

Nick Beams report to SEP founding congress—Part 1

Nick Beams
25 February 2010

The following is part 1 of the opening report delivered by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), to the SEP's founding congress held in Sydney on January 21–25 (see: "Socialist Equality Party (Australia) holds founding Congress"). The final part of the report will be posted on Friday, February 26.

1. In all our discussions on perspectives throughout our international movement—in the founding of the Socialist Equality Party in the US in August 2008, in the preparations for this founding congress and the preparations being made in all the other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—we have placed the central emphasis on historical analysis. We are seeking to lay bare the logic of the historical process and align our party in accordance with it. At every point we are seeking to place events in their historical context, grasp the processes that have shaped and given rise to these events and, in that way, prepare for the future. In other words, we prepare our perspectives for the future by going more deeply into the past. This is a method of work which is completely opposed—as we have previously reviewed and I shall refer to again later in this report—by all the various ex-left, ex-radical tendencies.

2. This process of historical examination and re-examination is not a once-and-for-all task. We are continually going back into history to clarify questions and processes—some of which could not have been understood at the time—and to further understand others which could only be understood partially or incompletely.

3. In this work there is no more important task than comprehending the objective logic of our own practice, of our own movement and the struggle we have undertaken because we do, in Trotsky's words, carry upon our shoulders "a particle of the fate of mankind". At this founding congress we are seeking to disclose and grasp the logic of our own historical development: that is, to reveal the historical processes, some of an extremely protracted character, out of which our party has arisen and thereby to grasp the significance of the point we have now reached in founding this party, and the tasks that are posed for the future. In the perspectives resolution, we have sought to trace the complex relationship between the development of the class struggle and the fight for Marxism in the Australian workers' movement, seeking to disclose in what way the particular and peculiar national features are, in Trotsky's words, an original combination of the basic features of the world process.

4. Let me try to illustrate these issues by recalling some dates. It was 38 years ago, in April 1972, that the Socialist Labour League was founded, to become, in November of that year, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Consider the situation 38 years before that. In 1934, the world was in deep economic depression, war clouds were rapidly gathering and Trotsky had issued the call for the building of the Fourth International following the disastrous events in Germany—a call which received a response even in this faraway land.

Over the course of the next 38 years, the world was to change dramatically, as it has in the period from 1972 until today. In the coming period, we can anticipate and must prepare for—and herein lies the significance of this congress—vast changes, taking the form of great social, economic and political upheavals.

5. I would like to turn to this analysis by pointing out that this year will see a major anniversary in the struggle of the International Committee. It is the 25th anniversary of the split with the national opportunists of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain—an event whose historical significance increases with every year that passes.

6. What a series of events has taken place in this quarter century. At the beginning of 1985—this month—delegates were gathered in Britain for the 10th Congress of the ICFI. It was a meeting of enormous crisis. The crisis emanated from the fact that the criticisms of the rightward political orientation of the WRP raised by David North and the Workers League had been suppressed. But within one year the political landscape had been completely transformed—the balance of forces shifted dramatically as the opportunist forces that were seeking to liquidate the ICFI were defeated and a struggle had begun to restore genuine Marxism to the centre of the ICFI and politically rearm it. The reason the ICFI was able to act so decisively in the crisis—amidst great confusion, conflict and turmoil—was that it worked off a perspective that had been developed in the preceding period. That is a tremendous lesson as we enter a period of great social and political crisis.

7. There was a deep significance to the victory of the Marxists over the opportunists. Our opponents sought to base themselves directly upon the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies and their continued domination over the workers' movement. But as subsequent events were to show, these apparatuses were breaking up. In 1985 the Stalinist bureaucracy had brought Gorbachev to leadership and by the end of 1991 the Soviet Union had been liquidated.

8. I mentioned that the importance of the split in the International Committee grows with every year that passes. The reason is that this struggle was the outcome, the expression in the political superstructure, of vast changes in the economic base of the world capitalist system that have now created a new period of social revolution. These processes found their initial expression in the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. In a certain sense, the historical period opened up by the Russian Revolution had come to an end. This did not mean, as the proponents of the "end of history" thesis tried to maintain, that socialist revolution was a thing of the past. Rather, the very processes that led to the collapse of the Stalinist regimes were creating the conditions for a new period of social revolution, with a scope and intensity far beyond that of the Russian Revolution. Of course that was not immediately apparent at the time—far from it. That

only demonstrates, once again, that it is necessary to base one's politics not on conclusions drawn from immediate appearances but from the objective historical logic of events. The past 25 years have been a period of preparation, both of objective conditions and of our own movement. Now a new stage has been reached. That is how we must understand the work of the International Committee over this period and the new situation we are entering with the holding of the SEP founding congresses.

