

The Fourth International and the Perspectives of the SEP

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The following speech was delivered by Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Nick Beams to the SEP's final election meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on Wednesday and Thursday. Beams heads the SEP's ticket in the state of New South Wales for the Senate and has been the party's national spokesman in the course of the campaign. He is a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site.

The significance of the SEP campaign in this election is not to be judged by the number of votes our party receives—we are of course urging that you fight for the biggest possible support—but above all lies in the program for which our party fights and the historical perspective and principles on which it is based.

The SEP is the only party that is advancing an internationalist and revolutionary socialist perspective, seeking to mobilise the independent strength of working class in a political struggle against the capitalist order.

At one meeting during the course of this campaign, I was asked: how can we be sure that you will not compromise and betray like other parties. I explained that the orientation of our party is to be judged on the basis of its program and the historical struggle it has waged for that program. Here is where the answer to the question is to be found.

There was not sufficient time at that meeting to fully respond. Tonight my remarks on the historical foundations and struggle of the Fourth International will be an extended response to this very important question.

In just a few days time—on election day itself—we shall be commemorating the 70th anniversary of the death of Leon Trotsky, who died of wounds inflicted by an agent of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union the day before. It should be noted that when the assassin was released from jail in Mexico and travelled to Cuba he was greeted by Che Guevara, the pin-up boy of all the middle class, pseudo-left groups.

This year also marks the 25th anniversary of the split with the opportunists of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, a struggle in which the genuine Trotskyists won back control of their own organisation, the Fourth International. This was the culmination of a 32-year struggle for the program of Trotskyism against opportunist tendencies that had again and again attacked its principles. The split of 1985 marked, in turn, the beginning of a renaissance of genuine Marxism within the international workers' movement. The significance of the struggle waged by the SEP in this election campaign is rooted in these great historical events.

The assassination of Leon Trotsky in August 1940 was the high point of the counter-revolutionary offensive waged by Stalinism against Marxism and its perspective of world socialist revolution. The murder of Trotsky was the crime of the 20th century—the greatest blow delivered to the international workers' movement. Trotsky was above all the author and living embodiment of the perspective that had guided and led the Russian Revolution—the first successful conquest of political power by the working class. But even more important than his role in the Russian Revolution,

was the fact that Trotsky was the supreme strategist of the program and perspective that had to form the basis for future victories—the strategy of world socialist revolution.

The historical significance of Trotsky is the significance of the program for which he fought and died, a perspective that encompassed all the strategic issues of the socialist revolution throughout the 20th century, continuing through to today and into the future.

Trotsky remains the most contemporary of historical leaders because the issues with which his life was bound up remain the issues confronting the working class. As David North puts it in his just published book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*: "... Trotsky remains a relentlessly contemporary political figure. The significance of his life in world history transcends his role in the Russian Revolution. Leon Trotsky was, above all else, the great theoretician and tribune of world socialist revolution. The passions evoked by his name testify to the enduring significance of Trotsky's ideas. Arguments about Trotsky are never simply about what happened in the past. They are just as much about what is happening in the world today, and what is likely to happen in the future."

Trotsky was struck down at the beginning of World War 2. The motivation of the Stalinist bureaucracy was fear: fear that the seemingly most isolated man in the world—a man without a visa, hounded on all sides, the victim of the most murderous counter-revolutionary apparatus in history, forced to seek sanctuary in Mexico—could, under a major turn of events, come to the leadership of millions.

In the course of this campaign, our Senate candidate in Victoria, Patrick O'Connor, was asked in a radio interview why he bothered to stand when the other parties had millions behind them. In 1940, the Stalinist parties around the world had millions in their ranks and were supported by a powerful state apparatus in the USSR. Today the Stalinist regime has passed into the "dustbin of history", and the Stalinist parties have either completely disappeared or are in an advanced state of decay.

Notwithstanding Trotsky's isolation, Stalin understood very well that the situation could change dramatically and that the party Trotsky had founded two years before, the Fourth International, could come to the leadership of the masses and take them to victory. That, after all, was what had happened in 1917.

For his part, Trotsky was under no illusion about the tremendous difficulties that confronted the Fourth International. These difficulties arose from the fact that millions of the most class conscious and revolutionary-minded workers all over the world wrongly identified the Stalinist Communist Parties with the party that, just two decades before, had carried out the October Revolution.

