

# Conference at New York University: a demoralized attack on Trotskyism

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“Explorations of the History of US Trotskyism” was the title of a conference held at the end of September at New York University. Anyone not familiar with this history but attracted to the gathering, out of interest in either the indelible works of Leon Trotsky or the legacy of the movement that fought for his revolutionary socialist perspective in the United States, would have scratched his or her head in wonder at the content of these “explorations.”

American Trotskyism is without question a rich field for historical research. As a political tendency, its origins lay in the struggle initiated by Lenin and Trotsky against the growth of bureaucracy in the Soviet state and the Bolshevik Party, and in defense of the program of world socialist revolution against the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country.”

The expulsion of the group led by James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern from the American Communist Party in 1928, and the subsequent struggle of Trotsky's US supporters to defend socialist internationalism and the legacy of the 1917 Revolution against Stalinism intersected with the greatest historical developments of the twentieth century. This group, which went on to found the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), played a key role in establishing the Fourth International in 1938, while waging a tireless struggle to win American workers to a genuine socialist perspective.

The early years in which the American Trotskyists battled against isolation and Stalinist persecution, the entry into the mass movement in the Minneapolis general strike of 1934, soon followed by the tactical turn toward entry into the Socialist Party, and then the struggle against both the Stalinists and the Rooseveltian “progressives” in the CIO movement—these are all areas that merit the attention of serious historians.

The same applies to the 1939-40 struggle within the SWP against a petty-bourgeois opposition led by Max Shachtman that capitulated to “democratic” imperialism on the eve of World War II, and the subsequent prosecution and imprisonment (enthusiastically supported by the Stalinists) of the leaders of both the SWP and the Minneapolis Teamsters on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the government. Finally, there are the complex factors that led to the SWP's degeneration and turn away from Trotskyism and the working class in the latter half of the twentieth century.

None of these issues animated the conference at NYU. The big historical questions of the Trotskyist movement remained a closed

book for the participants, who are indifferent to these issues, and who know that any serious examination of this history would pose questions about their own political development that they would rather not discuss.

While cosponsored by NYU's Tamiment Institute Library, a repository for materials on the labor and radical movements, the conference was organized by individuals who have repudiated the perspective for which Trotsky fought. They include former members of the Socialist Workers Party who were, for the most part, recruited to that organization in the 1960s, after its profound political degeneration. When the SWP, dominated by a clique led by Jack Barnes, renounced the last vestiges of its Trotskyist origins in the early 1980s, those who in one fashion or another still sought to associate themselves with Trotskyism were expelled.

These ex-Trotskyists are incapable of accounting for their own history. Politically they base themselves on the general conceptions of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, leaders of the Fourth International in Europe who concluded in the years immediately following the Second World War that the Stalinist bureaucracy had the capacity for self-reform, and even revolutionary leadership. The Pabloites advanced the thesis that a Third World War was inevitable and that the Stalinist Communist Parties would be driven to lead revolutions in the West.

The SWP joined with other Trotskyist parties to break from Pablo and Mandel in 1953, founding the International Committee of the Fourth International. Ten years later, however, the SWP reunified with the Pabloites. The SWP leadership proclaimed that the petty-bourgeois nationalist movement of Fidel Castro had established a workers state in Cuba and blazed a new path to socialism based on the peasantry and guerrilla warfare, superseding the need for the conscious revolutionary mobilization of the working class under the leadership of Marxist parties.

“The bias of the organizers was toward the strand of the US Trotskyist tradition associated with the Socialist Workers Party, but there was a serious effort to draw in representatives of other currents, as well as to include dissident strands within the SWP's tradition,” Paul LeBlanc, one of the event's organizers, explained at the opening of the conference.

These “other currents” and “dissident strands” were for the most part academics and radicals who trace their political roots to the earlier split from Trotskyism of Shachtman and his supporters on the eve of World War II.

Bowing to the pressure of middle class public opinion, this

tendency adopted a perspective that seems at first opposed to the one elaborated by Pabloism in a later period. Shachtman insisted that the Soviet bureaucracy was not, as Trotsky had analyzed, a reactionary privileged caste, but rather a new ruling class. The USSR, he maintained, had become a new form of totalitarian and exploitative society.

On this basis, Shachtman rejected the possibility of the Soviet working class settling accounts with Stalinism through a political revolution. He later developed into a Cold War anticommunist who advised the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and served as the intellectual mentor to figures who occupied important posts in the administration of President Ronald Reagan.

