

Meetings on 50 years of the International Committee of the Fourth International

Chris Marsden: The split with the WRP and the ascendancy of Trotskyism

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On November 16, 1953, the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP) published an Open Letter that called upon orthodox Trotskyists all over the world to unite in a struggle against a revisionist tendency under the leadership of Michel Pablo, at that time the secretary of the Fourth International. The Open Letter, drawn up by James P. Cannon, led to the foundation of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The German and British sections of the ICFI—the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP)—held meetings in Frankfurt and London on November 23 and 30 to commemorate this event and review the significance of the last 50 years of political work. Speakers at both meetings were Peter Schwarz, secretary of the ICFI, and Chris Marsden, national secretary of the SEP (Britain).

We are publishing here the contribution by Chris Marsden. Peter Schwarz's remarks were published on Saturday, December 6. [See Peter Schwarz: "The founding principles have been confirmed"]

The essential issue in the struggle against the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) renegades that led to a split in 1986 was a resurgence of the type of Pabloite revisionism that led to the foundation of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953. It was the conflict between those seeking to build a Marxist party for the working class and those who believed that this was an all but impossible sectarian fantasy.

Today, workers confront a resurgence of militarist barbarism led by the United States that threatens millions of lives around the world and an offensive against living standards and democratic rights aimed at destroying every last vestige of the gains made throughout more than a century of class struggle. And they do so while saddled with parties and trade unions that have abandoned all pretence of opposing the profit system.

Everything depends on the construction of a new socialist leadership armed with a perspective that articulates the independent interests of the working class and offers the possibility of constructing an alternative social order that offers peace and prosperity for all.

That is why the split that took place between the Workers Revolutionary Party and the International Committee in 1986 was not just a seminal event in the history of our movement, but one that has far-reaching implications for the course of the class struggle. For the defeat of the WRP renegades was to mark a turning point in the International Committee's decades-long struggle against Pabloite opportunism, when an essentially defensive struggle passed over into an offensive in which the forces of Trotskyism have moved into the ascendancy.

This provides an unprecedented opportunity to establish a new axis on which to reforge the international workers movement—the perspective of world socialist revolution we have defended and elaborated.

Any one who has been involved in politics for some time understands that one of the most difficult issues to explain to workers and youth, even those sympathetic to socialism, is why a split took place.

After all, they argue, there are far too many left-wing groups that all believe essentially in the same thing. If only we could all get together and forget our differences, then we would collectively become a powerful force for change.

Possibly the only split in history that is generally regarded as necessary and correct is that between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, beginning in 1903. Subsequent events undeniably demonstrated how that split determined which side of the barricades two political tendencies stood—for or against the Russian Revolution. It was no longer a purely theoretical issue.

As a result, Lenin has gone down in history for socialists as the man whose political foresight paved the way for the creation of the world's first workers' state. Or alternatively, for the enemies of socialism he is the villain who aborted Russia's development as a capitalist democracy.

If the October Revolution had failed for some reason, however, then even socialist-inclined people may have looked on Lenin as a factional intriguer and splitter who had thrown away the precious unity of the workers movement for some abstract principles.

Certainly, the charge of sectarianism has been levelled against all those who have put principles before opportunist considerations ever since, and none have been the subject of such insults more frequently than the Trotskyist movement.

But the same essential issues determined the split in 1903 and 1953, for both were the product of the essential struggle to define the perspective necessary for the success of the social revolution. Indeed, if anything, the split in 1953 was more fully defined than Lenin's conflict with Menshevism, at least in its earlier stages—because it was a defence of the entire programmatic heritage of the Marxist movement since Lenin's time and of Trotsky's theoretical and political struggle against Stalinism, in particular.

Trotskyism emerged in opposition to the most powerful bureaucracy the world has ever seen. It defended the perspective of international socialism through years of blackest reaction by challenging the Stalinists' nationalist perspective of building socialism in one country and subjecting their every twist and turn to a ruthless political critique.

The Stalinists seemed far more powerful than their opponents and were able to misappropriate the historical authority of the October Revolution to confuse millions of their supporters. Moscow identified all criticism as the work of agents of fascism, or at best of sectarians who counterposed their own schema to what was constantly identified as "actually existing socialism" in the USSR.