History had produced an excruciating contradiction: the most counter-revolutionary regime in the world, a regime that carried out the murder of more Marxists and revolutionists than Hitler and Mussolini combined—the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union—had been able to appropriate the mantle of the greatest revolution in history. However, no matter what the immediate difficulties, and they were horrendous, Trotsky remained

convinced that the truth would conquer. As the founding program of the Fourth International put it, in the final analysis the laws of history are stronger than any bureaucratic apparatus.

What was Trotsky's perspective? He explained that World War II arose out of the same unresolved contradictions of world capitalism that had given rise to World War I, only at a higher level. The situation was made even more complex by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. But Trotsky insisted that Stalinism was not a permanent formation. Its emergence was not the expression of the laws governing the transition from capitalism to socialism. It was an historical excrescence; the outcome of the isolation of the first workers' state.

The continued rule of the bureaucracy was not a viable historical outcome. Either the bureaucracy would be overthrown by the working class in a political revolution, or it would lead to the restoration of capitalism. Capitalist restoration would take place either through direct military conquest by the imperialist powers, or, and Trotsky considered this an extremely likely historical variant, through the emergence of a capitalist restorationist tendency from within the Stalinist apparatus itself.

Setting out the perspective of the Fourth International in May 1940, Trotsky wrote: "The capitalist world has no way out, unless a prolonged death agony is so considered. It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars, and new uprisings. A young revolutionary party must base itself on this perspective. History will provide it with enough opportunities and possibilities to test itself, to accumulate experience, and to mature. The swifter the ranks of the vanguard are fused the more the epoch of bloody convulsions will be shortened, the less destruction will our planet suffer. But the great historical problem will not be solved in any case until a revolutionary party stands at the head of the proletariat. The question of tempos and time intervals is of enormous importance; but it alters neither the general historical perspective nor the direction of our policy. The conclusion is a simple one: it is necessary to carry on the work of educating and organising the proletarian vanguard with tenfold energy. Precisely in this lies the task of the Fourth International."

I have cited this passage because the claim has continually been made by various pseudo-left groups that Trotsky somehow "promised" a revolution within ten years and that the failure of this revolution to eventuate invalidates the revolutionary perspective of the Fourth International. If that is the case then Marx himself must be similarly indicted. Those who want exact predictions when dealing with the complexities of the historical evolution of human society, and the greatest social overturn of all—the transition from capitalism to socialism—have no place in revolutionary politics. They should consult the soothsayers and astrologers.

As Trotsky had predicted, the war did bring a revolutionary upsurge—from 1943 onwards in Europe, and the rise of a mighty wave of anti-imperialist struggles in India and China. But notwithstanding the strength and breadth of this upsurge, it did not result in new socialist revolutions, because it was betrayed by Stalinism and social democracy. This did not invalidate Trotsky's perspective, but was a product of the contradictory course of the war itself.

There is no question that the chief factor in the defeat of Nazi Germany was the role of the Soviet Union and the Red Army. That victory was attributable to the continuing traditions of the October Revolution and the enormous productive capacities created as a result of nationalised property relations, despite the sabotage, utter ineptitude and outright criminality of the Stalinist regime.

But the victory of the Soviet Union led to a strengthening, politically, of the Stalinist apparatus and the Communist Parties around the world in the eyes of the most politically advanced workers and socialist-minded sections of the middle class.

Earlier Trotsky had explained that the doctrine of socialism in one

country—the reactionary nationalist dogma of the Stalinist regime—had been able to triumph because the very existence of the Soviet Union impacted on political consciousness. Its ability to grow economically, especially in the 1930s when the capitalist economies were collapsing, seemed to validate the Stalinist perspective. Similarly, the ability of the Soviet Union to defeat the Nazi armies meant that only the most advanced and far-sighted sections of the working class and intelligentsia were able to appreciate Trotsky's analysis of the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism and therefore the necessity for the building of a new party. Herein lay the reason for the relative isolation of the Fourth International in the immediate post-war period.

Moreover, the military victory of the Soviet Union gave added strength to the national bourgeois and anti-colonial movements in India and China, under the leadership of the Congress party in India and the Maoist Communist Party in China.

The emergence of Pabloite opportunism

This highly complex political situation, combined with the beginning of what was to become a post-war economic boom, created the conditions for what can only be described as a middle class rebellion within the Fourth International against the program on which it had been founded.

