

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party—Part 7

6 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, 3, 4, 5, 6, 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.

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Opposition in the SWP: The Emergence of the ACFI

133. Within the Socialist Workers Party, a minority tendency, led by Tim Wohlforth, opposed the increasingly opportunist orientation of the SWP and supported the criticisms made by the Socialist Labour League. The greatest strength of this tendency was its recognition that the political crisis of the SWP had to be approached as an international problem. The struggle within the SWP, therefore, could not be conducted from the standpoint of obtaining a tactical advantage in the discussion of one or another political issue. Instead, the basic aim of the discussion was to achieve political and theoretical clarification of the central problems of revolutionary perspective in the Fourth International. The advice given by the British SLL to its American supporters was to avoid, to the greatest extent possible, factional conflicts over secondary political differences and organizational issues, and to work for the political clarification of the SWP cadre. This principled approach differed sharply from that taken by another minority tendency, led by James Robertson, which placed its national factional concerns above those of international clarification.

134. The Wohlforth-led minority worked within the SWP from 1961 to 1964. Even after the 1963 Reunification Congress, the minority continued to seek a principled political discussion within the Socialist Workers Party. However, events in Ceylon brought the struggle within the SWP to a head. The pro-ICFI minority issued a letter to the SWP membership demanding that the organization permit a discussion of the roots of the LSSP's betrayal. The statement issued in June 1964 by the minority declared:

During the whole period from 1961 to 1963 we reiterated time and time again, in political solidarity with the International Committee, that a reunification of the Fourth International without the fullest political discussion prior to the actual reunification could only lead to disaster and the further disintegration of the international movement and the party here. Our position has been fully vindicated...

There can no longer be any further refusal to face up to the political, theoretical and methodological crisis tearing apart our party and the

international formation to which it is presently in political solidarity. For the very survival of the party a thoroughgoing discussion of these questions must be organized immediately in all branches.[84]

135. After issuing this letter, all nine signatories were suspended from membership. The minority formed the American Committee for the Fourth International and undertook the extensive preparations necessary for the transformation of the ACFI into a new Trotskyist party, allied politically with the International Committee.

The Third Congress of the ICFI

136. In the aftermath of the reunification, the ICFI had to assess the lessons of the struggle against Pabloism and its objective significance. The International Committee held its Third World Congress in April 1966 to consolidate the forces of World Trotskyism and lay the foundations for constructing Trotskyist parties throughout the world. The Congress resolution pointed to the contradictions within world imperialism and the signs of a decline of the postwar boom. It noted:

Imperialism is in a deepening crisis. The development of the productive forces during and since World War Two, particularly the production of nuclear weapons and the introduction of automation, strains to breaking point the conflict between the productive forces and capitalist property relations. The struggles produced by this contradiction radicalize the working class youth. The parties of the Fourth International will be built through these struggles.

137. The Congress resolution emphasized the objective role of Pabloite revisionism in blocking the revolutionary upsurge of the working class:

Revisionism, which separates into distinct sectors the revolution in the advanced countries, the "colonial revolution," and the political revolution in the workers' states, is a most important cover for capitalist domination of the workers' movement and for obstructing the construction of revolutionary parties. This revisionism is expressed particularly in the theory and practice of the self-styled Unified Secretariat of the Fourth International, which was formed without discussion of theoretical and political questions. The next phase in the building of the Fourth International must on the contrary be accompanied by a most serious theoretical discussion in all sections of the policies and theory of the movement, past and present.[85]

138. The International Committee stressed the necessity of basing the development of the Fourth International on the lessons of past struggles. It also insisted that the fight against Pabloite revisionism was a politically and theoretically decisive element of the history of the Fourth International — not a diversion from other, more important, tasks of party building. It was precisely in the persistent struggle against the revision of Marxism that the Trotskyist movement fought the ideological pressures exerted by the bourgeoisie and developed its revolutionary perspective.

This conception of the historical and political implications of the struggle against revisionism was opposed by two tendencies that had been invited to the Third Congress, in order to determine whether principled political collaboration was possible — Voix Ouvrière and James Robertson's Spartacist tendency. In both cases, it proved not to be possible.

