Socialist Workers Party (US) denounces rescue of Elian Gonzalez

Patrick Martin
23 May 2000

The US Socialist Workers Party has publicly solidarized itself with the right-wing Miami relatives of Elian Gonzalez, denouncing the April 22 raid by Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents which rescued the six-year-old boy and returned him to the care of his Cuban father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez.

An editorial statement published in the May 8 issue of the *Militant*, the SWP's weekly newspaper, stated that the raid "dealt a stunning blow to the right of every US resident to be 'secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures,' as provided by the Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution."

The *Militant* described Lazaro Gonzalez, the anticommunist great-uncle who headed the effort to separate Elian and his father, as "a Cuban-American worker and US citizen," and compared him to Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond in New York City, Tyisha Miller in Riverside, California, and other victims of police violence in the United States.

The SWP went on to denounce "chauvinist, anti-Cuban" propaganda and "blanket references to Cuban-Americans living in Miami as gusanos, or as the 'Miami Mafia'," and declared that the level of force utilized by the INS and Justice Department was excessive in view of "the virtual absence of the armed counterrevolutionary organizations that in earlier years would have furnished a cadre and played a weighty role in events such as those of the last five months..."

This is a grotesque whitewash of the Cuban right-wing groups and the terrorist methods they employ, both to intimidate political opponents in Miami, and, when given the opportunity, to attack the Cuban regime and its citizens. Among those prominent in the campaign to keep Elian Gonzalez in Miami were veterans of violent right-wing groups like Alpha 66 and Omega 7.

Media reports have confirmed that at least five armed guards from the Cuban-American National Foundation were on duty outside the home of Lazaro Gonzalez, with as many as 20 more thugs bivouacked in the house next door. Threats of violence, both from the Miami relatives and from their backers in the right-wing Cuban exile community, had escalated in the days since Attorney General Janet Reno ordered Lazaro Gonzalez to hand over Elian to the INS for transfer to his father.

The SWP's embrace of the anti-Castro right-wingers in Little Havana would be remarkable for any organization claiming to be socialist. It is all the more extraordinary since the Socialist Workers Party has made worship of the Castro regime its central political principle. For 40 years the SWP has proclaimed Cuba to be a model socialist state, equated any criticism of the Cuban regime's policies with support for US imperialism, and hailed Castro and Che Guevara as theoreticians who had displaced Lenin and Trotsky as the giants of twentieth century Marxism.

The SWP argues that the main issue in the Elian Gonzalez case is an attempt by the Clinton administration to utilize the issue to "polish the tarnished image" of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, "its largest and most hated federal police force, and to strengthen the executive powers of the imperialist state. These are strategic goals that rank high with the US rulers, as they prepare their arsenal for use against working people at home and abroad."

The lead article in the *Militant*, which accompanies the editorial statement, contains a lengthy list of repressive measures carried out by the Clinton administration, the courts and various state governments over the past seven years—ranging from expanded use of the death penalty to increases in police weaponry, to specific acts of police brutality and murder. The SWP maintains that the raid on the home of Lazaro Gonzalez should be seen as a continuation and intensification of this trend, writing, "The forced entry into the home of a US citizen, without an adequate warrant, in the dark, with a massive police mobilization is another watermark in this drive."

This overwrought and apocalyptic language dovetails with the outrage expressed by leading right-wing politicians, from the congressional Republican leadership to Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush to state and local politicians in Florida and Miami, both Democratic and Republican. All of these, of course, enthusiastically support brutal law-and-order policies, only criticizing Clinton for not being sufficiently aggressive in backing police repression. They are not roused to anger by police repression of black and Hispanic working people, but only when federal police action is targeted against their political allies among the Cuban exile right wing.

The *Militant* quotes, without comment or qualification, the condemnation of Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno from such right-wing figures as New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who compared the federal agents in the Miami operation to "storm troopers" and called the raid "unprecedented and unconscionable," although it pales by comparison with the daily violence meted out by Giuliani's "finest" in New York City.

In an effort to disguise this alliance with the Republican right, the SWP also cites the opinions of the handful of liberals who have criticized the raid, including Harvard Law Professor Laurence Tribe and attorney Alan Dershowitz. Tribe's op-ed commentary in the *New York Times*, published only a day after the raid, misstates basic facts of the case, claiming that the INS had no judicial warrant to enter the home of Lazaro Gonzalez, when, in fact, one had been obtained the night before.

Other commentators have pointed out that the raid had ample legal justification, since the Justice Department revoked Lazaro Gonzalez's temporary custody of Elian on April 13, nine days before, ordering him to turn over the boy immediately to the INS for return to his father. Lazaro Gonzalez flagrantly defied this order, insisting that the government would have to use force to remove Elian from his home.

As for the level of force, not only were there threats of violence from Miami-based Cuban exile groups, but also the attitude of the local police was in doubt, after much-publicized threats by Miami Mayor Joe Carollo and Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas to refuse cooperation with any federal action to rescue Elian. The INS agents reportedly had instructions not only to watch the crowd outside the house for weapons, but to make

© World Socialist Web Site

sure that Miami police did not themselves interfere with the operation.

A detailed examination of the precise methods employed in the April 22 raid can, however, be of only secondary concern in determining one's political attitude. The more fundamental issue is: whose democratic rights were at stake? The SWP and the congressional Republicans declare that the rights of Lazaro Gonzalez and his family were violated, while ignoring the gross, ongoing violation of the democratic right of Juan Miguel Gonzalez to be reunited with his son.

It is almost perverse to express concern for the "rights" of the Miami relatives while ignoring their denial of the rights of the father. A few of Elian's distant relatives, none of whom had ever seen the boy before he was rescued from the sea last Thanksgiving, backed by the anti-Castro groups in south Florida, seized upon the case as an opportunity to conduct political warfare against the Cuban government.

In early January the INS announced it had determined that Elian should be returned to his father, with whom the boy has lived for the majority of his life. But for nearly three more months the US government tolerated the de facto abduction of the six-year-old boy. On April 13, when Reno finally delivered the order for the immediate hand-over of Elian, Lazaro Gonzalez became, from the standpoint of US law, a kidnapper or hostage-taker. The continued refusal of the Miami relatives to turn over the child made the raid inevitable.

This does not imply any celebration of the raid or political support for the Justice Department and INS, as the SWP suggests. The Clinton administration deserves no credit for rescuing Elian Gonzalez from circumstances for which it was responsible in the first place. The real issue is not the belligerence of the federal government, as the SWP suggests, but its passivity in enforcing its own laws when faced with resistance from far-right elements with powerful political support in Washington. The administration only undertook the rescue of the Cuban boy when it was left no alternative by its right-wing opponents, and had to act or cede effective control of immigration policy as well as the Miami municipality to fascistic elements.

The "leftist" tone of the SWP's rhetoric in denouncing the INS action in Miami does not alter the right-wing content of its political line. According to the political criteria advanced by the SWP, the obligation of socialists is to oppose vociferously every action by the capitalist state, “our great historic enemy,” regardless of the circumstances or the specific content of the action. This caricature of Marxism makes an abstract identity of every conceivable action by the repressive forces of the state, from a policeman retrieving a cat stranded in a tree to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. All are equally to be condemned.

Such arguments would imply, for instance, that socialists should have opposed the federal investigation of the Oklahoma City bombing—which, like the rescue of Elian Gonzalez, also involved the mobilization of hundreds of federal agents—and the arrest and prosecution of two fascists who planned and carried out the murder of 180 people. But the jailing of Timothy McVeigh is not the same as the jailing of Mumia Abu-Jamal. Nor is the raid which freed Elian Gonzalez the same as an INS raid on a garment sweatshop or the FBI attacks on the Black Panthers.

Marxists seek to educate the working class on the fundamentally repressive nature of the capitalist state. We explain, for instance, that a strategy of relying on the capitalist state to defend democracy against fascism is bankrupt, because in the final analysis both the state and the fascists do the bidding of the capitalist ruling class. But the denial of any absolute contradiction between the bourgeois-democratic state and fascism does not imply the denial of a relative contradiction—there *are* circumstances in which the bourgeois state comes into conflict with the ultra-right. The April 22 raid was a case in point.

The Marxist truth is always concrete. This does not mean that Marxist principles depend upon circumstances, but rather that Marxism is a method of analysis, not a set of ready-made conclusions to be applied mechanically and dogmatically. Even in the example of an INS raid on a garment sweatshop, there have been instances where the result of such a raid was to free a group of immigrant workers from conditions of chattel slavery and semi-starvation. Acknowledging that fact does not alter our basic opposition to the INS, but no one—except perhaps the SWP—would suggest a campaign in defense of the "rights" of the garment shop slave-owner.

Lest the reader think this characterization of the SWP's politics is exaggerated, two examples should suffice. In the 1980s the US government moved to deport Nazi war criminal Karl Linnas to the Soviet Union, after evidence was presented that Linnas was guilty of mass murder while leading a Latvian fascist detachment allied with Hitler's regime. The actual charge for which Linnas was deported was that he lied in his original immigration application when he entered the US in the 1950s, concealing his actions on the Eastern Front. The SWP publicly denounced this deportation, giving similar grounds as in the Elian Gonzalez case, i.e., that it would strengthen the US immigration police.

More recently, the SWP publicly opposed the detention in Britain of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. The fascist general was held on a warrant brought by a Spanish magistrate seeking his extradition on charges of murder and torture during the 17 years that Pinochet held supreme power in Chile. While the SWP's arguments were full of left-sounding rhetoric, denouncing the action of the British authorities as an act of imperialist aggression against an oppressed South American country, this position put them in the same trench with Margaret Thatcher, the US Central Intelligence Agency, and the Chilean military and fascist right.