This rebellion aimed at nothing less than the liquidation of the Fourth International. According to Michel Pablo, the secretary of the Fourth International, and his closest associated Ernest Mandel, the Fourth International faced a "new world reality". They argued that it would not be possible, as Trotsky had believed, to repeat the role of the Bolsheviks and, on the basis of a struggle for the political independence of the working class, come to the leadership of the masses and lead them to victory in a socialist revolution.

According to the Pabloites, the existence and apparent strengthening of Stalinism, especially as a result of its territorial conquests in Eastern Europe, had made the old perspective of the Fourth International unviable. In the US Pablo's supporters rallied under the slogan "Junk the old Trotskyism". According to Pablo, socialism would not come about as a result of revolution, but through the establishment of Stalinist regimes that would last for centuries. The Stalinists were no longer counter-revolutionary. The sheer pressure of the masses could lead them to "project a revolutionary orientation." Consequently, the role of the Fourth International was not to build a new revolutionary leadership, but to integrate itself in the "real mass movement" in every country—that is, to subordinate itself to whatever political tendency dominated the "really existing" labour movement. In this schema there was no independent role for the working class and therefore no independent role for the Fourth International.

In 1953 a fight was begun against this liquidationist perspective. It was initiated by the American Trotskyist leader James P Cannon. Cannon issued an Open Letter to the World Trotskyist Movement calling for the removal of Pablo and for a return to the perspective of orthodox Trotskyism.

The Open Letter set out very clearly the repudiation by Pablo and his supporters of the principles on which the Fourth International had been founded. It might have appeared, therefore, that the fight against Pabloism would have been relatively straightforward. Far from it. The growth of this tendency was not the product of the incorrect ideas of this or that individual, but was the political expression of powerful social forces impacting on the Fourth International.

Far from leading to the repudiation of Pablo's perspective, the issuing of the Open Letter in November 1953 and the formation of the

International Committee of the Fourth International was only the opening shot in what was to be a 32-year fight in the Fourth International. It was only completed in 1985-86, when the genuine Trotskyists regained control of their own organisation after prosecuting a split with the national opportunists of the British section, the Workers Revolutionary Party.

The essential content of the middle class rebellion against Trotskyism was hostility to the conception of the unique historical role of the Fourth International. Trotsky had written that outside of the cadres of the Fourth International there did not exist a single revolutionary current on the planet really meriting the name. This conception brought furious opposition from the revisionist tendencies that continuously attacked the Fourth International. Stalinism, they claimed, could be forced to project a revolutionary orientation, Maoist forces in China were carrying out Trotsky's program of Permanent Revolution, and then later on, petty-bourgeois nationalist forces such as Castro were really "unconscious Marxists" forced by the logic of events to carry out a revolutionary program.

All these theories have been ground to dust by the wheels of history. Those wheels may appear to turn somewhat slowly, but they do grind exceedingly fine. The Stalinist bureaucracy, far from projecting a revolutionary orientation, carried out the liquidation of the Soviet Union. The Maoist regime did not embark on the road to socialism but, in the name of anti-imperialism, used the sacrifice of the Chinese masses to lay the foundations for capitalism, and the extraction of vast super profits by transnational corporations, through the exploitation of the labour of the Chinese working class. And Cuba? In the not too distant future, the old landowners and sugar barons will make a return, along with major transnational corporations.

Cannon launched the struggle for the defence of the Fourth International with the Open Letter. But the American SWP he led was a far from unified organisation. By 1957, just three years after the split with the Pabloites, the SWP was moving to a reunification with them. The victory of Castro in 1959 provided the means to complete it.

Reunification with the Pabloites was carried out on the basis that there would be no discussion of the issues that had led to the split in 1953 and agreement that Castro's Cuba was a workers' state and that a socialist transformation was taking place.

From 1961 to 1963, the British Trotskyists, under the leadership of Gerry Healy, waged a powerful struggle against the unprincipled reunification. Their efforts, in the face of great odds, not only ensured the continuity of the Fourth International, but established the theoretical foundations for the establishment of new sections of the ICFI, including the Australian section. Their struggle educated a new generation of revolutionary forces who would later fight against the national opportunist degeneration of the British section.

The Pabloite reunification of 1963 led to further isolation of the genuine Trotskyists, amid a continuous campaign of provocations against Healy and the British Socialist Labour League. But the objective significance of the struggle waged by the British Trotskyists—and its enduring importance for the international working class—was revealed in 1964 when the Pabloite's Sri Lankan section, the LSSP, entered the bourgeois coalition government of Mrs Bandaranaike. As Healy was to explain, the roots of the Great Betrayal lay not in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, but in Paris, the headquarters of the Pabloite international.

The British Trotskyists had fought against the reunification. But that did not mean that the pressures that produced it had lessened. On the contrary, they were to intensify under conditions where the liquidationist campaigns of the Pabloites struck major blows against the Fourth International.

The relative isolation this produced gave rise to damaging political conceptions. In 1966, in the midst of a growing upsurge of the British working class, Healy advanced the conception that the central task was to build a powerful revolutionary party in Britain that would inspire

Trotskyists around the world to do the same. This was a shift away from the internationalist political axis on which the British Trotskyists had fought in 1953 and in the historic fight they had waged against the unprincipled reunification of the SWP with the Pabloites in 1963. What began as a tendency, emerged more openly seven years later with the founding of the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain.

There was no reference in its founding document to the struggle of the Fourth International, no leaders of the ICFI were present at the founding congress and it was based entirely on a national tactic: the bringing down of the Tory government and its replacement by a Labor government.

The founding of the WRP was the outcome of an opportunist shift in the leadership of the British movement. The nationalist current was to become even more apparent in the coming period.

We do not have the time to review all the issues here. They are documented in the literature available at this meeting. In 1982 a decisive turn took place when David North, the leader of the American Trotskyist movement, the Workers League, raised criticisms of Healy's philosophical writings and the increasingly nationalist and opportunist politics for which they were a cover and insisted they be discussed. In 1984, North produced a detailed report showing that the politics of the WRP were increasingly coming to resemble those of the Pabloites: uncritical backing for national bourgeois movements in the former colonial and semi-colonial countries, especially in the Middle East, and a growing adaptation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy in Britain.

The WRP leadership would not tolerate any discussion of these criticisms, threatening the Workers League with an immediate split and isolation from the ICFI. In these conditions, the WRP leadership forced a withdrawal of the criticisms. But in 1985, when its opportunist politics produced a crisis in the WRP itself, these criticisms became the platform around which genuine Trotskyists rallied internationally and within Britain to fight for the program of the ICFI.

The essential question in the struggle of 1985-86 was defined by the ICFI: internationalism, the perspective on which the Fourth International had been historically grounded, against the nationalism of all the tendencies that had emerged from the crisis of the WRP to oppose the ICFI.

Healy himself set the tone for all of them when he denounced his opponents in the ICFI for believing in "whiter than white socialism of the purest water and the smallest number..." That is, according to Healy there was no basis for a struggle for principles in the workers' movement, because it would only lead to isolation. Healy turned directly to support the Stalinist bureaucracy as it moved to carry out the restoration of capitalism under Gorbachev. Cliff Slaughter renounced the struggle against opportunism as he sought to liquidate the ICFI into the various middle class "left" tendencies.

The ICFI was able to decisively defeat the WRP opportunists and re-establish the Trotskyist foundations of the Fourth International under the leadership of the International Committee. What is to account for this victory? It was above all an expression of the changing balance of forces in the international workers' movement.

Shallow political thinkers and assorted opportunists always seek to dismiss the struggles that develop within the revolutionary party as "storms in teacups" and "sectarian squabbles". But there is always a profound connection between these struggles and broader economic, social and political developments. The split of 1985-86 was no exception.

In their hostility to the ICFI, all the opportunist tendencies that had developed inside the WRP sought to base themselves on the bureaucracies that dominated the workers' movement. However they did so right at the point when the biggest bureaucratic apparatus of all—the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union—was breaking apart. In 1985, Gorbachev came to the leadership of the CPSU on a program whose logic was capitalist restoration and within six years the Soviet Union had been liquidated. Its

collapse was an expression, in the final analysis, of vast changes in the foundations of world economy bound up with the globalisation of production. These changes had rendered all nationalist programs obsolete and this shift was expressed in the demise of the Stalinist regime that had come to power on the nationalist dogma of “socialism in one country.”

Where do we stand?

Twenty-five years after the split with the WRP and the regaining by the Trotskyists of their own organisation, the Fourth International, where do we stand? What is the significance of this struggle?

To answer this question we must examine three interconnected processes: the development of the world economy over the past quarter of a century, the evolution of the working class, and the preparations of the revolutionary party.

First we must recognise the significance of the deep structural changes in world economy for these changes determine, in the final analysis, the framework of the class struggle and the role of the revolutionary party.

