

An exchange on Stalinism with a South African reader

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Below we publish an edited email exchange on Stalinism between a reader of the World Socialist Web Site in South Africa and Barbara Slaughter, a veteran Trotskyist who rejected the counterrevolutionary politics of Stalinism and joined the Fourth International following the tumultuous events of 1956.

Hi Barbara,

On a day-to-day basis, I read all the analysis from the *World Socialist Web Site* and I find it very informative on what is going on in the world. The question on the Middle East with regard to a revolutionary organisation of the working class is still an issue that needs a radical program in ensuring the overthrow of the Arab elite. But I still cannot really think of a clear strategy that can be employed in realising that objective.

On the question of South African politics, let me start by briefly telling you about myself. I belonged in a youth group in the mid-1980s. My involvement is from the period of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Mass Democratic Movement. I started participating in the struggle in 1985 (I think I was about 12 to 13 years old), and we all had one thing in mind, to liberate South Africa from the brutal white capitalist system, and most of us were not even afraid to die for that.

Most of our comrades died at the hands of the enemy. I personally lost some friends during that period. The hope was in the ANC and the South African Communist Party to provide us with the necessary means. But that has proven to be a difficult task and some of us went to the extent of going through military crash-courses inside the country and Mozambique with the aim of crushing the enemy. But the 1990s negotiations saw a lot of the militant youth becoming the so-called marginalized youth.

The dissatisfaction has developed from 1995 to date. This is as a result of the policies that the ANC opted for and the only hope was for the Communist Party to break away from this unholy alliance. The Communist Party for some time enjoyed popularity among the youth of this country since Comrade Chris Hani was the secretary. It was a blow after his death because we don't have someone like him in the party.

The Communist Party is no more the party of the working class of South Africa. I attended the recent provincial congress of the SACP in my province and what I observed is a pure betrayal of the working class in this country. The congress could not pronounce itself on the question of the alliance with the ANC because most of comrades attending are working in government departments and some are ministers in government with only few communists with no real influence with delegates. Any debate to propose a pullout of the alliance was killed. It can also be indicated that delegates were also paid money and promised better jobs if they voted for candidates of ANC's liking.

I personally had hoped that we could influence a radical working class position inside the party, but that has proved to be impossible. The problem in South Africa is that the whole working class still has the hope that it is only the ANC and the Alliance that can emancipate them from the captivity of the capitalist system. This is because of the history of this alliance.

The working class does not realise that the interest of this alliance has changed from that of destroying capitalism and replacing it with socialism. Most people think that the ANC is doing them a favour by building small shack houses for them and giving small social grants for children, while the resources are shared among a few in the country (friends and relatives).

On the question of my membership in the party: Yes, I engaged a number of comrades about that question and most of them have expressed the same sentiment. But they could not agree to the question of membership withdrawal, and this is informed by the fact that there is no revolutionary alternative or left opposition in South Africa.

Hope this has provided you with information as to who the person you are communicating with is and what I think of politics in South Africa.

I hope to hear from you.

Yours for Socialism,

RS

Dear RS,

Many thanks for the information in your email.

Having been involved in the liberation struggle from such an early age, you will have had many bitter experiences. As you say, your generation had only one thing in mind, the liberation of South Africa, and you and so many others were prepared to sacrifice your lives to achieve it.

You write, "The 1990s negotiations saw a lot of militant youth becoming so-called marginalized youth."

I think the responsibility for the situation you describe has to be laid at the door of the South African Communist Party (SACP), which by then, by its unconditional support for Mandela and the ANC leadership, had shown that it had abandoned any pretensions to being a revolutionary party. In fact, the ANC alliance, including the SACP, was the saviour of capitalism in South Africa.

Having been the subject of such a historic betrayal, you and the thousands of revolutionary youth of that period need to look back on that wealth of experience in the light of the whole struggle of the international working class throughout the twentieth century in order to understand what really happened.

It is not surprising that you saw the South African Communist Party as the organisation to lead that struggle of the working class. I myself joined the British Communist Party as a young girl in 1945, influenced, like so many youth at that time, by the tremendous sacrifices of the Soviet working class in the struggle against fascism. I understood something of the bankruptcy of the British Labour Party, and could see no other alternative.

But I left the Communist Party in 1956. Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that year, which denounced Joseph Stalin as a brutal dictator, had already sparked a tremendous intellectual and moral crisis within the ranks of the British CP. And when Russian tanks were sent into Budapest in the autumn of that year, to suppress the Hungarian Revolution, I like thousands of others wanted no part of it.

The questions that faced me then, which are the most profound questions of the twentieth century and remain equally so today, were: Why did the Communist Party degenerate? How did Stalinism develop? Was there an alternative?

In 1956, at that critical time in my life, it was only the writings of Leon Trotsky that provided me with a new orientation and enabled me to see a way forward. Soon afterwards I joined the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which is now the Socialist Equality Party.

In his book *The Revolution Betrayed* Trotsky explains how the Stalinist bureaucracy came into being. It is impossible to explain this in an email. You need to read the book for yourself. Nevertheless here are a few points.

The central material reason for the emergence of the Soviet bureaucracy was the fact that the revolution had first taken place in Russia—a backward country—and the workers state established by the revolution remained isolated due to the defeat of the socialist revolution in the rest of Europe. At the same time, the young workers state was devastated by a terrible civil war, in which the counterrevolutionary White armies were financed and militarily aided by the major capitalist powers.

As a result of economic backwardness inherited from the deposed Tsarist regime, international isolation and the effects of the civil war, the Soviet Union was unable to provide for all the needs of the working class. The bureaucracy, in this situation of inequality, became “the policemen of want,” as Trotsky called it. The bureaucracy became a privileged caste based on its control of the state apparatus.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks never dreamt that the Soviet Union could survive for long in isolation. They anticipated successful revolutions in one or more of the advanced countries. But that did not happen. Revolutionary struggles were defeated in many countries—Germany in 1923, Estonia in 1924, Poland in 1926, the British General Strike in 1926 and China in 1927. The Soviet masses were war weary and disappointed and began to lose faith in world revolution.

Since the Russian Revolution of 1905, Trotsky had insisted that the development of capitalism and the growth of the working class internationally meant that the bourgeoisie could no longer play a revolutionary role—not only in the advanced capitalist countries, but also in those countries with a belated capitalist development.

He predicted that the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries would collaborate with imperialist reaction against the workers and peasants within its own borders. Trotsky emphasised that the working class would have to assume the leading political role and fight to establish a workers state, and that the democratic revolution would become integrated into the socialist revolution.

Trotsky also insisted that imperialism—the division of the world amongst the major capitalist powers and the domination of world economy by finance capital—had undermined the very nation-state system through which capitalism had developed. His conception was based on the primacy of the world situation over all national conditions. Consequently, a purely national revolution could not free the oppressed people of Africa, India or China and the East from the domination of imperialism.

These ideas, elaborated in Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution, were the conceptions that formed the theoretical basis for the victory of the October Revolution in Russia. They were also the ideas that Trotsky fought for and developed in the 1920s and 1930s against the nationalist conceptions of the Stalinist bureaucracy, summed up in its advocacy of “socialism in one country.”

Stalin’s policy of “socialism in one country” was a complete abandonment of the principle of socialist internationalism, on which the Russian Revolution was based. Its implicit logic led inevitably to a repudiation of the most fundamental political concepts of Marxism, including the struggle for the political independence of the working class

from the bourgeoisie.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition fought against this nationalist position, which led to devastating defeats of the working class, beginning with the defeat of the Chinese revolution in 1926-27. By the 1930s, the Stalinist bureaucracy was deliberately betraying the revolutionary strivings of the working class throughout the world. It sought to establish friendly relations with capitalist governments of the West in order to protect its newly acquired privileges.

In order to suppress political opposition, which was growing inside the Soviet Union, the bureaucracy concentrated its fire on the Left Opposition. Stalin expelled Trotsky and banned the Left Opposition in 1927. Trotskyists were accused of being anticommunists and, after 1933, of being agents of Hitler. This led to the Moscow Trials of 1936 to 1938, when thousands of revolutionaries were murdered or sent to labour camps. Every one of the most important leaders of the Russian Revolution was executed by Stalin, with the exception of Leon Trotsky, who had been exiled years before.

In 1939, his strategy of making alliances with the Western powers having failed, Stalin signed the Stalin-Hitler pact. A year later, a Stalinist agent murdered Trotsky in Mexico. Even though the Trotskyist movement was still small and isolated, Stalin was determined to eliminate the man who most clearly represented the principles of socialist internationalism to which he and the bureaucracy were utterly opposed.

In 1933, after the defeat of the German working class and the rise of Hitler, Trotsky had declared that the Stalinist bureaucracy had become a consciously counterrevolutionary force. By this time they were consciously promoting the defeats of the working class, which in turn increased the isolation of the Soviet Union.

This was borne out in the experiences in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939. In 1936 a revolutionary situation existed in Spain. The Stalinists insisted that the working class had to support the Spanish government (i.e., the bourgeois republic) and the issue of working class power had to be left until after the civil war. This was a betrayal, which led to the victory of Franco.

There are documents now available in the British national archives in London that show how the British security services intercepted messages sent from Moscow to the Spanish CP instructing them to eliminate the Trotskyists in Spain and to suppress the revolutionary movement of the working class in Barcelona and elsewhere.

There are many, many other examples of Stalinist betrayals of the international working class.

During the 1950s the Stalinist parties turned to support for national liberation struggles like that of the ANC as part of the Cold War conflict with the imperialist countries. But they had no intention of promoting socialist revolutions, which would have destabilised the position of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

In South Africa the CP supported the Freedom Charter of the ANC. In fact the charter was drafted Rusty Bernstein, a member of the party. Although cloaked in socialist phraseology, the Freedom Charter was not a socialist programme, but was nationalist and capitalist in character.

This was demonstrated in an article written by Nelson Mandela in 1956. He explained that the intention of the ANC was not to overthrow capitalism but to break the hold of the big corporations that dominated the South African economy. He wrote, “The breaking up and democratisation of these monopolies will open up fresh fields for the development of a prosperous non-European bourgeois class. For the first time in the history of this country the non-European bourgeoisie will have the opportunity to own, in their own name and right, mills and factories and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before” (p. 95 of Anthony Sampson’s biography of Mandela. Most of the comments below about South Africa are drawn from a review of Sampson’s book, by one of our comrades, Ann Talbot, which you can read at:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/mand-a05.shtml>)

Mandela continued to argue throughout his imprisonment that the ANC's struggle was to allow the black middle class access to capital. During the late 1970s a fierce ideological debate went on among the prisoners on Robben Island about the character of the Freedom Charter. Against other prisoners who argued that the Freedom Charter was a socialist document, Mandela held that its purpose was to establish a bourgeois democracy and to maintain the capitalist system. And that is precisely what his government implemented.

Although every other aspect of the ANC's programme has been dropped, its central plank—creating black capitalists—has, as you well know, been adhered to.

In the period before 1990, the ANC had to struggle to put itself at the head of the movement that had broken out and was largely independent of it. Ultimately, it was not the ANC that forced the apartheid regime to the negotiating table, but the movement of the black working class and youth in the townships. By means of the ANC government, led first by Mandela and now by Mbeki, it has been possible for this mass movement to be kept under control.

Much of Mandela's supposed radicalism was derived from his connection with the Communist Party. Until today, as far as I know, the SACP has advocated support for the charter as representing a "socialist ideal."

Although it may criticize the government, the SACP has not called on the working class to break from the ANC and has not broken with Mandela's perspective. This was in line with the two-stage theory of revolution developed by Stalin in the 1920s, which, as I explained, bore no relation to the conceptions of Lenin or Trotsky. The SACP maintained that the first objective was to achieve bourgeois democracy in South Africa and only at an unspecified later date to go on to fight for socialism.

Its association with the Communist Party made the ANC seem far more left-wing than it really was, which proved invaluable as the South African working class grew in size and strength. By the 1970s the majority of black South Africans had left the land and were urban workers.

After the growing unrest, which had been manifested most sharply in the Soweto uprising of 1976, the economic recession of 1984 led to the development of an insurrectionary movement, of which you were part. This movement took the ANC by surprise. Had it not been for the Stalinists it would have been more difficult for the ANC to assert its leadership over the movement of the townships. They used their positions in the trade union bureaucracy to keep workers within the bounds of political protest, sanctified by the churches and liberal opponents of apartheid.

And today, as the working class becomes more and more opposed to the reactionary policies of the Mbeki government, the SACP is still playing that role, by containing the opposition to the government within the limits of trade unionism.

Of course you know much more about the situation in South Africa than I do. But I am convinced that pressures are building up in every country in the world and South Africa is no exception. There will be big political struggles in the future. What is needed is a leadership that has learned all the lessons of the twentieth century, especially of the Russian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This movement must be based on an international programme, not a narrow national perspective. The revolutionary traditions of the international working class are the bedrock of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Before I sign off I would like, if I may, to make a few other points from your last email.

Regarding the Middle East, we have written many articles analysing events as they develop and also going over the origins of the state of Israel, etc. It is a highly complicated and difficult situation. But we are

convinced that the only way forward in that region is the establishment of a Socialist United States of the Middle East, which will unite the Arab and Jewish working class.

You refer to your participation in 1985 to liberate South Africa from the brutal "white capitalist system." I am sure that you now have no illusions about capitalism and its brutality being the province of whites only. But the fact that the youth at that time saw it in that way is a measure of the miseducation carried out by the Communist Party.

Regarding your past hope that the Communist Party might break away from the ANC alliance and adopt a principled political position, this has been the hope of many people over the years.

In 1956 as I told you, after the Hungarian Revolution, I quickly made my mind up and left the Communist Party. Some others took a different course. They stayed inside the Communist Party for many months as an anti-Stalinist faction and fought to change the party's policy—but to no avail, because the British CP gave wholehearted support to the Stalinist bureaucracy and could not brook any opposition. Your experience inside the South African Communist Party is almost exactly the same, 50 years later. (That is not to say that the SACP may not at some point break from supporting the ANC government, but it would be in order to head off the developing militancy of the working class.)

There is a lot of invaluable historical material on our web site. For example, the series of lectures given by David North, the chairman of the editorial board of the WSWs, on, "The Russian Revolution and the unresolved issues of the twentieth century." It can be accessed at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/aug2005/le11-a29.shtml>

Also I recommend an article by Nick Beams, the leader of our Australian section, who is an expert on economic questions. He analyses the relationship between African countries and the organisations of international finance capital. You will find it at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/feb2002/corr-f18.shtml>

If you have any questions at all, please ask and I will do my best to answer them.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours fraternally,
Barbara Slaughter



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

www.wsws.org/contact