

Ted Grant: A political appraisal of the former leader of the British Militant Tendency

Part 1

Ann Talbot
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PART ONE | PART TWO

This is the first of a two-part obituary.

Opponents and supporters alike have joined in hailing Ted Grant, the founder of the Militant Tendency who died in July at the age of 93, as a lifelong proponent of the ideas of Leon Trotsky. The *Times* obituary declared him “[a]n unreconstructed Trotskyite revolutionary of the old school.” The *Financial Times* announced the death of “a leading Trotskyist for more than 70 years.” This view accorded with Grant’s own estimation of himself.

The week before he died, Grant, already disabled by a stroke, was helped to the podium at a meeting of his International Marxist Tendency, which he declared stood “firmly on the ideas of Trotsky.” It was a remarkable performance for one already close to death and testified to both the man’s physical stamina and his single-minded political commitment. Grant was one of the last surviving representatives of a generation who became politically aware as Trotsky’s struggle against the bureaucracy that had usurped political power in the Soviet Union reached a climax.

Of all the young people who looked to the Russian Revolution as a model and an inspiration for the future of mankind in the decades after 1917, few were able to maintain a principled commitment to revolutionary politics throughout their lives under the impact of the shocks and upheavals of the twentieth century. All those who recognised that Trotsky represented the continuity of Marxism and the revolutionary tradition of Bolshevism deserve our respect. But the greatest tribute we can pay to their youthful commitment to revolution is to subject their subsequent political career to an objective historical analysis.

It must be said at the outset that Grant was not a Trotskyist when he died and had not been for a long time, if by the term Trotskyist we are to understand a revolutionary Marxist who defends the principles of socialist internationalism expressed in the Russian Revolution of October 1917. It might seem churlish to deny an old man in death the epithet he so much craved in life, but Grant’s politics were not a personal matter. They were characteristic of an epoch in which bureaucratic apparatuses dominated the working class and in large part came to be identified as the legitimate leadership of the working class.

In Britain, the organisation Grant led, which was known as the Revolutionary Socialist League in private and the Militant Tendency in public, trained young people in the reformist political outlook of the Labour Party. Militant’s claims to revolutionary socialism were always reserved for speeches and historical articles. This outlook insisted that socialism would come about as a result of a Labour government passing an enabling act through Parliament to nationalise the top 200 or so monopolies as the basis for a planned and publicly controlled economy.

Militant was characterised by a type of tactical opportunism that always

adapted to the spontaneous protest movements in the British working class and kept such movements safely within the confines of the official workers’ movement—the Labour Party and the trade unions.

This was the case in Liverpool in the 1980s, when Militant came to dominate the Labour-controlled city council. It notoriously made an opportunistic deal with the Conservative government that headed off a struggle by Liverpool’s council workers over attacks on local services and helped contribute to the isolation of the 1984-1985 miners strike that was imposed by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock. In this way, Grant contributed to one of the most serious defeats that the British working class has suffered in recent decades.

During the campaign against the poll tax early in the 1990s, and with its support for Scottish separatism that resulted in the formation of the Scottish Socialist Party from a split with Militant, the organisation misdirected the revolutionary aspirations of many young people and workers into reformist channels during a period of intense class conflict.

During the 1980s, Militant claimed to be the biggest self-professed Trotskyist party in Britain. This was the period of Grant’s greatest public success, but it proved to be the prelude to his downfall. The young people that joined Militant were being radicalised by their experience of the Thatcher government, which was characterised by mass unemployment, cuts in public services and a return to imperialist wars. Many looked initially to the Labour Party where they encountered Militant, but the political trajectory of these young workers was to the left, while Grant’s organisation was moving to the right. They met in passing as they travelled in opposite directions.

Grant’s rhetoric could not keep them in the Labour Party because the objective basis for his kind of politics was being undermined by the dynamics of the international political situation. The period when it was possible for Labour to offer a programme of reforms and welfare measures was rapidly coming to an end. In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had provided the model and inspiration for so many other bureaucratic apparatuses, was reaching a crisis from which it was never to recover.

Grant’s entire political perspective since the end of World War II had been based on the assumption that the Kremlin bureaucracy, the social democratic parties and trade unions in the West and the national movements in the former colonial and semi-colonial countries would maintain their political hegemony. But by 1992, when he was expelled from Militant, what Grant had taken to be permanent features of the political landscape had proved to be relatively ephemeral products of the arrangements that the major powers put in place after World War II to prevent a revolutionary upheaval such as that of 1917.

Grant, along with Alan Woods, formed another group known as Socialist Appeal, from the name of its paper, while the majority led by

Peter Taaffe formed Militant Labour, which later became the Socialist Party. Grant's International Marxist Tendency is one of the most enthusiastic of scores of similar radical cheerleaders for President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. It presents him as a revolutionary leader who has dared to confront the might of America and is in the process of transforming Venezuelan society in a socialist direction.

