The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party—Part 1

29 September 2008

The Socialist Equality Party (US) today begins the publication of The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party. *The document was discussed extensively and adopted unanimously at the Founding Congress of the SEP, held August 3-9, 2008. (See* "Socialist Equality Party holds founding Congress"*) The WSWS will serialize the publication over two weeks. (Click here for parts* 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 *and* 11*)*

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The WSWS has published the Socialist Equality Party Statement of Principles, *which was also adopted at the Founding Congress. Click* here *to download a PDF version of the* Statement of Principles.

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The Principled Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party

1 The program of the SEP is of a principled, not of a conjunctural and pragmatic character. It is based on an analysis of the crisis of world capitalism and an assimilation of the strategic revolutionary experiences of the working class and the international socialist movement. The world economic and political system is, in its fundamental characteristics, imperialist. Despite the advances in technology, the growth of the productive forces, and the expansion of capitalist production relations throughout the globe, the world capitalist system is beset by the same insoluble contradictions that produced the 20th century horrors of two world wars, fascism, a virtually endless series of regional military conflicts and innumerable brutal political dictatorships.

2. The main features of imperialism identified by Lenin during World War I (the monopolistic concentration of production, the domination of finance capital and economic parasitism, the great power striving for global geo-political and economic dominance, the oppression of weaker nations, and the universal tendency toward political reaction) define the present world economic and political order. As in 1914 (on the eve of World War I) and in 1939 (on the eve of World War II), the basic contradictions are between the global economy and the nation state system, and between socialized production and private ownership of the means of production. From these contradictions emerge not only the danger of another catastrophic world war, but also the objective conditions for the overthrow of capitalism—the socialization of industry and finance, the globalization of economic life, and the social power of the working class.

3. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ideologists and apologists of the bourgeoisie proclaimed "The End of History." By this they meant "The End of Socialism" and the final triumph of capitalism. Subsequent events have demonstrated that the obituaries for revolution, not to mention for history itself, were premature. The 21st century will be no less tumultuous than the 20th. The international working class will be confronted with the historical problems that previous generations were unable to solve.

4, 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.

5. 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 twentieth century and their central strategic lessons. Rosa Luxemburg once described history as the "Via Dolorosa" of the working class. 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.

The Origins and Development of Marxism

6. The imperialist epoch emerged in its modern form during the last decades of the 19th century. The expansion of capitalist industry brought with it the growth of the working class and eruption of class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the new industrial proletariat in Europe and North America. This historical process had been theoretically anticipated in the development of Marxism. *The Communist Manifesto* was published in November 1847 on the eve of the first revolutionary struggles of the working class. Through the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, utopian projects for the general improvement of the human condition were superseded by the discovery of the objective laws governing the historical process. The materialist conception of history established, as Engels explained in his classic work *Anti-Dühring*, that:

> ...the production and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or estates is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch. The growing perception that existing

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> social institutions are unreasonable and unjust, that reason has become unreason, and right wrong, is only proof that in the modes of production and exchange changes have silently taken place with which the social order, adapted to earlier economic conditions, is no longer in keeping. From this it also follows that the means of getting rid of the incongruities that have been brought to light must also be present, in a more or less developed condition, within the changed modes of production themselves. These means are not to be invented, spun out of the head, but discovered with the aid of the head in the existing material facts of production.[1]

7. The publication of *Capital* in 1867 provided the working class with an understanding of the laws governing the capitalist mode of production. Though several years were to pass before Marx's masterwork gained the attention of a significant working class audience, *Capital* established the scientific foundation for the development of the modern socialist movement. As wider sections of the working class, especially in Germany, came under the influence of Marxism, the social and theoretical foundations emerged for the establishment of mass socialist parties throughout Europe. The formation of the Second International in 1889 was a milestone in the struggle for the political unity of the international working class. It rested on objective foundations far more mature, in terms of the development of capitalism and the industrial working class, than those that had existed when Marx and Engels founded the First International in 1864. The period between 1876, when the First International was dissolved, and 1889 witnessed an immense growth in capitalism and the industrial proletariat. The next quarter century was characterized by contradictory tendencies in the social, economic and political development of capitalism and the international workers' movement. On the surface, economic growth and political stability were the dominant features of the period. Within this framework, the growth of the organized workers' movement, especially in Western Europe, proceeded along parliamentary and trade union lines. However, beneath the apparent stability of the political and economic order, immense internal pressures were building up. The development of imperialism in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century was accompanied by an escalation of dangerous rivalries among the major capitalist states. At the same time, economic strains were undermining the foundations of class compromise and causing an intensification of social tensions.

