

# Socialist Equality Party holds founding Congress

19 September 2008

The founding congress of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the United States, held on August 3-9 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, represents a milestone in the history of the Fourth International and the development of the revolutionary socialist movement.

The founding congress was the outcome of theoretical, political and organizational work within the United States and internationally that spanned more than a decade. The predecessor of the SEP, the Workers League, initiated the process of transforming itself into a party in June 1995. It shared the view of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the irrevocable discrediting of Stalinism, together with the political bankruptcy of the social-democratic and reformist parties and trade union organizations, would lead to a fundamental change in the relationship between the Trotskyist movement and militant sections of the working class and youth, radicalized by the deepening crisis of American and world capitalism.

The launching of the *World Socialist Web Site* in February 1998, which rapidly developed into the most widely read Internet-based socialist publication in the world, led to the expansion of the political influence of the ICFI and a significant influx of new members into the Socialist Equality Party. Moreover, the intensification of the political and economic crisis of world capitalism during the past decade substantiated the perspective upon which the formation of the SEP had been based.

The weeklong congress was attended by delegates from across the United States and by representatives of the International Committee from Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Sri Lanka, Australia and New Zealand.

The Congress discussed and adopted two major documents, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party* and the SEP's *Statement of Principles*, both of which will be published on the WWSWS. The delegates also adopted a new party constitution.

The Congress elected a new National Committee of the SEP. Joseph Kishore was elected SEP national secretary and Lawrence Porter assistant national secretary. David North, who had served as national secretary of the Workers League and, later, the SEP, since 1976, was elected by the Congress to the new position of national chairman. Barry Grey was elected national editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The *Statement of Principles* adopted by the Congress elaborates the basic positions of the SEP on issues such as the political independence of the working class, the nature of the capitalist crisis and the necessity for socialism, the international character of the fight for socialism, the defense of democratic rights and the struggle against militarism and war, and the significance of the fight for socialist consciousness.

The statement declares: "The program of the Socialist Equality Party expresses the interests of the working class, the leading and decisive international revolutionary social force in modern capitalist society. The central task of the SEP is to win the support of American workers for the program of international socialism. The SEP strives, on the basis of this program, to unify and mobilize the working class for the conquest of political power and the establishment of a workers' state in the United

States. It will create, thereby, the objective preconditions for the development of a genuinely democratic, egalitarian and socialist society. These objectives can be realized only within the framework of an international strategy, the goal of which is the global unification of the workers of all countries and the creation of a United Socialist States of the World."

The document asserts that the principles of the SEP "incorporate the essential experiences of the revolutionary upheavals of the 20th century and the corresponding struggle waged by Marxists for the program of world socialist revolution."

The *Statement of Principles* emphasizes the international dimensions of the struggle for socialism: "Wherever revolutionary struggles of the working class first break out, whether in an advanced or lesser-developed capitalist country, in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia or Australasia, the social conflagration will inevitably assume global dimensions. The socialist revolution will not and cannot be completed within a national framework. It will, as foreseen by Trotsky in his theory of permanent revolution, be completed on the world arena."

Addressing essential issues of socialist strategy, the document states:

"The establishment of workers' power requires far more than the election of socialist candidates to the existing institutions of the bourgeois state. New forms and structures of participatory democracy—arising in the course of revolutionary mass struggles and representative of the working class majority of the population—must be developed as the foundations of a workers' government, that is, a government of the workers, for the workers, and by the workers. The policy of such a government, as it introduces those measures essential for the socialist transformation of economic life, would be to encourage and actively promote a vast expansion of democratic working class participation in, and control over, decision-making processes. It would favor the abolition of existing institutions that either curtail democratic processes or serve as centers of conspiracy against the people (such as the imperial Presidency, standing army, and national-security apparatus). These and other necessary changes of a profoundly democratic character, to be determined by the masses themselves, are possible only in the context of the mass mobilization of the working class, imbued with socialist consciousness."

Stressing the importance of Marxist theory, the *Statement of Principles* explains, "The fight for socialism demands an enormous growth in the political, intellectual, and cultural stature of the workers' movement, in the United States and internationally. In contrast to the practitioners of pragmatic and opportunist politics, the SEP is convinced that only a movement working at the highest theoretical level will prove capable of attracting the working class to its banner, preparing it for the struggle against capitalism, and, beyond that, the construction of a socialist society."

*The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*, adopted by the Congress after a discussion that spanned three days, reviews the crucial historical events, political struggles, and theoretical disputes which determine the programmatic identity and perspectives of

the ICFI and the SEP. The document explains:

“Revolutionary socialist strategy can develop only on the basis of the lessons of past struggles. Above all, the education of socialists must be directed toward developing a detailed knowledge of the history of the Fourth International. The development of Marxism as the theoretical and political spearhead of socialist revolution has found its most advanced expression in the struggles waged by the Fourth International, since its founding in 1938, against Stalinism, reformism, the Pabloite revisions of Trotskyism, and all other forms of political opportunism.