139. According to these groups, the ICFI vastly overestimated the significance of Pabloism and the political struggles within the Fourth International. Robertson declared at the 1966 conference:

We take issue with the notion that the present crisis of capitalism is so sharp and deep that Trotskyist revisionism is needed to tame the workers, in a way comparable to the degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals. Such an erroneous estimation would have as its point of departure an enormous overestimation of our present significance, and would accordingly be disorienting.[86]

140. All that divides Marxism, theoretically and politically, from petty-bourgeois radicalism was summed up in this statement. In essence, Robertson denied the objective social and political significance of the conflict within the Fourth International. The lessons of Lenin's struggle to build the Bolshevik Party in the struggle against revisionism, and, later, of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism and various forms of centrism, were ignored. The struggle against Pabloism within the Fourth International — so clearly connected to major political and social processes in the aftermath of World War II — was derided by Robertson as a subjectively-motivated squabble between various individuals. And Robertson's evaluation came less than two years after the entry of the LSSP into a bourgeois coalition government!

Pabloism, the New Left and Guerrillaism

141. Even as Robertson made these comments, the Pabloites were setting in place props and buffers upon which both the bourgeoisie and the Stalinists would rely in the social upheavals that were approaching. In the United States, the SWP was playing a critical role in the subordination of the growing anti-Vietnam War movement to the capitalist Democratic Party. Throughout Europe, the Pabloite organizations were adapting themselves to both the Stalinists and the petty-bourgeois "New Left" tendencies that were soon to contribute significantly to diverting and disorienting the mass movements of social protest that erupted in 1968. In France, the Pabloites facilitated the Stalinist betrayal of the revolutionary eruption of the working class in May-June of that year. And further, as the Czechoslovak "Prague Spring" of 1968 and the wave of strikes in Poland clearly demonstrated, the Stalinist regimes were already entering into terminal crisis. The Pabloite organizations, with their theories of self-reforming bureaucracies, diverted the Fourth International from concentrating its forces in an implacable struggle against the Stalinist regimes and preparing for their overthrow. It was not pre-determined, in the mid-1960s, that the eventual collapse of Stalinism would lead inexorably to the formation of right-wing and pro-capitalist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Indeed, in the 1960s, the struggles against Stalinist tyranny in Eastern Europe were left-wing and socialist. The later reactionary outcome in Eastern Europe, the USSR and, for that matter, China, was the product of political conditions that were shaped, to a significant extent, by the Pabloites' false and reactionary policies.

142. Among the betrayals of Pabloism was its glorification of Castroism and guerrillaism, which had a devastating impact on an entire generation of left-wing workers and youth in Latin America. The political disasters of the 1970s — in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay — were the consequence of theories and policies promoted by the Pabloite United Secretariat. The signal for the repudiation of Trotskyism was given by the

United Secretariat's celebration of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine radical who, like many Latin American intellectuals of his generation, explicitly rejected the Marxist conception of the revolutionary role of the working class. The Pabloites looked the other way when Guevara welcomed Ramon Mercader, the assassin of Trotsky, to Cuba after the latter's release from a Mexican prison in 1960. They called on socialist youth in Latin America to find an alternative to a strategy based on the working class. As the Bolivian Pabloite Moscoso wrote:

The guerrilla method advocated by the Cubans is applicable to all underdeveloped countries, although its form must vary in accord with the peculiarities of each country. In those countries where there exists a great peasant mass with an unresolved land problem, the guerrillas will draw their strength from the peasantry; the guerrilla struggle will bring this mass into action, solving their agrarian problem arms in hand, as occurred in Cuba, starting from the Sierra Maestra. But in other countries the proletariat and the radicalized petty bourgeoisie of the cities will provide the guerrilla forces.[87]

"Continuity" vs. "Reconstruction" of the Fourth International

143. The ICFI — and, in particular, the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League — demonstrated great political prescience at the 1966 Congress and its aftermath in opposing all efforts to denigrate the fight against Pabloite revisionism. "The first prerequisite is to grasp that the fight against Pabloism was a fight to develop Marxism and at the same time to defend every past conquest of Marxist theory," the SLL wrote in 1967. "The 1966 Conference of the IC expressed this clearly in insisting that the IC, through its struggle inside the FI, represented the continuity of the movement. Against Voix Ouvrière and Robertson, we insisted that only in the fight against Pabloism had Marxists preserved and developed the theory of the revolutionary party, of Bolshevism." [88]

144. The French section of the Fourth International, the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) supported the position of the SLL at the 1966 Congress. However, it argued that the Fourth International had to be "reconstructed." Underlying this ambiguous terminology — which betrayed a significant degree of skepticism toward the viability of the Fourth International as it had emerged out of the break with the Pabloites — was a centrist shift in the OCI itself. By 1967, the OCI had begun to insist that the main problem with Pabloism was not its orientation to Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism, but its overly centralized bureaucratic methods. The OCI insisted that the task was to build more "supple" organizations focused on the "united front" tactic. The SLL issued a prescient warning to the OCI leadership:

Now the radicalization of the workers in Western Europe is proceeding rapidly, particularly in France... There is always a danger at such a stage of development that a revolutionary party responds to the situation in the working class not in a revolutionary way, but by adaptation to the level of struggle to which the workers are restricted by their own experience under the old leaderships, i.e., to the inevitable initial confusion. Such revisions of the fight for the independent Party and the Transitional Program are usually dressed up in the disguise of getting closer to the working class, unity with all those in struggle, not posing ultimatums, abandoning dogmatism, etc.[89]

The Formation of the Workers League

145. Based on the lessons of the Third Congress, the American Committee for the Fourth International completed its preparation for the establishment of a new Trotskyist party, in political solidarity with the ICFI. The founding congress of the Workers League took place in November 1966. The growing opposition to the war in Vietnam among masses of students, the eruption of violent protests by African-American workers and youth in major cities, and the militant strikes by substantial sections of the working class were indications of the crisis of American capitalism. The Socialist Workers Party, repudiating its Trotskyist heritage, responded to these developments by adapting to petty-bourgeois tendencies that dominated these movements. Its opportunism found expression in its promotion of Black nationalism as an alternative to the struggle for the unity of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. The SWP's espousal of Black nationalism, including the demand for a separate Black nation, reflected its dismissal of the American working class as a revolutionary force. This perspective expressed the influence of the New Left, which derived much of its theoretical inspiration from the anti-Marxist conceptions of Herbert Marcuse, a leading representative of the "Frankfurt School," who characterized the working class as a "proto-fascist" element in American society.

146. The founding of the Workers League, rooted in the struggles of the Fourth International since 1953, marked a milestone in the fight for Marxism in the United States. The development of Marxism could only proceed on the basis of the recognition of the revolutionary character of the American working class and its decisive role in the struggle against US imperialism. This perspective could be realized only on the basis of an irreconcilable struggle against the myriad petty-bourgeois radical tendencies, promoting various forms of racial, ethnic, sexual and gender "identity" politics, that flourished in the 1960s and early 1970s. In his greetings to the Workers League's founding congress, SLL leader Gerry Healy stated:

The working class in the United States is the most powerful in the world, and it is within this class that you must build your party. This is a basic principle of Marxism and one which applies with particular urgency to the conditions existing inside the United States. It is not Black Power or the dozens of peace and civil rights movements which extend throughout the country which will resolve the basic questions of our time, but the working class led by a revolutionary party. It is at this point that we separate ourselves completely from the revisionists. We emphatically reject their idea that the Negroes by themselves as well as middle-class movements can settle accounts with American imperialism. Whatever critical support we are called upon from time to time to extend to such movements, the essence of our support must be based on making clear our criticisms of their shortcomings.[90]

147. The central task confronting the Workers League was to fight for the political independence of the American working class from the bourgeoisie and its political parties, especially the Democratic Party. This assumed the form of the demand, in the conditions then prevailing in the United States, that the mass trade union organizations of the AFL-CIO form a labor party based on socialist policies. This demand, which arose out of the experiences of the 1930s, and which had been initially proposed by Trotsky, had been largely abandoned by the SWP in the 1950s, as it reoriented itself to the middle-class protest movements. It was revived by the Workers League, which declared, in its principal resolution at the founding congress:

The working class must be shown that it must of necessity go beyond isolated economic struggles to a fundamental political struggle against the ruling class and its political instruments. The labor party demand thus becomes the unifying demand of all our work in the United States. It must permeate all our propaganda and agitation: among the working class youth, in the trade unions, among the minority peoples, around the war question...

We must struggle for a labor party which will unite black and white workers in a common struggle against the common oppressor rather than concede to race politics. The concept of a labor party must be taken into the anti-war movement. The struggle against the war policies of the US imperialists cannot be separated from the other anti-working class policies of the imperialists. Middle class political parties set up on a "classless" basis to fight the "war issue" are futile efforts and serve to obscure the class issues involved rather than to explain them.[91]

148. The fight for the formation of a labor party, based on the trade unions, would play a major role in the struggle waged by the Workers League, over the next 25 years, against the subordination of the working class by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to the Democratic Party. This demand was not conceived as a proposal for the building of a reformist alternative to the revolutionary party — i.e., an American version of the British Labour Party or the Canadian New Democratic Party — but as a means of developing a revolutionary political movement of the working class and breaking the stranglehold of class collaborationist policies. Moreover, as long as the AFL-CIO functioned, even if in only a limited way, as an instrument of working class struggles, and commanded the allegiance of significant sections of class conscious workers, the demand for the building of a labor party, committed to socialist policies, provided a clear political lead to the working class, indicated a path beyond the limits of trade unionism, and played a significant role in the development of revolutionary and socialist class consciousness. Later, changes of an objective character in the nature of the trade unions and their relationship to the working class — the product of developments in the structure of global capitalism and the cumulative impact of massive betrayals of working class struggles by the trade unions — would compel the Workers League to withdraw its demand for the labor party.

149. The escalating conflict between Trotskyism and revisionism unfolded against the backdrop of increasing economic and political instability. The overwhelming economic preponderance of the United States at the end of World War II — which was critical for the restabilization and reconstruction of world capitalism — eroded in the course of the 1950s and 1960s. The export of American capital overseas had, by the 1960s, produced a dollar crisis that signaled the breakdown of the postwar equilibrium. Repeated efforts to contain the crisis proved futile, and on August 15, 1971, the United States destroyed the foundation of the Bretton Woods system by ending dollar-gold convertibility. The Socialist Labour League recognized that the breakdown of the Bretton Woods systems would lead to new economic and political convulsions, but unresolved issues within the International Committee, and within the SLL itself, would soon begin to exact a heavy political toll.

Split in the International Committee

150. The growth of the British and French sections in the aftermath of the Third Congress of the ICFI — and especially after the events of May-June 1968 — led to political conflict. But while the British section made correct criticisms of the centrist orientation of the OCI, political differences were emerging within the Socialist Labour League leadership itself. Though it was known that Cliff Slaughter, who held the position of ICFI secretary, had evinced sympathy with the OCI's call for a "reconstruction" of the Fourth International, the issue was not pursued within the leadership. A similarly evasive attitude was taken toward the uncritical attitude of Michael Banda, another leading member of the SLL, toward Mao's "Cultural Revolution" and the policies of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. The reluctance of the SLL leadership to engage in an open discussion of these vital issues reflected Healy's anxiety

that political conflict within his own organization would undermine the practical work and organizational advances being made by the British section.

151. The avoidance of an examination of crucial questions of perspectives — essential for the development of political program — assumed within the Socialist Labour League a peculiar theoretical form. As differences with the OCI intensified in 1970-71, the SLL leadership argued that the political issues in dispute were merely secondary, even inessential, manifestations of differences over philosophy. The significant truth that philosophical method is revealed in the exercise of political analysis was invoked in a one-sided manner, to justify the dissolution of the concrete examination of political issues into ever-more abstract discussions of philosophical epistemology. When the OCI asserted, incorrectly, that dialectical materialism was not a "theory of knowledge," this was seized on to shift attention away from an examination of the French organization's centrist politics. In contrast to the approach taken by Trotsky in the 1939-40 struggle against Burnham and Shachtman — in which the significance and proper use of the dialectical materialist method was clearly related to questions of political perspective — Healy and Slaughter advanced the position that the discussion of dialectics superseded the political issues and even rendered them superfluous.

152. In the autumn of 1971, the SLL announced a split in the Fourth International, while leaving the political issues unclarified. Despite the plethora of crucial political questions, bound up with problems of revolutionary strategy arising from the crisis of capitalism and struggles of the working class, the SLL declared, in a statement published on March 1, 1972, that the split was "not about tactical aspects of how to build the Fourth International. ... the split is not a question of dozens of detailed points of organization, or even of political positions on various questions." Rather, the SLL asserted, "It is a political split, going to the foundations of the Fourth International — Marxist theory." [92] But without the necessary elaboration of the actual political issues in dispute, the invocation of "Marxist theory" was little more than an exercise in abstract rhetoric. The SLL wrote that it had learned "from experience of building the revolutionary party in Britain that a thoroughgoing and difficult struggle against idealist ways of thinking was necessary which went much deeper than questions of agreement on program and policy." [93] This statement directly contradicted Trotsky, who held that "The significance of the program is the significance of the party," and that this program consisted of "a common understanding of events, of the tasks..." [94] Now the SLL was claiming that the "struggle against idealist ways of thinking" — a rather vague formulation — was more important than programmatic agreement! Moreover, the SLL's assertion that it was basing its work on the experience "of building the revolutionary party in Britain", rather than on the lessons of the Fourth International's struggle against Stalinism, Social Democracy and Pabloism, expressed a disturbing shift in its political axis — from internationalism to nationalism.

153. This failure to clarify the political issues that underlay the split with the OCI undermined the work of the International Committee at precisely the point when the crisis of world capitalism required the greatest possible degree of programmatic clarity. The principal task confronting the leadership of the Socialist Labour League was to draw out the implications of the centrist drift in the program, practice and international orientation of the OCI. This was of the greatest importance at a time when new sections of the International Committee were being formed. The Revolutionary Communist League was established as the Ceylonese section in 1968. The Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter was established as the German section in 1971. The Socialist Labor League was established as the Australian section in 1972. In Greece, the establishment of a new section in 1972 occurred under conditions in which its membership had been divided between supporters of the ICFI and the OCI.

154. It has now become publicly known that, in the late 1960s and early

1970s, the OCI became heavily involved in the behind-the-scenes political maneuvers that led to the creation of the French Socialist Party. Members of the OCI worked closely with Francois Mitterrand as the SP was developed, on a thoroughly opportunist basis, into an instrument of his electoral ambitions. One of the OCI members, Lionel Jospin, became a political aide to Mitterrand, advanced within the hierarchy of the Socialist Party, and eventually attained the office of Prime Minister. It is impossible to determine, retrospectively, whether an open political struggle by the SLL might have arrested the opportunist degeneration of the OCI and its transformation into an instrument of the French state. But such a struggle would have clarified the political issues and alerted the SLL to the dangers posed by opportunist tendencies within its own ranks.

The Founding of the Workers Revolutionary Party and the World Crisis of 1973-75

155. The transformation of the SLL into the Workers Revolutionary Party in November 1973 was not prepared on the basis of a review of the strategic experiences of the international Trotskyist movement. Rather, it was a tactical response to the working class movement against the government of Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath. The International Committee was excluded by the SLL from participating in the discussions that attended the founding of the Workers Revolutionary Party. After the founding congress, the growth of the WRP during this period of working class militancy, which resulted in the fall of the Heath government and the coming to power of a Labour government in March 1974, concealed briefly the mounting problems within the organization.

156. The defeat of the Heath government was one episode in an economic and political crisis that convulsed world capitalism in the period between 1973 and 1975. The end of dollar-gold convertibility unleashed an inflationary cycle that was exacerbated by a general loss of confidence in the American currency. In October 1973 war broke out in the Middle East, leading to a quadrupling of oil prices by OPEC, which, in turn, triggered the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In April 1974 the fascist dictatorship of Salazar in Portugal, which had been in power for nearly a half-century, collapsed beneath the pressure of anti-colonial insurgencies in Africa (Angola and Mozambique) and mounting domestic crises. The first legal May Day was celebrated in Lisbon with a demonstration of several million people. In July 1974 the military junta in Greece, which had seized power in 1967, fell in the wake of a disastrous intervention in Cyprus. In August 1974, President Richard Nixon was forced to resign after the House Judiciary Committee voted for Articles of Impeachment as a result of revelations relating to the Watergate scandal and to illegal military actions that had been ordered by the Administration in Cambodia. Finally, in April 1975, Vietnamese liberation forces entered Saigon, achieved the unification of their country, and brought the neo-colonialist operations of the United States in Indochina to a humiliating conclusion.

To be continued

Notes:

84. *The Heritage We Defend*, op. cit., p. 403.

85. "Resolution of the Third World Conference, April 8, 1966," in: *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume 5 (London: New Park Publications, 1975), pp. 25-27.

86. "Spartacist Statement to the International Conference, *Marxist Internet Archive*, <http://www.marxistsfr.org/history/etol/document/icl-spartacists/1986/1966conf.html>

87. Hugo González Moscoso, "The Cuban Revolution and Its Lessons," in: *Fifty Years of World Revolution*, ed. Ernest Mandel [New York:

Pathfinder Press, 1970], pp. 194-95.

88. "Reply to the OCI by the Central Committee of the SLL, June 19, 1967" in *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism Volume Five* (London: New Park, 1975) p. 111.

89. Ibid., pp. 113-14.

90. *The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth* (New York: Labor Publications, 1984), p. 209.

91. Quoted from M. McLaughlin, *Vietnam and the World Revolution* (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1985), p. 96.

92. "Statement by the International Committee (Majority), March 1, 1972," in: *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Six [London: New Park, 1975], pp. 72 and 78.

93. Ibid., p. 83.

94. Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 2001), pp. 207-08.



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