

# Socialist Equality Party (Australia) holds founding Congress

24 February 2010

The Socialist Equality Party in Australia held its founding congress in Sydney on January 21-25, marking a decisive step forward for the Fourth International. The congress was part of an international initiative, beginning with the founding congress of the SEP's sister party in the United States in August 2008, by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in response to the breakdown of world capitalism ushered in by the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-2008.

The five-day congress was a thoroughly international event, attended by representatives of the world Trotskyist party, the ICFI, from the US, Britain, Germany, Sri Lanka and New Zealand, as well as delegates from across Australia. Leaders of the ICFI sections addressed the congress, pointing to its historical significance for the movement in Australia and throughout the world.

The congress was the product of protracted theoretical, political and organisational preparation within the ICFI and the SEP over more than a decade. After months of intensive discussion within the party in the course of 2009, followed by further discussion on the congress floor, the delegates unanimously adopted the SEP's founding perspectives resolution, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)*. The Congress also adopted the US SEP document, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*, which outlines the key strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a statement of principles.

The congress elected a new National Committee of the SEP, which elected Nick Beams as SEP national secretary.

*The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)* reviews the most critical political experiences in the fight for Marxism in Australia over the past 120 years, and sets out the SEP's analysis of the political tasks facing the party and working class.

In its opening section, the document points to the revolutionary implications of the current global financial and economic crisis. "The financial crash of 2007–2008 was not a conjunctural downturn from which there will be a return to the status quo ante. Rather, the breakdown is the form through which a massive restructuring of world capitalism is taking place, affecting social and political relations within every country, and relations between the major capitalist powers." The "restructuring" of economic and class relations on a global scale "will propel the working class into political struggle".

One of the seminal features of the resolution is its examination of Australian exceptionalism. "Throughout the history of the Australian workers' movement, the Labor and trade union bureaucracies, together

with the various ex-radical organisations, have promoted the myth of Australian exceptionalism as a counter to the development of socialist consciousness. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> they characterised Australia as the 'workingman's paradise' where the laws of the class struggle did not apply."

Australian exceptionalism, the document continues, was always a myth, because the development of capitalism in Australia was entirely driven by global economic forces. But exceptionalism "has been sustained over decades by a combination of powerful material factors. Geographic isolation and the material advantages flowing from the economic relationship of the settler-state to the British Empire, in which wool and other exports created the basis for a relatively high standard of living, promoted an insular outlook."

The document refers to the few, but extraordinarily insightful, comments on Australia made by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and other international Marxist leaders. Trotsky noted that, while the attainment of democracy in Russia required a "grandiose revolutionary overturn" in 1917, conditions in Australia were very different: "The Australian democracy grew organically from the virgin soil of a new continent and at once assumed a conservative character and subjected to itself a young but quite privileged proletariat."

Australian exceptionalism, the resolution explains, found its embodiment in the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy. "Closely associated from its very origins with the capitalist state and resting on definite material privileges, the Labor bureaucracy has played the key role, above all in times of economic and political crisis, in mobilising both the ideological and material forces to counter the 'foreign' doctrines of Marxism and socialist internationalism."

Central to this role was the adherence, by the Labor and trade union movement, to the "White Australia" doctrine, reflecting the fears of the emerging Australian capitalist class that the introduction of labour from Asia would create a "dangerous class", that is, a proletariat with ties to the Asia-Pacific region's oppressed masses.

"The reactionary utopia of a white 'workingman's paradise', where living standards would be protected through a ban on the immigration of 'coloured' labour, underpinned the program of national reformism. White Australia was supplemented by tariffs to protect local industry, and, therefore, wages. Wages and conditions were regulated by the state, with the trade unions given official recognition in the legal structure of the state through the federal arbitration system. Together, White Australia, tariff protection and arbitration formed the basis of what later came to be known as the 'Australian Settlement'."

The document quotes previously buried records from the Communist

International, which was established in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution to fight for world socialism. Its Fourth Congress, held in November 1922, addressed two questions of fundamental importance for the orientation of the young Communist Party of Australia (CPA): the need to unify the workers of the Pacific region and to develop tactics that would expose the Labor Party and break class-conscious workers from it. The Fourth Congress called on the Communist Parties of America, Canada and Australia to “conduct a vigorous campaign against restrictive immigration laws and must explain to the proletarian masses in these countries that such laws, by inflaming racial hatred, will rebound on them in the long run”.

The perspective resolution reviews the subsequent degeneration of the CPA at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its nationalist program of “socialism in one country”, and the courageous struggle waged against Stalinism, Laborism and centrism by the first Trotskyist organisation in Australia, which was established in 1933. Guided by Trotsky’s analysis of the imperialist character of World War II, the early Trotskyists were the only ones to uphold a program that defended the independent interests of the working class. In their 1945 victory over the Stalinists in the ship repair yards at Cockatoo Island and Morts Dock in Sydney, they demonstrated the significance of the fight for a principled political line in the working class.

