

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party—Part 3

1 October 2008

The Socialist Equality Party (US) today continues 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 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11)

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.

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

The Consequences of "Socialism in One Country"

44. While Trotsky and the Left Opposition fought for the implementation of a correct economic policy within the Soviet Union, they insisted that the fate of the revolutionary regime depended on the extension of the revolution beyond the borders of the USSR. Without the victory of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries of Europe and North America, the Soviet state would not survive. It was on this very question that the conflict between the Left Opposition and the Stalinist bureaucracy centered. In 1924 Stalin, with the support of Bukharin, proposed that socialism could be built on a nationalist basis in the USSR. The promulgation of the theory of "socialism in one country" represented a fundamental repudiation of an essential tenet of Marxist theory and the world revolutionary perspective upon which the October Revolution had been based. It marked a turning point in the history of the USSR: the policies of the Soviet Union were severed by the bureaucracy from the fate of the world socialist revolution. The material interests that found expression in the program of "national socialism" were those of the bureaucracy itself. To the extent that state property was the source of its income and privileges, a nationalist policy of an essentially defensive character served the interests of the Stalinist regime. In the sphere of foreign policy, opportunist calculations of "national interest" replaced principled internationalist revolutionary considerations. The Stalinist regime converted the Communist International into an instrument of a nationalist Soviet foreign policy, utilizing local Communist parties to exert pressure on bourgeois governments. Herein lay the political origins of the class collaborationist policies that would eventually transform the Stalinist parties into instruments of political counterrevolution.

45. The international consequences of the shift in Soviet policy were demonstrated in the defeat of the general strike in Britain in May 1926. Stalin, seeking to curry favor with the national leadership of the British trade unions, instructed the British Communist Party to give the General Council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), controlled by the bureaucracy, uncritical support in the build-up to, and during, the general

strike. This left the working class unprepared for the TUC's betrayal of the strike.

46. Even greater disasters followed. The Soviet bureaucracy attacked the Theory of Permanent Revolution and revived the Menshevik two-stage theory of revolution in countries with a belated capitalist development. In China in 1925-1927, Stalin directed the Communist Party to support the national bourgeois movement of the Kuomintang on the basis of the theory of the "Bloc of Four Classes" against imperialism. Trotsky vehemently opposed this class-collaborationist policy and warned of its devastating consequences for the socialist revolution in China. The fact that China was oppressed by imperialism did not lessen the conflict between the Chinese bourgeoisie and the working class. Indeed, the opposite was the case. As Trotsky wrote:

The powerful role of foreign capital in the life of China has caused very strong sections of the Chinese bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy, and the military to join their destiny with that of imperialism. Without this tie, the enormous role of the so-called militarists in the life of modern China would be inconceivable.

It would further be profound naiveté to believe that an abyss lies between the so-called comprador bourgeoisie, that is, the economic and political agency of foreign capital in China, and the so-called national bourgeoisie. No, these two sections stand incomparably closer to each other than the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants...

It is a gross mistake to think that imperialism mechanically welds together all the classes of China from without... The revolutionary struggle against imperialism does not weaken, but rather strengthens the political differentiation of the classes.[30]

47. Trotsky's warnings were confirmed. In April 1927 the military forces of the Kuomintang, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, carried out a massacre of the Shanghai working class. A large section of the Chinese Communist Party leadership was murdered by the bourgeois nationalist forces. After April 1927, the Chinese Communist Party was ordered to enter the "left" Kuomintang led by Wang Ching-wei. The "left" Wang Ching-wei crushed the workers' and peasants' movement no less brutally than Chiang Kai-shek. Then, in August 1927, after the nearly complete demoralization of the Communist Party, the leadership of the Comintern demanded an immediate transition to armed insurrection. An attempt to implement this policy in Canton was drowned in blood within just three days. These catastrophic defeats, which were to have such a far-reaching impact on the history of the 20th century, effectively marked the end of the CCP as a mass party of the Chinese working class. Fleeing into the countryside to escape the consequences of the disaster produced by Stalin's policies, the surviving remnants of the CCP leadership, including Mao Zedong, reestablished the Communist Party as a peasant-based organization. It is not possible to understand the subsequent history of China - including its present-day emergence as a bastion of the most rapacious forms of capitalist exploitation - except within the context of Trotsky's critique of Stalin's "Bloc of Four Classes" and the tragedy of 1927.

