

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)—Part 4

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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 origins of Trotskyism in Australia

82. The political struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition from 1923 against Stalinism began to reach an international audience after James P. Cannon, the American revolutionary, smuggled Trotsky's critique of the Sixth Congress documents of the Comintern out of the Soviet Union and founded the Trotskyist movement, the Communist League of America (CLA), in the United States. This initiative was to play a decisive role in the development of the international Trotskyist movement. By 1932, the CLA's newspaper, *The Militant*, was circulating in Australia, where it found its way into the hands of a layer of ex-CPA militants who had come into conflict with the party's Stalinist leadership.

83. Trotsky's critique provided a principled political foundation for the struggle against Stalinism. Significant opposition had emerged within the CPA to the bureaucratic, anti-democratic character of the party regime, but it remained at the level of national-based, organisational differences. Trotsky's analysis clarified the *political* basis of the bureaucracy and its suppression of inner-party democracy, which lay in the theory of "socialism in one country". Drawing out the implications for every section of the Communist International, Trotsky wrote: "The new doctrine proclaims that socialism can be built on the basis of a national state *if only there is no intervention*. From this there can and must follow (notwithstanding all pompous declarations in the draft program) a collaborationist policy towards the foreign bourgeoisie with the object of averting intervention, as this will guarantee the construction of socialism, that is to say, will solve the main historical question. The task of the parties in the Comintern assumes, therefore, an auxiliary character; their mission is to protect the USSR from intervention and not to fight for the conquest of power. It is, of course, not a question of the subjective intentions but of the objective logic of political thought." [34] To fight the bureaucracy, Trotsky and the International Left Opposition insisted, it was necessary to oppose to its reactionary nationalist political program the perspective of world socialist revolution.

84. In January 1933, the victory of Hitler's Nazi party in Germany confirmed Trotsky's repeated warnings about the consequences of Stalin's "Third Period" line. The German working class—the most powerful in the world—had suffered a catastrophic defeat without a single shot being fired. On April 1, 1933 the Comintern declared: "Having heard the report of Comrade Heckert on the situation in Germany, the presidium of the ECCI declares that the political line and organisational policy pursued by the CC of the Communist Party, led by Comrade Thaelmann, before and at the time of the Hitler coup was quite correct." [35] Not one communist party in the world criticised either the Comintern or the policies that had led to the German disaster. This response proved that the Communist International was dead for the purposes of revolution.

85. In July 1933, Trotsky issued the call for the founding of the Fourth International: "The Moscow leadership has not only proclaimed as infallible the policy which guaranteed victory to Hitler, but has also prohibited all discussion of what had occurred. And this shameful interdiction was not violated, nor overthrown. No national congresses; no international congresses; no discussions at party meetings; no discussion in the press! An organisation which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it." [36]

86. Laying the necessary political and theoretical groundwork for the new International was a difficult and protracted process. For five years, from 1933 until its founding in September 1938, Trotsky led a patient but determined political struggle to differentiate the program and perspective of proletarian internationalism from the outlook of various centrist political tendencies which, while claiming agreement with Trotsky's criticisms of Stalinism, opposed the founding of a new International and sought a middle ground between reformist and revolutionary politics. The centrists' opposition to the formation of the Fourth International flowed from their rejection of Trotsky's analysis of the counter-revolutionary role of the Stalinist regime and its affiliated Communist Parties, and their fundamentally nationalist orientation.

87. In response to both the cataclysmic events in Germany and the analysis of the International Left Opposition, the Workers Party was founded in Australia in May 1933. Its founding document declared: "The crushing of the German working class organisations under the heel of Fascism, brought about by the criminal failure of the Communist International to give a decisive lead to the German Party...add[s] further proof to the contention that the teachings of Lenin have been distorted by the present Stalinist bureaucracy into a utopian theory of establishing Socialism in one country, with a consequent sacrifice of international

revolutionary struggle.”[37]