It was never possible to fool all of the people all of the time. Indeed, the Trotskyist movement attracted the best and brightest, the most idealistic and committed—despite of, and even because of, the calumnies of the Stalinists. And it acquired a growing moral authority as time passed and Stalinism's actions discredited its own claims to socialism. Even during this most difficult period, moreover, isolation and persecution never daunted the cadre of the Fourth International. They drew confidence from the understanding that their perspective was correct and historical circumstance would eventually shift away from reaction.

The conditions would be created where the fight for political principles would cut a path to the masses. Trotsky predicted of the bureaucratised labour movement that not one stone would be left upon another by the coming revolutionary wave, whereas the Fourth International's members who had proved themselves able to swim against the stream would be carried aloft.

This confidence was based on an historically derived understanding that the construction of socialism depended on the political education and mobilisation of the international working class—a force far more powerful than the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies.

Pabloism emerged in the late 1940s from those forces that rejected this perspective and adapted to the apparent strength of Stalinism and the post-war stabilisation of capitalism that Stalinism's betrayals helped bring about. One of Pabloism's characteristics was that it translated Moscow's ideological offensive against socialism into a pseudo-Trotskyist apologia for Stalinism, and later social democracy and bourgeois nationalism. The issue once again was to insist that one must recognise political reality: Stalinism had been forced to carry out supposedly revolutionary measures, and the Stalinist world was the only genuine basis of opposition to US and world imperialism.

More generally, the working class owed its allegiance to mass parties and movements of a social democratic, Stalinist or nationalist character. So realism dictated that the task of transforming these parties into revolutionary instruments was far more practical than vain attempts to build an independent Marxist movement.

The history of the International Committee of the Fourth International is one of opposition to this world view. And because it was a struggle between opposing ideologies, it could not be resolved on the basis of a split or any organisational measure. The Pabloites' ideas were alien to Marxism and could be theoretically disproved. But they drew strength from the domination of the working class by anti-socialist tendencies and acted as a conveyor belt for the pressure of imperialism on the workers' movement.

The ICFI's insistence that it represented orthodox Trotskyism could not be denied. But still, the Trotskyists were reduced to a small and embattled minority as the majority of the Fourth International capitulated to the Pabloite disease. Even James P. Cannon and the Socialist Workers Party leadership were to abandon their stand in 1953, and by 1963 had reunified with the Pabloites on an unprincipled basis.

From that point, the leadership of orthodox Trotskyism passed to the British Socialist Labour League (SLL) led by Gerry Healy, Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter.

The reaction by its political opponents to this stand was one of savage and unrelenting hostility. "Healyism" was branded as the worst form of sectarianism, so bad that it justified treating the ICFI as political pariahs.

It is to the credit of the Socialist Labour League, the WRP's forerunner, that in such difficult circumstances it was able to make major political and organisational advances on the basis of which young forces were attracted to the Trotskyist movement in Britain and in several countries internationally. Many of those inspired by the leadership provided by the SLL are today themselves leaders of the sections of the International Committee.

One thing that the SLL's history proves is that a defence of principles is

not a recipe for isolation. Rather, the isolation suffered by Marxists has been historically determined. It reflected the domination of the workers' movement by vast bureaucratic apparatuses that had secured their control through the systematic political genocide waged by Stalinism against Trotsky's supporters in the Left Opposition and the defeats inflicted on the working class as a result.

Isolation could not be overcome by clever tactical adaptation to supposed political reality, but only through the protracted and at times painful struggle to cut a path to the working class through a struggle against its misleaders.

The tragedy of the WRP—and there is an element of tragedy in what occurred, whatever one may feel about this or that individual—is that the pressures the party faced, combined with crucial political weaknesses, led its leaders to abandon this earlier principled stance.

The conception developed within the SLL that the organisational successes it had achieved were more important than the theoretical struggle against Pabloism, and that the ICFI would be built largely through the attractive power of a large British movement.

For the sake of organisational success, therefore, internal political conflict was avoided. So, when some within the SLL and WRP leadership began to articulate positions not dissimilar to the Pabloites, this was not opposed. Eventually, the WRP abandoned any attempt to construct an independent Marxist party in favour of efforts to build its own relations with what it saw as far more powerful tendencies.

It is not possible here to detail every aspect of the SLL/WRP's degeneration, which took place over two decades. But it began by placing a question mark over the significance of the struggle against Pabloism, continued by Cliff Slaughter openly questioning the significance of Trotskyism per se, and ended with a glorification of the supposed revolutionary potential of nationalist movements such as the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and an orientation to the trade union bureaucracy and the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy.

This political descent into opportunism met opposition within the International Committee primarily from the Workers League (WL) in the United States—from the very forces recruited on the basis of the SLL's own earlier struggles.

Everything was done to suppress the critique made of the WRP's abandonment of a Trotskyist perspective by David North (national secretary of the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the US). The WRP's leaders temporarily forgot their factional conflicts to unite against what they understood as the common enemy. But by 1985, the WRP was riddled with factional intrigue and blew up as a result of a sex scandal. It was no longer possible to suppress the criticisms of the Workers League and its defence of Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution. North's critique won the overwhelming majority of the International Committee to its side as well as the support of a pro-ICFI minority that today constitutes the SEP in Britain.

On its face, and certainly according to the common sense views of political pragmatists, this would constitute a terrible blow to the ICFI. Certainly, its Pabloite political opponents could not contain their obvious glee at the explosive end of the British section, which was by far the largest and most well known. For their part, Healy, Banda and Slaughter boasted that they were now free of the old sectarianism and could begin to orient themselves to "real mass movements."

Their factional disputes notwithstanding, all those who split with the ICFI in 1986 sought their various ways into the bosom of the old bureaucracies. Banda started by declaring that Trotsky had sowed dragons' teeth but reaped fleas, before concluding that he had in fact sown fleas and that the "proletarian Bonaparte" Joseph Stalin had been right all along.

Healy embraced the official anti-Stalinism of Mikhail Gorbachev and later Boris Yeltsin, portraying the capitalist restorationist wing of the

bureaucracy as the “unconsciously Trotskyist” realisation of a political revolution and the rebirth of Soviet democracy.

Slaughter initially tried to orient towards a regroupment with the centrist opponents of Trotskyism, and through them to forge an alliance with the Stalinists as part of a bigger organisation, targeting Argentina’s Movement towards Socialism (MAS) in particular. After suffering several major setbacks in this project, he concluded his political trajectory away from Marxism by proclaiming his hostility to any efforts to build a political leadership for the working class in favour of a glorification of the most degenerate anarchist groupings and an ideology of pure spontaneity.

All of them would have no difficulty in subscribing to Healy’s criticism of the International Committee, that they believed in “whiter-than-white socialism of the purest water and the smallest number,” and to his attack on North that maintained, “for him the most vital question is to maintain doctrinal purity [which is] possible only in the smallest discussion group: numbers encourage only doctrinal impurity.”

A strange thing happened, however. Instead of success, the fragments of the WRP suffered one setback after another. They have split and split again—and today barely register a blip on the political radar screen.

In contrast, the ICFI has gone from strength to strength. Today, the *World Socialist Web Site* is the most widely read revolutionary socialist journal in the world and is recognised by many as the authoritative spokesman of socialist internationalism.

How can this be explained?

The fate of the WRP renegades was the product of a fundamental shift in political and social relations on a world scale. Their abandonment of the struggle for an independent Marxist leadership and orientation to Stalinism were the political product of decades of bureaucratic domination of the workers’ movement.

But the WRP’s betrayal was only one side of the equation. We are not here to explain that betrayals alone have objective roots and causes. The fight waged by the Workers League also had objective significance and enabled the ICFI to theoretically prepare for a major shift in social and political relations the world over to which the WRP renegades were blind.

The WRP’s wholesale capitulation to Stalinism was a classic example of rats jumping aboard a sinking ship. It coincided with the unfolding of the gravest crisis ever faced by the Soviet bureaucracy. The perspective of socialism in one country and of long-term coexistence with imperialism had led the Soviet Union into a dead end. The response of the Gorbachev wing of the bureaucracy, far from being revolutionary, was to seek reintegration of the USSR into the structures of world capitalism through the overturn of nationalised property relations—a perspective pursued with even greater vigour by his successor Yeltsin.

The destruction of the Soviet Union by Stalinism became the ideological spearhead for the wholesale renunciation of socialism by all the old bureaucracies. For their part, the Labour Party and other social democratic organisations proceeded to ditch their old reformist programmes and became converts to a variety of Thatcherite free market monetarism.

The trade unions followed suit, presiding over a substantial decline in living standards, and in the process losing millions of members. And the nationalist movements made their peace with imperialism—most famously in South Africa where the African National Congress (ANC) took charge of capitalism’s interests.

The renegades once again attempted the classic Pabloite justification for their opportunism by claiming that adaptation to Stalinism, social democracy and national liberation movements was the only road to the masses. Instead, the grip of these leaderships over the working class had been fatally undermined and all those groups that based themselves on orientation to them have seen their schemas and often their organisations collapse around their ears.

Under these conditions, the ICFI’s “whiter-than-white socialism”—its defence of principles and of the historical canon of the Marxist

movement—has proved to be the most precious political commodity and a powerful pole of attraction for those seeking a way forward.

What was defended by the ICFI is the only programme through which the working class can realise the goal of creating a socialist world, one derived not through passive contemplation but over decades of opposing the very parties and perspectives that have now so patently failed.

Today, a great deal of political confusion and disorientation have been created by the destruction of the Soviet Union and the rightward lurch of all the old reformist parties and organisations. The constant insistence by the media and by academia that what has failed is socialism reinforces the message of the Blairs of this world that there is no alternative to the market system.

But there are limits to how long this message—a call to abandon all hope and bow before the power of Mammon—will be accepted. Powerful objective factors are preparing the way for a major political realignment of the international working class on a revolutionary axis.

Pabloism emerged as a political adaptation to the Cold War—the historically peculiar circumstances that followed the end of World War II in which an uneasy bargain was struck between world imperialism and Stalinism:

This was a time when the political vocabulary consisted of détente and “peaceful coexistence” on one side, and the “arms race,” the nuclear threat and “Mutually Assured Destruction” on the other. The price of the Faustian bargain was paid in the survival of the capitalist system, which was made possible through the political betrayal and suppression of the revolutionary strivings of the working class by Moscow and its apologists.

The end of the Cold War has seen the essential contradictions of the profit system re-emerge in explosive forms. A ferocious conflict is developing to re-divide the world between the major imperialist powers, focusing on those areas of the globe that were partially sealed off from capitalist exploitation by the extension of the Soviet system, or areas such as the Middle East and Africa, where the very existence of the Soviet Union acted as a check on imperialism’s most predatory tendencies.

The Bush administration in the US is leading this scramble, utilising its military superiority as the now unchallenged superpower, but the European powers are desperately seeking to build up their own military power in response.

The class struggle has also reverted to a more brutal and direct form. A social offensive is being waged in every country against the working class, aimed at clawing back the concessions that were made to avert the socialist threat in an earlier period.

The fact must be faced that, to date, the working class has been unable to formulate a political response to this historic shift in social relations.

A ruthless and criminal financial oligarchy has accrued fabulous wealth for itself through the rape of the entire planet by its globally operating corporate empires. And it has been able to do so because the working class in every country finds itself without any form of political representation and organisation.

The parties workers built now confront them as bitter enemies that act on behalf of the oligarchy and implement its policies in open defiance of the democratically expressed popular will. The most telling expression of this is the British Labour government’s warmongering against Iraq and its joint occupation of the country alongside the US. But Blair is only the front-runner in a general scramble rightwards in which Gerhard Schröder in Germany and others are all vying for pole position.

This means that despite mass opposition to war on an unprecedented scale, the ruling elite is proceeding with its militarist agenda and preparing even greater crimes than the bombing of Baghdad. And the class struggle at home takes on the form of an unprecedented one-sided offensive by the bourgeoisie against a working class that has been largely demobilised by its unions and denied political representation and influence.

As a result, there is a growing recognition amongst many workers and

youth that a new party is needed.

The revolutionary perspective defended by the Marxist movement has proved itself to be the only basis for such a party to be built. The post-war period has turned out to be a peculiar historical episode in the class struggle, rather than a new epoch necessitating the abandonment of the socialist perspective. Yet even now, the Pabloite groups are again attempting to prevent the formation of a Marxist leadership in the working class. Their response to the collapse of the old nationalist and reformist bureaucracies is a frantic effort to construct a new reformist party, while insisting that the time is never ripe for advancing a revolutionary socialist programme.

Their proposed party takes slightly different forms in different countries, but pride of place is always given to the handful of dissidents and die-hards who have left the old parties and claim loyalty to past ideas of social democracy and Stalinism before their rightward lurch.

This not only hands the leadership of the working class over to those who are directly responsible for the predicament facing the international workers movement. More importantly, it ties the working class to the failed perspective of national reformism.

In Britain, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is attempting to create what it defines as an “antiwar” party to stand in next June’s European election. It is conceived of as an organisation advancing a limited programme of demands on which virtually everyone can agree. Of course, the SWP advances this as a socialist project, albeit of a reformist character, and is supported by, amongst others, the film director Ken Loach. But it has adopted Labour MP George Galloway as its figurehead, and his perspective is explicitly opposed to even this limited agenda.

Galloway was a prominent critic of Blair’s support for war against Iraq, but his history is one of opportunist relations with the Arab bourgeoisie and of 33 years of political loyalty to Labour. I attended a meeting where both Loach and Galloway spoke in Sheffield under the title “Britain at the Crossroads.”

Loach advanced the perspective of creating an essentially reformist party in which ostensibly revolutionary groups would be allowed to function and argue while leadership would be granted to the likes of Galloway and various left trade union leaders.

His one proposal was that the party should recognise that the interests of workers and business were incompatible, which he argued was the lesson of Labour’s failure. He said nothing about the necessity to base oneself on the revolutionary mobilisation of the international working class as opposed to working within the political structures of the capitalist nation state. And Loach, as is his wont, glorified the trade unions as the essential organisation of the working class and the natural basis of any new party.

But even this was rejected by Galloway. Unlike Loach, he told those present, he did not want a Marxist party, a Leninist party or even a socialist party. He was a socialist, of course, but he wanted to attract millions who weren’t socialists—including Muslims and those Tories who believed in democracy. He would be happy if Labour supporters lent his new party their vote on June 10, even if they went back to Blair the next day—so he could prove what could be achieved. He did not want just the 10 percent of the vote needed for representation in the European Parliament. He wanted “power”—and by June 10 of next year, no less!

There is nothing as unseemly, or indeed as ugly, as a political opportunist in a hurry. Galloway and the SWP’s project may use all sorts of rhetoric about being a necessary stepping-stone towards a socialist party. But it is defined by its opposition to a socialist perspective. The role of the radicals is to conceal this fact and provide a left cover for a discredited and exceedingly small section of the old labour bureaucracy that is attempting to create a political instrument with which to trap and neutralise discontent amongst workers and youth.

Galloway knows that the only political challenge he faces comes from the ICFI. At a recent meeting in Leeds, we circulated a leaflet appealing

for those present to attend this meeting, briefly explaining the history and significance of the struggle against Pabloism. Galloway chose to make this the centre of his own appeal for a different type of party.

He said he had read the leaflet and knew “there are people who prefer to be in small groups, who prefer the purity of a convention in a telephone box.”

In contrast, he was setting out “to politicise the millions, who have been radicalised by the events of the last two years” based on an agreement on “a relatively small number of very important policies and attitudes.”

“Other issues, like the 1953 denunciation by Cannon of Pabloism, that I have just read in one of these pamphlets, or other ideological or theological or psychological differences that are outside of those relatively small number of very important things—if we agree to set those aside for now, confident that in time engagement with other people will persuade them of our point of view, on Cannon or Pabloism or other minority issues, if we approach it that way I believe we can build a mass movement.”

He spoke of three planks of the new party—opposition to war and occupation, the repeal of antiunion laws, and the restoration of the link between the state pension and earnings.

Who could disagree with such demands? Certainly not the Socialist Equality Party, despite Galloway’s efforts to portray us as hopelessly divorced from such basic issues in our pursuit of “purity.”

We are in favour of unity of all those forces opposed to war and the depredations of capitalism. But this does not require that we develop historical and political amnesia and accept the perspective advanced by Galloway.

Make no mistake. He is not appealing for differences to be set aside for the sake of unity, but to be abandoned for the sake of his own domination of the antiwar movement. He has no intention of suspending his proselytising against socialism and advocacy of a pro-capitalist perspective.

At the launch meeting for his new party at London’s Friend’s Meeting House on October 29, he made no effort to conceal his hostility to socialism in order to save the blushes of the SWP.

He declared that his opposition to imperialism “arises from a deep patriotism about my own islands.” He believed “that sovereignty lies in the people and that the English Revolution of 1688 lies unfinished,” “that the State should be the servant of the people, transparent and accountable” and that “politics today can be boiled down to this issue of the morality and legitimacy of the state.”

Again and again, he professed that he was “a democratic socialist” who believed in “traditional British socialism.”

“My socialism is not that of ‘bloody revolutionists’ or foreign ideological importations. It is rooted in this land,” he proclaimed.

New Labour had “lost its bearings on national service provision and has turned a vigorous tradition of national democracy into a pale pink ersatz global version for the consumption of foreign elites.”

Galloway could not be clearer. He is an opponent of Marxism as a “foreign importation,” a defender of the entire tradition of Labour reformism, and a nationalist whose opposition to New Labour is that it serves the interests of “foreign elites.”

This is what he is demanding that his radical collaborators accept—a party of what he calls “grass-roots radicals to hobble the state, bring it under popular control and complete an unfinished radical democratic revolution” that he says “will unite Muslims, Christians and Jews, socialists, liberal and conservatives, men, women and the disadvantaged of all types in one movement of democratic liberation.”

Of course, the SWP and others that support the creation of such an antiwar party will argue that Galloway’s views are those of just one man and should not be used to discredit the idea behind the proposed antiwar party. But in truth, Galloway’s outlook will do more to shape the antiwar

party and determine its political character than whatever occasional socialist phraseology is used to dress up the project.

The SWP will accept Galloway's demands because it sees him as the first of a number of possible big names that can be won from Labour—providing that a new home is found that does not make them uncomfortable. For the sake of this alliance with a section of the bureaucracy—and the money it may bring in the form of a share of the trade union political levy—the working class must wait yet again for the building of a genuinely socialist party. In short, the response of the radical groups to the collapse of the old reformist bureaucracies is not to seek to supplant them, but to rebuild their authority by boosting the shop-soiled reputation of the likes of Galloway and other time-served opponents of socialism.

The fiery rhetoric about uncompleted democratic revolutions notwithstanding, such a party would be an abortion—one created on a lower political level than the Labour Party itself at the turn of the century. It would advance nothing but the political career of Galloway and his friends.

The working class must indeed lead the struggle for democracy and oppose the disenfranchisement of the mass of the population. But it must do so by its own means and not by efforts to make itself a non-threatening and acceptable ally of a phantom liberal wing of the Tories—or by becoming an adjunct of groups such as the Muslim Association of Britain and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament!

Rosa Luxemburg insisted at the turn of the last century that we are living in an epoch in which politics is dominated by “the aggravation and generalisation of competition on the world market,” bringing with it an inevitable turn to militarism and an intensification of the class struggle. This meant that “bourgeois democracy must logically move in a descending line.”

She concluded that “the socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy but that, on the contrary, the fate of democracy is bound up with the socialist movement... He who would strengthen democracy should want to strengthen and not weaken the socialist movement. He who renounces the struggle for socialism renounces both the labour movement and democracy.”

This argument and the entire theoretical legacy of Marxism defended by the ICFI must be made familiar to and acted upon by workers, intellectuals and youth. The fundamental issue is to learn the lessons of the past and on this basis to understand what type of party is required.

We urge unity on that basis. We know that all those who seek a revolutionary alternative to capitalism will not come from our tradition alone, and we do not demand prior agreement on everything as a precondition for common struggle. But we are not prepared to abandon our own heritage for the sake of what would be ephemeral initial success.

Rather, we insist that the historical struggle waged by our movement against Stalinism, social democracy and bourgeois nationalism is the only basis for politically rearming the international workers movement. And we are confident that this will not isolate us, but will confirm in the eyes of advanced workers and youth that ours is the party for them.



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