No one at the NYU conference saw fit to raise the issue of Shachtman's role. The Shachtmanite supporters, for their part, exhibited disdain for their ex-SWP hosts, as exemplified by a paper on the role of Hal Draper delivered by Alan Johnson, a British academic. Johnson attacked the Fourth International for upholding the legacy of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, and none of the other speakers bothered to reply.

If either of these tendencies had been serious about a discussion of history, they could have begun at an obvious point—the conspicuous collapse of their own perspective. Nearly a decade after the formal dissolution of the USSR at the hands of the bureaucracy, history has refuted both the Shachtmanites' conception that Stalinism represented a new form of class society, and the Pabloite perspective of the bureaucracy's supposed revolutionary potential.

In contrast to the Pabloites and Shachtmanites, the warning of Trotsky and the Fourth International—that the Stalinist bureaucracy would act as the gravedigger of the Russian Revolution and usher in the restoration of capitalism unless the working class overthrew it through a political revolution—has been borne out.

Incapable of learning anything new or honestly discussing their past, the political groups represented at the conference had no interest in assessing the world historic events of the past decade. Their disinterest in the history of the Fourth International was matched by their silence on the collapse of Stalinism and its aftermath.

The conference's treatment of history amounted to demoralized reminiscences and the type of post-modernist treatises, steeped in identity politics, that are the coin of the realm in the academic circles which are home to many of the former student radicals who made presentations to the gathering.

Kathleen Brown, a professor at a Texas college, gave a talk on “Engendering Minneapolis unions after the Teamsters strike: images of masculinity and femininity in the *Northwest Organizer*.” The thrust of her remarks was to portray the struggle led by the Trotskyists in 1934 as an exercise in gender bias.

The founder of American Trotskyism, James P. Cannon, described the strike as one of the “greatest, most heroic and best organized struggles in the annals of American labor history.” Combining organizational audacity with a political understanding of the role of both the gangster union bureaucrats and the Roosevelt government, the Trotskyists were able to win one of the first major victories which paved the way for industrial unionism, and secure for themselves a foothold in the American labor

movement. In the course of this struggle, it should be added, they formed a Women's Auxiliary that played a powerful role in the strike.

Cannon had it all wrong, Ms. Brown informed the audience. The real lesson of this battle was that the Trotskyist movement was deeply infected with male chauvinism. In fact, according to her, the Stalinists of the Communist Party USA had a much better line on the woman question!

Another speaker was Alan Wald, a professor from the University of Michigan. Wald is a leading figure in Solidarity, an organization which has joined together ex-Shachtmanites and ex-Pabloites on the basis of a social democratic outlook and opposition to the building of a revolutionary party. Solidarity has underscored its rejection of a socialist perspective in the past few months by supporting the presidential campaign of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader.

Wald portrayed a 1962 demonstration in defense of Cuba held in Bloomington, Indiana as a turning point in the development of the “left” and an example of the “non-dogmatic audacity” that is required today. The main task before Marxists, he said, was the “deoccidentalization of revolutionary thought.”

To the extent that any aim emerged from this confused gathering, it was to unite in the hopes that a new middle class protest movement would arise to revive the fortunes of the ex-student radicals and anti-war protesters, enabling them to pose as advisers and mentors to a new generation. This goal sums up the reactionary character of these tendencies. In the 1960s these same individuals, then members of the Socialist Workers Party and other revisionist groups, worked to prevent the independent mobilization of the working class against the Vietnam War, advancing the perspective of “single-issue protest” and seeking to subordinate the struggle against the war to the Democratic Party.

While Solidarity, Socialist Action, the Spartacist League and the various other tendencies represented at the NYU conference are willing to undertake a similar political job on behalf of capitalism today, the conference itself illustrated the demoralized and politically isolated character of these organizations. The past several years have pulled the political rug out from under them all. Their attempts to endow Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism and guerrillaism with revolutionary capacities have been thoroughly discredited before masses of working people all over the world. Their efforts to dress up the trade union bureaucracy as “progressive” have similarly been in vain.

Deepening economic crisis and sharpening social polarization produced by the capitalist system internationally will inevitably regenerate mass struggles and produce a new generation seeking a revolutionary alternative for the working class. It will not find such a perspective in the tattered remnants of the Pabloite and Shachtmanite organizations that are chasing each other's tails.



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