88. In December 1933 the Workers Party’s monthly journal, *The Militant*, supported Trotsky’s call for the founding of a new International. Under the headline “To the Fourth International”, it explained that “the decision to form a new party in Australia, although considered premature in some working class circles, has received ample endorsement in view of the events of world importance now taking place in the international revolutionary movement. Following on the German debacle and the emphatic refusal of the Stalinist bureaucracy to correct the mistakes developed by them in the European arena, or even to admit those mistakes, the various sections of the International Left Opposition have come to a definite decision regarding the whole situation ... the Left Opposition has taken the decisive step of calling for the building of a new party and a new International.”[38]

89. The Moscow Trials, which began in August 1936 and continued to March 1938, were the most public expression of a wave of counter-revolutionary violence organised by the Stalinist bureaucracy, resulting in the deaths of almost one million people. Hundreds of thousands of Marxists, socialists and intellectuals—the highest representatives of an intellectual and political culture stretching back decades—were murdered, dealing the Soviet and international working class a blow of incalculable proportions. At the three public trials virtually all the leaders of the October Revolution were forced to denounce themselves as “counter-revolutionaries.” Throughout the bloody purges, the CPA regurgitated all the lies and slander emanating from Moscow. Despite its lack of resources, the Workers Party launched a campaign against the Moscow Trials, organising public meetings in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle, and exposing the frame-up through the circulation of *The Militant* and other printed material.

90. While the Workers Party courageously fought the ongoing and violent attacks of the Stalinists and the state, it was plagued with unclarified political problems and internal feuds, stemming largely from its isolation and the difficulty of overcoming the powerful pressures of the national milieu. While it published and distributed several works by Trotsky, along with *The Militant* and regular leaflets, it tended, like the early CPA, to overemphasise national economic struggles at the expense of political and theoretical clarity, and to underestimate the political importance of a thorough review and assimilation of the lessons of the strategic experiences of the international working class during the preceding years. Only on such a basis could the struggle for socialist internationalism in the Australian working class be developed.

91. In 1937, the Workers Party carried out an important intervention into the October federal election, seeking to define the attitude that class conscious workers should take to the Labor Party. By now the CPA, in line with the decisions of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, had abandoned its “social fascist” line and, in yet another 180-degree about-turn, was now seeking to forge an alliance with the Labor Party and so-called “progressive” sections of the capitalist class. In the name of establishing a “united front” against the threat of fascism, the Stalinist Popular Front was aimed at defending the bourgeois state against social revolution by tying the working class to social democracy and through it, to the bourgeoisie. Accordingly, CPA secretary, J.B. Miles declared that it would be a “gross error” to claim that Labor governments had always betrayed the workers. In reply, the Workers Party election manifesto insisted: “[T]he struggle to expose the fallacy and treachery of ALP policy must begin again. ... The task of revolutionists is to point out and drive home the lessons of this experience. This consists in an uncompromising struggle against the Australian Labor Party and Stalinist reformism in

every field, and above all, in the trade unions. We must unmask their pseudo-leftism, their passive resistance strike policy, their class collaboration, counterposing the methods of Leninism of the revolutionary class struggle. ... [W]e urge all genuine militants who recognise the futility of parliamentary reformism to join us in staying with the workers to the extent of voting Labor at this election. Such a vote by a worker who sees the truth of our contentions in this manifesto is in no way an endorsement of ALP policy, but is a tactic by which sincere revolutionists can ensure a bigger possibility for getting a hearing from the workers.”[39]

The struggle against centrism

92. In the lead-up to the founding of the Fourth International, the most important political struggles in Australia were those led by Nick Origlass against various centrist groupings inside the Workers Party. Origlass had joined the Unemployed Workers Movement and the Communist Party in 1932, but was expelled soon after. He joined the Workers Party in 1934 and by 1937 had become its leading figure.

