

Britain: SEP leader addresses students on the legacy of Trotskyism

Our correspondent
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On May 10 Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain, was invited to address the Radical Society of Haberdashers' Aske's Boys School on the subject "Trotsky versus Stalin." Haberdashers' is a leading private school located in Hertfordshire. The Radical Society was set up by two students in protest at what they saw as the right-wing dominance of the official Politics Society.

The meeting took place in the lunch break, giving Marsden time for only a 20-minute presentation. Despite these restrictions, and the fact that it was held in the middle of exams, an audience of around 40 attended and an enthusiastic discussion took place that lasted up until the bell was sounded for lessons. Inquiries ranged over how Trotskyists had fought against the emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy, what a socialist society would look like, the role of today's antiwar movement, the extent of contemporary class differences and whether people wanted or needed socialism.

Marsden's presentation is published below.

I am here to appeal for you to make a serious study of the historic struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and the movement he founded against Joseph Stalin and the bureaucratic state and party apparatus he came to dominate.

I do so because this was a struggle that determined the fate not just of the Soviet Union itself but the socialist working class movement on a world scale. Without understanding this history, it is impossible for workers and young people to politically orientate themselves today.

We are living today in the post-Soviet age, in which it is accepted wisdom that there is no alternative to the profit system. It is a fact that the last great gift of Stalinism to the ruling classes of the world was the liquidation of the USSR in December 1991 and the restoration of capitalism under the leadership of Stalin's heirs, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

This event, added to the monstrous forms assumed by the Soviet Union under the Stalinist dictatorship, is again and again wielded against those looking for a way of opposing discrimination, oppression—and, above all, war. They are told, "Socialism does not work. Look at Russia. Even they realized the superiority of capitalism."

Yet today, the issues that once gave rise to a mass socialist movement of the working class, and which culminated in the October revolution, once again cry out for progressive resolution. The gap between rich and poor grows ever wider. Democratic rights are under sustained attack. The untrammelled exploitation of the planet threatens its survival. War in Iraq for oil looks set to be followed by hostilities against Iran.

Despite mass opposition to this state of affairs, including millions who opposed the war against Iraq and who want its architects out of office, there seems to be no way forward. Instead people are forced to choose which political rogue they want in power, based only on who they calculate represents the lesser evil.

In Scotland for their pains they got the Scottish National Party. In the US they have the Democrats now working directly with Bush. In France,

we have the right-wing presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy—thanks above all to the right-wing policies of Segolene Royal.

In Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair has begun his ceremonial handover to Gordon Brown, who will continue Labour's pro-business and warmongering agenda with only the Conservative Tony-clone David Cameron as a possible replacement.

There is no alternative, they say? Well, there has to be an alternative. Socialism remains the way forward for humanity, but to understand this means to rescue the movement's traditions and history from under the mountain of filth heaped on it by Stalinism. It means rediscovering the historic legacy of Trotsky and adopting the socialist programme and principles he defended as your own.

In our recent electoral campaign in Scotland and Wales we insisted that, without understanding the political conflict that took place from 1923 until Trotsky's death in 1940, one cannot explain why the capitalist profit system survived—at a terrible cost of two world wars, countless military battles and the worsening impoverishment of the vast majority of the world's peoples.

Yet if, like me, you have studied the Russian Revolution of 1917 at school, you will probably have been told how after the Bolsheviks seized power Lenin imposed a dictatorial regime that found its natural heir in Stalin. Trotsky's opposition to Stalin, if mentioned at all, is presented as either an unprincipled power struggle or as a hopeless gesture against historical inevitability. For, after all, the argument goes, communism can only survive by suppressing the natural tendencies of the most talented to "get on" and provide for themselves and their own—thanks to the miracle of the market.

Such paeans to the superiority of capitalism can only carry any weight because of the systematic campaign waged for decades to equate Stalinism and its police-military dictatorship in the Soviet Union with socialism. In turn that lie could not withstand a moment's scrutiny without the accompanying efforts to denigrate Trotsky and deny that he represented a genuinely socialist alternative to Stalinism.

I have only a short time to speak here, so I will concentrate on the fundamentals in the hope that I can convince you of the need to examine these issues in greater detail.

The October Revolution in 1917 was the first time in history that the working class took power. The chain of imperialist capitalism broke at its weakest link—in backward and underdeveloped tsarist Russia. But this was seen as the first step in the worldwide overturn of capitalism and was welcomed by and inspired workers and youth all over the world.