“Political agreement within the party on essential issues of program and tasks cannot be achieved without a common evaluation of the historical experiences of the 20th century and their central strategic lessons.... Only to the extent that the working class learns from history—the lessons of not only its victories but also its defeats—can it be prepared for the demands of a new period of revolutionary struggle.”

In his opening report, David North stated:

“The political significance of this founding congress of the Socialist Equality Party can only be understood if placed in the necessary historical context. The Marxist conception of a party is entirely different from the conventional, pragmatic—that is, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois—conception of a political organization. From the latter standpoint, a political party is generally understood as an organization of people who, sharing agreement on a set of rather abstractly defined goals, have come together to pursue those aims, for the most part within the framework of electoral campaigns. By their very nature, such parties are developed as alliances—bringing together divergent groupings so they may pursue, in an electorally efficient manner, their associated and conflicting aims. The former—the areas of agreement—are defined as loosely as possible. The areas of difference, at least publicly, are referred to even more vaguely, if at all. Within the context of bourgeois politics, this approach to the formation of party alliances is workable, because the parties do agree on certain essential issues—those relating to the foundations of bourgeois rule, such as the defense of bourgeois property, the defense of the national state, etc.”

However, North argued, the application of this approach within the socialist and workers’ movement can lead only to disaster. He referred to the example of the new “Anti-Capitalist Party,” founded by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), the French Pabloite organization. Citing a statement by the Anti-Capitalist Party’s leader, Olivier Besancenot, which explicitly rejects the need for agreement among party members on the basic historical and political lessons of the struggle for socialism in the 20th century, North declared:

“Every word and phrase reeks of charlatantry, cynicism, and political bad faith. Besancenot’s aim is to bar discussion and examination of the lessons of the past. The Anti-Capitalist Party does not want to have its hands tied by a commitment to principles.”

North reviewed the political struggles within the Fourth International, and, especially, within the International Committee, out of which the SEP emerged. He emphasized the conflict that developed within the International Committee between 1982 and 1985. During that period, the orthodox Trotskyists within the ICFI opposed the opportunist tendencies that were adapting to the Stalinist and reformist labor bureaucracies and the petty-bourgeois nationalist organizations. None of these tendencies anticipated the collapse of the Stalinist regimes and the crisis of the reformist and nationalist organizations to which they were oriented.

But those who were defending the revolutionary perspective of Trotskyism were able to correctly align their work with essential processes of historical development. “The ICFI,” North stated, “placed a heavy political wager on the revolutionary potential and implications of economic globalization, the associated developments in technology, and the tendency toward the international unification of the class struggle. At the same time, to use the language of the market, we heavily shorted

American capitalism and its bid for global hegemony.”

The careful preparation of the founding congress, North stated, has prepared the SEP for the demands of a period of intensified economic and political crisis. “The developing crisis will fundamentally change conditions of life for the broad mass of American workers. The consequences of the protracted decline in the global position of American capitalism will find expression in the development of revolutionary mass struggles.”

Barry Grey developed these themes in a political report entitled, “The revolutionary implications of the decline of American capitalism.” Grey stressed that the objective development of the crisis of capitalism would find expression in a political radicalization of the American working class.

“We are, in fact, holding this congress in the midst of a major turning point in world history,” Grey said. “The collapse of the US housing and credit bubble has rapidly developed into what is widely acknowledged to be the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression.”

Grey stressed that the financial crisis that had developed over the past year had revealed in the starkest manner the vast decline of the United States. “Suddenly, before the eyes of the world, the outcome of a decades-long process of internal decay has broken through the surface and revealed a level of financial parasitism and criminality with no historical precedent.”

“The rapidity and violence of such changes must have a proportional relationship to the scale of the myths that are being shattered and the scope of old illusions. As the ruling class that most persistently preached the gospel of free markets, private enterprise and individual self-reliance scrambles to bail out Wall Street giants to the tune of trillions of dollars—while millions lose their homes and poverty, unemployment, ill health and illiteracy increase—it becomes impossible to conceal the class divisions that dominate American society.”

Grey noted that American capitalism had become the greatest factor in the destabilization of world capitalism, including the danger of a new world war. “The outbreak of war between Georgia and Russia,” he noted, “which carries the most ominous implications of a far wider conflagration, is but the latest example of the consequences of American imperialism’s efforts to resolve its crisis by employing the most reckless and belligerent methods in pursuit of a hegemonic foreign policy.”

Grey concluded by emphasizing the significance of these developments for the SEP. “In founding the Socialist Equality Party of the United States,” he said, “we anticipate a shift in the political orientation of the working class. On the basis of a historical and materialist analysis of the world political situation and its reflection in the United States, we confidently predict and prepare for a new period of class struggle on a mass scale.”



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