93. The most significant petty-bourgeois grouping inside the Workers Party was headed by John Anderson, professor of philosophy at Sydney University. Anderson was a supporter of Sidney Hook and, like Hook and James Burnham in the United States, an avowed opponent of dialectical materialism. He was, however, a founding member and leading public speaker for the Workers Party and wrote several articles in *The Militant* and elsewhere, exposing the Moscow Trials frame-ups and the strangling of the Spanish revolution by the Stalinists. In 1937 he began arguing that the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy signified that the Soviet Union could no longer be considered even a degenerated workers’ state—a position that won considerable support in the party. As in the case of other rightward-moving centrist tendencies in the United States and Europe, behind Anderson’s rush to abandon a Marxist—i.e., scientific and historical—analysis of the class nature of the Soviet Union, and thus any basis for defending the USSR against imperialist attack, lay a profound scepticism in the revolutionary capacities of the working class. In a paper circulated prior to the April 1937 Workers Party’s Fourth Conference entitled “In Defence of Revision”, Anderson argued that the source of Stalinism lay in Marxism itself. “As has been indicated,” Anderson wrote, “the crudities which are the whole stock-in-trade of the Stalinists have their basis in the theories of Marx. His ‘reflection theory’, his denial of the independence of social movements, is based on his *monism*, his conception of reality as developing along a single track—a position most appropriate to the fanatical sectarian. With this goes the theological conception of the inevitability of Socialism as rooted in the ‘nature of things’.”[40]

94. In opposing monism and the “reflection theory”, Anderson was attacking the very philosophical basis of the Marxist materialist world outlook: that the unity of the world consists in its materiality; that thought is a reflection of the external world, which exists independently of man’s consciousness; that social being determines social consciousness. His equation of socialism with theology was an expression of the hostility of all bourgeois ideology to the Marxist analysis of the law-governed character of historical development. While Anderson denied the laws of the class struggle, they nevertheless determined his own evolution. His opposition to the Marxist understanding that all social movements ultimately arise from and reflect class interests, was itself a well-known class phenomenon. It was an expression of the striving of petty-bourgeois

layers, especially sections of the intelligentsia, for their own “independence”—a feature of Anderson’s outlook that was to make him a central figure in the individualistic, anti-Marxist “libertarian” movement that emerged in the 1950s. After his positions were opposed by Origlass at the 1937 conference, Anderson’s hostility to the party emerged even more openly. Its weaknesses, he insisted, were due to the “bankruptcy of Trotskyism”, a product of Trotsky’s attachment to Bolshevism. “The lesson we have to learn today is that Bolshevism is dead...”[41] Accordingly, Anderson endorsed the call by another Workers Party member to “broaden the base” of the party, declaring that it should be open to all who had “a belief in militant struggle and a desire to work out the conditions of the Australian revolution.”[42] Not for the last time, anti-Bolshevism joined hands with Australian nationalism. By the end of the year, Anderson’s group had broken with the party and within two years he was publicly championing “liberal democracy”. In the post-war years he was to become an open anti-communist, attacking communism as “the disease of the modern times”.[43]

95. Origlass led an even more protracted struggle against a centrist grouping headed by Ted Tripp. In 1929, Tripp was the first member of the CPA to be sent to the International Lenin School in Moscow. On his return, he worked as a party activist until his expulsion in 1934 for “right opportunism”—i.e., opposition to the Third Period line of “social fascism”. Not long after, Tripp joined the Workers Party, and for a short time edited *The Militant*. In 1937 he opposed the Workers Party formally affiliating to the Movement for the Fourth International. Claiming agreement with Trotsky’s analysis, Tripp and his followers sought to utilise the political authority of Trotskyism while maintaining a free hand to determine their own syndicalist and opportunist orientation within the national arena. At the most fundamental level, Tripp opposed the subordination of the Australian party to the principles, program and organisational discipline of the International. His group quit the party after the 1937 conference.

96. On September 3, 1938, the Fourth International was founded at a conference in Paris to take forward the struggle for socialist internationalism in the international working class. Its founding program, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (The Mobilization of the Masses around Transitional Demands to Prepare the Conquest of Power)*, defined the central task of the epoch as the resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership.

97. In May 1938, Tripp’s group had reunited briefly with the Origlass-led Workers Party to found the Communist League of Australia (CLA). But at the very beginning of the CLA’s January 1939 conference, where the question of affiliation to the new Fourth International was to be finally decided, Tripp and his co-thinkers reaffirmed their hostility to internationalism and staged a walkout. This ended Tripp’s brief association with Trotskyism. He moved to Melbourne and, for the rest of his life, immersed himself in the Victorian Labor College—a training ground for trade union careerists and bureaucrats.