Why then did this not happen?

Today the revolution is portrayed as a violent and even criminal episode, usually by those who make no reference to the circumstances that gave birth to it. The year 1914 had seen the beginning of the First World War, in which millions fought and millions died on Europe's Western Front and elsewhere.

The war had by 1917 laid waste to the continent. It was a contest for

control of the world's markets and resources that demonstrated the urgent necessity to bring an end to the profit system and the national antagonisms it gives rise to.

The Russian Revolution emerged as a result of that conflict—which by 1916 had claimed 1,700,000 Russian military dead and 5,000,000 gravely injured. The Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917 primarily because they pledged “peace, land and bread” after the previous liberal capitalist government, also elevated to power by revolution in February, had continued to wage war despite their promises.

Yet the Bolsheviks could not bring peace, even after withdrawing from the conflict in Europe. Instead they faced a civil war that lasted until 1921 against White Armies that were backed by the Western powers. This had a terrible impact on the workers' state established in Russia and goes some way to explaining the emergence of Stalinism.

One study of the Soviet Union notes that the number of workers in factories employing more than 16 declined from 3.5 million in 1917 to 1.5 million by the end of 1920. From a population of 2.5 million in 1917, only 722,000 people were left in Petrograd by 1920 while Moscow's population fell from 2 million to just over 1 million. The most politically advanced workers, the leading communists, were hit hardest of all, with an estimated 200,000 out of 500,000 Communists who served in the Red Army killed during the civil war.

This did not bode well for the development of the workers' state established in Russia.

The theoretical differences between Trotskyism and Stalinism were rooted in the conflict between definite social interests and were to end in the politically inspired mass murder of his opponents by Stalin.

Trotsky, the co-leader with Lenin of the Bolshevik Revolution and founder of the Red Army, understood the development of a socialist revolution in Russia from his analysis of capitalism as a world system. Against those who argued that Russia would develop into a liberal capitalist democracy along European lines, he had insisted that the Russian bourgeoisie could not fulfil the role of liberating Russia from feudalism because it had arrived on the scene of history too late.

The world had already been divided up between the major Western powers and had penetrated deep into Russia itself, dominating its industrial development. The Russian capitalists therefore depended on the support of international capital for their survival. And above all they feared the small but powerful working class that had developed in Russia as a result of industrial growth in the major cities.

The bourgeoisie could only seek compromise and half-measures with the tsarist aristocracy and the imperialist powers at the expense of the workers and peasants—an analysis confirmed by the actions of the post-February 1917 Provisional Government in continuing the war and refusing to address the liberation of the massive peasantry from the landlord class.

The leadership of the democratic struggle therefore fell to the working class, which inevitably had to come into struggle against the Russian bourgeoisie and take the first steps towards socialism by taking power. However, the ultimate fate of the Russian Revolution and of socialism depended on the conquest of power by the working class in economically advanced Europe. Otherwise class differences must re-emerge with increasing force within the Soviet Union as a result of its backwardness and isolation—and the USSR would also face the constant threat of external overthrow.

Socialism presupposes a certain level of economic and cultural development that allows the fulfilling of essential human needs and a working class that is educated and not so burdened with work that it can take active part in running society. This creates the basis for the ending of social and class distinctions and the application of the principle “From each according to his ability to each according to his needs” to economic and social organization. The resulting lack of class distinctions also means the withering away of the state as an instrument of class rule and of the

state bureaucracy as a social layer as more and more people assume their part in running society.

In Russia these circumstances did not exist. The task at hand was to hold out, do as much as could be done regarding internal economic and social development, and do everything possible to prepare for the revolutionary development of the European and international working class through the parties of the Third Communist International.

Instead, the Soviet Union's protracted isolation and backwardness were to give rise to the monstrous development of a bureaucracy within the Soviet state and party apparatus that began to assert its interests and which found its political representative in the person of Stalin.

These layers, whose outlook was narrow, pragmatic and nationalist, were primarily concerned with organisational issues of running the state and enjoyed certain albeit relative privileges in this role. They took on the role of the “policeman of inequality.” Sceptical of the possibility of social revolution elsewhere, the bureaucracy became ever more concerned with the “defence of the Soviet Union”—that is, the defence of the basis of their own privileges.

This outlook was codified by Stalin in 1924 in the call to build “Socialism in One Country,” which also appealed to sections of workers and peasants that were exhausted by the years of world war, revolution and civil war and wanted an end to struggle, hardship and sacrifice.

Lenin's last great struggle was waged along with Trotsky against the rising bureaucracy and its nationalism. It led Lenin to call for Stalin to be removed from the administrative post of general secretary for being “too rude,” Lenin's illness and death in 1924 left the struggle to Trotsky and the Left Opposition, the thousands of often leading Bolsheviks who set out to curb the bureaucracy and defend the socialist and internationalist perspective of Marxism.

Stalin's ascent to power was to mark the end of the revolutionary phase of Russian history and the beginning of a counterrevolution that was to cost the lives of millions. The policies imposed by Stalin and his allies in the Communist parties internationally proved disastrous as far as the workers' struggle for socialism was concerned. But here is a terrible irony. The defeats suffered by the working class served to strengthen the position of the bureaucracy against their Marxist opponents.

The Stalin faction was responsible for the failure to take advantage of a revolutionary situation in Germany in 1923 and the defeat of the British General Strike in 1926 and of the Chinese Revolution in 1927. This ended in the massacre of tens of thousands of communists and communist-led workers in Shanghai in 1927 by the Koumintang, the bourgeois party hailed by Stalin as the workers' ally, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek.

These were terrible mistakes. But for Trotsky, the turning point in the transformation of the Stalinised Communist Parties into a *consciously* counterrevolutionary force was its role in allowing Adolf Hitler and the Nazis to come to power in Germany.

Hitler could have been stopped in his tracks had the two mass workers' parties in Germany mobilized jointly against him. But against the urgings of Trotsky, the Communist Party of Germany refused to call for a United Front. Such a call would have had a tremendous appeal for workers that followed the Social Democrats and created the best conditions to win them to a revolutionary perspective. Instead the SPD was condemned as “social-fascists”—no different in essence from Hitler's Brownshirts.

The result of the disunity and demobilization of the working class was the triumph of fascism and the eventual descent into a second world war that was to leave 60 million dead—27 million in the Soviet Union alone—and which saw the Holocaust against the Jews and other peoples deemed subhuman. Trotsky's response was to call for the building of a new, Fourth International.

Stalin had expelled Trotsky from Russia in 1929 and had begun a systematic campaign to remove his opponents from office and exile them

whenever possible from Moscow. By the mid 1930s this initial campaign was transformed into what can only be described as a political genocide against his opponents.

It was not that Stalin won the argument against Trotsky, as things are sometimes presented. Rather, he tortured and killed anyone suspected of remaining loyal to socialism. In total, over 1 million were killed in the purges, along with millions more as a result of state repression and Stalin's disastrous policies in the field of agriculture and foreign affairs.

By the end of the show trials in Moscow in 1936 and 1937, Stalin had murdered all of Lenin's Central Committee members, including those who had at one time been Stalin's allies, such as Zinoviev, Kamanev and Bukharin. The Trotskyists were hounded throughout the world. Almost all of Trotsky's oldest comrades, some of his closest collaborators and his children ended up dead. Finally on August 20, 1940, Trotsky died at the hands of the assassin Ramón Mercader, at his home in exile in Mexico.

Stalin's aim was to behead the revolution and secure his rule in the USSR, which was to be protected by forming alliances with various imperialist powers. This necessitated the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution against General Franco and culminated in the signing of the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact on August 23, 1939. One week later, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and France and Britain declared war on September 3. On June 22, 1941, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union.

From this brief overview, one can I hope see the magnitude of Stalin's crimes and why his regime has ever since been used as a means to discredit socialism. But I hope also that I have demonstrated how Stalin's police state was built on a mountain of corpses of his socialist opponents.

A river of blood separates Stalinism from the political tradition that embodies the genuine ideals of socialist internationalism—Trotskyism. Stalin tried to wipe Marxism from the face of the earth, but he did not succeed. In the teeth of political persecution without historical precedent, Trotsky succeeded in founding the Fourth International in 1938.

It was a small embattled minority, but its programme was a powerful one made all the more so by the political struggle waged against Stalin. It is on the basis of this programme that young people can begin the task of rebuilding a socialist workers' movement. I hope that some of you here will rise to that great challenge. I thank you for listening.



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