

The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International

Chapter 18: James P. Cannon's "Open Letter"

15 November 2003

For all the vehemence of Banda's denunciation of the "Open Letter," the readers of his "27 Reasons" will search in vain for any analysis of this document. He vilifies it as the "epistle from the philistines of 'orthodox Trotskyism,'" an "arrogant ultimatum," an "opportunist response" and an "equivocal and undignified maneuver." But he says nothing about the political content of the "Open Letter." He does not say whether he agrees or disagrees with its summation of the principles of Trotskyism, its characterization of Pablo's line as revisionist, or even its assertion that irreconcilable differences exist between Trotskyism and Pabloism. Nor does Banda explain why he personally supported the "Open Letter" in 1953.

Banda can write whatever he likes about Cannon. He can point to all his personal failings and his political limitations. But after having done all that, he has still to tell us what was unprincipled or revisionist in the political content of the "Open Letter." The fact that he has not done this demonstrates that his approach to the history of the Fourth International is subjective, unprincipled and reactionary.

When, in 1939 Shachtman, Abern and Burnham produced in their infamous document "War and Bureaucratic Conservatism" a lengthy catalog of Cannon's personal weaknesses, mistakes and crimes, Trotsky was totally unimpressed and uninterested. He replied, "Cannon represents the proletarian party in process of formation. The historical right in this struggle—independent of what errors and mistakes might have been made—rests wholly on the side of Cannon." [1]

Would it have been wrong to make the same assessment of the Cannon tendency in 1953? Did Pablo and Mandel now represent "the proletarian party in process of formation"? Aside from the errors and mistakes which are committed in every difficult and complex struggle by even the greatest Marxists, on what side was historical right to be found in 1953? Who represented, regardless of their personal failings, the class interests of the proletariat? Would the Fourth International have been strengthened had Cannon not fought the Cochranites, had he not challenged Pablo's line, and had he not written the "Open Letter"? Would Trotskyism have flourished if Pablo's "entryist" line of liquidation into the Stalinist parties been carried out? Banda never poses such questions, for the answers would constitute a devastating refutation of his attack on the "Open Letter." The fact that Banda denounces the "Open Letter" but says nothing at all about the liquidationist views against which Cannon was fighting proves that his attack is directed against Trotskyism itself.

Nearly 33 years after it was written, the "Open Letter" remains an outstanding and extraordinarily contemporary document. It summed up all the essential political questions raised in the struggle against Pabloite liquidationism. It began:

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Trotskyist movement in the United States, the Plenum of the National Committee of the Socialist Workers Party sends its revolutionary socialist greetings to orthodox Trotskyists throughout the world....

As is well known, the pioneer American Trotskyists 25 years ago brought the program of Trotsky, suppressed by the Kremlin, to the attention of world public opinion. This act proved decisive in breaching the isolation imposed by the Stalinist bureaucracy on Trotsky and in laying the foundation for the Fourth International. With his exile shortly thereafter, Trotsky began an intimate and trusted collaboration with the leadership of the SWP that lasted to the day of his death....

After the murder of Trotsky by an agent of Stalin's secret police, the SWP took the lead in defending and advocating his teachings. We took the lead not from choice, but from necessity—the second world war forced the orthodox Trotskyists underground in many countries, especially in Europe under the Nazis. Together with Trotskyists in Latin America, Canada, England, Ceylon, India, Australia and elsewhere we did what we could to uphold the banner of orthodox Trotskyism through the difficult war years.

With the end of the war, we were gratified at the appearance in Europe of Trotskyists from the underground who undertook the organizational reconstitution of the Fourth International. Since we were barred from belonging to the Fourth International by reactionary laws, we placed all the greater hope in the emergence of a leadership capable of continuing the great tradition bequeathed to our world movement by Trotsky. We felt that the young, new leadership of the Fourth International in Europe must be given full confidence and support. When self-corrections of serious errors were made on the initiative of the comrades themselves, we felt that our course was proving justified.

