Australia: Public meetings mark 70th anniversary of the Fourth International

Historical lessons discussed

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held lively and well-attended public meetings in Sydney on Sunday and Melbourne on Wednesday night to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International (FI), established by Leon Trotsky in September 1938.

A wide cross-section of people participated—students, workers and professional people—both young and old, and from many different continents and countries. They included long-time supporters of the SEP, members of the International Students for Social Equality and appreciative readers of the WSWS, as well as many who were attending their first SEP public meeting.

The audiences listened intently as speakers drew out the connection between the history of the FI and the greatest global capitalist crisis since the Great Depression. Some had travelled long distances to hear the party's analysis, reflecting an awareness that the financial meltdown was raising fundamental political issues. There were animated questions and discussion, generous collections for the SEP's monthly fund, and significant purchases of literature, especially the works of Leon Trotsky.

Opening the Sydney meeting, Linda Levin said it commemorated one of the major turning points in the history of the international working class and the socialist movement: the founding, exactly 70 years earlier, of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution. The SEP had been affiliated to the FI, led by the International Committee, since the founding of the Australian section in 1972.

"The very fact that we are holding this anniversary meeting—that we regard it as vital to review the founding of our movement and the key historical experiences through which it has passed, sets this party apart from every other political tendency," she said.

"Our attitude to history flows from the nature of our program and our tasks. We are fighting to mobilise the working class, in Australia and throughout the world, to take political power and undertake the greatest and most progressive transformation of economic and social life in world history. But it cannot take a single step forward unless it understands the historical experiences out of which it has emerged, and which have led to the situation it now confronts."

Levin said the FI had been founded in a period of great crisis and turbulence: the Great Depression, the victory of fascism in Germany, and the defeat of mass revolutionary struggles in Europe. Capitalism was about to lurch into the Second World War, just 20 years after the so-called war to end all wars—World War I.

"Over the past decades we have been told by all those who disdain historical perspective, and who regard as impossible any scientific understanding of the historical process, that such events could never happen again. And for millions of ordinary people the world over, that appeared to be the case. War and revolution, the great social upheavals of millions in the major centres of the world that characterised the first half of the twentieth century, seemed to be relics of a long distant past."

Those illusions had been shattered by the staggering financial and political turmoil that had begun in the United States. While virtually every political pundit, journalist and economics commentator had been taken totally by surprise, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) had, during the past two decades, "subjected to an ongoing and detailed analysis the deepening crisis of US and world capitalism, and the resurfacing of fundamental contradictions that had been preparing the way for just such a breakdown, and the eruption, once again, of immense social struggles".

Levin said the founding Congress of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, from August 3-9, had marked the conscious preparation by the Trotskyist movement for the re-entry of the working class onto the scene of history. The SEP's founding documents, *The Historical and International Foundations of the SEP* and the *Statement of Principles*, based on an assimilation of the historical experiences of the past century, established the political, theoretical and practical foundations for a new mass party of the working class.

Against all those who had written off the prospect of winning the working class to socialism, especially in America, Levin said: "The American working class is re-entering the historical stage. That is one of the major reasons the Treasury and the Congress are finding it so difficult to agree on the Wall Street bailout. A major factor in the situation is the immense anger, hostility and resentment of tens of millions of ordinary people to this enormous swindle, following the mass opposition that has developed to the Iraq war and US militarism."

The Fourth International

The first speaker at the Sydney meeting, WSWS writer James Cogan, explained the historical circumstances in which the founding congress of the Fourth International was held in the Paris suburb of Périgny on September 3, 1938. Trotsky, the strategist and co-leader, alongside Vladimir Lenin, of the 1917 Russian Revolution, had issued the call for a new international after the betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had led to one of the greatest defeats of the international working class: the coming to power of the Nazi regime in 1933 and the crushing of the German working class.

Cogan explained that at the heart of the degeneration and death of the Third International was Stalin's repudiation of the perspective of world socialist revolution. Stalin's anti-Marxist theory of "socialism in one country" expressed the interests of a privileged bureaucratic caste that had developed under conditions in which the Soviet Union was economically and politically isolated.

The speaker emphasised that the FI had been founded not only in a struggle against Stalinism, but against centrist tendencies that argued that the formation of the Fourth International would be "premature," because

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it was too small and had not emerged from "great events". In reality, as Trotsky wrote in its founding program, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, the FI had arisen out of great events: the greatest defeats of the proletariat in history.

Cogan concluded: "Seven decades later, we are confident that the Fourth International will provide this generation of the international working class with the political weapons necessary to bring about the completion of the world socialist revolution."

Delivering the keynote address, SEP national secretary Nick Beams, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* international editorial board, said the historical significance of the 70-year struggle to defend and develop the program of Trotskyism, led since 1953 by the ICFI, was being underscored by the tumultuous events unfolding in the world economy.

Beams said the crisis was not unexpected for the Marxist movement. "It is the outcome of deep-seated contradictions which, as our movement has explained, lead inexorably to the breakdown of the capitalist system." He explained that such a breakdown was not a single event, in which capitalism suddenly ceased to function, but signified "the opening of a new period of history in which old structures, both economic and political, as well as ideologies and ways of thinking, give way and new forms of political struggle develop that will determine the fate of society itself."

Beams reviewed in considerable detail both the financial meltdown and the huge Wall Street bailout efforts in the United States. He emphasised that the crisis had shattered not only the ideological foundations of the "free market" politics of the past three decades, but also the economic foundations on which world capitalism had rested since World War II, rooted in the strength of US capitalism.

Beams traced the protracted struggle of the FI against all forms of impressionism and opportunism, which were based on impressionistic evaluations of the post-World War II stabilisation of capitalism, the role of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Eastern Europe and the victory of the Chinese and Yugoslav revolutions, to the effect that there was no longer any independent role for the working class and, consequently, for the Fourth International.

