

Bill Vann replies to a member of the International Socialist Organization

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Dear *World Socialist Web Site*,

I cannot tell you how much I treasure reading the articles on your site every day. While I think there is a good deal of useful left-wing commentary out there, few rival yours. The clarity, range and intelligence of the writing on your site provide indisputable proof that Marxism is not a historical relic but a living theoretical tradition which can explain the world and offer a guide to changing it. I frequently forward articles from your site to friends. Lively debates always ensue.

But I have a question for you guys. I am a member of the International Socialist Organization in the US.

While still very small, we are by far the largest, most youthful and energetic revolutionary socialist organization in North America. The various Trotskyist sects look very sad indeed next to us. This was obvious last weekend in Washington DC during the pro-Palestinian/antiwar protests. While the ISO led a large, loud, unified contingent which expressed a concrete anti-imperialist politics, the sects bickered and bitched at the margins. My feeling is that their failure to grow, or even to survive, is due to major theoretical shortcomings in the orthodox Trotskyist tradition. They hold on to shibboleths about the nature of Stalinism which just do not match reality. You read their papers (i.e., the *Militant*, the *Workers Vanguard*, *Socialist Alternative*, etc.) and the ossification is obvious.

Within the context of social movements and actual class struggles such groups act as a shameful dead weight, as they endlessly counterpose, in the most mechanical fashion, the struggle for reforms to a revolutionary perspective over which they claim sole proprietorship. The whole idea that the fight for revolution and reform are part of an indissoluble process, which separates real Marxism from left-wing infantilism, remains completely foreign to these sectarians.

Your group seems to have completely escaped the fate of the “orthodox Trotskyist” sects. On a daily basis you produce a Marxist analysis of great quality. Yet you appear to hold on to a set of fundamental ideas no different than theirs. The only obvious departure I can see is that you have a very different analysis of the trade unions and of globalization.

It seems to me that a group which provides the kind of quality Marxist analysis that yours does would want to engage with the most active socialist organization on the US revolutionary left. Instead, you appear to simply scorn the ISO as a “middle class protest group.” To me this is really not a serious approach, especially given the rigor which you apply to analyzing world events.

Perhaps I am mistaken; perhaps you have written critiques or analyses of the IS tendency. I wonder what you think of Duncan Hallas’s writings on orthodox Trotskyism or of Tony Cliff’s theory of state capitalism.

Again, I love your site and I will continue to visit it to get some of the best political analysis on the Web. I’m also interested in what you have to say about my organization and its politics (i.e., beyond, “It’s a radical middle-class protest group”).

Best,
AH

Dear AH:

Thank you for your letter. We are glad to hear that you have found the *World Socialist Web Site* a source of Marxism as “a living theoretical tradition which can explain the world and offer a guide to changing it.”

However, judging from other points in your letter, I doubt that you fully understand the politics underlying the WSWS. Permit me to make a few points.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) does not rule out, a priori, political discussion with any genuine socialist tendency. When we refer to the International Socialist Organization as a “middle class protest group” it is not a political swear word, but rather a characterization of its approach to political and programmatic questions.

You describe the ISO as the “most youthful and energetic” organization, pointing to its “large, loud and unified contingent” at the April 20 demonstration in Washington. Frankly, this is besides the point in judging an organization’s politics. If, as you say, the group is youthful, that would suggest that many of its members have little experience and only a rudimentary understanding of the history of the socialist movement.

There are all sorts of demonstrations taking place and no doubt there will be even larger ones in the future. It is hard to find within them, however, a trace of programmatic clarity.

Young people are being radicalized by conditions of war and repression, yet, through no fault of their own, are cut off from the history and traditions of the Marxist movement. For most, the Soviet Union is merely an historical fact of which they are vaguely aware. The broader implications of the October Revolution for the course of the twentieth century and the shaping of the twenty-first remain a closed book.

Your characterization of other tendencies as “sects” that “look very sad indeed next to us” or “bicker and bitch at the margins” is not our approach. You may be criticizing organizations with whom we ourselves have strong differences, but our critique is based upon their political conceptions, not their size or appearance. Your use of such language, regardless of your intentions, expresses an underestimation, if not a certain contempt, for theory.

You contrast the ISO to these other radical groups, concluding that the greatest indictment of the others is their “failure to grow.” But

growth, in and of itself, proves little. As the April 20 demonstration showed, all sorts of organizations can grow in the current political situation, including the Muslim fundamentalists.

Your characterization of these other organizations as “orthodox Trotskyists” is way off the mark. This term has a definite political meaning in the history of the Fourth International that has nothing to do with dogmatism or the sterile repetition of formulae.