The SWP has all the characteristics of a cult group, with little or no influence in the working class or on public opinion as a whole. Its internal regime is despotic and exploitative. The SWP leadership keeps its members moving from place to place, job to job, every two or three years, to prevent them from developing relationships outside the party and keep them dependent on the organization.

The group's political focus is on itself, not on a broader audience, as is evidenced by the publication in the *Militant* of minuscule subscription goals that any healthy, outward-looking organization would be embarrassed to publicize. The current subscription drive, for instance, sets public goals of 12 subscriptions on the continent of Australia and 25 in the Cleveland metropolitan area, to be reached in the space of two months.

Articles in the *Militant* are written in an impenetrable jargon which only those privy to the internal workings of the SWP can decipher.

But there is a broader significance to the SWP's political somersault on the Elian Gonzalez case, beyond the strange twists and turns that have become familiar to experienced observers of the SWP. This organization, which broke with the socialist perspective decades ago, is developing a definite orientation to the extreme right in American politics.

It is not merely by accident that the SWP criticizes the Clinton administration from the same standpoint and with nearly the same language as Tom DeLay, George Bush and Patrick Buchanan, or that it covers up for the fascist elements in Little Miami. Despite its ritualistic references to "working people" and the "workers movement" the SWP's political focus is not on the working class, but on a layer of the lower middle class, which has frequently, in times of crisis, been fodder for right-wing populist and fascist-minded demagogues. Thus the May 8 editorial statement in the *Militant* sums up the principal social grievances in America in the following terms:

"Millions of working people feel nothing but outrage at the rulers' trampling on our most basic rights and political space, our livelihoods, our very life and limb. The regressive burden of the bourgeoisie's tax policies; the inevitability of banks and government agencies foreclosing on small farmers squeezed by the ever-increasing weight of giant monopolies; the brutal indifference to human life symbolized by the deadly police assault

© World Socialist Web Site

on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco..."

There is nothing specifically working class or socialist about this list of grievances. Taxes, foreclosures and the Waco massacre are all legitimate issues for a socialist movement to raise and campaign on, provided they are part of a comprehensive program directed against the capitalist system as a whole, in which the central issue is the establishment of the political independence of the working class and the unification of the American working class with its class brothers and sisters internationally. Taken in isolation, as the SWP presents them, these very issues have been demagogically utilized by extreme right groups to win popular support. The words published in the *Militant* could have appeared on the lips of Patrick Buchanan or even Timothy McVeigh.

It might appear incomprehensible that an organization like the SWP, which ritualistically refers to itself as “communist” and uses an ostensibly Marxist lexicon, should move in the direction of Patrick Buchanan and the Miami Cuban exiles. But this is a trajectory that can be seen in many of the groups whose origins, like that of the current SWP leadership, lie in the middle class radical movement of the 1960s. We have already before us the example of Lenora Fulani, a self-proclaimed socialist and black nationalist, presidential candidate of the New Alliance Party in 1992, serving as a major leader of Buchanan's campaign for the Reform Party presidential nomination this year. Other radical groups make their approach to the extreme right through the medium of the trade union bureaucracy, a section of which has already developed close ties to Buchanan on the basis of anticommunism and trade protectionism.

There is a profound class logic at work here. The orientation of the “New Left” involved a rejection of the Marxist perspective that socialism would be brought about through the mobilization of the working class as a conscious historical force. Under conditions where the bureaucratic decay of the workers organizations, including both trade unions and political parties, produced a loss of confidence among left intellectuals in the revolutionary capacities of the working class, the New Left envisioned sections of the radicalized middle class—students, black nationalists, feminists, pacifists—serving as the vehicle for a political struggle against capitalism. Internationally, they idolized such Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist leaders as Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Castro and Guevara, as well as Ben Bella in Algeria, Nkrumah in Ghana, and guerrilla groups like the PLO, the Tupamaros, the Sandinistas and, more recently, the Zapatistas in Mexico.

Today, these petty-bourgeois movements have either disappeared or made their peace with capitalism. Guerrilla leaders have traded in their kalashnikovs for business suits. Former antiwar protesters now occupy cabinet seats—or, as in case of Clinton, the Oval Office. With the drastic shift to the right in bourgeois politics over the past two decades, those organizations which wedded themselves to protest politics find that the radicalism of the left has given way to a radicalism of the right, in the populist demagogy of Buchanan, Haider and Jean Marie le Pen.

The deepening international crisis of the capitalist system will inevitably produce the revival of the genuine left, that is, a renewed mass struggle for the perspective of world socialism. This will be based, not on any of the existing radical or “labor” organizations, which are rotted and corrupted through and through, but on a new upsurge of militancy and political activism among the broad masses of working people. It is to further this development that the *World Socialist Web Site* devotes its efforts.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site