However, we must now admit that the very freedom from sharp criticism which we together with others accorded this leadership helped open the way for the consolidation of an uncontrolled, secret, personal faction in the administration of the Fourth International which has abandoned the basic program of Trotskyism.

This faction, centered around Pablo, is now working consciously and deliberately to disrupt, split, and break up the historically created cadres of Trotskyism in the various countries and to liquidate the Fourth International.

To show precisely what is involved, let us restate the fundamental principles on which the world Trotskyist movement is built:

1. The death agony of the capitalist system threatens the destruction of civilization through worsening depressions, world wars and barbaric manifestations like fascism. The development of atomic weapons today underlines the danger in the gravest possible way.

2. The descent into the abyss can be avoided only by replacing capitalism with the planned economy of socialism on a world scale and thus resuming the spiral of progress opened up by capitalism in its early days.

3. This can be accomplished only under the leadership of the working class in society. But the working class itself faces a crisis in leadership although the world relationship of social forces was never so favorable as today for the workers to take the road to power.

4. To organize itself for carrying out this world-historic aim, the working class in each country must construct a revolutionary socialist party in the pattern developed by Lenin; that is, a combat party capable of dialectically combining democracy and centralism—democracy in arriving at decisions, centralism in carrying them out; a leadership controlled by the ranks, ranks able to carry forward under fire in disciplined fashion.

5. The main obstacle to this is Stalinism, which attracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them either into the arms of the Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism. The penalty for these betrayals is paid by the working people in the form of consolidation of fascist or monarchist forces, and new outbreaks of wars fostered and prepared by capitalism. From its inception, the Fourth International set as one of its major tasks the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism inside and outside the USSR.

6. The need for flexible tactics facing many sections of the Fourth International, and parties or groups sympathetic to its program, makes it all the more imperative that they know how to fight imperialism and all its petty-bourgeois agencies (such as nationalist formations or trade union bureaucracies) without capitulation to Stalinism; and, conversely, know how to fight Stalinism (which in the final analysis is a petty-bourgeois agency of imperialism) without capitulating to imperialism.

These fundamental principles established by Leon Trotsky retain full validity in the increasingly complex and fluid politics of the world today. In fact the revolutionary situations opening up on every hand as Trotsky foresaw, have only now brought full concreteness to what at one time may have appeared to be somewhat remote abstractions not intimately bound up with the living reality of the time. The truth is that these principles now hold with increasing force both in political analysis and in the determination of the course of practical action. [2]

Banda does not state what it is that he rejects in these formulations. He does not tell us whether he believes that they were wrong in 1953 or whether they have since become outdated. In these paragraphs Cannon reasserted the essential Trotskyist conceptions of the nature of the epoch, the revolutionary role of the working class, the crisis of revolutionary proletarian leadership, the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism, and the necessity for the development of Marxist strategy and tactics in the struggle for state power. By his silence on this essential content of the “Open Letter,” Banda serves notice that he no longer considers it even worthy of comment, for, he has gone beyond the “dogmatic fetishisms” of “orthodox” Trotskyism. Those who adopt such a haughty attitude to the principles of the Fourth International have “gone beyond” them indeed.

The “Open Letter” then proceeded to an analysis of Pablo’s revision of Trotskyism:

These principles have been abandoned by Pablo. In place of emphasizing the danger of a new barbarism, he sees the drive toward socialism as “irreversible”; yet he does not see socialism coming within our generation or some generations to come. Instead he has advanced the concept of an “engulfing” wave of revolutions that give birth to nothing but “deformed,” that is, Stalin-type workers’ states which are to last for “centuries.”

This reveals the utmost pessimism about the capacities of the working class, which is wholly in keeping with the ridicule he has lately voiced of the struggle to build independent revolutionary socialist parties. In place of holding to the main course of building independent revolutionary socialist parties by all tactical means, he looks to the Stalinist bureaucracy, or a decisive section of it, to so change itself under mass pressure as to accept the “ideas” and “program” of Trotskyism. Under guise of the diplomacy required in tactical maneuvers needed to approach workers in the camp of Stalinism in such countries as France, he now covers up the betrayals of Stalinism.