Even though the repressive apparatus of the Venezuelan state remains in place and transnational corporations continue to make a profit there, Grant's supporters claim that the capitalist class is no longer in power. In doing so, they only prepare the way for a defeat on an even greater scale than that suffered by the British working class. Experience has shown that in Latin America, left-wing movements that come to power without destroying the existing state apparatus and leaving capitalism intact can be the prelude to a bloody repression such as that carried out by Pinochet in Chile. [1]

Grant's reputation as a Marxist and lifelong proponent of the ideas of Leon Trotsky continues to play an important part in the ability of these organisations to attract support among workers and youth. His followers assiduously cultivate the image that he was an original Marxist thinker and major political figure in the Trotskyist movement. Alan Woods, writing on the anniversary of the launch of the Grant group's paper *Socialist Appeal*, explained, "In the person of Comrade Ted Grant, we stand for the continuation of the ideas of Trotsky. This year is also the seventy-fifth anniversary of the expulsion of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition from the Russian Communist Party. Comrade Grant was a member of Trotsky's International Left Opposition from the very beginning. He represents an unbroken thread that connects us to the finest traditions of Bolshevism-Leninism and the October revolution."

Hostility to the Fourth International

The more closely one looks at his record the more difficult it is to identify any period when Grant had a firm grasp of the principles of Marxism, or any clear understanding of the significance of Trotsky's political struggle.

The central political lesson that can be drawn from Trotsky's writings and the fight he waged against the Stalinist bureaucracy is the importance of internationalism. Grant's political career may have begun in the Left Opposition, but he remained resolutely national in his outlook throughout his life. For Grant, Trotsky's political programme was a means to win a political hearing among the most advanced workers, but he neither understood nor accepted the international perspective that underlay it.

Grant migrated to Britain from South Africa in 1934. During World War II, the group to which Grant belonged—the Workers International League (WIL)—gained new members as the Labour Party, the Communist Party of Great Britain and the trade union leaders associated with those parties suppressed strike action and stifled workers' grievances in the interests of maintaining the war effort. The WIL published the founding programme of the Fourth International and modelled itself on the example of the Socialist Workers Party in America, which had developed under the influence of Trotsky himself. But the WIL refused steadfastly to join the Fourth International, which was founded in 1938.

Grant was extremely proud of this fact. In his memoir, *A History of British Trotskyism*, he recounted how the WIL members rejected the proposal that the different Trotskyist groups in Britain should unite in preparation for the founding conference of the Fourth International. Grant recalled how he shouted, "Even if Comrade Trotsky himself had come here we would have acted no differently."

Grant's outburst was an example of the mulish devotion to nationalism that was to be his political hallmark. The WIL refused to unite with the other groups because they could not agree on whether to work in the Labour Party. Trotsky had advised his co-thinkers in Britain to work in the Independent Labour Party and later in the Labour Party, but this was never more than a tactic. The WIL elevated it, however, to a strategic principle

that took precedence over the fundamental question of founding a new international to replace the Third International that had betrayed the interests of workers all over the world when it failed to resist the rise of Hitler.

Questions such as entry into the Labour Party could have been discussed in the unified British section of the new International where they would have assumed their appropriate place in an international perspective. The WIL's refusal to join the Fourth International reflected the immense political pressure that was exerted on the British workers' movement in the oldest capitalist country in the world.

Trotsky would not compromise with the group, since to do so would have undermined the most fundamental principle of the International. He warned the comrades of the WIL "that they are being led on a path of unprincipled clique politics which can only land them in the mire. It is possible to maintain and develop a revolutionary political grouping of serious importance only on the basis of great principles. It is possible for a national group to maintain a constant revolutionary course only if it is firmly connected in one organisation with co-thinkers throughout the world and maintains a constant political and theoretical collaboration with them. The Fourth International alone is such an organisation. All purely national groupings, all those who reject international organisation, control, and discipline, are in their essence reactionary." [2]

The WIL eventually became part of a unified British section of the Fourth International after World War II through the efforts of an internationalist faction led by Gerry Healy and the intervention of the Socialist Workers Party in the US. Unification was achieved against the bitter opposition of the WIL's leader Jock Haston, whom Grant served as a loyal lieutenant. Even after unification and the formation of the Revolutionary Communist Party as the British section of the Fourth International, Haston and Grant remained deeply hostile to the International and aligned themselves with a rightward-moving opposition tendency that was grouped around Albert Goldman and Felix Morrow, who condemned "the unchanging programme" of the Fourth International. [3]

Grant's followers continue to maintain that the programme of Trotskyism was proved wrong by events after the war when revolutionary movements were strangled by the Stalinists. The fact that capitalism was not overthrown and Stalinism remained in control of the Soviet Union and extended its rule over Eastern Europe, Grant wrote, "served to falsify the original war-time perspective of the movement of either a restoration of capitalism in the USSR or a political revolution, and a revolutionary crisis that would undermine the old parties and prepare the way for the creation of mass Trotskyist parties. In the words of Trotsky, 'not one stone upon another would be left of the old organisations, and the Fourth International would become the dominant force on the planet.' But the Trotskyists were far too weak to take advantage of the revolutionary situation that followed the war. Power fell into the hands of the Stalinist and reformist leaders, who, as in 1918, betrayed the movement and handed the power over to the bourgeoisie." [4]

The idea that Trotsky had promised that there would be a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and a political revolution in the Soviet Union is entirely incorrect. No Marxist would pretend that it is possible to predict the outcome of complex political processes with complete accuracy or suppose that Marxism can offer a precise timetable of revolution. Grant and many others clearly believed that Trotsky had let them down, demonstrating that they had never understood the character of scientific Marxist political analysis. [5]

According to his followers, Grant alone in the Trotskyist movement was capable of developing an analysis of the new political realities of Stalinist expansion and imperialist stabilisation. The leadership of the RCP were in fact far from alone. As early as 1939, Max Shachtman and James Burnham had opposed Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union, as had the

Johnson-Forrest tendency. Goldman and Morrow subsequently emerged as an opposition. After initially opposing these tendencies, Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, who were then leaders of the Fourth International, began to argue that the Stalinist bureaucracy could play a progressive role and bureaucratically create workers' states by military force and nationalisations without a revolutionary transformation of society.

Grant's distinction is not that he was alone in making this shift to the right, but that he was among the first to make it in the postwar period. Jimmy Deane, Grant's co-thinker in the RCP, acknowledged the identity between their ideas and those of Pablo when he wrote to Grant in June 1950. "Pablo has made the transition! What a development. He conducts a struggle against us," Deane complained, "and then ends up with our position more or less. It is only a matter of time before he argues that you have workers states throughout Eastern Europe." [6]

As struggles developed in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, Pablo and Mandel went on to maintain that petty bourgeois national movements could create workers' states without the necessity for the conscious participation of the working class, the existence of a Marxist party, or the revolutionary overthrow of the existing state and property relations. There was therefore no need to construct revolutionary parties in these countries, where the role of Marxists was to act as advisors to nationalist leaders such as Ben Bella in Algeria or Castro in Cuba.

In 1953, James Cannon, the leader of the US Socialist Workers Party, issued an Open Letter in which he summed up the central political questions involved in the fight against Pabloism. The faction centred on Pablo, Cannon wrote, "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." [7]

Cannon restated the fundamental principles on which the Fourth International was founded, and the Open Letter became a rallying point for all those that still adhered to them and rejected Pablo's liquidationism and capitulation to Stalinism. Later that year, the International Committee of the Fourth International was formed on the basis of a resolution that affirmed its solidarity with Cannon's Open Letter.

Pablo responded to the Open Letter by expelling all those who agreed with it. When his representative in Britain, John Lawrence, took his line to its logical conclusion and joined the Communist Party, Pablo was left without an organisation in the UK. Grant took the opportunity to team up with Pablo, whose organisation became known as the United Secretariat. One will look long and hard at Grant's collected works and find no reference to the Open Letter. He answered it with his actions when he joined Pablo, but he never felt obliged to make any other response to this historic statement of proletarian internationalist principles.

Grant split from the Pabloite United Secretariat in 1964. But in every essential respect his political perspective coincided with that of Pablo and Mandel. Grant's politics could be characterised as Pabloism *sans* Pablo. His group has even mimicked the Pabloite Fair Play for Cuba Committee by forming an organisation called Hands Off Venezuela to act as a front organisation for its campaign in support of Chavez.

To be continued

Notes:

1. See <http://wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/van2-m20.shtml>.
2. *Documents of the Fourth International*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973, p. 270.
3. *SWP Internal Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 8, July 1946, pp. 28-29; quoted in David North, *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, Detroit, Michigan: Labor Publications, 1988, p. 100.
4. Ted Grant, *A History of British Trotskyism*, Introduction. www.marxist.com/hbt/
5. See <http://wsws.org/articles/2005/sep2005/le41-s14.shtml>.
6. Letter from Deane to Grant, Jimmy Deane archive 24 June 1950.

7. Quoted in *The Heritage We Defend*, p. 231. www.wsws.org/articles/2003/nov2003/her2-n15.shtml.



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