The Expulsion of Trotsky

48. The defeats in Britain and China diminished the revolutionary confidence of the Soviet working class. This, in turn, strengthened the bureaucracy and deepened its alienation from the working class. Power in the Soviet Union was consolidated in the hands of a bureaucratic clique headed by Stalin. In 1926, the Left Opposition briefly united with Kamenev and Zinoviev to form the United Opposition. In July-October 1926, Kamenev and Trotsky were expelled from the Politburo, and in November 1927 Trotsky and Zinoviev were expelled from the Russian Communist Party. In December, all supporters of the Left Opposition were expelled from the party. While Zinoviev and Kamenev subsequently capitulated to Stalin and rejoined the Communist Party, Trotsky was exiled to Alma Ata in January 1928, and was expelled from the Soviet Union in February 1929.

49. From the beginning of his final exile, Trotsky insisted that all the differences between the Stalinist faction and the Left Opposition stemmed from their adherence to two irreconcilably opposed conceptions of socialism. The Stalinists proceeded from the possibility of constructing an isolated national socialist society, based on the resources of Russia; the Left Opposition insisted that the fate of the workers' state and its progress toward socialism was inextricably linked to the development of world socialist revolution. In his 1930 preface to a German edition of a pamphlet that he had written two years earlier, entitled *The Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky summed up the essential issue:

Marxism takes its point of departure from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labor and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets. The productive forces of capitalist society have long ago outgrown the national boundaries. The imperialist war (of 1914-1918) was one of the expressions of this fact. In respect of the technique of production, socialist society must represent a stage higher than capitalism. To aim at building a nationally isolated socialist society means, in spite of all passing successes, to pull the productive forces backward, even as compared with capitalism. To attempt, regardless of the geographical, cultural and historical conditions of the country's development, which constitutes a part of the world unity, to realize a shut-off proportionality of all the branches of economy within a national framework, means to pursue a reactionary utopia.[31]

50. The political implications of Trotsky's critique of Stalin's national socialist perspective extended beyond the problems of Soviet policy. At stake were fundamental questions of the global perspective and strategic tasks of the international working class in the imperialist epoch. Trotsky wrote:

The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follow, on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.[32]

51. The Left Opposition found support outside the Russian Communist Party. A breakthrough occurred when Trotsky's *Critique of the Draft Program of the Comintern*, prepared for the Sixth Congress held in 1928, fell, through a stroke of luck, into the hands of James P. Cannon, a veteran revolutionary and founding member of the American Communist Party. After studying the document, he and the Canadian revolutionary, Maurice Spector, decided to take up the fight for Trotsky's positions. Soon after returning to the United States, Cannon - supported by Max Shachtman and Martin Abern - initiated the struggle for the positions of the Left Opposition within the Communist Party. A statement written by Cannon, Shachtman and Abern was presented to a meeting of the Political Committee of the Communist Party on October 27, 1928. It declared:

The attempts to revise the basic Marxist-Leninist doctrine with the spurious theory of socialism in one country have been rightly resisted by the Opposition led by Trotsky. A number of revisionist and opportunist errors in various fields of Comintern activity and its ideological life in general have proceeded from this false theory. To this, in part at least, can be traced the false line in the Chinese revolution, the debacle of the Anglo-Russian Committee, the alarming and unprecedented growth of bureaucratism in the Comintern, an incorrect attitude and policy in the Soviet Union, etc., etc. This new "theory" is bound up with an overemphasis on the power and duration of the temporary stabilization of capitalism. Herein lies the true source of pessimism regarding the development of the proletarian world revolution. One of the principal duties of every Communist in every party of the Comintern is to fight along with the Opposition for the teachings of Marx, Engels and Lenin on this basic question.[33]