This course has already led to serious defections from the ranks of Trotskyism to the camp of Stalinism. The pro-Stalinist split in the Ceylon party is a warning to all Trotskyists everywhere of the tragic consequences of the illusions about Stalinism which Pabloism fosters. [3]

The document examined the Pabloite response to crucial events in 1953, proving that in each instance, their policies represented a capitulation to the counterrevolutionary line of the Soviet bureaucracy.

With the death of Stalin, the Kremlin announced a series of concessions in the USSR, none of them political in character. In place of characterizing these as nothing but part of a maneuver aimed at further retrenchment of the usurping bureaucracy and part of the preparation for a leading bureaucrat to assume the mantle of Stalin, the Pabloite faction took the concessions as good coin, painted them up as political concessions, and even projected the possibility of the “sharing of power” by the Stalinist bureaucracy with the workers (*Fourth International*, January-February, 1953, p. 13).

The “sharing of power” concept, promulgated most bluntly by Clarke, a high priest of the Pablo cult, was indirectly sanctioned as dogma by Pablo himself in an unanswered but obviously leading question: Will the liquidation of the Stalinist regime take the form, Pablo asks, “of violent interbureaucratic struggles between elements who will fight for the status quo, if not for turning back, and the more and more numerous elements drawn by the powerful pressure of the masses”? (*Fourth International*, March-April 1953, p. 39).

This line fills the orthodox Trotskyist program of political revolution against the Kremlin bureaucracy with a new content; namely, the revisionist position that the “ideas” and “program” of Trotskyism will filter into and permeate the bureaucracy, or a decisive section of it, thus “overthrowing” Stalinism in an unforeseen way.

In East Germany in June the workers rose against the Stalinist-dominated government in one of the greatest demonstrations in the history of Germany. This was the first proletarian mass uprising

against Stalinism since it usurped and consolidated power in the Soviet Union. How did Pablo respond to this epochal event?

Instead of clearly voicing the revolutionary political aspirations of the insurgent East German workers, Pablo covered up the counterrevolutionary Stalinist satraps who mobilized Soviet troops to put down the uprising. "... the Soviet leaders and those of the various 'People's Democracies' and the Communist Parties could no longer falsify or ignore the profound meaning of these events. They have been obliged to continue along the road of still more ample and genuine concessions to avoid risking alienating themselves forever from support by the masses and from provoking still stronger explosions. From now on they will not be able to stop halfway. They will be obliged to dole out concessions to avoid more serious explosions in the immediate future and if possible to effect a transition 'in a cold fashion' from the present situation to a situation more tolerable for the masses" ("Statement of the [International Secretariat] of the Fourth International," published in the *Militant*, July 6).

Instead of demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops—the sole force upholding the Stalinist government—Pablo fostered the illusion that "more ample and genuine concessions" would be forthcoming from the Kremlin's gauleiters. Could Moscow have asked for better assistance as it proceeded to monstrously falsify the profound meaning of those events, branding the workers in revolt as "fascists" and "agents of American imperialism," and opening a wave of savage repression against them? [4]

The fact that Banda does not tell us whether or not he agrees with this assessment of Pablo's capitulation to Stalinism on an event so crucial as the East German uprising, the historic precursor of the Hungarian Revolution, cannot be accidental. "Silence betokens consent." Banda says nothing about Pablo's monumental betrayals and directs his fire against those who denounced his political crimes. This can only mean that he now holds positions—or more correctly, he privately has held positions for a considerable period of time—that coincide with those of Pablo on the role of the Soviet bureaucracy.

The "Open Letter" then examined the Pabloite betrayal of the French general strike of August 1953.

