

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)—Part 10

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*The World Socialist Web Site has published *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)*. The document was adopted unanimously at the party's founding congress in Sydney on January 21–25. (See: "Socialist Equality Party (Australia) holds founding Congress"). (Click here for Parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11)*

The World Perspectives of the ICFI

257. The publication of the ICFI's Perspectives Resolution in August 1988 marked a critical turning point in the development of the ICFI as a unified world party. Grounded on the assimilation of the political lessons of the split of 1985–86 and on an analysis of the objective significance of changes in the structure of the world capitalist economy—above all the globalisation of production—it became the foundation for the development of perspectives resolutions in all the sections of the ICFI.

258. The resolution emphasised that "the revolutionary internationalism that constitutes the foundation of the International Committee's perspective proceeds from a scientific appreciation of the international nature of the capitalist mode of production, the world dimensions of the capitalist crisis, and, above all, the nature of the proletariat itself as an international class." It explained that the unity of the international working class was being strengthened by profound objective processes. The days when production was carried out within the framework of a given nation-state had passed. Every production process now combined the labour of workers in many different countries and regions. This, and the global mobility of capital, meant that all nationalist programs had become obsolete and reactionary. The old leaderships of the working class were repudiating "even the elementary conceptions that the proletariat exists as a distinct class in society and that it must defend its independent interests against capitalist exploitation"—giving rise to a universal phenomenon of "renunciationism". The national programs of the labour bureaucracies were now aimed at the systematic lowering of workers' living standards in order to strengthen the position of "their" capitalist country in the world market. The global character of production had sharpened the objective contradiction between the world economy and the nation-state system and had brought to the forefront sharp antagonisms between the imperialist powers.

259. "For these fundamental reasons," the resolution continued, "no struggle against the ruling class in any country can produce enduring advances for the working class, let alone prepare its final emancipation,

unless it is based on an international strategy aimed at the worldwide mobilization of the proletariat against the capitalist system. This necessary unification of the working class can only be achieved through the construction of a genuine international proletariat, i.e., revolutionary, party. Only one such party, the product of decades of unrelenting political and ideological struggle, exists. It is the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938, and led today by the International Committee."

260. In a section entitled "The International Committee and the Struggle for Marxism", the resolution summed up the lessons of the struggle waged in the aftermath of the 1985–86 split to overcome the legacy of the WRP's degeneration: "Revolutionary internationalism is the political antipode of opportunism. In one form or another, opportunism expresses a definite adaptation to the so-called realities of political life within a given national environment. Opportunism, forever in search of shortcuts, elevates one or other national tactic above the fundamental program of the world socialist revolution. Considering the program of 'world socialist revolution' too abstract, the opportunist hankers after supposedly more concrete tactical initiatives. Not only does the opportunist choose to 'forget' the international character of the working class. He also 'overlooks' the fact that the crisis in each country, having its essential origin in global contradictions, can only be resolved on the basis of an internationalist program. No national tactic, however significant its role in the political arsenal of the party (e.g., the Workers League's call for the formation of a Labor Party, or the placing of demands on the Labor 'lefts' by the Socialist Labour League in Australia), can preserve its revolutionary content if it is elevated above or, what amounts to the same thing, detached from, the world strategy of the International Committee. Thus, the central historic contribution which the sections of the International Committee make to the workers' movement in the countries in which they operate is the collective and unified struggle for the perspective of world socialist revolution."^[94]