98. The CLA conference voted to affiliate to the Fourth International. Writing to Trotsky on May 8, 1939, Origlass, after detailing some of the manoeuvres of the opposition, concluded: “What was really at stake was our insistence that the Transitional Program [the founding document of the Fourth International] applies also to Australia.”

99. In March 1940, in an introduction to the Australian publication of the Transitional Program, Origlass summed up the lessons of the preceding struggle: “For the Australian section of the Fourth International (the Communist League of Australia) the presentation of this program marks a significant step forward. Situated as they are in a backwater

isolated from the main stream of world developments, with class antagonisms mollified by virtue of a liberal capitalist regime made possible in the developmental period of a new land, the Australian people have developed an insular backwoods outlook of disdain for the ‘foreign’ doctrines of Marxism. Nevertheless Australia is not excluded from the imperious sway of the laws of world economy, as has been demonstrated in the first imperialist world war, in the world-wide economic crisis of 1929–32, and in the imperialist slaughter of the peoples today. This epoch of the decline of the capitalist system is rapidly eliminating Labor reform politics from the agenda and poses to the Australian people the inescapable alternative: the socialist revolution or fascism.”[44]

100. The political clarification provided by the Fourth International and its struggle to delineate the independent interests of working class against all forms of national opportunism laid the basis for the courageous stand taken by the Trotskyists of the CLA during WWII against state repression and the combined forces of the Stalinists and Laborites, who sought to subordinate the working class to the imperialist war effort.

Stalinism, Trotskyism and World War II

101. The Second World War began on September 3, 1939. It was not a war for democracy against fascism, but a continuation, on an even wider and more destructive scale, of the struggle that had erupted in 1914 among the imperialist powers for the division and redivision of the world.

102. Two days after the war began, Trotsky explained its essential logic. “The present war, which its participants started before they signed the treaty of Versailles, grew out of imperialist contradictions. It was as inevitable as the crash of two trains which are let loose one toward the other on the same track. ... Diplomatic machinations, juggling with the formula ‘democracy versus fascism,’ sophisms concerning responsibility, cannot make us forget that the struggle is going on between the imperialist slaveholders of different camps for a new division of the world. According to its ends and methods the present war is a direct continuation of the previous great war, only with much greater rottenness of the capitalist economy, and with much more terrible methods of destruction and extermination. ... The task of the authentic representatives of the working class and oppressed nations does not consist in helping one imperialist camp against the other, but in teaching the laboring masses of all countries to understand the reactionary meaning of the present war, to raise their own program—the world socialist federation of nations—and to prepare themselves to replace the regime of robbery by the regime of general cooperation.”[45]

103. The outbreak of the war placed Trotsky’s life in even greater danger. Fearful of the social upheavals it would bring, and with the revolutionary consequences of World War I still fresh within living memory, the Stalinist bureaucracy feared that Trotsky was, in reality, the leader of the revolutionary government in exile. Working through a network of agents that infiltrated deep into the Trotskyist movement, Stalin ordered Trotsky’s assassination. On August 20, 1940, Trotsky was attacked by Ramon Mercader, an agent of the GPU, the Stalinist secret police, at his home in Coyoacan, Mexico. He died the next day. As explained in *The Historical & International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*: “Trotsky’s assassination was a devastating blow to the cause of international socialism. He was not only the co-leader of the October Revolution, the implacable opponent of Stalinism and the founder

of the Fourth International. He was the last and greatest representative of the political, intellectual and moral traditions of the classical Marxism that had inspired the mass revolutionary workers' movement that emerged in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th.”[46]

104. The war was to underscore the historic significance of the struggle waged by Trotsky against the centrist organisations that had opposed the founding of the Fourth International. In the course of the war, all of them capitulated either to their “own” bourgeoisie or to the “democratic” imperialist powers. Only the Fourth International and its sections fought to maintain the political independence of the working class and advance a revolutionary socialist program against both “democratic” and fascist regimes alike.

105. In Australia, Britain’s declaration of war was followed immediately by a statement from conservative United Australia Party (UAP) Prime Minister Robert Menzies that “as a result, Australia is also at war.” The Labor Party, now in opposition, declared its full support. Over the next six years, with the crucial assistance of the CPA Stalinists, it was, once again, to play the key role in organising the war effort on behalf of the Australian bourgeoisie. Almost one million people, out of a population of barely seven million, served in the Australian armed forces in Europe, Africa, the South-West Pacific and Asia, resulting in some 40,000 deaths.

106. The war’s outbreak exacerbated the crisis of the UAP-led government, which had been in a state of disintegration for the previous three years, wracked by sackings, cabinet reshuffles, and scandals. It faced growing hostility within the working class, where the pro-fascist sympathies of the main government leaders were well-known. Despite the efforts of the press to whip up patriotism, opposition intensified to the government’s National Register—widely regarded as the precursor to conscription. Strikes were on the increase as workers recovered their strength from the ravages of the Great Depression. In the elections of 1940, the ALP and the main establishment parties were returned in equal numbers, with the balance of parliamentary power held by two bourgeois independents, who initially extended their support to the UAP. Menzies wanted the Labor Party to join a coalition government in order to prosecute the war, but Labor leader John Curtin refused. This was not because Curtin was opposed either to the war or to collaborating with the UAP—indeed, the Labor Party had secured agreement from Menzies for the establishment of an Advisory War Council, with equal representation from government and opposition—but because he was fearful of a movement in the working class developing outside and against the Labor Party if it were to join the government. Curtin had come into politics as a member of the left-wing Victorian Socialist Party and had been a vehement opponent of conscription in World War I. At that time, the anti-conscription movement resulted in the expulsion of Hughes and Holman from the Labor Party. Curtin was concerned about entering a coalition government under conditions where the working class was moving to the left and the Communist Party, which at this point was denouncing the war as “imperialist”, was winning the leadership of its most militant layers.

107. The CPA’s characterisation of the war as “imperialist” was not based on principle. Rather, it flowed from the logic of the Stalin-Hitler non-aggression pact, signed by Molotov and Ribbentrop in August 1939. Prior to this, the CPA, together with other Stalinist parties around the world, had fought for a Popular Front with the Labor Party and so-called “progressive” sections of the bourgeoisie for the defence of “democracy” against fascism. This policy continued in the first days after the outbreak of war. On September 12, 1939, for example, the CPA denounced the Trotskyist characterisation of the war as “imperialist”, and a week later

issued a call for the “full weight of Australian manpower and resources being mobilised along with other British forces, for the defeat of Hitler”. Over the next weeks, Moscow’s interests were communicated. The CPA carried out another about-face and started characterising the war as “imperialist”, hailing the Stalin-Hitler pact for localising its impact. The new line was motivated not by any concern to develop the movement of the working class against the imperialist bourgeoisie—in the US, Britain or Australia—but to turn it into an appendage of the Soviet bureaucracy, which feared the war’s consequences.[47]

108. Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and the complete collapse of the “pact”, the CPA rapidly changed course once again, becoming the most fervent supporter of the war effort. In a statement issued on September 19, 1941 it declared: “The Communist Party wholeheartedly supports the present war. The Party and its members are working for the supreme war effort required from Australia toward the common objective of Britain, the United States and other allied nations.”[48] With the CPA now backing the war, the way was open for a Labor government. On October 30, 1941, the two independents crossed the floor in a budget debate, to effectively bring down the UAP-Country Party coalition government. The outgoing conservative Prime Minister Arthur Fadden, who had replaced Menzies, then advised the governor-general to call on the Labor leader Curtin to form a government.