We are orthodox Trotskyists, i.e., Marxists. That means we base ourselves on the fundamental lessons the world socialist movement has derived from the strategic historical experiences of the international working class.

The very organizations to which you refer rejected orthodox Trotskyism, adapting themselves, chameleon-like, to whatever they perceived as mass movements, beginning with Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism. And, at least for a period, they too grew on that basis.

The orthodox Trotskyists were those who defended the principles upon which the Fourth International was founded, summed up in the 1953 “Open Letter” of James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, and related documents. They insisted on the necessity of the political independence of the working class and its international unification, against the revisionist tendency within the Fourth International, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, which sought to subordinate the workers movement to the Moscow bureaucracy or the bourgeois leaderships of the anti-colonial struggle. The result was that the Pabloite organizations played a critical role in the betrayal of a wave of revolutionary struggles that erupted internationally in the 1960s and 1970s.

The *Militant*, *Workers Vanguard*, etc. are certainly ossified, but not for the reasons you seem to imagine. These are organizations that for decades prostrated themselves before the likes of the Moscow Stalinists, Fidel Castro, or the black nationalists, maintaining that they represented the “real” movement. As each of these trends has abandoned even the pretense of opposition to imperialism, those who rejected orthodox Trotskyism have become increasingly disoriented and irrelevant.

I do not propose to recapitulate here the extensive critique that the ICFI has made of Tony Cliff’s theories of state capitalism. These theories, however, had their source in the same pressures of Stalinism and imperialism bearing down on the Trotskyist movement that gave rise to Pabloite revisionism.

While the Pabloites saw the Stalinist bureaucracy playing a revolutionary role, predicting that it would establish “centuries of deformed workers states,” the state capitalists took the seemingly opposite position, proclaiming the Soviet Union a new form of class society and the bureaucracy a new ruling class.

These assessments—both representing a break with orthodox Trotskyism—shared one essential trait. They both endowed the bureaucracy with a historically necessary role and called into question the ability of the working class to establish its own state and new forms of property relations by means of socialist revolution.

Against both those who claimed a progressive role for the bureaucracy and those who proclaimed it a new ruling class, the ICFI defended Trotsky’s analysis of the bureaucracy as the instrument of world imperialism within the first workers state. It fought for the program of political revolution—the overthrow of the bureaucracy by the working class and the reestablishment of Soviet democracy—as an integral component of the strategy of world socialist revolution.

The collapse of the Soviet Union 1991 provided a crushing

refutation of all state capitalist theories that the bureaucracy had become a new ruling class or had established new, unique property relations. The restoration of capitalism in the USSR required the systematic destruction of what remained of the state property relations introduced by the October Revolution.

Unlike any ruling class in history, the predominant sections of the Moscow bureaucracy did not defend the property relations that existed in the USSR, but played the main role in dismantling them, with much of the ruling Communist Party elite transforming themselves into businessmen. The nature of this transformation made it clear that the bureaucracy’s rule had not been rooted in new forms of forms of property that it had established as a ruling class. Rather, it had constituted a parasitic stratum that derived its privileges from an abuse of its power in the administration of the state and state enterprises.

In your letter you criticize the other radical organizations for not understanding the relationship between reform and revolution, but the way you yourself pose this important question leaves the door open to the crassest forms of opportunism. Right-wing social democrats have long argued that reform and revolution are merely two sides of an “indissoluble process.” I would urge you to have a look at two lectures by David North posted on our site that make a serious analysis of these issues.

Reform and Revolution in the Epoch of Imperialism
[<http://www.wsws.org/history/1998/jan1998/reform.shtml>]

Marxism and the Trade Unions
[<http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/unions/unions.htm>]

You seem mystified about what separates us from the various revisionist organizations that you name, saying, “The only departure I can see is that you have a very different analysis of the trade unions and of globalization.”

Only? You have managed to point to what are two of the most crucial questions confronting the working class internationally. The unprecedented worldwide integration of capitalist production, distribution and exchange objectively demands the organization of the class struggle on an international scale and on the basis of an international strategy. This, in turn, requires the building of a new international revolutionary leadership. That is the essential perspective that has guided the political work of the ICFI and the development of the WSWs.

The revisionist organizations reject this perspective, clinging to the moribund trade union apparatus and a nationally based reformist strategy that has been rendered impotent by the new forms of international economic organization.

In closing, I would urge you to give these programmatic questions more careful consideration, and not judge either your own organization or others based on less essential criteria.

Sincerely,

Bill Vann, for the WSWs editorial board



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