261. In May 1989, at its first congress following the split, the SLL adopted a new perspectives resolution, *Build the Fourth International*. The most comprehensive document in the party's 17-year history, it was grounded on the discussion in the International Committee during the preceding three years. The primary significance of the resolution was that it identified the central task of the Socialist Labour League as the fight for internationalism: to win Australian workers to the program and perspective of the International Committee, the program of world socialist revolution. The document incorporated the IC's analysis of the intensification of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism and of the re-emergence of inter-imperialist antagonisms, and applied it to an historical assessment of the deepening crisis of Australian imperialism and its fundamental strategic dilemma—military and geo-political dependence on the US post-war alliance, on the one hand, and the new political obligations arising from the rapid development of its trade in Asia, on the

other. The resolution made a thoroughgoing review of the experiences of the Australian working class with Laborism, Stalinism, trade unionism and their petty-bourgeois “left” defenders throughout the previous century, and emphasised the significance of the most recent experiences of workers under the Hawke-Keating Labor government. The SLL document advanced a political line, oriented to the working class, which provided a lever for mobilising it against the Laborites, on the basis of the fight for a workers’ government and a revolutionary socialist program, and for educating the most advanced layers of workers and young people in the treacherous role of the trade union and Labor “lefts”.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and its implications

262. The adoption of the 1988 Perspectives Resolution *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International* by the ICFI and all its sections, ushered in a new era in the history of the Fourth International, characterised by an unprecedented level of international integration. This was grounded on the understanding that the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution was itself a necessary expression of objective tendencies of contemporary socio-economic development. The global integration of production had profoundly revolutionary implications, exacerbating the conflict between the capitalist nation-state system and the international character of the productive forces. The split in the IC between proletarian internationalism and national opportunism was the highest expression, within the conscious revolutionary vanguard, of the irreconcilable conflict between the unprecedented internationalisation of the working class, and the nationalist policies and practice of the Stalinist and social democratic parties and trade unions. Increasingly, the class struggle would, of necessity, assume a directly international form. The IC would grow and develop to the extent that it was able to give conscious expression to these objective tendencies of development.

263. This analysis, developed as a response to, and in the aftermath of, the 1985–86 split, prepared the IC for the crisis and collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990, which culminated in the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991. While the radical and revisionist organisations responded with shock and demoralisation, either refusing to accept that any change had occurred, or concluding that all was lost and socialism had collapsed, the IC assessed the juridical liquidation of the USSR as the final destruction of the workers’ state—albeit highly degenerated—established 74 years earlier by the 1917 October Revolution. The new Confederation of Independent States was “openly and unequivocally devoted to the destruction of the remnants of the national economy and planning system that issued from the October Revolution.” The primary task facing the IC was to draw the necessary historical lessons for the international working class.

264. The IC made clear that the events of 1989–1991, prepared for decades by the counter-revolutionary nationalist policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy, were, in the final analysis, the outcome and expression of the breakdown of the post-war equilibrium of world capitalism. While the bourgeoisie and its apologists the world over revelled in an orgy of triumphalism at the “end of socialism”, the IC alone was able to assess its objective historical significance. Based for more than 65 years on the Stalinist, national autarchic program of “socialism in one country”, the Soviet Union’s collapse represented, at the highest level, the bankruptcy and collapse of all national programs under the pressures generated by globalised production.

265. In the wake of the catastrophic defeat suffered by the Soviet

working class, David North emphasised, in a seminal report to the ICFI’s 12th Plenum in 1992, the decisive role of conscious political leadership in developing, within the working class, the scientific socialist consciousness necessary for the victory of socialism. Against the conception that socialist revolution arose as a spontaneous response to the breakdown of capitalism, the report traced the intellectual foundations of the Russian Revolution—the development of an extraordinary socialist culture within the intelligentsia and the most advanced layers of the working class over a period of seventy years. The political consciousness of the Soviet and international working class had been severely damaged through its domination, for several decades, by the old Stalinist, social democratic and trade union leaderships, and, above all, by the physical extermination of an entire generation of the most cultured and politically conscious leaders, workers, intellectuals, artists and scientists in the purges of 1936–38, at the hands of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy. The combined impact of this assault resulted in a deep-going crisis, not only of leadership, but of perspective, in which workers saw no viable historical alternative to capitalism. This was why the working class had been unable to defend the remaining gains of the October Revolution against the liquidationist program of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

266. The IC had a responsibility to answer the Stalinist falsifiers of history, and revive a broad-based socialist culture within the international working class, encompassing a critical and historical attitude to every aspect of social, economic and cultural life: “The intensification of the class struggle provides the general foundation of the revolutionary movement. But it does not by itself directly and automatically create the political, intellectual and, one might add, cultural environment that its development requires, and which prepares the historic setting for a truly revolutionary situation. Only when we grasp this distinction between the general objective basis of the revolutionary movement and the complex political, social and cultural process through which it becomes a dominant historical force is it possible to understand the significance of our historical struggle against Stalinism and to see the tasks that are posed to us today.”[95]

267. The IC’s analysis of the essential causes and historical significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union illuminated broader international processes. The role of the Stalinist bureaucracy in restoring capitalism underscored the transformation of the old bureaucratic and nationalist organisations of the working class into nothing but appendages of the bourgeoisie and the policemen of its agenda. “It may have appeared that for much of the post-war period that these bureaucracies played a legitimate and, to some extent, even progressive role in the working class movement. Certainly, Pabloism attempted to make that point. The trade unions grew more powerful, the organizations and political parties that claimed to represent the working class—whether Stalinist or social democratic—became established parts of the political superstructure. Living standards rose, reforms were granted. But when considered from the standpoint of the independent political activity of the working class and its revolutionary consciousness, it was a period of stagnation, degeneration and decay. Neither the extent nor historical implications of this decay were entirely clear during the years of economic expansion, when great struggles were not required to raise living standards. But the development of the world crisis has brought the crisis to the surface. All over the world the reactionary character of the bureaucratized organizations, not to mention their utter impotence, has been exposed.”[96]

268. In Australia, under the Hawke-Keating government, the Labor Party and the trade unions had not only abandoned any last pretence of advocating “socialism” but made it clear that their role was to boost the profits of capital. In 1992, the Keating government’s *One Nation* program, endorsed by the trade union movement, declared: “The government and the union movement are committed to ensuring that investors undertaking

major capital expansion in Australia receive the greatest cooperation to achieve standards of production which will be competitive with the best in the world.”[97] In other words, they would together police ever greater rates of exploitation of the working class while savaging publicly-funded services, welfare provisions and social infrastructure. For this purpose, enterprise bargaining was introduced to split workers into individual enterprises, tying their wages and conditions directly to the requirements of “their” employers, outlaw all strikes outside enterprise bargaining periods and ban all forms of unified or solidarity industrial action. Compulsory superannuation was also imposed, giving unions a direct material stake in driving up corporate profits through their partnership in massive joint employer-union superannuation funds. The quantitative changes in the relationship of the Labor Party and the unions to the working class on the one hand, and to the bourgeoisie on the other, had resulted in a qualitative transformation.

269. In its 1992 perspectives resolution, the SLL drew a balance sheet of the response of the petty-bourgeois “left” tendencies to the demise of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Communist Party of Australia in 1991. “The milieu of middle class radicals, pacifist priests, liberal democrats and Greens, which constitutes a kind of apparatus-in-waiting, has undergone a major regroupment over the past two years. Throughout the post-war period, the radicals functioned as satellites orbiting around the CPA and the Labor ‘lefts’. As long as the working class was dominated by and subordinated to the vast apparatuses of Stalinism and Laborism, they were happy to define themselves as ‘socialists’ and even as ‘Marxists’ or ‘revolutionaries’. They formed part and parcel of the petty-bourgeois buffer, created by the ruling class in the aftermath of the war, to suffocate the working class.” Now, they had “shamelessly shed their ‘socialist’ pretensions and become the most outspoken opponents of Marxism.” With the old mechanisms for containing the class struggle crumbling, these organisations were being called upon “to block any independent mobilisation of the working class around a socialist perspective and, above all, to prevent the development of socialist consciousness in the working class.”[98]

270. In light of the transformation of the old workers’ organisations, the document began a review of the SLL’s political line and its demand that the Labor “lefts” take up the fight for a workers’ government: “Now the division between the Labor right wing and the ‘lefts’ has lost all political meaning. They are indistinguishable in everything but the name of their respective factions.” The resolution cited the passage in the Transitional Program on which the previous tactic had been based: “Of all parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers and peasants and speak in their name we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers’ and farmers’ government.” It then noted: “No longer can either the trade union apparatus or the Labor Party be considered, in any real sense, as ‘parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers ... and speak in their name’.”[99]

271. In 1993, this re-assessment, which was underway in all the sections of the ICFI, formed the basis of a change in the SLL’s political line. In the March 1993 federal election, the SLL broke with past practice and refused to advocate a critical vote for the Labor Party. In a report to the SLL central committee, Nick Beams explained: “Our attitude to the Labor Party was determined by the analysis of the objective transformation in this party and the trade unions. They are no longer workers’ organisations. This is not a question of finding some terms of abuse but is based on a scientific appraisal of all national-based organisations in the era of internationalised production under capitalism. Such organisations can do nothing but continuously attack the living conditions of the working class. This is a completely objective question. To the extent that it was possible for the productive forces to be developed within the framework of the nation-state and to the extent that the bourgeoisie was

able, for a period and under peculiar conditions, to develop a series of mechanisms which regulated the fundamental contradictions of world capitalism, it was possible for organisations of the labour movement based on a nationalist perspective to in some way defend the immediate interests of the working class, while at the same time acting against its long-term historical interests. Those conditions have now ended.”

272. The transformation of all national-based organisations under the impact of globalisation required a re-assessment of the national question. The IC insisted that in the interests of the international unity of the working class it was necessary to take a critical and even hostile attitude towards separatist movements and that the repetition of the slogan “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination” was not a substitute for political and historical analysis. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, national movements such as the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in Sri Lanka and the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) in the Middle East had dropped their anti-imperialist pretensions as they sought an accommodation with the major powers on the basis of offering “their own” working class as a source of competitive, cheap labour. At the same time, new separatist tendencies were emerging in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Republics as well as in Asia, Latin America and Africa that openly sought great power sponsorship. Explaining the fundamental shift that had taken place from earlier anti-colonial struggles, the IC declared: “In India and China, the national movements posed the progressive task of unifying disparate peoples in a common struggle against imperialism—a task which proved unrealizable under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. This new form of nationalism promotes separatism along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, with the aim of dividing up existing states for the benefit of local exploiters. Such movements have nothing in common with a struggle against imperialism, nor do they in any sense embody the democratic aspirations of the masses of the oppressed. They serve to divide the working class and divert the class struggle into ethno-communal warfare.”[100]

273. The reassessment of the national question assisted in the clarification of fundamental class issues involved in the struggle of the Aboriginal people in Australia against their historical and ongoing oppression. From the mid-1960s onwards, “land rights” had become a central demand of the Stalinists and the petty-bourgeois “left” to turn the struggle of Aboriginal people away from the working class, and subordinate them to the bourgeoisie. The granting of certain “land rights” became the vehicle for major resource companies to do deals with relatively privileged sections of the Aboriginal community at the expense of the vast majority who continued to suffer appalling disadvantage. The Mabo decision of 1992, in which the High Court recognised “native title,” was seized on as a means of promoting the illusion that the crimes committed against the Aboriginal people could be overcome within the framework of the capitalist state. An article on the “History Wars” by Nick Beams later explained: “For the liberals, the Mabo decision of 1992, which recognised native title, signified the wiping out of the concept of *terra nullius*, at least insofar as property was concerned. They regard it as the basis for advancing the interests of the indigenous population. Historical justice, they argue, requires the recognition of prior ownership, in the form of native title, which will eventually lead to some kind of restitution for past crimes. To claim that when the High Court bestowed native title it somehow enhanced the cause of the Aboriginal people is to obscure the nature of the struggle they confront. The Aboriginal people will never advance through the creation of another capitalist property form, based on the very legal principles and doctrine that provided the framework for their dispossession in the first place. Rather, they can only go forward to the extent that capitalist property in the land and means of production is abolished. This is not simply a matter of logic, but of historical experience. If capital came into the world ‘dripping from head

to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’, five hundred years of capitalist development—including two centuries of Australian settlement—are sufficient to demonstrate that it is organically incapable of securing justice for the indigenous peoples upon whose death and dispossession it rests. The deep-seated problems confronting the Aboriginal population cannot be resolved by the creation of new capitalist property forms. On the contrary, to even start to address them requires deep inroads into capitalist property. In other words, ending the oppression of the Aboriginal people is a task that falls to the socialist revolution. Included within its ambit are all the historical problems bequeathed by capitalism.”[101]

The formation of the Socialist Equality Party

274. In June 1996, the SLL held its 17th National Congress to begin the process of transforming itself into the Socialist Equality Party. A similar initiative was being undertaken in all the sections of the ICFI. This was not simply a change of name. It was based on the recognition of the new responsibilities posed to the party by the far-reaching changes in the fundamental historical context in which the party conducted its work. New forms of work were necessitated by the political realignment underway in the international working class.

275. The new perspective was elaborated by David North: “It is the development of the contradictions of world capitalism and the class struggle as an objective historical process that determines the organisational forms within which our activity develops. These forms, and the relation to the working class that they express, bear a specific relation to the historic conditions under which they arose and initially developed. The formation of leagues, from the Socialist Labour League in Britain in 1959, the Workers League in 1966, the Revolutionary Communist League in 1968, to the formation of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter in 1971 and the Socialist Labour League in Australia in 1972, was bound up with definite historical conditions and strategic conceptions of the development of the revolutionary movement of the working class. The central strategic problem that confronted the Trotskyist movement in this early period in the development of the ICFI was the active and militant allegiance given by the most advanced sections of the working class to the mass Stalinist and social democratic parties and trade unions. The political activity of our sections therefore assumed, despite variations in tactics, that the starting point of a great new revolutionary reorientation of the working class would proceed in the form of a radicalisation among the most class-conscious and politically-active elements within the ranks of these organisations. Out of that movement, in which sections of the International Committee would play a catalytic role as the most intransigent opponents of social democracy and Stalinism, would arise the real possibilities for the establishment of a mass revolutionary party.”[102]

276. The transformation of the old organisations of the working class meant that the SLL now had to shoulder the responsibility for establishing that party and fighting to build it in the working class. In its congress resolution, the SLL noted: “The very name ‘Socialist Equality’ makes clear the connection between socialism and the most basic strivings of the working class for a just society, based on social equality and the right of all people to a decent and productive life.”[103]

To be continued

Footnotes:

94. *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, op. cit., pp. 70-71.[back]

95. David North, ‘The Struggle for Marxism and the Tasks of the Fourth International’, Report to the 12th Plenum of the ICFI, March 11, 1992, *Fourth International*, vol. 19, no.1, p. 74.[back]

96. *Ibid.*, p. 70.[back]

97. *Industrial relations and the trade unions under Labor: from Whitlam to Rudd*, op. cit., p. 17[back]

98. *A Socialist Strategy for the Working Class*, Socialist Labour League, Marrickville, Australia, 1992, pp. 45–46.[back]

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.[back]

100. *Globalization and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment*, Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International (Mehring Books, Oak Park, MI, 1998), p. 109[back]

101. Nick Beams, ‘What is at stake in Australia’s “History Wars”?’ Part 10, *World Socialist Web Site*, July 23, 2004, viewed February 17, 2010.[back]

102. *The Historical & International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*, op. cit., pp. 150–151.[back]

103. *From the Socialist Labour League to the Socialist Equality Party*, Labour Press Books, Bankstown, Australia, 1996, p. 2.[back]



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