8. This contradictory development underlay the tensions within the Second International, and the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) in particular. The official doctrine of the SPD was that of class war, but its growth was bound up with the expansion of German capitalism and national industry, which brought with it the strengthening of the proletariat and the trade unions. The period of capitalist growth allowed the bourgeoisie to cultivate a section of the working class and trade union bureaucracy (what Lenin later called the "labor aristocracy"), integrating its interests with the capitalist system. This was the foundation for the growth of opportunism within the Second International, manifested in every country. This opportunism found its most developed theoretical expression in the writings of Eduard Bernstein, who rejected the Marxist analysis of the contradictions of the capitalist system and their revolutionary implications. Bernstein also rejected the scientific basis of Marxist theory, and argued that socialism should be viewed as a moral ideal that had no necessary material relationship to the laws of capitalist development. These arguments reflected the widespread influence of various forms of subjective idealist philosophy, especially neo-Kantianism, which opposed Marxian materialism.

9. The strength of the revisionist anti-Marxist tendencies did not reflect the intellectual power of their arguments, which were inconsistent and impressionistic. Rather, revisionism developed in a period of rapid economic expansion and rising living standards in Europe that provided the working class, though led by socialists, with no opportunity for a revolutionary assault on capitalist society. Thus, a strange dualism arose within the social-democratic movement, especially in Germany. Its leaders employed the language of revolutionary Marxism, but the daily practical work of the party proceeded within the boundaries of reformism. Bernstein's formulations reflected and justified this reformist character of the daily practice of the German Social Democratic Party and the trade unions. The political implications of his theoretical revisions found expression in France, in 1899, when the socialist leader Millerand became a minister in a bourgeois government.

The Origins of Bolshevism

10. The Bolshevik tendency emerged out of the struggle led politically by Lenin (and, in the sphere of philosophy, by Plekhanov) against revisionist and opportunist tendencies within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. Lenin (basing himself on the position developed earlier by Kautsky, the principal theoretician of the SPD) insisted that socialist consciousness did not develop spontaneously within the working class, but had to be brought into the workers' movement. In his seminal work, *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin cited the following critical passage from the program of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party:

> ...Modern socialist consciousness can only arise on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow this to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without, and not something that arose within it spontaneously.[2]

11. The central task of the revolutionary party was to saturate the workers' movement with Marxist theory. "Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement," Lenin wrote, "the only choice is – either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a 'third' ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology."[3] Lenin opposed all tendencies that adapted their work to the spontaneous forms of working class activity and detached the daily practical struggles from the historical goal of social revolution. Lenin recognized more clearly than any other socialist of his time that the development of Marxism within the working class required a persistent struggle against the political and ideological pressure exerted by bourgeois and middle class tendencies. Herein lay the significance of the fight – conducted over issues of theory, political strategy and party organization –

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against diverse forms of revisionism and opportunism.

12. The 1903 Second Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party ended in a split between the Bolshevik and Menshevik tendencies. It marked a turning point in the history of the revolutionary socialist movement. Though the split occurred unexpectedly, over what at first seemed to be secondary issues relating to party rules and organization, it gradually became clear that the conflict was tied to the larger problem of political opportunism in the RSDLP and, beyond that, to issues of political perspective and program. In relation to the organizational question, as Lenin explained in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, "Opportunism in program is naturally connected with opportunism in tactics and opportunism in organization."[4] He noted further, "The opportunist wing of any party always defends and justifies all backwardness, whether in program, tactics or organization."[5] Lenin concluded his analysis with a memorable declaration:

> In its struggle for power the proletariat has no other weapon but organization. Disunited by the rule of anarchic competition in the bourgeois world, ground down by forced labor for capital, constantly thrust back to the "lower depths" of utter destitution, savagery, and degeneration, the proletariat can, and inevitably will, become an invincible force only through its ideological unification on the principles of Marxism being reinforced by the material unity of organization, which welds millions of toilers into an army of the working class.[6]

13. Following the Second Congress, Lenin's uncompromising stance came under bitter criticism within many sections of the RSDLP that held him responsible for the split. His approach to the inner-party struggle was harshly criticized by the young Trotsky (who was only 23 at the time of the Congress) and Rosa Luxemburg. These outstanding revolutionists did not yet understand Lenin's insight into the material relationship between theoretical, political and organizational disputes within the party and the objective social process of class realignments and class conflict developing on a mass scale outside the party. While most socialists of the day tended to interpret the conflict within and between factions of the RSDLP as a conflict of tendencies competing, in a subjective sense, for influence over a politically uncommitted working class, Lenin interpreted the conflict as an objective manifestation of real shifts in class relations – both between the working class and the bourgeoisie and also between different strata within the working class itself. Lenin studied the struggle of tendencies within the party as a "key indicator" of the development of the revolutionary epoch. In relation to the conflict that erupted at the Second Congress, the issue concealed within the constitutional question was the relationship of the Russian working class and the RSDLP to the liberal bourgeoisie and its political parties. Underlying the opportunist attitude of the Mensheviks toward organizational issues, such as the definition of the responsibilities of party membership, was a conciliatory orientation toward Russian liberalism. Over time, as the political situation in Russia matured, the immense implications of the organizational issues became more apparent. As Trotsky later acknowledged, his understanding of Lenin's political methods deepened as, against the backdrop of cataclysmic events, he "worked out a more and more correct, i.e., Bolshevik, conception of the relations between class and party, between theory and politics, and between politics and organization...What had seemed to me to be 'splitterism,' 'disruption,' etc., now appeared as a salutary and incomparably farsighted struggle for the revolutionary independence of the proletarian party."[7]

The Theory of Permanent Revolution

14. The split at the 1903 Congress anticipated social upheaval in Russia. The Russian Revolution of 1905 raised crucial problems of strategy for Russian Social Democracy. Despite the defeat of the revolution, the events of 1905 demonstrated the immense social power of the working class, which played the leading role in the struggle against the tsarist regime. Prior to 1905, revolutions were seen as national events, the outcomes of which were determined by the logic of their internal socio-economic structures and relations. Marxist theoreticians had assumed that the socialist revolution would begin in the most advanced European capitalist countries (Britain, Germany and France), and that the less developed countries (such as Russia), would have to pass through an extended stage of capitalist economic and bourgeois-democratic political development before they were "ripe" for a proletarian socialist revolution. In the latter countries, it was generally maintained that Marxist parties would be obligated to limit the revolutionary struggle to the establishment of a democratic republic under the political leadership of the national bourgeoisie. This traditional perspective guided the work of the Russian Mensheviks, following the political strategy developed by Plekhanov. In the 1905 revolution, however, the bourgeoisie proved unwilling to carry through the democratic revolution against the Tsar, and instead sided with the Tsar against the working class.

15. Lenin, in opposition to the Mensheviks, argued that because of the political weakness of the bourgeoisie, the revolution would be led by the working class in alliance with the peasantry. This alliance would establish a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry." This formulation expressed Lenin's determination to impart to the democratic revolution the most radical character possible (i.e., the uncompromising destruction of all remnants of feudal relations in the countryside and the resolute destruction of autocratic rule). But it did not define in socialist terms either the revolution or the state that was to issue from it. The democratic dictatorship did not necessitate an encroachment on bourgeois capitalist property. Moreover, it remained ambiguous on the distribution of power between the proletariat and peasantry.

16. Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution presented a bolder solution to the problem of the democratic revolution in Russia. His conception was without the ambiguity, relating to the class nature of the state power that would issue from the overthrow of tsarism, which characterized Lenin's formulation. Trotsky predicted that the revolution would not be limited to democratic tasks, that it would assume a socialist character, and that the working class would take state power and establish its dictatorship. The nature, tasks and outcome of the Russian revolution, Trotsky insisted, would be determined by international rather than national conditions. Though the immediate tasks that confronted the Russian masses were of a bourgeois-democratic character – the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy and the liquidation of the remnants of feudal relations in the countryside – they could not be realized either under the political leadership of the national bourgeoisie or within the framework of a bourgeois-democratic republic. The changes in world economy and the emergence of the working class as a powerful social force meant that the democratic revolution in the 20th century would develop very differently than in the 19th. The Russian bourgeoisie, having been integrated into the world capitalist system, was weak and dependent upon imperialism. The democratic tasks could be realized only through a revolution led by the working class with the support of the peasant masses. Having taken power, however, the working class could not limit itself to democratic tasks and would be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character. Moreover, the social revolution in Russia could not maintain itself within a national framework. Its survival depended upon the extension of the revolution into the advanced capitalist countries and,

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ultimately, throughout the world. Trotsky wrote in June 1905:

> Binding all countries together with its mode of production and its commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism...This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character, and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions.[8]

Lenin's Defense of Materialism

17. In later years, Trotsky commented that Lenin's work was distinguished by the highest level of theoretical conscientiousness. This found particular expression in Lenin's defense of Marxism against different forms of philosophical idealism and subjectivism that threatened to disorient the socialist movement. Lenin's decision to devote an entire year to the writing of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908-09) reflected his awareness of the immense danger posed by the widespread influence of philosophical idealism within the socialist movement, not only neo-Kantianism – often associated with efforts to base socialism on ethics – but also openly irrationalist conceptions, expressing the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, which glorified voluntarism and the subjective will to action. Lenin opposed idealist subjectivism as incompatible with a scientific understanding of the laws governing capitalist society and the revolutionary struggle.

18. Lenin insisted, "The philosophy of Marxism is materialism." He stated that materialism "has proved to be the only philosophy that is consistent, true to all the teachings of natural science and hostile to superstition, cant and so forth." He explained that Marxism had developed materialism beyond the form in which it existed in the eighteenth century, by enriching it "with the achievements of German classical philosophy, especially of Hegel's system, which in its turn had led to the materialism of Feuerbach." The great contribution of German classical philosophy was the elaboration of dialectics, defined by Lenin as "the doctrine of development in its fullest, deepest and most comprehensive form, the doctrine of the relativity of human knowledge that provides us with a reflection of eternally developing matter."[9] Writing on the eve of World War I, Lenin provided this concise explanation of the philosophical standpoint of Marxism:

> Marx deepened and developed philosophical materialism to the full, and extended the cognition of nature to include the cognition of human society. His historical materialism was a great achievement in scientific thinking. The chaos and arbitrariness that had previously reigned in views on history and politics were replaced by a strikingly integral and harmonious scientific theory, which shows how, in consequence of the growth of the productive forces, out of one system of social life another and higher system develops – how capitalism, for instance, grows out of feudalism.
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> Just as man's knowledge reflects nature (i.e., developing matter), which exists independently of him, so man's social knowledge (i.e., his various views and doctrines – philosophical, religious, political and so forth) reflects the economic system of society. Political institutions are a superstructure on the economic foundation. We see, for example, that the various political forms of the modern European states serve to strengthen the domination of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat.
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> Marx's philosophy is a consummate philosophical materialism which has provided mankind, and especially the working class, with powerful instruments of knowledge.[10]

19. After the publication of Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* in 1922, numerous efforts were made by academically-trained intellectuals, schooled in idealist philosophy, within and on the periphery of the socialist movement, to counterpose dialectics to materialism; and even to discredit works such as *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* as examples of a "vulgar materialism" that Lenin supposedly repudiated once he undertook a systematic study of Hegel's *Science of Logic* in 1914-15. Such claims, which were (and continue to be) based on a gross distortion of not only Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* but also of his intellectual biography, played a major role in the bourgeois assault on the foundations and heritage of classical Marxism that gathered strength against the backdrop of the triumph of Stalinism in the USSR, the rise of fascism in Germany, and the physical liquidation of large sections of the theoretically-educated revolutionary cadre of Europe. The "dialectic" to which the idealists paid a purely rhetorical tribute has nothing whatsoever to do with the "doctrine of development" referred to by Lenin, let alone with the genuinely scientific method, described by Engels, which "comprehends things and their representations, ideas, in their essential connection, concatenation, motion, origin, and ending."[11] It was, rather, a "dialectic" from which nature, the material universe existing prior to and independent of man, was excluded. It was (and is) the pseudo-dialectic of a subjectively-conceived interaction of the discontented petty-bourgeois intellectual and his environment, in which that individual – unbound by objective laws that govern the development of nature, society and consciousness – is free to "create" the world as he or she sees fit.

To be continued

Notes:

1. Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in: *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), pp. 254-55.
2. "What Is To Be Done?" in:V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 5, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), pp. 383-84.
3. Ibid., p. 384.
4. "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" in: V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 7 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 398.
5. Ibid., p. 395.
6. Ibid., p. 415.
7. "Our Differences," in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 2002), p. 299.
8. Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park, 1971), p. 239-40
9. "Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism," in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 19 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), p. 24.
10. Ibid., p. 25.
11. *Anti-Dühring*, in: *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 25, p. 23.

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