In France, in August the greatest general strike in the history of the country broke out. Put in motion by the workers themselves against the will of their official leadership, it presented one of the most favorable openings in working-class history for the development of a real struggle for power. Besides the workers, the farmers of France followed with demonstrations, indicating their strong dissatisfaction with the capitalist government.

The official leadership, both Social Democrats and Stalinists, betrayed this movement, doing their utmost to restrain it and avert the danger to French capitalism. In the history of betrayals it would be difficult to find a more abominable one if it is measured against the opportunity that was present.

How did the Pablo faction respond to this colossal event? They labeled the action of the Social Democrats a betrayal—but for the wrong reasons. The betrayal, they said, consisted of negotiating with the government behind the backs of the Stalinists. This betrayal, however, was a secondary one, deriving from their main crime, their refusal to set out on the road to taking power.

As for the Stalinists, the Pabloites covered up their betrayal. By that action they shared in the Stalinist betrayal. The sharpest criticism they found themselves capable of uttering against the

counterrevolutionary course of the Stalinists, was to accuse them of "lack" of policy.

This was a lie. The Stalinists had no "lack" of policy. Their policy was to maintain the status quo in the interests of Kremlin foreign policy and thereby to help bolster tottering French capitalism.

But this was not all. Even for the internal party education of the French Trotskyists Pablo refused to characterize the Stalinist role as a betrayal. He noted "the role of brake played, to one degree or another, by the leadership of the traditional organizations"—a betrayal is a mere "brake"!—"but also their capacity—especially of the Stalinist leadership—to yield to the pressure of the masses when this pressure becomes powerful as was the case during these strikes." (Political Note No. 1)

One might expect this to be sufficient conciliation to Stalinism from a leader who has abandoned orthodox Trotskyism, but still seeks the cover of the Fourth International. However, Pablo went still further.

A leaflet of his followers addressed to the workers at the Renault plant in Paris declared that in the general strike the Stalinist leadership of the CGT (main French trade union federation) "was correct in not introducing demands other than those wanted by the workers." This in face of the fact that the workers *by their actions* were demanding a Workers and Farmers Government. [5]

Elsewhere in his "27 Reasons," Banda attacks the role played by the OCI in the events of May-June 1968, declaring that it "betrayed the general strike and impugned every tradition and principle of Trotskyism by its obdurate refusal to implement transitional demands and the struggle for power." But he says nothing about the far greater betrayal of the Pabloites in a similar situation in 1953. Rather, he attacks those who brought the Pabloite betrayal of the general strike to the attention of the international Trotskyist movement.

After completing its analysis of the role of the Pabloites in August 1953, the "Open Letter" dealt with the renegacy of the Cochranites:

The test of these world events is sufficient, in our opinion, to indicate the depth of Pabloite conciliationism toward Stalinism. But we would like to submit for public inspection of the world Trotskyist movement some additional facts.

For over a year and a half the Socialist Workers Party has been engaged in a struggle against a revisionist tendency headed by Cochran and Clarke. The struggle with this tendency has been one of the most severe in the history of our party. At bottom it is over the same fundamental questions that divided us from the Burnham-Shachtman group and the Morrow-Goldman group at the beginning and end of World War II. It is another attempt to revise and abandon our basic program. It has involved the perspective of the American revolution, the character and role of the revolutionary party and its method of organization, and the perspectives for the world Trotskyist movement.

During the post-war period a powerful bureaucracy consolidated itself in the American labor movement. This bureaucracy rests on a large layer of privileged, conservative workers who have been "softened" by the conditions of war prosperity. This new privileged layer was recruited in large measure from the ranks of former militant sectors of the working class, from the same generation that founded the CIO.

The relative security and stability of their living conditions have temporarily paralyzed the initiative and fighting spirit of these

workers who previously were in the forefront of all militant class actions.

Cochranism is the manifestation of the pressure of this new labor aristocracy, with its petty-bourgeois ideology, upon the proletarian vanguard. The moods and tendencies of the passive, relatively satisfied layer of workers act as a powerful mechanism transmitting alien pressures into our own movement. The slogan of the Cochranites, "Junk the Old Trotskyism," expresses this mood.