52. Cannon was expelled at that very session of the Political Committee. He proceeded to found the Communist League of America. Thus, the Trotskyist movement in the United States, which was to play such a significant role in the development of the international Trotskyist movement, began on a principled foundation. Its point of departure was not a dispute over organizational issues or national tactics, but, rather, the decisive questions of international revolutionary strategy. The document that inspired Cannon, Trotsky's *Critique of the Draft Program*, was a comprehensive indictment of the nationalist orientation of the Stalin leadership and its failure to assess the strategic experiences of the international working class since the October Revolution of 1917. In his assessment of the world political and economic situation, Trotsky criticized the draft program's failure to analyze the rise of American imperialism and called attention to the implications of the struggle of American imperialism to establish and maintain its hegemonic position. While foreseeing a major economic crisis in the United States, he did not believe that this would lessen America's dominant position in world politics:

Just the contrary is the case. In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies at the expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war.[34]

53. The Wall Street crash of October 1929 marked the beginning of a global depression that plunged capitalism into the greatest crisis in its history. Beginning little more than a decade after the end of World War I, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the bloody social and political upheavals that arose out of it, provided another crushing refutation of all the complacent nostrums of the revisionists and reformists. Capitalism was brought by its own contradictions to the brink of collapse in Europe,

Asia and even North America. That it survived these upheavals, at an incredible cost in human lives, is attributable to the political betrayals of the mass organizations of the working class led, first and foremost, by the Stalinists and Social Democrats. The Fourth International arose on the basis of the struggle, led by Trotsky, against these betrayals. The record and lessons of these struggles form, to this day, the essential historical, theoretical and political foundation for the education of Marxists.

54. After his arrival in Turkey in 1929, Trotsky continued to fight for a correct policy in the Soviet Union, calling for a planned and rational program of industrialization. The aim of the International Left Opposition remained the political reform of the regime in the Soviet Union, and the return of the Communist International to a correct revolutionary line, based on Marxist principles. In the late 1920s, in the face of mass famine caused by the peasantry's withholding of grain from the cities, the Stalinist bureaucracy reversed its previous orientation to the peasantry and promotion of market policies with a brutal and unplanned program of industrialization, collectivization of agriculture, and the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class." Its program of rapid industrialization, based on the perspective of economic nationalism and autarky, bore no relation to Trotsky's proposals for a planned program of state industrial development that utilized the resources of the world economy and its international division of labor. Ultra-leftism in domestic policy was accompanied by a sharp turn in the Comintern to sectarian political adventurism, based on the theory of the "Third Period." The political perspective promoted by this "theory" - or, to be more precise, anti-theory - hypothesized a continuous "radicalization of the masses," devoid of contradictions and apparently unrelated to objective economic, political and social processes. All problems of political strategy and tactics were reduced by the Stalinists to the simplistic shouting of radical slogans. Trotsky warned that the Stalinist hypothesis made a mockery of Marxist political analysis. He wrote:

It goes without saying that from the point of view of our epoch as a whole the development of the proletariat advances in the direction of the revolution. But this is not a steady progression, any more than the objective process of the deepening of capitalist contradictions. The reformists see only the ups of the capitalist road. The formal "revolutionaries" see only its downs. But a Marxist sees the road as a whole, all of its conjunctural ups and downs, without for a moment losing sight of the main direction - the catastrophe of wars, the explosion of revolutions.[35]

The Victory of Fascism in Germany

55. Under the influence of "Third Period" policy, the Communist Parties were instructed to replace their adaptation to the trade unions, Social-Democratic parties, and bourgeois nationalists with an ultra-left program that included the formation of independent "red" unions and the rejection of the tactic of the united front. The united front tactic was replaced with the designation of Social-Democratic parties as "social fascist."

56. The new policy of the Comintern was to have disastrous consequences in Germany, where the rise of fascism posed a mortal challenge to the socialist movement. Fascism was a movement of the demoralized petty bourgeoisie, devastated by the economic crisis and squeezed between the two main classes, the bourgeoisie and the working class. The defeats of the socialist movement had convinced broad sections of the petty bourgeoisie that the working class was not the solution but the source of its problems. The German bourgeoisie employed the fascists to destroy the labor organizations and atomize the working class. The victory of Hitler's Nazi Party in January 1933 was the result of the betrayals of

Social Democracy and Stalinism. The Social Democrats placed their confidence in the bourgeois Weimar Republic and tied the working class to the capitalist state. The Stalinist policy of "social fascism" - which claimed that the SPD and Hitler's party were "twins" - opposed all forms of collaboration between the Communist Party and the Social Democracy, even for defensive purposes. It deprived the Communist Party of any means of winning the confidence of workers still loyal to the SPD. As the Communist Party leadership developed the criminally complacent slogan, "After Hitler, us," Trotsky warned in December 1931, "Worker-Communists, you are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for any place; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory. Make haste, worker-Communists, you have very little time left!"[36] This warning was tragically confirmed after Hitler came to power in 1933 and proceeded to arrest or execute the leadership of the working class and destroy its independent organizations.