109. The Communist Party, which had been illegalised by the Menzies government in June 1940, was now de facto legalised. The formal decision only came after the CPA and the Curtin Labor government had signed an agreement in December 1942 that spelt out the Stalinists’ responsibilities in supporting the industrial war effort. According to the agreement, the CPA would do all in its power to “assist the official prosecution of the war,” “increase the production of war materials and the provision of services for war or industrial purposes” and do its “utmost to promote harmony in industry, to minimise absenteeism, stoppages, strikes or other hold-ups.”[49]

110. The economic crisis of the 1930s and the outbreak of war revealed, once again, the weakness of the Australian bourgeoisie and its historic dependence on the Labor Party to maintain its rule. Not only did the coalition government collapse, but the UAP, the main bourgeois party, completely disintegrated. Only when the war crisis had passed was Menzies able to form a new organisation, the Liberal Party, in 1944. While the bourgeoisie turned to the Labor Party in its hour of need, the ALP could not govern alone. The Laborites rested in turn on the CPA Stalinists, who used the support they derived in the working class from the false identification of the party with socialism and the October Revolution, to enforce the Labor government’s program.

111. At the turn of the century, the Labor Party had played the key role in the formation of the Australian nation-state within the framework of the British Empire. At the end of 1941, as the war in the Pacific began and British forces in the Far East collapsed before the advances of the Japanese army, the Laborites effected a major shift in international orientation. As the Fourth International had explained before the outbreak of war, the alignment of Australian imperialism would be determined by which of the major powers it believed would best protect its interests in the Pacific against Japan. The defeats inflicted on the British by Japan in the first days of the conflict, which were to culminate in the fall of Singapore on February 15, 1942 and the largest-ever surrender of British-led forces, showed that British imperialism could no longer meet this objective. It was time to shift allegiance to the rising imperialist power, the United States. In a New Year message issued on December 26, 1941, Prime Minister Curtin declared: “[W]ithout any inhibitions of any kind, I

make it clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.”[50]

112. From the outset of the war, the Trotskyist Communist League of Australia was the only political tendency to advance an independent perspective for the working class. On September 10, 1939, a special edition of *The Militant*, headlined “This is not our war”, declared: “The Second World War is an Imperialist War, just as the first was. It is not a war to defend democracy; it is a war for capitalist profits, pure and simple.” The statement explained that the war was not being fought for “any such fine sounding things as freedom, democracy, peace etc.” but was a war between “rival gangster imperialists to determine who will control Europe, and who will rob and exploit the colonial peoples.” Under the headline “Enemy in Our Own Country”, the statement continued: “If Chamberlain [the British prime minister] wants to stop Hitler it is not because Hitler crushes the working class in Germany, but because Hitler threatens Britain’s colonies. If Daladier [the French prime minister] wants to stop Hitler it is not because Hitler has destroyed the liberty of the German workers, but because he is afraid to lose some French colonies. If Roosevelt [the US president] is so pugnacious against Hitler it is not because Hitler has made virtual slaves out of the German workers, but because Germany threatens to take away much of the South American trade which is now in possession of American capitalists. While the rulers of England, France and USA do not like Hitler for the above reasons, they have no objection to *Hitlerism*. On the contrary, they know that the totalitarian organisation of their own nations is now the only method they have for preserving their power and privileges.” The CLA explained that the working class had to fight for the defeat of fascism, but it could not entrust that task to the capitalist class in the so-called “democracies.”[51]

113. Throughout the war, the CLA defended every independent action by the working class. In May 1940, when NSW miners went on strike, the Trotskyists called for mass pickets, the extension of the strike, the formation of workers’ defence guards and the bringing down of the Menzies government. That month *The Militant* was banned by a government decree under the draconian war-time National Security Regulations. In June 1940, when the CPA was declared illegal, and meekly submitted, the CLA immediately demanded the CPA ban be lifted, pointing to its implications for the democratic rights of the working class as a whole, despite continuing provocations by the Stalinists against its own members. Soon after, when the CLA itself was declared illegal, and its press and organisation suppressed, it responded by widely distributing a leaflet to workers warning of the government’s plans: “First crush all opposition, then conscription: this is the Menzies plan. ... Down with Menzies, down with imperialist war and for a socialist peace.”

114. Japan’s entry into the war and the threat that it would invade Australia heightened political pressures on the CLA and its fight for proletarian internationalism. But the party had been politically prepared in advance by Trotsky. In 1937, he wrote a letter responding to a request for advice from Origlass on how to respond to such a threat. In the letter, Trotsky declared: “Naturally no Australian worker or farmer wishes to be conquered and subjected to Japan. For a revolutionary party it would be suicidal to say simply we are ‘indifferent’ to this question. But we cannot give to a bourgeois and essentially imperialist government the task of defending the independence of Australia. The *immigration* policy of the Australian government furnishes the Japanese imperialists a kind of justification in the opinion of the Japanese people. By its *general* policy the bourgeois government weakens the Australian people economically, politically and militarily. Finally, in the case of a great social crisis the bourgeois government would inevitably be ready to compromise with the foreign imperialists, sacrificing the vital interests of the country, in order

to have the opportunity to prevent the social revolution. All these reasons are more than sufficient to justify our irreconcilable policy toward the bourgeois ruling class in every capitalist country. But there is not the slightest reason to proclaim our indifference on the question of national independence.”[52]

115. In January 1942 the Trotskyists issued a Workers Defence Policy based on Trotsky’s 1937 letter and the discussions he had held with the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) on a proletarian military policy. In opposition to the petty-bourgeois pacifists, who called for individual resistance to war, the Fourth International called for the training of workers in military arts under the control of the trade unions and with working class officers. The Workers Defence Policy explained that while Australian workers and farmers wanted to fight against domination by Japanese imperialism, for the Australian capitalist class conquest by Japan was by far a “lesser evil” than the victory of the working class and of the oppressed masses in the colonies. The “democratic” imperialists would “prefer the military victory of their rivals rather than arm the native people, knowing that the latter would inevitably struggle to drive out the old master as well as the new one moving in.” When faced with defeat, “the Australian capitalist class will drop its ‘patriotism’, will come to terms with the Japanese imperialists, and behind the backs of the masses will collaborate in exploiting them. ... The capitalist class always operates on the basis of the proposition: the main enemy is at home, the working class.”[53]

116. In response to the Stalinists’ collaboration with the Curtin government under the slogan “all for production” the Trotskyists replied: “To the capitalist class we say: You claim our homes and families are in imminent danger. Very well, we are not terrified. But we do not trust you, our class enemy, nor your ‘brass hats’, to lead and direct the fight. We want military training and arming under our own elected leaders. We will not seek to capitulate when an enemy bombardment destroys your valuable property. We are the people who build. We can build up everything that is destroyed. We know the miracles that can be achieved by an armed people. We remember Madrid, Moscow, Leningrad. You say you want maximum production. You, in subservience to the banks, have sabotaged Australian production for scores of years. In 1929 you closed down your factories and workshops and put us on the streets. And today graft and profit-seeking constitute your ‘war effort’. Let the Federal Government nationalise the war industries and let them be controlled by shop committees of workers. Then from your huge profits the workers will get proper conditions and there will be uninterrupted production. ...”[54]

117. The fight for these policies was carried out under continual state repression, including arrests and jailings, as well as verbal and physical attacks from the Stalinists. After police raids on their offices and homes, three Trotskyists were jailed for up to 12 months for possessing literature exposing the imperialist character of the war, calling for the election of soldiers’ committees in the army, and hence “causing disaffection” among the armed forces, contrary to National Security regulations. The Stalinists’ campaign reached a fever pitch at the beginning of 1943, following their agreement with the Curtin government in December 1942. The deal had been reached, the Trotskyist newspaper, *The Socialist* reported, at the point where Prime Minister Curtin’s conscription scheme had lost him the support of rank and file workers. He had given the Communist Party “the shameful job of attempting to terrorise the militant rank and file from expressing their views.” The deeper the collaboration of the Stalinists with the Labor government, the more they stepped up their attack on the Trotskyists. In January 1943, the Stalinist newspaper *Tribune* denounced *The Socialist* as “doing a good job for the fascists. The

Yanks are making an ‘imperialist occupation’ of Australia; the war is an ‘imperialist’ one. Hurrah for more strikes, more disruption, etc. and, particularly, down with the Communists everywhere. These fascist rats are doing a nice job for the Axis masters of the unlamented Trotsky, and would be on the reception committee if the Japs invaded Australia” In August 1945, the CPA Stalinists celebrated the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[55]

118. Throughout the war, the Trotskyists had very small forces, whereas the CPA now boasted around 20,000 members. But the CLA upheld a program that defended the independent interests of the working class. Moreover in their victory over the Stalinists in the ship repair yards at Cockatoo Island and Morts Dock in Sydney, they demonstrated the significance of a consistent fight for a principled political line.