The Cochranite tendency sees the powerful revolutionary potential of the American working class as some far-off prospect. They denounce as "sectarian" the Marxist analysis which reveals the molecular processes creating new fighting regiments in the American proletariat.

Insofar as there are any progressive tendencies within the working class of the United States they see them only in the ranks or periphery of Stalinism and among "sophisticated" union politicians—the rest of the class they consider so hopelessly dormant that they can be awakened only by the impact of atomic war. Briefly, their position reveals: loss of confidence in the perspective of the American revolution; loss of confidence in the role of the revolutionary party in general and the Socialist Workers Party in particular. [6]

Banda prefers not to comment on this analysis of the Cochranites, precisely because their views correspond most closely to his own. More than 30 years before Banda, they denounced the "Open Letter," which, they claimed, was based on a "make-believe world" in which "the small nuclei will tomorrow become the mass revolutionary parties challenging all contenders and destroying them in battle." [7] They declared that the traditions and program of the Fourth International were "of no interest to the existing labor movements" and that "the revolutionary parties of tomorrow will not be Trotskyist, in the sense of necessarily accepting the tradition of our movement, our estimation of Trotsky's place in the revolutionary hierarchy, or all of Trotsky's specific evaluations and slogans." [8]

The "Open Letter" documented Pablo's abuse of authority, first of all exposing the way he secretly collaborated with Cochran and Clarke to build a revisionist tendency inside the SWP, while professing to oppose unprincipled factionalism. It dealt with Pablo's attempt to muzzle the leadership of the British section with a Comintern-style "committee discipline." Finally, it documented the bureaucratic expulsion of the majority of the French section in 1952, with the SWP specifically acknowledging that it was wrong not to have intervened earlier against Pablo's unprecedented action:

This error was due to insufficient appreciation on our part of the real issues involved. We thought the differences between Pablo and the French section were tactical and this led us to side with Pablo, despite our misgivings about his organizational procedure, when, after months of disruptive factional struggle, the majority was expelled.

But at bottom the differences were programmatic in character. The fact is that the French comrades of the majority saw what was happening more clearly than we did....

The whole French situation must be re-examined in the light of subsequent developments. The role the majority of the French section played in the recent general strike demonstrated in the most decisive way that they know how to uphold the fundamental principles of orthodox Trotskyism. The French section of the Fourth International was unjustly expelled. The French majority,

grouped around the paper *La Verité*, are the real Trotskyists of France and are so openly recognized by the SWP. [9]

Pablo's organizational methods were not the product of personal aberrations, but were bound up with the liquidationist line of the International Secretariat. As the role of the WRP inside the International Committee since the early 1970s has shown once again, the attempt to impose a liquidationist line upon the Fourth International invariably requires the use of base and factional methods against the Trotskyist cadre. Healy, Banda and Slaughter perfected the tricks which were used by Pablo 30 years earlier. Thus, it is not surprising that Banda prefers not to deal with Cannon's indictment of Pablo's organizational methods.

The "Open Letter" then dealt with one aspect of Pablo's opportunism that has received too little attention:

Particularly revolting is the slanderous misrepresentation Pablo has fostered of the political position of the Chinese section of the Fourth International. They have been pictured by the Pablo faction as "sectarians," as "fugitives from a revolution."