57. The victory of fascism in Germany was a turning point in the degeneration of the Communist Parties. Despite the unprecedented magnitude of the defeat suffered in Germany, there was no opposition within the parties of the Communist International. In response, Trotsky issued the call for the founding of new parties and a new International. "The Moscow leadership has not only proclaimed as infallible the policy which guaranteed victory to Hitler, but has also prohibited all discussion of what had occurred," he wrote in July 1933. "And this shameful interdiction was not violated, nor overthrown. No national congresses; no international congress; no discussions at party meetings; no discussion in the press! An organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of the bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it."[37] While Trotsky continued to define the Soviet Union as a workers' state, albeit one that had undergone a far-reaching degeneration, he warned that its long-term survival, not to mention its development along genuinely socialist lines, depended upon the overthrow of the bureaucracy in a political revolution.

The Fourth International and the Struggle against Centristism

58. The call for the Fourth International was not a tactical maneuver. It was based on an assessment of the social and political transformation of the Soviet regime, the Communist International and their relationship to the working class. On this point Trotsky came into conflict during the mid-1930s with political tendencies that he defined as "centrist." While proclaiming their devotion to socialist revolution, these groups opposed the formation of the Fourth International. They sought, rather, to find some sort of middle ground between Stalinism and Trotskyism, and between reformist and revolutionary policies.

59. Trotsky wrote in 1934 that a centrist "views with hatred the revolutionary principle: state what is. He is inclined to substitute for a principled policy personal maneuvering and petty organizational diplomacy." Trotsky explained, "A centrist occupies a position between an opportunist and a Marxist somewhat analogous to that which a petty bourgeois occupies between a capitalist and a proletarian: he kowtows before the first and has contempt for the second." Another feature of centristism was that it did not "understand that in the present epoch a national revolutionary party can be built only as part of an international party. In his choice of his international allies, the centrist is even less discriminating than in his own country."[38]

60. As the working class moved to the left in response to the menace of fascism, the centrist groups blocked the formation of a genuinely revolutionary party. The centrist tendencies - including the Independent Labor Party in Britain, the German-émigré SAP (in which Willy Brandt, the future SPD leader and German Chancellor, played a leading and treacherous role), the Spanish POUM, and others - attempted to find a half-way house between revolutionary and reformist politics. Underlying their claims that it would be "premature" to proclaim the founding of the Fourth International was (1) a basic disagreement with Trotsky's characterization of the Stalinist regime and its affiliated parties as counterrevolutionary, and (2) a refusal to break with the opportunist political relations that prevailed within their national milieu.

The Treachery of the Popular Front

61. The evasions and vacillations of the centrist tendencies undermined the struggle against Stalinism under conditions in which the policies of the Soviet regime had assumed an openly counter-revolutionary character. Having opposed Trotsky's call for a "united front" of working class parties against Hitler in Germany, the Stalinists swung in the other direction after the victory of the Nazis. At the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, they unveiled a new program - the "Popular Front." This called for, in the name of the struggle against fascism and the defense of democracy, the formation of political alliances with "democratic" bourgeois parties. The practical effect of these alliances was the political subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie, private property and the capitalist state. While politically catastrophic for the working class, the Popular Front served the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. By offering to use the local Communist parties as instruments for the suppression of revolutionary struggle by the working class, Stalin hoped to curry favor with bourgeois regimes and improve the diplomatic position of the USSR. In fact, whatever the limited and short-term diplomatic gains achieved on the basis of this strategy, the defeats of the working class produced by "Popular Frontism" profoundly weakened the Soviet Union.