While the Trotskyists had been able to withstand the violent attacks of the Stalinists and the state throughout the war, they succumbed to the pressures generated by the restabilisation of capitalism in the war’s aftermath, expressed in the emergence of Pabloite opportunism. They rejected the formation of the ICFI in 1953 and effectively liquidated into the Labor Party. The struggle for Trotskyism was only resumed in Australia with the founding of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) in 1972. The period between 1968 and 1975, marked by the greatest revolutionary movement of the international working class since the 1920s, became the driving force for the radicalisation of a new generation, and the turn by the most conscious layers in Australia and other countries to revolutionary Marxism.

Just three years after its establishment, the SLL was thrown into the turmoil of the Canberra coup—when the Whitlam Labor government was ousted by the ruling class after it failed to suppress a powerful wages movement. The document examines this major strategic experience for the Australian and international working class, and clarifies the political difficulties faced by the SLL as a result of the increasingly opportunist and nationalist orientation of the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain, then the oldest and most experienced section of the ICFI. It explains that the lessons of these and subsequent experiences of the SLL and the Australian working class, could only be drawn after the defeat of the WRP leadership in the 1985-86 split in the ICFI, which opened a new era in the history of the Fourth International.

The document warns that, as in every previous period of crisis throughout the past century—the Labor Party has been brought to office to implement the agenda of the corporate elite. “In the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, Labor is once again charged with defending Australian capitalism by propping up the banks, financial institutions and corporations at the direct expense of the working class. This requires nothing less than the violent ‘restructuring’ of economic and class relations. The Rudd Labor government is neither a ‘progressive’ alternative to the Liberals nor a ‘lesser evil’, but the direct instrument of the ruling elite to implement this agenda.”

The perspective resolution makes clear that the inevitable political

eruption of the working class will “not take place through the existing political structures and organisations, but will assume the form of a rebellion against them, posing the necessity for a new political perspective, aimed at the complete re-organisation of society, and the construction of new organisations to carry it through. All the work of the SEP is directed toward preparing for this new historical period.”

The *Statement of Principles* adopted by the congress elaborates the basic programmatic positions of the SEP, bound up with winning the support of Australian workers for the program of international socialism, the global unification of the workers of all countries and the creation of a United Socialist States of the World.

The *Principles* emphasises the importance of Marxist theory: “The Socialist Equality Party, as a section of the ICFI, defends the classical conception—developed systematically by Lenin in the construction of the Bolshevik Party and carried forward by Trotsky in the struggle to found and build the Fourth International—that revolutionary socialist consciousness does not develop spontaneously in the working class. Socialist consciousness requires scientific insight into the laws of historical development and the capitalist mode of production. This knowledge and understanding must be introduced into the working class, and this is the principal task of the Marxist movement.”

In his opening report, which will be published on the WSWS, Nick Beams emphasised that the SEP was being founded on an historical analysis, the assimilation of the strategic experiences of the working class and the principles derived from that history by the Trotskyist movement. This method of approach was diametrically opposed to all the ex-radicals, such as the new “Anticapitalist Party” in France, which explicitly rejected the need for agreement among party members on the basic historical and political lessons of the struggle for socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Beams drew attention to this year’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the defeat of the leaders of the British WRP. Guided by a clear historical perspective, the orthodox Trotskyists had been able to decisively defeat the opportunist tendencies that had adapted to the Stalinist and reformist labour apparatuses and nationalist organisations. That victory ultimately reflected vast economic and political changes.

Beams explained that the globalisation of production over the past quarter century had doubled the world’s labour force and integrated the international working class, including in Australia, on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, the United States, the bulwark of global capitalism since World War II, had declined with profoundly destabilising consequences.

Most essentially, Beams said, the past 25 years had clarified the role of the Pabloite opportunists who once claimed to represent genuine Trotskyism. In Australia, as in France, they were now seeking to establish “broad anti-capitalist parties” with non-revolutionary tendencies and had entirely repudiated Trotsky and the Fourth International. Unlike the previous period of mass radicalisation from 1968 to 1975, the SEP was now indisputably the sole Trotskyist party.

David North, the national chairman of the SEP in the US and chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* international editorial board, brought the greetings of the American party to the congress. North said the careful preparation and discussion of the congress documents had prepared the SEP for a period of intensified economic and political crisis.

North pointed to the parallels between the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> and

21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Profound economic contradictions and technological advances had matured that were likely to produce upheavals no less explosive than those during the 1910-1920 decade, which witnessed the first world war and the 1917 Russian Revolution.

North explained that since the last period of revolutionary convulsions, in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Trotskyist movement had undertaken a decisive resurgence. Although the 1980s had witnessed a counter-offensive by the capitalist class, and the 1990s began with triumphalism in ruling circles over the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dominant tendency had been the protracted decline of US capitalism. The re-grounding of the ICFI after the 1982-86 conflict with the British WRP was bound up with its correct analysis of the global developments that ultimately shattered Stalinism and gave rise to the greatest crisis of world capitalism in 70 years.

“The re-emergence of the class struggle will immediately take a global character,” North emphasised. “The entry of any section of the international working class into serious struggle will blow the political situation sky high. Our perspective is based on the resurgence of the international working class.”

In coming days, the *World Socialist Web Site* will publish the opening report by Nick Beams to the congress followed by the documents, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)* and *Statement of Principles*.



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