119. Industrial conflict at the dockyards began in 1943–44 and culminated in a three months’ battle in the first half of 1945. Shipyard workers were fighting to defend their wages and conditions in opposition to the Labor government’s National Security regulations, which were policed by the Stalinists in the national leadership of the ironworkers’ union. The struggle was a precursor to the industrial upsurge for improved wages and conditions that was to develop in broader sections of the working class in the immediate aftermath of the war, against the regulations of the Chifley Labor government. The conflict ended with Origlass and his supporters defeating the Stalinists and their witch-hunting tactics, and winning election to the leadership of the Balmain branch of the ironworkers’ union. In the more than six decades since these events, all manner of political tendencies, from the right-wing of the Labor Party and trade union bureaucracy to the Labor “lefts” and cynical “ex-Trotskyists”, have denounced the CLA’s stand on the war as “bonkers”, “over the top” and “totally unrealistic”. Both then and since, they have insisted that, in time of war, the working class has to be subordinated to the demands of its “own” ruling class and that any other policy is unrealistic. But the record shows that it was the political perspective advanced by Trotsky and the Fourth International on the nature of the war, and the Australian Trotskyists’ insistence on the necessity to fight at every stage for the independent interests of the working class, that won the respect of the most advanced layers, and led to the CLA’s victory over the Stalinists.

To be continued

Footnotes:

34. *The Third International after Lenin*, op. cit., p. 47.[back]

35. *The Communist International-Documents*, vol. III, 1929–1943, Jane Degras (ed.), Routledge, 1971, p. 257.[back]

36. ‘It is Necessary to Build Communist Parties and an International Anew’, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, op. cit., p. 431.[back]

37. Workers Party policy statement, <http://www.reasoninrevolt.net.au/pdf/d0070.pdf>, viewed February 15, 2010.[back]

38. ‘To the Fourth International’, *The Militant*, no. 3, December 1, 1933, pp. 1–2.[back]

39. ‘Workers Party Election Manifesto’, *The Militant*, vol.4, no.11, Sydney, October 18, 1937, pp. 1–2.[back]

40. John Anderson, ‘In Defence of Revisionism’, *Life: The Political Writings of Professor John Anderson*, Mark Weblin (ed), Pluto Press, Sydney, 2003, p. 145.[back]

41. Hall Greenland, *Red Hot, The Life and Times of Nick Origlass*, Wellington Lane Press, Neutral Bay, 1999, p. 76.[back]

42. Ibid., p. 77.[back]

43. *A Perilous and Fighting Life: The Political Writings of Professor John Anderson*, op. cit., p. 18.[back]

44. *Red Hot: The Life and Times of Nick Origlass*, op. cit., pp. 92–93.[back]

45. Leon Trotsky, ‘Who is Guilty of Starting the Second World War?’ *Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1939–40*, Pathfinder, New York, 1977, pp. 84–85.[back]

46. *The Historical & International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*, op. cit., p. 59.[back]

47. *Betrayal: A History of the Communist Party of Australia*, Workers News Editorial Board, Allen Books, Sydney, 1981, p. 89.[back]

48. Ibid., p. 90.[back]

49. Ibid., p. 90.[back]

50. *In His Own Words. John Curtin’s Speeches and Writings*, David Black (ed.), Paradigm Books, Bentley, Western Australia, 1995, p. 195.[back]

51. *The Militant*, Sydney, September 10, 1939, vol.2. no. 8, (C.L.A. series) p. 1.[back]

52. Leon Trotsky, ‘Letter to Australians, December 23, 1937’, *Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1937–38*, Pathfinder, New York, 1976, pp. 116–117.[back]

53. *Betrayal: A History of the Communist Party of Australia*, op. cit., pp. 104–105.[back]

54. Ibid., p. 105.[back]

55. Ibid., p. 112.[back]



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