Beams explained that we were once again entering a politically tumultuous period. "The struggle waged by the revolutionary movement against opportunism is going to assume decisive importance in the development of the struggles of the working class, and it will become clear to millions that the conflict between Marxism and opportunism is one of revolution or counter-revolution," he said.

A number of important questions were raised in response to the reports. In Sydney, members of the audience asked about the tendency of capitalism toward dictatorship, the support given by various "left" groups for Islamic fundamentalism, the role of feminism and other forms of "identity politics", the level of class consciousness of Chinese workers and the turn to financial speculation within the capitalist economy. At the Melbourne meeting, questions mainly focused on the unfolding economic crisis, with audience members voicing their concerns about its implications. In particular, they wanted to know whether the corporate elite operated on the basis of any economic theories at all, and about the relationship between the US and China.

Historical lessons discussed

The WSWS interviewed participants after the meetings. In Sydney, **Joshua Cromarty**, a Japanese-language and history student from Newcastle, said he had been reading the WSWS for about four years.

"I'm studying history and have read about the Russian Revolution and so I found the meeting very interesting. Nick Beams's analysis of the present crisis of world capitalism really hit home and made clear to me that things are coming to a head. The working class is going to be looking for a political alternative because obviously there is none to be found in official politics. The SEP and the Fourth International is the only organisation that can explain the social forces at work and provide the working class with the education necessary to deal with the present situation."

Asked what had attracted him to the ideas and policies of the Fourth International, Cromarty replied: "The Fourth International is the only organisation that really has a Marxist history and program that tells the truth. Other parties, currents and trends have no real political integrity or a history like the Fourth International and simply respond to the immediate issues of the day. For them, it is responding to whatever the latest protest of the day is—nuclear power or climate change—and they have no theoretical basis or proper analysis on which to base themselves. And there are parties that can't really discuss history because of their own role and what transpired. They don't want the real political record brought up because of what they did at the time.

"Capitalism is international. The only way workers can advance is if they organise internationally, otherwise they get trapped in national political systems like the one in North Korea. What keeps coming to my mind is that the conditions today are so like those that led up to World War I—the formation of empires and competing national blocs, with governments in each country trying to get the working class to go into war against each other. As someone once said, war is a continuation of politics by other means, and that seems to be the direction we're coming to now.

"All this is worrying but I do have some confidence in the fact that people are not swallowing what their governments tell them. There is some consciousness of what is going on among a lot of people but it needs to be developed. I know from reading the WSWS that this won't happen automatically—there is no such thing as an unconscious Marxist, like a lot of so-called left groups claim. This is why the Fourth International is important."

Donna Clarke, a healthcare worker, originally from New Zealand, said: "This is my first attendance at an SEP meeting. I liked the fact that the SEP is not a party of 'identity politics'. The question and the answer on identity politics got my attention. Because I think it's a further divide-and-rule tactic formulated by the capitalist system. I think it's very healthy that the SEP allows a much broader and global perspective. I like the idea of being able to lift up and out of one's worldview, and to move away from fractioning off into smaller groups, as occurs in identity politics.

"I found the meeting really interesting because I like history, and the meeting gave you an historical perspective, not only of US capitalism but also what's happened in different parts of the world. That sort of global perspective you don't get anywhere else."

Stefan Kent, an IT worker from Parramatta, was also attending his first SEP public meeting. "It was a real eye-opener as to what is actually happening in the economic crisis and around the world. The fairytales of capitalism are actually collapsing and there are people who are moving to do something about it, rather than just watching, which is really good. This is something I can see myself getting behind, but I will need to do some reading.

"I was not aware of all the mistakes that were made in the past. All the vital moments of history come together and are linked through an underlying pattern leading to where we are now. You always see the propaganda about evil Nazism, and this bad man and that bad man, but things are kept hidden. Unless you remember what you've done in the past you will repeat the same mistakes.

"I was pretty much ignorant about Trotsky and the struggle against Stalinism, because it is not taught in school. Communism has been painted as a big red bogeyman. What the Socialist Equality Party is talking about is redistributing from the small minority to the people who actually produce and add value to society. And that's good."

In Melbourne**, Jenny,** an administration officer, had met SEP members on a street campaign. After the meeting she bought several books on the Marxist analysis of the globalised economy.

"The meeting raised a whole lot of questions for me, and it struck home

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for me that there is another way. The Wall Street bailout seems such a huge injustice—not enough people here recognise that. The meeting reinforced my way of thinking about it. There are two options. People are told there has to be the bailout or the whole world economy will be killed. They aren't told the bigger solution—that there needs to be a whole different system.

"Before this I had never heard of the SEP and I had little idea of socialism. I feel it is a lot of information to take in. The history of the Fourth International is a lot to understand, but I'm definitely going to research these questions now."

Donald Payne, a physicist and electrical engineer at the University of Melbourne, commented:

"One thing that struck me was that there were just 30 people in a house in Paris that formed the Fourth International. Small groups of people can make big changes. That's obviously been true in this case. It was an element of the history that I wasn't fully aware of. It's something that's not learnt in mainstream historical education.

"History in the typical analysis is always thought of as a numbers game. When you look more critically, it's smaller movements that are the seeds to much bigger things, and that are much more important than any revision that was later entered into.

"The rapid day-to-day financial events, the collapses worldwide, the domino effect that we're seeing here, the ridiculous volatility—to put it in the light of this movement, that's what attracted me tonight. It's very timely. This analysis and discussion is something that will attract more people too as they look toward an alternative paradigm, because the current paradigm is undergoing great stress, and it may well be the beginning of the end."

The text of the remarks of Nick Beams and James Cogan will be published on the WSWS over coming days.

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