

Speeches commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Trotsky's assassination

The contemporary significance of Leon Trotsky's life and work

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At two meetings commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky, speakers illuminated the contemporary significance of Trotsky's work. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the World Socialist Web Site hosted the meetings in Berlin and London in September. Peter Schwarz gave the following speech on September 23 in Berlin. He is the secretary of the International Committee the Fourth International and a member of the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site. Over the next two days we will post the speeches by WSWs Editorial Board member Vladimir Volkov and Chris Talbot, a regular contributor to the WSWs from Britain.

Leon Trotsky, murdered 60 years ago, will go down in history as the outstanding Marxist of the twentieth century. He came from a generation of socialist revolutionaries, to which Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Christian Rakovsky and others also belonged, who were deeply rooted in the traditions of Marxism. But nobody else has left a life's work that is so broad, so farsighted and so multifaceted. If one wants to understand the great questions of the twentieth century—the two world wars, fascism, Stalinism—then one cannot ignore Trotsky's analysis.

Above all, if one regards the great social and political questions of our century—globalisation, the complex development of technology and science and the social problems and distortions resulting from this—then one cannot formulate a progressive response without recourse to Trotsky.

One can only be a serious socialist today by carrying on the tradition Trotsky defended. All the other political tendencies that claim to have stood for socialism or communism in the course of the twentieth century—the Stalinists, Maoists, and various national liberation movements—have thoroughly discredited themselves. This is an objective question. One can predict with certainty that as discussions over the great problems of our society—the growth of social inequality, increasing international tensions—gain in intensity, Trotsky will step into the foreground.

What differentiates Trotsky's socialism from all the other “socialisms” of the twentieth century? Or more exactly, what differentiates genuine Marxism—which Trotsky represents—from the many reformist, Stalinist or nationalist currents that temporarily defined themselves as “socialist” or “communist” or still do so?

One can give a very long, complex and extensive response to this question. But the quintessential point is the following: For Trotsky, the realisation of a socialist perspective—both the preparation of the socialist revolution and the construction of a socialist society—was inseparably bound up with raising the cultural level of the masses, with arousing their creative potential.

Already in 1906, when he faced trial as chairman of the St. Petersburg

Soviet, the 27-year-old Trotsky hurled the following words back at the judges: “A rebellion of the masses, my learned judges, is not made, however. It makes itself. It is the result of social conditions and not paper designs. A rebellion of the people cannot be produced. One can only foresee it.”

Trotsky's conceptions were not based on spontaneity. He was conscious of the tremendous significance of the subjective factor—of political leaders and parties, of revolutionary initiative and energy. But the subjective factor could only be successful in the long run if it succeeded in overcoming everything that keeps the masses subjugated through prejudice and ignorance, which puts a brake on their creative strength.

This is not a pedagogical exercise, but a political task. Only a political perspective that is based upon the most progressive achievements of science, technology and the control of nature, including man's very own, a perspective which proceeds from the greatest achievements of culture, a perspective, which calls things by their right name, is not at all half-hearted and does not shrink from the consequences, can fulfil this function.

Trotsky rejected every other road to socialism, because he knew that it could not achieve its aim and was, in the long run, counterproductive. For this reason, he did not rely on the Red Army in the struggle against the Stalin faction, because the logic of this step would have set back the masses and would have inevitably led to a military dictatorship. For this reason he had only scorn for Stalin's theory that socialism could be built in an isolated country because it represented the attempt to pull back the productive forces that had, under capitalism, already grown over the boundaries of the national state. In Trotsky's view this was a reactionary utopia. And for this reason he rejected all attempts to circumvent the difficult and lengthy process of constructing a socialist workers party by relying—as Mao Zedong did in China—on peasant armies or on guerrilla movements, which conquer the cities from the country.

Trotsky's socialism was based on a global vision of human progress and in this regard represents a link with the traditions of the bourgeois revolutions. In the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the masses intervened in history for the first time as an active and conscious factor. Over the preceding centuries, dynasties, military leaders and mercenary armies had predominantly made history. The bourgeois revolutions were based upon and preceded by an enormous development and widening of human knowledge.

This year we will also celebrate the six hundredth birthday of Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of printing. It is beyond doubt that Gutenberg's invention was the crucial prerequisite that enabled knowledge and culture to break out of the monopoly of the clerics and aristocracy and become the

property of the masses. It enabled an explosion of knowledge. Reading spread like a bush fire and could no longer be stopped.