62. Stalinist policy was consciously directed against the revolutionary seizure of power by the working class. Stalin feared that the victory of the working class, especially in Western Europe, would rekindle the revolutionary movement of the Soviet working class. In 1936-38, the Stalinists helped strangle a revolutionary situation in France, which was touched off by a general strike in June 1936. The Popular Front regime supported by the French Communist Party demoralized the working class and cleared the path for the capitulation of the French bourgeoisie to Hitler in June 1940. In the Spanish Revolution, the Stalinists supported the bourgeois government of Azaña. The Spanish Communist Party became the principal prop of capitalist property and bourgeois law and order. It recruited heavily among better-off sections of the urban middle class who desperately feared socialist revolution. Stalin flooded Spain with GPU agents who carried out a reign of terror against revolutionary socialist tendencies. His agents organized the suppression of the working class insurrection in Barcelona, and they kidnapped, tortured and murdered Andres Nin, leader of the POUM. The Stalinists' liquidation of the POUM was facilitated, tragically, by the centrist policies pursued by Nin, who had entered into the popular front government in Barcelona. In the United States, the Communist Party supported the Democratic Party and the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

63. The purpose of Popular Frontism - which Trotsky defined as the alliance of bourgeois liberalism with the GPU - was the defense of capitalist property against the menace of socialist revolution. The rhetorical tributes to "democracy" were employed to facilitate the political

disarming of the working class as an independent force, while concealing the class interests served by the "democratic" state. To the extent that the working class was prevented from fighting for political power, the struggle against the real threats to democracy was fatally handicapped. As demonstrated in France and Spain, the attempt to defend democracy without fighting for socialism proved bankrupt and ended in disaster. Among the arguments repeatedly made by the Stalinists in both Spain and France was that revolutionary policies "frightened" the petty bourgeoisie and turned them in the direction of the fascists. Thus, the working class could retain the sympathy of the middle class only by eschewing socialist demands that threatened private property and by giving support to moderate bourgeois leaders within the framework of the Popular Front. Trotsky emphatically rejected this cowardly and defeatist approach, which expressed a total misappraisal of the social psychology of the middle classes:

It is false, thrice false, to affirm that the present petty bourgeoisie is not going to the working class parties because it fears "extreme measures." Quite the contrary. The lower petty bourgeoisie, in its great masses, only sees in the working class parties parliamentary machines. They do not believe in their strength, nor in their capacity to struggle, in their readiness this time to conduct the struggle to the end.

And if this is so, is it worth the trouble to replace Radicalism [the "left" bourgeois political tendency] by its parliamentary colleagues on the Left? That is how the semi-expropriated, ruined and discontented proprietor reasons or feels. Without an understanding of this psychology of the peasants, the artisans, the employees, the petty functionaries, etc. - a psychology that flows from the social crisis - it is impossible to elaborate a correct policy. The petty bourgeoisie is economically dependent and politically atomized. That is why it cannot conduct an independent policy. It needs a "leader" who inspires it with confidence. This individual or collective leadership, i.e., a personage or party, can be given to it by one or the other of the fundamental classes - either the big bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Fascism unites and arms the scattered masses. Out of human dust it organizes combat detachments. It thus gives the petty bourgeoisie the illusion of being an independent force. It begins to imagine that it will really command the state. It is not surprising that these illusions and hopes turn the head of the petty bourgeoisie!

But the petty bourgeoisie can also find a leader in the proletariat.[39]

64. The transformation of the Comintern into an instrument of the Soviet bureaucracy was accompanied by a series of purges and expulsions, in which any leaders representing the traditions of revolutionary internationalism were replaced with loyal representatives of the apparatus. This transformation had begun in 1923 and continued throughout the 1930s, often as part of the struggle against Trotskyism. By the period of the "Popular Front," the Comintern had completely rejected the program of world revolution, to which Stalin referred as a "tragi-comic misunderstanding." The Comintern was finally dissolved in 1943, as a gesture to the Stalinist bureaucracy's imperialist allies.

The Revolution Betrayed

65. In 1936 Trotsky wrote *The Revolution Betrayed*, which established the socio-economic necessity that motivated the fight for the Fourth International. In this monumental work, Trotsky uncovered the laws governing the emergence, growth and inevitable destruction of the Soviet bureaucracy, to which he refused to attribute any progressive historical role. Analyzing the contradictions that governed the existence of the bureaucracy as a privileged caste within a workers' state, Trotsky established that the conquests of the 1917 October Revolution could be

preserved and extended only through the political revolution, in which the Soviet workers overthrew the bureaucracy through a violent insurrection, while preserving and developing the nationalized property relations established by the Bolshevik revolution. He defined the Soviet regime as transitional, whose fate depended upon the world revolution. Trotsky wrote:

The USSR is a contradictory society halfway between capitalism and socialism, in which: (a) the productive forces are still far from adequate to give the state property a socialist character; (b) the tendency toward primitive accumulation created by want breaks out through innumerable pores of the planned economy; (c) norms of distribution preserving a bourgeois character lie at the basis of a new differentiation of society; (d) the economic growth, while slowly bettering the situation of the toilers, promotes the swift formation of a privileged stratum; (e) exploiting the social antagonisms, the bureaucracy has converted itself into an uncontrolled caste alien to socialism; (f) the social revolution, betrayed by the ruling party, still exists in property relations and in the consciousness of the toiling masses; (g) a further development of the accumulated contradictions can as well lead to socialism as back to capitalism; (h) on the road to capitalism the counterrevolution would have to break the resistance of the workers; (i) on the road to socialism the workers would have to overthrow the bureaucracy. In the last analysis, the question will be decided by a struggle of living social forces, both on the national and the world arena.[40]

66. An objection to Trotsky's analysis of Soviet society, identified with the theory generally known as "state capitalism," is that the bureaucracy represented a new ruling class. Trotsky rejected this theory, which, in all its variations, fails to provide a Marxist substantiation of its characterization of the bureaucracy as a class. For Marxism, a class is distinguished by its independent roots in the economic structure of society. The existence of a class is bound up with historically specific forms of property and relations of production, which, in turn, are embodied in the activities of this social stratum. The Soviet bureaucracy did not represent such a historical force. It usurped political power; it administered the state; and it devoured a significant portion of the wealth of the Soviet Union. But the forms of property had emerged out of a working class revolution. Trotsky acknowledged that the overwhelming political control over the state exerted by the bureaucracy had created "a new and hitherto unknown relation between the bureaucracy and the riches of the nation." [41] He warned that this could lead, unless preempted by a political revolution, "to a complete liquidation of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution." [42] This is what eventually happened, some 55 years after the publication of *Revolution Betrayed*. However, the consequences of the dissolution of the USSR provided decisive confirmation of Trotsky's definition of the bureaucracy as a caste, rather than a class. The destruction of the USSR led rapidly to the liquidation of state property and its conversion into private property. Well-placed bureaucrats converted the state-owned industrial, financial and natural resources that they had previously administered into their personal assets. Inheritance laws were established which allowed this new bourgeoisie to pass its property, acquired almost entirely through the theft of state assets, to its spouses and children. A stock exchange was established. Labor was transformed into a commodity, regulated by the law of value. Whatever remained of state planning collapsed. Not a single special social attribute by which the ruling bureaucracy might have been legitimately identified as a distinct class survived the USSR. If what had existed prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union was "state capitalism," it rapidly disappeared along with the workers' state! The "theory" of state capitalism contributed nothing to a sociological understanding of Soviet society, or to a political strategy for the revolutionary struggle against Stalinism.