Contrary to the impression deliberately created by the Pablo faction, the Chinese Trotskyists acted as genuine revolutionary representatives of the Chinese proletariat. Through no fault of theirs they have been singled out as victims by the Mao regime in the way that Stalin singled out for execution the entire generation of Lenin's Bolsheviks in the USSR, emulating the Noskes and Scheidemanns of Germany who singled out the Luxemburgs and Liebknechts of the 1918 revolution for execution. But Pablo's line of conciliationism toward Stalinism leads him inexorably to touch up the Mao regime *couleur de rose* while putting gray tints on the firm, principled stand of our Chinese comrades. [10]

Though Banda says nothing about this passage, there is no doubt that on this question, he is in full agreement with Pablo. As is indicated by his earlier reference to the Fourth International's "total failure" to understand the Chinese Revolution, Banda believes that Maoism is not merely a viable alternative to Trotskyism; he is convinced, rather, that it represents an advance beyond the Fourth International. This position is rooted in his complete abandonment of the class standpoint of the revolutionary proletariat.

Banda's petty-bourgeois notion of revolution leaves out that element which is central to the entire Marxist concept of the class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Banda does indeed believe that "power comes out of the barrel of a gun," and this stupid aphorism—which contributes no more to the science of politics than it does to the science of ballistics—has been the theoretical underpinning of his belief that the armed struggle constitutes the fundamental strategy of Marxism. [11]

The "Open Letter" concluded:

To sum up: The lines of cleavage between Pablo's revisionism and orthodox Trotskyism are so deep that no compromise is possible either politically or organizationally. The Pablo faction has demonstrated that it will not permit democratic decisions truly reflecting majority opinion to be reached. They demand complete submission to their criminal policy. They are determined to drive all orthodox Trotskyists out of the Fourth International or to muzzle and handcuff them.

Their scheme has been to inject their Stalinist conciliationism piecemeal and likewise in piecemeal fashion, get rid of those who

come to see what is happening and raise objections. That is the explanation for the strange ambiguity about many of the Pabloite formulations and diplomatic evasions.

Up to now the Pablo faction has had a certain success with this unprincipled and Machiavellian maneuverism. But the qualitative point of change has been reached. The political issues have broken through the maneuvers and the fight is now a showdown.

If we may offer advice to the sections of the Fourth International from our enforced position outside the ranks, we think the time has come to act and to act decisively. The time has come for the orthodox Trotskyist majority of the Fourth International to assert their will against Pablo's usurpation of authority.

They should in addition safeguard the administration of the affairs of the Fourth International by removing Pablo and his agents from office and replacing them with cadres who have proved in action that they know how to uphold orthodox Trotskyism and keep the movement on a correct course both politically and organizationally. [12]

A principled challenge to the legitimacy of the "Open Letter" would have to demonstrate that Cannon's characterization of the "lines of cleavage between Pablo's revisionism and orthodox Trotskyism" was either exaggerated or entirely false. Banda would have to demonstrate that a compromise was both possible and desirable in the interests of the working class. Because he cannot do this on the basis of an honest presentation of the historical record, Banda is forced, once again, to lie in the most brazen fashion. Thus, he makes the incredible declaration, "I challenge North and his flunkies in the IC to produce a single document, resolution or memorandum which sought to explain theoretically the causes and origins of the split. *He will find none.* That is the greatest indictment of the IC and that is why, I for one, will treat his invocation of IC authority with the contempt, pity and anger it deserves." (Banda's emphasis.)

The literary output surrounding the 1953 struggle compares extremely favorably with the two splits inside the Workers Revolutionary Party with which Michael Banda was directly associated: the 1974 expulsion of Alan Thornett and the 1985 break with Healy. The entire Thornett affair lasted little more than six weeks. Banda, in that fight, claimed to have "unmasked" Thornett's "Menshevism" with just one brief document that will be remembered only for its defense of the majority's right to change the party's constitution in accordance with the factional needs of the leadership. As for the 1985 bloodbath, Banda proclaimed proudly that "the party has been split not on tactical and programmatic issues, but on the most basic question of revolutionary morality." [13]

In contrast, few political struggles have been so exhaustively documented as the 1953 split inside the Fourth International. Banda's "challenge" is easily disposed of. The publication of all the documents between 1951 and 1954, tracing the origins of Pabloism and the development of the split, would require several volumes totaling well over 1,000 pages.

There were, in fact, scores of documents, resolutions, memoranda and letters in which the cadre of the Trotskyist movement, especially inside the Socialist Workers Party, were able to carefully follow all of the political issues which arose after the Third World Congress.

Among the most important documents analyzing Pablo's revisionist conceptions of Stalinism were Morris Stein's "Some Remarks on 'The Rise and Fall of Stalinism,'" and John G. Wright's "Memorandum on 'The Rise and Decline of Stalinism.'" Together, these two documents represented a crushing refutation of Pablo's "new world reality" and demonstrated that he had completely repudiated the essential programmatic conceptions upon which the founding of the Fourth

International was based.

The "Open Letter" of November 1953, which, as we have seen, summed up in extremely concise form the central issues of principle, program and organization involved in the split, was followed by the more detailed document of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Plenum of the SWP, entitled "Against Pabloist Revisionism."

Another major document, which exposed Pablo's criminal abuse of the Chinese Trotskyist movement and his obscene adaptation to Maoism, was Peng Shu-tse's "The Chinese Experience with Pabloite Revisionism and Bureaucratism."

As was common inside the Fourth International, many crucial documents were initially prepared in the form of letters. Cannon's voluminous correspondence with Sam Gordon, Gerry Healy, Leslie Goonewardene and George Breitman are not only an invaluable historical record of the split, but also provide profound insights into the political and historical issues at stake in the struggle against Pabloism.

Among the most important letters is that which Cannon wrote on February 23, 1954, to Leslie Goonewardene, the secretary of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) of Ceylon. This letter is particularly relevant to Banda's denunciation of the "Open Letter." Although Banda does not care to make this known, his present-day attack on the "Open Letter" is written partially as a belated defense of the unprincipled position adopted by the LSSP in relation to the split with the Pabloites. Banda's invocation of organizational criteria to attack the "Open Letter" (i.e., it "did nothing to alter the line of forces") simply repeats the line taken by the LSSP.

For reasons bound up with the political situation in Ceylon, the LSSP strongly sympathized with those aspects of the liquidationist line of Pablo which sanctioned its own increasingly open adaptation to the bourgeois nationalist parties. Although it was still critical of Pablo's line on Stalinism, the LSSP did not want an international struggle against centrism inside the Fourth International that threatened to cut across its search for alliances with forces like Bandaranaike's MEP. Thus, the LSSP passed a resolution which opposed the "Open Letter."

While reassuring Cannon that the LSSP remained opposed to any trace of Stalinist conciliationism within its own section, Goonewardene employed a series of lawyer's arguments to justify the LSSP's opposition to the "Open Letter." He called on Cannon to pull back from the split with the Pabloites and attend the scheduled Fourth World Congress.

The evolution of the LSSP over the next decade was to expose the organic connection between its opposition to the struggle against Pabloism and its steady movement toward popular frontism. Cannon clearly sensed that Goonewardene's position expressed a weakening of the Trotskyist convictions of the LSSP, and, despite the generally respectful and comradely tone of the letter, his concern was apparent. While congratulating the LSSP for its struggle against a pro-Stalinist tendency within its own ranks, he reminded Goonewardene, "As internationalists, it is obligatory that we take the same attitude toward open or covert manifestations of Stalinist conciliationism *in other parties, and in the international movement generally.*" [14] (Cannon's emphasis.)

After delivering this pointed rebuke, Cannon explained the significance of the split:

A realistic approach to the present crisis must take as its point of departure the recognition that the Fourth International is no longer a politically homogeneous organization. The issues of the factional struggle are matters of principle which put the Trotskyist movement squarely before the question: To be or not to be. The attempt to revise the accepted Trotskyist analysis of the nature of Stalinism and the Lenin-Trotsky theory of the party, and thereby in effect, to deprive the Trotskyist parties and the Fourth International as a whole of any historical justification for

independent existence, is at the bottom of the present crisis in our international movement. In connection with this as a highly important, although subordinate issue, matters of organizational principle—not merely procedure, but principle—are also involved.