In 1456, Gutenberg printed his first Bible in an edition of 180. It took six printers two years to manufacture the over one thousand-page volumes. Fifty years later there were already 40,000 printed copies of the Bible in circulation, as well as numerous other books. Another 10 years later, Luther nailed his theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg, an act whose consequences we all know and whose effect would have been hardly conceivable without Gutenberg's invention.

The bourgeois revolution created a new form of class society. Its ideals of equality and liberty could only apply to a minority. Marx and Engels drew from this the conclusion that the liberation of the working class can only be the product of the working class itself, and that it presupposes its political emancipation from the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. A whole generation of Marxists, who often knew Marx and Engels personally or corresponded with them, dedicated themselves to this task: the political emancipation and education of the working class. These included Wilhelm Liebknecht, August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, Franz Mehring, Georgi Plekanov, Antonio Labriola and many others. Trotsky's generation—to which Lenin and Luxemburg belonged—grew up in this tradition. Trotsky embodies it in the most outstanding way.

Trotsky's conception of socialism brought him into conflict with the bureaucracy in the state and party, which intuitively viewed every spontaneous movement from below as a threat. They correctly saw in Trotsky the most conscious representative of the working class, whose power they had usurped and which represented the main danger to their privileges. But the fanatical hatred with which the Soviet bureaucracy pursued Trotsky while he was alive, and even decades after his death, also has a psychological component. The creative potential of the masses, which plays such a central role in Trotsky's conception of socialism, appears to the bureaucracy as the epitome of unrest and disorder, the elevation of culture as an attack on their own narrow-mindedness and mediocrity. The German trade union bureaucracy and the right wing of social democracy had already reacted to Rosa Luxemburg in a similar manner, finally helping to murder her.

This question—the encouragement of the initiative of the masses and the party membership against the bureaucratic tendencies of the apparatus—was from the outset a central aspect of the struggle of the Left Opposition against bureaucratism. In his letter “The New Course” (December 1923), which unleashed the first substantial campaign against Trotsky, he writes, “The center of gravity, which was mistakenly placed in the apparatus by the ‘old course’, has now been transferred by the ‘new course’, proclaimed in the resolution of the Central Committee, to the activity, initiative, and critical spirit of all the party members, as the organized vanguard of the proletariat.” And, “Bureaucratism kills initiative and thus prevents the elevation of the general level of the party.”

That Trotsky returned to questions of culture and everyday life—his writings *Literature and Revolution* and *Problems of Everyday Life* were written at this time—in the following years did not represent a turn away from politics, as many of his critics claimed. Rather, Trotsky understood at a very early point in time what the struggle against Stalin really represented. The fight against the bureaucracy—whose interests Stalin formulated—could only be won if it succeeded in lifting the cultural level of the masses and overcoming the legacy of Russian backwardness. This itself required an international orientation, and access to the more highly developed technologies and culture of the West on a revolutionary basis.

In this way, the fight against bureaucratism and for party democracy formed one pole of the Opposition's work, and an international orientation the other. In addition came the struggle for a correct economic policy, which would enable productivity to increase as fast as possible without endangering the social basis of the Soviet state. The raising of the general conditions of living was a prerequisite for the elevation of culture. In the

long run, the victory of the bureaucracy over the Left Opposition, Stalin's triumph over Trotsky, also sealed the fate of the Soviet Union. Only a political revolution by the working class to overthrow the bureaucracy could have prevented the decline of the Soviet Union, as Trotsky predicted in the 1930s.

The suppression of the revolutionary initiative of the international working class by the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracy, which led to the devastating defeats of the 1920s and 30s and culminated in the murder of Leon Trotsky, forms the key to understanding today's world.

This is characterised by a deep social crisis. Only a small minority profited from the upturn of the last years. All the appropriate statistics speak unmistakably in this regard. The fortunes of 500 billionaires today equal the collective wealth of the poorer half of mankind. Growing poverty, unemployment and stress not only scar the impoverished countries, but are also found increasingly in the richer ones as well. New epidemics such as AIDS or old ones like tuberculosis are spreading and afflicting millions. A third of mankind does not have access to fresh drinking water. Horrific conditions can be found in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where a mixture of mafia, secret service and former bureaucrats seized power and plundered the countries without restraint.

This social crisis has not, so far, led to a revival of revolutionary, socialist traditions. Apart from desperate and usually fruitless protests, the working class has not reacted to it. Instead, predominantly right-wing tendencies have profited from the social crisis. The reason for this is the domination for many decades of the reformist and Stalinist bureaucracy over the workers movement, burying the once strong socialist traditions. The relative peace on the surface of political events is not a characteristic of stability. It only reveals that the working class still sees no way forward on which it can fight for a progressive way out of the social crisis.

This explains the growth of the right wing. Trotsky once called fascism the “party of despair” and socialism as the “party of hope”. As long as there is no hope, for which it is worth fighting, the party of despair can win ground. The fight against the right wing coincides, therefore, with the overcoming of the crisis of the workers movement; with the revival of its Marxist traditions, which Trotsky's life represents.

What is the basis for such a revival?

Today's society is characterised by a contradiction: social stagnation is accompanied by a tremendous technological revolution. The introduction of computer technology to every area, from production to administration, and the revolution in communications technology changes every aspect of human life and society.

As we have seen, the significance of Gutenberg's invention—printing with moveable type—lay in the fact that the knowledge of his time could be made accessible to broader social layers for the first time. If we look at one of the most important technical developments of modern times, the Internet, then obvious parallels exist with the invention of printing. In relation to the spreading of information and knowledge it represents a quantum leap in human development.

I can tell you a tale from my own experience as a journalist. I still remember well how difficult, time-consuming and expensive it was 20 years ago to get access to international newspapers or information that was not kept in local libraries. Today a large part of human knowledge lies at our disposal in our own living rooms or is just a mouse click away on a laptop computer. Or how often in the past we had to run to the station late at night, so that an article reached the editorial board in time. And then it still took days until the newspaper was set, printed and delivered. Today a world-wide readership can see an article just a few minutes after it is completed.

The Internet is certainly the most democratic—and in this sense the most subversive and revolutionary medium—which has been invented since printing. It not only provides millions of humans with access to

knowledge; for relatively low costs it also provides the possibility of reaching an international public. Thus it differs fundamentally from the mass medium that has dominated the second half of the twentieth century: television. The operation of a TV station is so expensive and complex that it automatically remained a monopoly of the state and the most powerful and wealthy media companies.

The Internet spread with explosive speed. Just 10 years ago its name was only known to a small group of the initiated. Today 300 million people use it world-wide. It is also no longer the monopoly of an intellectual elite or the rich countries. At a seminar we held this summer at a German holiday resort, a Tamil participant bitterly deplored the fact that one could not find an Internet café in the whole place, while in Madras in India there was one on every street corner.

Naturally the Internet also reflects the problems of our time. It is used to distribute all kinds of backward rubbish—pornography, mysticism and superstition. The right wing and fascists soon discovered it as a communication medium. But those who call, therefore, for state control and censorship, are, if you will excuse my harsh expression, hopeless reactionaries. Such calls contain an element of Luddism.

If one regards Trotsky's legacy, his conception of socialism, then it is no coincidence that it was the International Committee the Fourth International who saw the possibilities of this medium and how to use it. Of course, today every political organisation has its own homepage. But usually this is an archive of old editions of their newspaper or a bulletin board for the announcement of activities. Only the International Committee recognised the potential of this medium with the *World Socialist Web Site* and concentrated its work completely on it.

This was based upon the understanding that the crisis of the workers movement cannot be overcome by means of tactical initiatives and actions. Without doubt, the tremendous social tensions and contradictions will lead to protests, strikes and social clashes. Our task consists of giving these movements a perspective and an orientation. The *World Socialist Web Site* is an ideal medium to this end.

The increasing number of readers shows that the site is attracting growing interest. In the past, when we printed our own newspapers, we at best reached some 10,000 readers. We reach many times this number each month with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Its contents constantly increase in variety. Its focal point consists of the Marxist analysis of political events, the function of which is to provide a political orientation. In addition, there are articles on cultural topics, history, polemics and much more besides. In this way, the *World Socialist Web Site* has become an international centre of Marxist culture.

The technological revolution has yet another consequence: never before was the world economy integrated so closely. In this way the conditions of life of the working class become increasingly similar around the globe. The bourgeoisie has tremendously enriched itself from this development. But it confronts its social and political consequences with helplessness. Confusion and perplexity characterise the political establishment everywhere. One looks in vain for a politician who has such a thing as a social vision. Their policy is limited to reacting to events and diverges ever-further from the needs of the masses.

Under these conditions new political parties must and will develop. The crucial question is therefore not how much influence a party had yesterday or has today. The crucial question is the strength of its ideas, its ability to understand the situation and provide an answer. In this regard, the Fourth International finds itself in a strong starting position and can look with confidence to the future.





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