67. The Stalinist bureaucracy murdered virtually the entire leadership of

the October Revolution. Show trials were organized, between 1936 and 1938, of Bolshevik leaders, including Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and Rakovsky. These gruesome proceedings, in which the defendants were compelled to denounce themselves (having been falsely promised that such confessions would save them and their families), ended invariably with the announcement of death sentences that were carried out within hours. In the few cases where prison sentences were imposed - as with Rakovsky and Radek - the defendants were later murdered in secret. The trials were the public image of an unprecedented campaign of mass murder conducted away from public view. Hundreds of thousands of socialists, the finest representatives of several political generations of Marxist intellectuals and workers, were physically exterminated. The fascist dictator Mussolini commented with admiration that Stalin's regime had killed far more communists than his own! Nearly one million people were killed in a wave of counter-revolutionary violence from 1936 to 1939. This liquidation - which confirmed, in the most direct sense, Trotsky's assessment of Stalin as the "gravedigger of the revolution" - dealt a blow to the revolutionary consciousness of the Soviet working class from which the Soviet Union never recovered. The history and record of these unparalleled crimes constitute the unanswerable refutation of the claim of countless bourgeois propagandists that Stalinism based itself on the theoretical and political heritage of Marxism, let alone the claim that Stalinism and Trotskyism were merely variants of one and the same Marxism. The real relationship between Stalinism and Trotskyism was described best by Trotsky: they were separated, he wrote, by "a river of blood."

The Founding of the Fourth International

68. In September 1938, the Fourth International held its founding congress, a historical milestone for the socialist movement and the international working class. Its founding document, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (The Mobilization of the Masses around Transitional Demands to Prepare the Conquest of Power)* was written by Trotsky and outlined the central tasks facing the socialist movement:

Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.[43]

69. The only way out of this crisis of leadership was through the building of sections of the Fourth International in every country. Against the skeptics and centrists who argued that it was premature to build a new International, that it would have to arise out of "great events," Trotsky replied:

The Fourth International has already arisen out of great events: the greatest defeats of the proletariat in history. The cause of these defeats is to be found in the degeneration and perfidy of the old leadership. The class struggle does not tolerate an interruption. The Third International, following the Second, is dead for purposes of revolution. Long live the Fourth International!

But has the time yet arrived to proclaim its creation?...the skeptics are not quieted down. The Fourth International, we answer, has no need of being 'proclaimed.' It exists and it fights. It is weak? Yes, its ranks are not numerous because it is still young. They are as yet chiefly cadres. But these cadres are pledges for the future. Outside of these cadres there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name.[44]

70. The subsequent history of the 20th century would prove the

correctness of the assessment of the Fourth International as the only genuinely revolutionary leadership. The strategic task of the period was to bridge the gap between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard. To meet this challenge, the Fourth International formulated a series of economic and political demands - such as the sliding scale of wages and hours; the nationalization of industry, banks, and agriculture; the arming of the proletariat; the formation of a workers' and farmers' government - as a means of developing the revolutionary consciousness of the working class and exposing its old leaderships. The demands, Trotsky wrote, would constitute a bridge "stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion, the conquest of power by the proletariat." [45] In later years, revisionist tendencies would seek to transform the *Transitional Program* into a recipe book for opportunist adaptation, by tearing isolated demands out of their revolutionary context and using them as a substitute for the struggle to win the working class to a socialist perspective and program. In this way, they sought to use fragments from the Transitional Program as a means of adapting to, rather than combating, the backward consciousness of the working class and the old reformist and Stalinist leaderships.

71. In discussions held by Trotsky with leaders of the American Trotskyist movement in May 1938, he insisted that the program of the revolutionary party had to take as its point of departure the objective development of the crisis of world capitalism, not the subjective mood and existing level of working class consciousness. "The program," he insisted, "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 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. We cannot postpone or modify objective conditions which don't depend upon us. We cannot guarantee that the masses will solve the crisis; but we must express the situation as it is, and that is the task of the program." [46]

To be continued

Notes:

30. "The Chinese Revolution and the Theses of Comrade Stalin," in: *Leon Trotsky on China* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), pp. 176-77.

31. Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park Publications, 1971), p. 22.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

33. James P. Cannon, *The Left Opposition in the United States 1928-31* (New York: Monad Press, 1981), p. 32.

34. Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder, 2002), pp. 28-29.

35. "The 'Third Period' of the Comintern's Errors," in: *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1930* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), p. 28.

36. "For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism" in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971) p. 141.

37. "It is Necessary to Build Communist Parties and an International Anew" in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p. 420.

38. "Centrism and the Fourth International," in: *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34* (New York: Pathfinder, 1998), p. 233.

39. Leon Trotsky, *Whither France* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), p. 13.

40. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1991), p. 216.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (New York: Labor Publications, 1981), p. 2.

44. *Ibid.*, p.42.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

46. *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 2001), pp. 189-90.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact