the struggles of Canadian workers with those of their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and across the globe. The CPC, on the other hand, seeks to tie the working class to a national program, by urging Canadian workers to make common cause with those sections of capital threatened by competition with larger and more-technically advanced foreign rivals and to defend the reactionary and outmoded Canadian nation-state. This orientation finds further expression in the CPC's call for a People's Coalition, including sections of capital, to enact a program of democratic reforms. The coming to power of such a coalition is, according to the CPC program, both a separate stage and one upon which any future struggle for socialism is conditional.

We welcome all opportunities to clarify the International Committee of the Fourth International's perspective, program and history. Nothing I have said above precludes our continuing to discuss the historical and programmatic issues in fighting to forge a new revolutionary, working class leadership.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest a number of titles which will be of assistance to you in a study of Trotskyism, the history of the Fourth International, and the program of the ICFI. *1937, Stalin's Year of Terror*, authored by the late Russian Marxist historian Vadim Rogovin, demonstrates that the purges were in fact aimed at annihilating the socialist opposition to Stalin's regime and in so doing immeasurably strengthened reaction. *The Heritage We Defend*, written by David North, is a comprehensive account of the history of the Fourth International. Among the many subjects it discusses is how in the postwar period the Trotskyist tactic of "entry" was distorted by an opportunist current that adapted to the temporary domination of the working class by Stalinism and social-democracy. Written in the form of a polemic against the Spartacist group, *Globalization: A Marxist Assessment* outlines the ICFI's analysis on many of the central programmatic questions confronting contemporary Marxists, including the significance of globalization and the Marxist attitude toward the trade unions and the national question.

For the WWSWS,
Keith Jones



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