There is no way to get around the fact that we are up against a revisionist tendency which extends from basic theory to political action and organizational practice. We have not imagined this tendency or invented it; we simply recognize the reality. We have become convinced of this reality only after the most thorough deliberation and consideration of the trend of the Pablo faction, as we have seen it manifested in its concrete actions as well as in its crafty theoretical formulations and omissions. We have declared open war on this tendency because we know that it can lead to nothing else but the destruction of our movement; and because we believe that silence on our part would be a betrayal of our highest duty: that is, our duty to the international movement....

We are fighting now in fulfillment of the highest duty and obligation which we undertook when we came to Trotsky and the Russian Opposition 25 years ago. That is the obligation to put international considerations first of all and above all; to concern ourselves with the affairs of the international movement and its affiliated parties; help them in every way we can; to give them the benefit of our considered opinions, and to seek in return their advice and counsel in the solution of our own problems. *International collaboration is the first principle of internationalism.* We learned that from Trotsky. We believe it, and we are acting according to our belief....

The first concern of Trotskyists always has been, and should be now, the defense of our doctrine. That is the first principle. The second principle, giving life to the first, is the protection of the historically-created cadres against any attempt to disrupt or disperse them. At the best, formal unity stands third in the order of importance.

The cadres of the “old Trotskyists” represent the accumulated capital of the long struggle. *They are the carriers of the doctrine*; the sole human instruments now available to bring our doctrine—the element of socialist consciousness—into the mass movement. The Pablo camarilla set out deliberately to disrupt these cadres, one by one, in one country after another. And we set out, no less deliberately—after too long a delay—to defend the cadres against this perfidious attack. Our sense of responsibility to the international movement imperatively required us to do so. Revolutionary cadres are not indestructible. The tragic experience of the Comintern taught us that. [15] (Cannon’s emphasis.)

These lines—and, more decisively, the whole content of the SWP’s political work in 1953-54—give the lie to Banda’s allegation that “Cannon and the SWP abandoned even the pretense of building the Fourth International by 1950.” As we have already demonstrated on the basis of the historical record, Cannon’s struggle against Pabloism was the highpoint of his life as a Marxist revolutionary and proletarian internationalist. Out of the battle against a right-wing tendency which reflected the enormous pressures of American imperialism upon the SWP, Cannon mounted an international offensive against revisionism inside the Fourth International, preserved the heritage of Trotskyism and extended it into the future.

The 1953 struggle against Pabloism was, perhaps, the “last hurrah” of this great, though fallible, fighter for Trotskyism. While his later retreats cannot be excused, they in no way detract from what Cannon achieved in defending the continuity of the world movement in 1953-54. Those who would deny that do not measure up to Cannon’s ankles.

Notes:

- [1] Leon Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism* (London: New Park Publications, 1971), p. 79.
- [2] Cliff Slaughter, ed., *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism: A Documentary History* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), vol. 1, *The Fight Against Pabloism in the Fourth International*, pp. 298-301.
- [3] Ibid., p. 301.
- [4] Ibid., p. 301-3.
- [5] Ibid., p. 303-4.
- [6] Ibid., p. 306-7.
- [7] National Education Department Socialist Workers Party, *Towards a History of the Fourth International*, June 1973, part 4, vol. 4, pp. 208-9.
- [8] Ibid., p. 209.
- [9] Slaughter, ed., *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism: A Documentary History* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 311-12.
- [10] Ibid., p. 312.
- [11] International Committee of the Fourth International, “How the Workers Revolutionary Betrayed Trotskyism, 1973-85,” *Fourth International*, vol. 13, no. 1, Summer 1986, pp. 47-49.
- [12] Slaughter, ed., *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism: A Documentary History* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 312-13.
- [13] News Line, 2 November 1985.
- [14] SWP, *Towards a History*, part 3, vol. 4, p. 222.
- [15] Ibid., pp. 222-28.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact