

An exchange of letters on the Balkans

5 July 2005

The following exchange was in response to the article, “International Commission calls for Kosovo independence” by Paul Mitchell, 24 May 2005.

Dear Paul,

The greater part of this article focuses on the history of this unfortunate part of the world. This historical perspective is, I believe, accurate. The International Commission’s approach deserves all the criticisms you make of it, both in terms of its recommendations (calling for Kosovo independence within a capitalist context and endorsing the ethnic statelets in the territory of the former Yugoslavia).

Your alternative approach, which you present in the final paragraph of your article, reads as follows: “The Marxist movement has sought to overcome the misery and barbarism that capitalism and nationalism have created in the region by fighting for the unification of the entire working class in a socialist federation of the Balkans.

“Only this perspective can provide the economic and political framework for meeting the social and democratic aspirations of Serb, Albanian, Croat and Moslem workers and create the basis for a struggle against both the region’s chauvinist demagogues and criminals and the imperialist powers.”

This approach, laudable though it may be, does not square with the realities on the ground. Unfortunately, there is no chance in the foreseeable future that such a socialist federation will come into existence, both because of the history which your article cited and because of the resistance of the European Union and the United States, which you also cited.

Therefore, you are really offering us nothing concrete in the way of an available alternative to the Commission’s proposal. Given that, it seems that you are, in effect, putting yourself in the position of supporting this proposal.

Now, it may be that the realities of the situation prevent there from being a good solution to the current disaster. But if that is true, you should say so without offering us only this unrealistic alternative, which has no chance of occurring.

EG
* * *

Dear EG,

Thanks for your comment on my article.

I note you say our historical perspective is accurate but our solution impossible. What would you say is an alternative? Your answer will help me frame a response to your letter.

Paul Mitchell
* * *

Dear Paul:

The first point that I would make is that in their political writings about the contemporaneous situations in the various parts of Europe—Ireland, France and Germany spring to mind—Marx and Engels did not say glibly that socialism was the answer to their problems (although, of course, they thought that ultimately it was). They thought and wrote much more specifically about what should be striven for in the SHORT-TERM by the working class movements of their time, since they felt that socialism was not then on the horizon. I think you ought to take your cue from their

writings.

My second instinct is to say that it isn’t fair for you to be asking me for a solution. Unlike you, I am not part of a political party that seeks to be a vanguard; I am only myself. If your party aspires to lead, it has to earn this leadership by developing the sort of clarity of approach that I asked for in my previous letter.

Nevertheless I’ll try to take up your challenge. (You may not have meant it as a challenge, but I see the situation as so complex that I see it as a challenge.) But please understand that what I write, I write with all modesty: a) I am not there and am not in touch with the goings-on on a daily basis; b) I am not a Yugoslav and do not have the overall command of the history and current situation to be able to arrogate to myself the right to do more than make general comments and suggestions; c) my theoretical understanding is undoubtedly limited.

That said, I ought to add that part of what I write comes as a result of having lived in Sarajevo for a year, from 1969 to 1970, and having been back there several times, the last time after the siege ended, when I spent three weeks there, trying to do my bit to help put that unhappy city back together. So, here are my comments:

If there is any positive hope now, I think, it lies in 1) slow, painstaking efforts by workers and intellectuals to unravel from whence came the ethnic enmities, which seemed to appear out of nowhere as Yugoslavia disintegrated. After that has been clarified, it would be important, I feel, for them 2) to try to determine in whose interest this ethnic friction has been and continues to be. Following this, it would be good if 3) tentative steps could be taken toward a reassertion of working class unity, which transcends the ethnic diversity. This would be a harking back to the cross-ethnic anti-Nazi resistance which developed during World War II. At the same time it would be necessary to 4) develop an assessment of the successes and failures of the Tito regime and its successors, so that it would be possible to build upon the positives and avoid the negatives of that era. (It is interesting to note that the main street in Sarajevo—from the late 1940s until today—was and is named for Tito.) The fruits of this massive group effort would be an attempt to 5) kick out the German and the American corporations (and the Iranian and Russian wanna-bes) and 6) struggle for self-determination and socialism.

In sum, the contrast between what I wrote here and what you were postulating in your article is that yours was what I would call a “glittering generality” which was based upon a lack of concrete reading of the situation, while mine is an attempt to do the opposite. In addition, I tried to lay out a series of incremental steps through which positive change might come about, rather than implying that the revolution would occur in one fell swoop.

Sincerely,

EG
* * *

Dear EG

Thanks for your further comments. You say you agree with our analysis of the situation in the Balkans but think the call for a United Socialist States of the Balkans, though laudable, is unrealistic in the present circumstances and that only short-term solutions are possible.

But your solution itself turns out to be anything but short term. You

suggest a “massive group effort” is needed to unravel the “successes and failures” of the history of Yugoslavia and the Tito regime in particular. You want to start from scratch as if nothing is known and no lessons have been learnt.

In opposition to this fundamentally pessimistic conception, the scientific and historical perspective of the Fourth International embodies the vital lessons of the twentieth century. It is imbued with the rich experience gained in the decades-long struggle of the Marxist movement against bourgeois nationalism, social democracy and Stalinism whose parliamentary and national roads to socialism have disintegrated. History has cast its verdict on these—the most politically damaging—“short-term” alternatives to the protracted struggle for revolutionary socialist consciousness.

You should make a serious study of the *World Socialist Web Site* archive, which has a wealth of material on this subject, in particular, “How the WRP joined the NATO camp: Imperialist war in the Balkans and the decay of the petty-bourgeois left” and “Marxism, Opportunism and the Balkan Crisis”.

These documents were written as polemics against Cliff Slaughter, a former leader of the Fourth International who abandoned revolutionary socialist politics and who rejected the possibility of a genuinely progressive transformation of society.

In its campaign for ethnic separation in Bosnia, Slaughter’s Workers Revolutionary Party discarded the perspective of a socialist federation of the Balkans region which the Marxist movement had developed as the concrete expression of the call in the Communist Manifesto for “Working men of all countries, unite!” It is the struggle to defend this concept of the international unity of the working class against the various forms of “national socialism” spread by social democracy and Stalinism that is the key to understanding the history of Yugoslavia.

Svetozar Markovic, the founder of the Serbian socialist movement, advanced the concept of a socialist federation of the Balkans in the 1870s. The first congress of Balkan Social Democratic parties in 1910 called for a Balkan federation “to free ourselves from particularism and narrowness; to abolish frontiers that divide peoples who are in part identical in language and culture, in part economically bound together; finally to sweep away forms of foreign domination both direct and indirect that deprive the people of their right to determine their destiny for themselves.”

Leon Trotsky elaborated on this perspective in “The Balkan Question and Social Democracy”, writing, “The only way out of the national and state chaos and bloody confusion of Balkan life is a union of all the peoples of the peninsula in a single economic and political entity, on the basis of national autonomy of the constituent parts. Only within the framework of a single Balkan state can the Serbs of Macedonia, the Sandjak, Serbia and Montenegro be united in a single national-cultural community, enjoying at the same time the advantages of a Balkan common market. Only the united Balkan peoples can give a real rebuff to the shameless pretensions of tsarism and European imperialism.”

The bureaucracy that emerged within the Soviet Union under the leadership of Stalin and its supporters within the Third Communist International rejected the perspective of socialist internationalism and world revolution, arguing that a policy of building “socialism in one country” and the formation of “united fronts” with bourgeois nationalist parties was a more “realistic” means of defending what the October 1917 Revolution had accomplished. The nationalist orientation and adaptation to non-working class tendencies articulated the interests of a privileged elite in Moscow and became a rallying point for opportunist tendencies that developed in the Communist Parties in every country.

Leon Trotsky opposed the Stalinist degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Third International. When Hitler came to power in Germany—as a direct result of Stalin’s policies—Trotsky concluded that the Third

International was dead for the purpose of socialist revolution and a new Fourth International was necessary.

In Yugoslavia, the policies of the Stalinised Comintern strengthened ethnic separatist movements such as the Croatian Nationalist Peasant Party and led to the eventual collapse of the Yugoslav Communist Party (CPY).

The leader of the CPY, Sima Markovic, opposed the line advanced by Stalin and upheld the demand for a socialist federation as the only way to resolve national and ethnic grievances. Stalin denounced Markovic as a “right-wing parliamentarian” and deposed him and the entire Yugoslav leadership in 1928.

Josip Tito rose to power in the CPY in the 1930s after the Soviet bureaucracy executed large numbers of Yugoslav Communists, including Markovic. At the same time, the revolutionary generation of October 1917 was being purged in the Soviet Union, culminating in Trotsky’s assassination by a GPU agent in 1940.

Under Tito the CPY was reorganised to incorporate national separatism into the party’s structure. Tito at first modelled himself on Stalin and tried to recreate the bureaucratic state forms of the USSR. However, he opposed Stalin’s post-war agreement with the Allied imperialist powers for a carve up of Europe into “spheres of influence” that involved splitting Yugoslavia 50-50 and the formation of a popular front government to include three members of an imperialist-backed exile regime in London. With the Communist Party-led partisans enjoying mass support and holding all the real power, the bourgeois representatives resigned and in November 1945 the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia was proclaimed.

Tito subsequently clashed with Stalin and the bureaucracy in Moscow, leading to an open break by 1948. The Fourth International saw this split as an opportunity to outline a progressive, socialist direction for Yugoslavia’s development and issued an Open Letter that posed the question:

“The alternatives facing Yugoslavia, let alone the Tito regime, are to capitulate either to Washington or to the Kremlin—or to strike out on an independent road. This road can be only that of an Independent Workers and Peasant Socialist Yugoslavia, as the first step towards a Socialist Federation of the Balkan Nations. It can be achieved only through an appeal to and unity with the international working class.”

The CPY ignored these warnings and sought to balance between Washington and the Kremlin. It too tried to build “socialism in one country” and pursue what it called a “Third way” as a supposedly more realistic alternative to the perspective of world socialist revolution. But it proved as disastrous for Yugoslavia as it did for the Soviet Union.

Under pressure from Moscow, Tito abandoned his initial steps towards a Balkan federation and cultivated a new, pan-Yugoslav nationalism. At the same time, faced with growing economic problems and increasing hostility from Moscow, the Tito leadership sought to accommodate itself to imperialism.

Having rejected a principled struggle to unite the working class on a genuinely socialist basis, Tito tried to balance between the various national and regional forces that existed in the separate republics. For a period, this arrangement provided each of the ethnic groups in Yugoslavia with some security against fratricidal war and the atrocities of the past, but after Tito’s death the unresolved national problems and economic backwardness of the country again broke out into the open.

A layer of capitalists had developed under Tito’s regime of “market socialism”—in which the development of capitalist enterprises was encouraged that took a pronounced regional form, but which was supposedly subordinated to the “workers’ state”—i.e., to the bureaucracy in Belgrade. This layer, together with various ex-Stalinist bureaucrats, gangsters and nationalist demagogues saw national separatism as the best way to break working class resistance, restore capitalism and establish

their right to exploit the resources of their region of what was once the Yugoslav federation. They were supported by the Western powers that saw in Yugoslavia's break-up a chance to re-assert their own strategic and economic interests in the Balkans and beyond—into the oil-rich territories long dominated by Moscow.

In Yugoslavia, no less than the Soviet Union, the prerequisite for the successful building of socialism was the extension of the revolution beyond the boundaries of Yugoslavia, in the struggle for the socialist federation of the Balkans and in unity with the working class in the advanced capitalist countries.

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not start with the present confusion and low level of political consciousness of the working class that has resulted from the betrayals of social democracy and Stalinism, but seeks to educate its most advanced representatives in the historically grounded perspective of Marxism. We are confident the world crisis of capitalism and the inability of the various ethnically-based governments to solve the social disaster in the Balkans will lead to increasing support for the perspective of the United Socialist States of the Balkans—the only basis on which the “reassertion of working class unity, which transcends the ethnic diversity” you wish for will come about.

Sincerely,
Paul Mitchell



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)