9. The most profound socio-economic process of the past 25 years has been the globalisation of production—a process that has transformed the structure of world capitalism, with the most far-reaching social, economic and political consequences. Let me turn to some aspects of this transformation and their implications for our perspectives.

10. In the first place, we have seen the integration of the global working class on an unprecedented scale—a fact of great historical significance for our perspective of world socialist revolution. It has been estimated that, with the integration of China and India into the circuits of global capital over the past 25 years, the size of the global labour force has doubled. This integration, of course, has been carried out with all the brutality and violence with which every transformation of capitalism has been implemented. Writing in the 1850s on the role of British colonialism in India, Marx explained that a social revolution had been carried out that was “actuated by the vilest interests.” “But that is not the question,” he continued. “The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.” He returned to this question in a letter to Engels in 1858: “The specific task of bourgeois society is the establishment of the world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon the world market.” That process had some considerable further distance to go when Marx wrote these lines but today it has in a certain sense reached its completion with the development of an integrated global market for labour. Given the global character of the socialist revolution, Marx even pondered whether it would be possible for a socialist revolution to take place in Europe under conditions in which “in a far greater territory the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant”.

11. Trotsky turned to this question in his famous report on Europe and America delivered in February 1926. Nine years after the October Revolution, the Soviet Union still remained isolated. Did this perhaps mean that the perspective of world socialist revolution on which it had been based was somewhat premature? To answer this question Trotsky conducted a review of the world situation. European capitalism had become reactionary in the absolute sense of the word. But what of America and Asia, what were the perspectives there? American capitalism was clearly taking forward a development of the productive forces and capitalism was only just beginning its penetration of Asia and Africa. “The conclusion seems to be the following: capitalism has outlived itself in Europe; in America it still advances the productive forces, while in Asia and Africa it has before it a vast virgin field of activity for many decades if not centuries. Is that really the case? Were it so, comrades, it would mean that capitalism has not yet exhausted its mission on a world scale.” Of course, the crucial question, as Trotsky pointed out was that capitalism operated on the basis of world economy—no part of the world could be considered in isolation. Yes, American capitalism was able to continue the development of the productive forces yet America could no longer maintain itself on the basis of an internal equilibrium—no matter how large its home market—but required a world equilibrium. America depended on unstable Europe while at the same time the penetration of capitalism into Asia and Africa brought with it vast struggles against imperialism and

colonialism. Trotsky's perspective of world revolution was completely vindicated in the revolutionary struggles that erupted over the next period. Capitalism was only finally able to stabilise itself after World War II, not because of any inherent strength but as a result of the betrayals of the leaderships of the working class. A certain equilibrium was established. Europe was reconstructed, American capitalism was able to revive the world economy and the anti-imperialist struggles were brought under the control of the national bourgeoisie and their political representatives—a process that took its most left-wing forms in India and China. But now this equilibrium has been completely shattered and we have the emergence of a global working class connected by the daily processes of production and the movement of capital, and where masses of people the world over are connected by new and ever more powerful means of communication. This has profound significance for our work. We spent considerable effort in our perspectives document working over the question of Australian exceptionalism. What have been the obstacles to the development of a socialist movement? One of the most significant changes over the past 38 years has been the breaking down of the objective conditions on which all the national opportunists based themselves. In the past it was somewhat difficult to grasp the predominance of world economy and world politics. Today it is a palpable fact of life. That does not mean that there is any lessening of the struggle but it does signify that our tendency undertakes this struggle under transformed conditions.

12. This brings us to the second major aspect of the transformation arising from the globalisation of production—the decline of the United States. When the Soviet Union disintegrated 20 years ago our movement alone explained that its demise was the initial expression of the breakdown of the entire post-war order, and the harbinger of a crisis of US imperialism. Contrast the present situation with that at the beginning of the current decade. Just ten years ago the talk was of the unchallenged supremacy of the United States, the unipolar moment. The US was the indispensable nation. Now the decline of the US is an openly acknowledged political fact of life—one with profoundly destabilising consequences.

13. This decline is rooted in the US economy itself—a fact of great historical significance. If we take the period since the Russian Revolution, then the major objective factor blocking the development of the socialist revolution has been the economic strength of US capitalism. Trotsky pointed to the fact that in the 1920s American capitalism was still capable of developing the productive forces. A series of political factors—crucially the betrayals of the social democratic and Stalinist leaderships of the working class—meant that this capacity was, on the basis of great destruction and the death of tens of millions, able to be utilised for the reconstruction of the world capitalist system after World War II. What a contrast with the present situation. It is highly significant that the global economic and financial crisis has emerged in the form of the decay and putrefaction of American capitalism. US capitalism, which once stabilised the entire world capitalist system, has now become the most destabilising factor. It seeks to use its military might to retain its global position, threatening to plunge mankind into a third world war.

To be continued



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