

# Documents of the SEP Founding Congress: Statement of Principles—Part 2

## The Working Class and the Socialist Revolution

26 September 2008

*The Socialist Equality Party (US) has begun publication of the documents from its founding Congress, starting with the SEP Statement of Principles. Part 1 was posted September 25 and below we are posting Part 2, the conclusion. Click here to download a PDF version of the Statement of Principles.*

*The Statement of Principles was adopted unanimously by the Congress, held August 3-9, 2008. (See “Socialist Equality Party holds founding Congress”). In the coming days, the WSWS will continue publication of the documents with the posting of The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party, followed by a report to the Congress by Barry Grey, US national editor of the WSWS.*

*To find out more about how to join the SEP, contact us here.*

### Against Opportunism

22. In its approach to all political questions and in its selection of the appropriate tactics, the Socialist Equality Party upholds the fundamental interests of the working class, based on a scientific understanding of the law-governed nature of the capitalist system and the political dynamics of class society, and a systematic assimilation of the lessons of history. It is this approach that places the SEP in irreconcilable opposition to opportunist politics, which, in the pursuit of short-term tactical gains, sacrifices the long-term interests of the working class. Time and again opportunists have defended their betrayal of principles by claiming to be realistic politicians, not guided by “inflexible” dogmas and who understand how to adapt their practice to the requirements of any given situation. Time and again, such “realistic” politics have led to disaster - precisely because they were based on superficial, impressionistic, non-Marxist and, consequently, unrealistic and false appraisals of objective conditions and the dynamics of the class struggle.

23. But opportunism is not merely the product of an intellectual and theoretical error. It has substantial socio-economic roots in capitalist society, and develops within the workers’ movement as an expression of the pressure of hostile class forces. All significant manifestations of opportunism - from that of Bernstein, which arose within the German Social Democracy at the end of the 19th century, and that of Stalin, which grew inside the Bolshevik Party in the 1920s, to that of Pablo and Mandel, which developed in the early 1950s inside the Fourth International, and, finally, to the opportunism of the British Workers Revolutionary Party that led to its break from the ICFI in the mid-1980s - can be traced to the influence exerted by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois social forces upon the working class. This is the underlying cause and significance of revisionism and opportunist politics. The struggle against such tendencies

is not a distraction from party building, but, rather, the highest point at which the fight for Marxism in the working class is engaged.

### Socialist Consciousness and the Crisis of Leadership

24. The Socialist Equality Party, in political solidarity with the ICFI, defends the classical Marxist conception - developed systematically by Lenin in the construction of the Bolshevik Party and carried forward by Trotsky in the struggle to found and build the Fourth International - that revolutionary socialist consciousness does not develop spontaneously in the working class. Socialist consciousness requires scientific insight into the laws of historical development and the capitalist mode of production. This knowledge and understanding must be introduced into the working class, and this is the principal task of the Marxist movement. This was precisely the point that Lenin emphasized in *What Is To Be Done?* when he wrote: “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Apart from the efforts of the revolutionary party to introduce Marxist theory into the workers’ movement, the predominant form of mass working class consciousness will remain at the level of trade unionism, defined by Lenin as the “bourgeois consciousness” of the working class. Denigration of the struggle for revolutionary consciousness, which is usually combined with demagogic attacks on intellectual and Marxist “elitism,” is the stock-in-trade of reactionary academics and political opportunists.

25. The victory of socialism - and, therefore, the survival and progressive development of human civilization - requires the construction, on the foundations of Marxist theory, of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution. Socialism will not be realized merely as the inevitable outcome of an unconscious historical process. The entire history of the 20th century testifies against such fatalistic “inevitabilism,” which is a caricature of historical materialist determinism and has nothing in common with the dynamic interaction of cognition, theory and practice exemplified in the work of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. Capitalism survived the 20th century not because objective conditions were insufficiently mature for socialism, but rather because the leadership of the mass working class parties was “insufficient” for socialist revolution. The working class again and again entered into epic struggles. But these struggles, misled by the Stalinists, social democrats, centrist and reformist organizations, ended in defeats.

26. Capitalism exists today because of the betrayals of the working class by its own organizations - the mass political parties and the trade unions. “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.” These words, with

which Leon Trotsky began the founding document of the Fourth International, remain supremely relevant as a definition of contemporary political reality. There is not a single mass organization in the world today that presents itself as an opponent of the existing world capitalist order, let alone summons the working class to revolutionary struggle. This has created a surreal environment, in which the anger and discontent of the working class is suppressed by the old, politically sclerotic organizations. But as Trotsky also wrote in the founding document of the Fourth International, *The Transitional Program*: "The orientation of the masses is determined first by the objective conditions of decaying capitalism and second by the treacherous politics of the old workers' organizations. Of these factors, the first of course is the decisive one: the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus."

## Marxist Theory and the Working Class

27. The contradictions of the capitalist system will drive the working class into struggles that pose the revolutionary reorganization of society. These struggles will assume an explicitly international character, arising objectively from the advanced level of the global integration of the productive forces. Therefore, the great strategic task of the modern epoch is the forging of the political unity of the workers of all countries as the decisive international revolutionary force.

28. The Socialist Equality Party bases its activity on an analysis of the objective laws of history and society, particularly as they are manifested in the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. Rooted in philosophical materialism, Marxism insists on the primacy of matter over consciousness. "The ideal is nothing else than the material world," wrote Marx, "reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." The materialism of Marx is dialectical, in that it regards the material world and the forms of its reflection in thought not as an aggregate of fixed objects and concepts, internally undifferentiated, but, rather, as a complex of processes, in constant movement and interaction, with antagonistic and divergent tendencies.

29. The SEP seeks to develop, within the advanced sections of the working class, a scientific understanding of history, a knowledge of the capitalist mode of production and the social relations to which it gives rise, and an insight into the real nature of the present crisis and its world-historical implications. The SEP strives to transform the material potential for social revolution created by an objective historical process into a class-conscious and self-confident political movement. Applying the method of historical materialist analysis to world events, the SEP anticipates and prepares for the consequences of the intensification of the world capitalist crisis, lays bare the logic of events, and formulates - strategically and tactically - the appropriate political response. The SEP insists that the progressive and socialist transformation of society can be achieved only through the *mass struggle* of the politically conscious working class. The actions of isolated individuals, resorting to violence, can never serve as a substitute for the collective struggle of the working class. As long political experience has shown, acts of individual violence are frequently instigated by provocateurs and play into the hands of the state.

30. The SEP upholds under all conditions the essential revolutionary socialist principle: *to tell the working class the truth*. The program of the party must be based on a scientific and objective assessment of political reality. The most insidious form of opportunism is that which justifies itself on the grounds that the workers are not ready for the truth, that Marxists must take the prevailing level of mass consciousness - or, more precisely, what the opportunists imagine it to be - as their point of departure, and adapt their program to the prejudices and confusion

existing among the masses. This cowardly approach is the antithesis of principled revolutionary politics. "The program," declared Trotsky in 1938, "must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers. It must reflect society as it is, and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to overcome and vanquish the backwardness. That is why we must express in our program the whole acuteness of the social crisis of the capitalist society, including in the first line the United States." The first responsibility of the party, Trotsky continued, is to give "a clear, honest picture of the objective situation, of the historic tasks which flow from this situation, irrespective of whether or not the workers are today ripe for this. Our tasks don't depend on the mentality of the workers. The task is to develop the mentality of the workers. That is what the program should formulate and present before advanced workers." These words define precisely the approach taken by the SEP.

## The Betrayal of the Trade Unions

31. The opportunists' aversion to telling the workers the truth is virtually always connected to their efforts to provide political cover for, and preserve the authority of, the old reactionary, bureaucratized and thoroughly corporatist trade unions and political organizations that maintain the subordination of the working class to the capitalist system. The SEP, in opposition to the opportunists, aims to develop within the working class an understanding of the nature of the old organizations - principally, in the United States, the trade unions - which claim to represent the working people. The AFL-CIO and its factional rival, the so-called "Change to Win" coalition, are controlled by and serve the interests of a substantial stratum of middle-class functionaries whose personal income is derived from their active and conscious role as facilitators of the corporate exploitation of the working class. During the past quarter century, the trade unions have played a major role in breaking strikes, lowering wages, eliminating benefits, cutting jobs and shutting down factories. During this process, despite the loss of membership, the revenues of the trade unions and the salaries of their functionaries have continued to rise. Insulated from and indifferent to the hardships suffered by their membership, and protected by the "dues check-off" and labor laws from rank-and-file protests, the unions are tied by a thousand threads to the corporations and the capitalist state, including its intelligence agencies. The Socialist Equality Party calls for a rebellion against and break with these corrupt organizations, which do not represent the working class. This does not mean that the SEP abstains from working inside such organizations, to the extent that such activity is required to gain access to and assist the workers jointly oppressed by their employers and the union functionaries. But the SEP conducts such work on the basis of a revolutionary perspective, encouraging at every point the formation of new independent organizations - such as factory and workplace committees - that truly represent the interests of the rank-and-file workers and are subject to democratic control.

## Class Unity Versus Identity Politics

32. Another form of opportunism, which has played a significant role in undermining the struggle for the unity of the working class and lowering class consciousness, is the promotion of innumerable forms of "identity" politics - based on the elevation of national, ethnic, racial, linguistic,

religious, gender, and sexual distinctions above class position. This shift from class to identity has been at the expense of an understanding of the real causes, rooted in the capitalist system, of the hardships that confront all working people. At its worst, it has promoted a competition among different “identities” for access to educational institutions, jobs and other “opportunities” which, in a socialist society, would be freely available to all people without such demeaning, dehumanizing and arbitrary distinctions. Affirmative action programs have benefited, for the most part, a relatively small layer of the middle class. The demand for legal and social equality, which dominated the historic civil rights movement of the African-American masses during the 1950s and 1960s, was undermined by a class shift in political focus, which replaced the fight against mass poverty with the securing of preferential treatment and privileges for a few. This shift, promoted by the Democratic Party and its allies among the advocates of petty-bourgeois identity politics, has had a devastating impact on the conditions of life for the broad mass of minority workers. The SEP demands full equality for all people, and defends unequivocally their democratic rights. All forms of discrimination based on national, ethnic, racial, religious, or linguistic heritage, or on gender or sexual orientation, must be abolished. The SEP advances this essential democratic component of its program within the context of the fight for socialism, based on the political unification of all sections of the working class.

#### **For the Rights of Immigrants and Native Americans**

33. An essential precondition for the forging of this unity is the unconditional defense of the democratic rights of immigrants living in the United States. The Socialist Equality Party stands for the unconditional right of workers of every country to live and work where they choose. We call for full democratic and citizenship rights for all immigrants, including the 12 million or more now classified as undocumented or “illegal.” Moreover, the Socialist Equality Party raises with special concern the plight of Native Americans, whose deplorable conditions of life are the legacy of American capitalism’s blood-soaked rise to continental power. Accounts of American democracy that evade the far-reaching implications of the crimes committed against the people already inhabiting the North American continent are shot through with hypocrisy. The social consequences of these crimes - extreme poverty, a life expectancy 20 years below the national average, absence of adequate housing, and general neglect of the social needs of Native American reservations and communities by government agencies - persist to the present day.

#### **Socialist Policies Versus Protectionism and “Free Trade”**

34. The claim made by national chauvinists, invariably endorsed by the trade unions, that the answer to the loss of jobs within the United States is to be found in protectionism, is false. As a practical matter, there can be no return, in the age of globalization, to economic nationalism. At the same time, the invocation of “free trade” by the pitchmen for the transnational monopolies is as fraudulent as all their other tributes to “freedom.” The SEP advocates neither protectionism nor “free trade,” but fights instead for social ownership of the productive forces, the elimination of national borders, and the creation of a planned, rationally-integrated global economy. A major step toward the achievement of that goal, advocated by the Socialist Equality Party, would be the establishment, on a voluntary basis, of a United Socialist Federation of North, Central and South America.

#### **Democratic Centralism**

35. The revolutionary struggle of the working class requires organization, and organization is impossible without discipline. But the discipline required for revolutionary struggle cannot be imposed bureaucratically from above. It must develop on the basis of an agreement, freely arrived at, on principles and program. This conviction finds expression in the organizational structure of the Socialist Equality Party, which is based on the principles of *democratic centralism*. In the formulation of policy and the appropriate tactics, the fullest democracy must prevail within the party. No restraints, other than those indicated by the party’s constitution, are placed on internal discussion of the SEP’s policies and activities. Leaders are democratically elected by the membership, and are subject to criticism and control. Those candidates for leadership who cannot abide criticism should ponder the words of James P. Cannon, the founder of the Trotskyist movement in the United States: “The truth never hurt anyone, provided he was on the level.” But if the formulation of policy requires the broadest discussion and open and honest criticism, its implementation demands the strictest discipline. The decisions arrived at democratically within the party are binding on all members. Those who object to this essential element of centralism in the implementation of decisions, who see in the demand for discipline a violation of their personal freedom, are not revolutionary socialists but anarchistic individualists, who do not understand the implications and demands of the class struggle.

#### **Class Consciousness, Culture and the *World Socialist Web Site***

36. 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. While the bourgeois politicians seek to drag the working class down to their own intellectually debased level, the SEP strives to raise the working class up to the level required by its historic tasks. Not only politics but also science, history, philosophy, literature, movies, music, the fine arts, and all areas of culture fall within the domain of socialist education. The SEP’s most important instrument for the development of socialist consciousness within the working class is the *World Socialist Web Site* [www.wsws.org]. With its daily analysis of world political and economic developments, exposure of the social realities of capitalism, coverage of workers’ struggles, commentary on vital questions of culture, discussion of historical and philosophical themes, and examination of critical issues of revolutionary strategy, tactics and practice, the WSWS plays a decisive role in forging the contemporary world Marxist movement.

#### **Revolutionary Strategy and Transitional Demands**

37. The strategic aim of the Socialist Equality Party, in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International, is to educate and prepare the working class for the revolutionary struggle

against capitalism, the establishment of workers' power and the creation of a socialist society. Our aim is not the reform of capitalism, but its overthrow. The attainment of this goal, however, requires the most careful and detailed attention to the conditions of life of the broad mass of workers, and the formulation of demands that address their needs. The SEP recognizes the necessity of establishing, in practice, a link between the perspective of socialist revolution and the concrete struggles in which the working class is engaged. In this effort, the work of the SEP is guided by the approach advocated by Leon Trotsky in the *Transitional Program*: "It is necessary," he wrote, "to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find a bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of *transitional demands*, stemming from today's conditions and today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat."

38. Such demands include universal employment, unrestricted access to quality medical care and education, decent housing, the cancellation of foreclosures and evictions, automatic adjustment of wages in line with inflation, the democratization of the workplace, unrestricted inspection by the public of the financial records of corporations and financial institutions, establishment of restraints on executive salaries, reduction of working hours with no loss of pay, imposition of a genuinely progressive income tax and significant restriction on the transfer of massive personal wealth via inheritance, nationalization and the establishment of democratic workers' control of large corporations vital to the national and global economy, dismantling of the national "volunteer" army and the transfer of authority to popular militias controlled by the working class and with elected officers, and other demands of a democratic and socially beneficial character.

39. Transitional demands will play an important role in the political mobilization of the working class to the extent that they form part of a broader campaign to develop socialist consciousness. The *Transitional Program* is not an *à la carte* menu, from which demands are arbitrarily selected, without the appropriate political context or reference to broader political goals. If the *Transitional Program* is to serve as a bridge to socialism, the destination cannot be kept a secret from the working class.

## **The Working Class and the Socialist Revolution**

40. The work of the SEP is imbued with an unwavering confidence, grounded in advanced scientific theory and rich historical experience, in the revolutionary role and destiny of the working class. But the victory of the socialist revolution depends upon the conscious struggles of workers. The emancipation of the working class is, in the final analysis, the task of the working class itself. As Engels put it so well, "Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul." Thus, socialism can only be established when the workers themselves want it; and, conversely, when that decision is made, beneath the blows of crisis-stricken capitalism, there is no force on earth that will stop the American workers from taking their place in the vanguard of the world socialist revolution.



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