The globalisation of production has brought about a transformation in world capitalism. It was initiated under the impact of the crisis that erupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In an effort to combat pressures on the rate of profit and to break up large and very powerful concentrations of workers in the major capitalist countries, a fundamental re-organisation of production was carried out. It was based on the integration of the cheaper labour of vast new regions of the world, South-East Asia, China and India, into the circuits of global capital accumulation.

For a time, during the decade of the 1990s and well into the first decade of the new century, this integration produced an upswing in capitalist development. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the integration of China into the world market, it appeared, at least to short-sighted observers, that the contradictions that had erupted with such explosive force in the first half of the 20th century and which lay behind the revolutionary upsurge in the period 1968 to 1975, had been overcome. The ideologists of capitalism sang hymns of praise to the “free market” while central bankers spoke of The Great Moderation. At the annual conclave of central bankers held in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, at the end of August 2005, the main question on the agenda was whether the retiring US Federal Reserve Board chairman Alan Greenspan was the greatest central banker in history or merely one of the greatest.

Just two years later the financial system started to unravel and then collapsed in September 2008, producing the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Now let us turn to developments in the struggles of the working class. The past 25 years have seen the complete decay of all the old organisations of the labour movement and their transformation into open agencies of the corporate and financial elites.

To illustrate this process I can do no better than quote from a recent speech by the incoming president of the United Auto Workers in the US, Bob King. According to King, in the 20th century the UAW saw the employers as adversaries rather than partners. All that had now changed. “The 21st-century UAW has welcomed the openness, collaboration, and creative problem solving partnerships that we have forged with Chrysler, GM, and Ford. Out of the ashes of the cataclysm of 2008 and 2009, a new, more visionary and stronger 21st-century UAW is being born. The 21st-century UAW no longer views these managements as our adversaries or enemies, but as partners in innovation and quality. Our new relationships with these employers are built upon a foundation of respect shared goals, and a common mission,” he said.

Meanwhile under agreements enforced by the UAW, new employees at GM start on the poverty-line wage of just \$14 an hour.

There is nothing in King’s remarks that would be opposed by the trade union bureaucracy in this country or anywhere else in the world. In fact Australian union officials have authored many similar remarks.

There has been a systematic assault on the social position of the working class in all the major capitalist countries over the past three decades and a dramatic increase in social inequality. Let me quote one significant figure. In the US, in the period 1976 to 2007, some 58 cents of every additional dollar of national income went to the top 1 percent of income earners. It is as if there were a giant vacuum cleaner sitting on top of society sucking up the wealth created by millions of people and placing it at the disposal of the upper echelons.

This process, which has seen the cutting of real wages in all the major capitalist countries, has been alleviated to some extent by a series of “coping mechanisms”—more family members working, more overtime, less holidays, and above all, more credit. Now these mechanisms are exhausted.

These developments in the major capitalist countries have been accompanied by the emergence of powerful new sections of the working class, especially in Asia. Now these workers are pressing forward with their own demands.

Vast new sections of the working class have been created by the drive of global capital for access to cheaper labour. But because of the very nature of economic globalisation—its dependence on highly advanced communications—these workers are connected ever more closely to the rest of the world. And they directly challenge the demand of the corporations that they must simply function as material for exploitation.

The *Financial Times* carried a report today that begins as follows: “Bangladeshi garment workers, who make clothes for western brands such as H&M, Gap and Marks & Spencer, greeted a recent 80 percent pay rise by rampaging through the capital Dhaka burning cars and looting shops.” The reason for their anger was that the rise, the first in four years, did not meet their demand for a \$75 per month increase to compensate for soaring prices.

Two explosive movements are coming together. The working class in the advanced capitalist countries, after decades of being pushed down, is reaching a limit. At the same time, the working class in the so-called “emerging economies” is determined that it is not going to be simply exploited as ultra cheap labour, but will have its share of the vast wealth that it is creating.

And now let us turn to the third factor. The past 25 years have seen the most far-reaching preparations by the International Committee of the Fourth International for the period of revolutionary struggles now on the agenda. Let us indicate the main points and draw out their underlying logic.

In the split of 1985-86, the ICFI re-established the program of Trotskyism. It demonstrated that the degeneration of the WRP was the outcome of national opportunism.

In 1987, the ICFI made a new turn. It posed the question: what underlying, organic process did its victory over the opportunists signify? It was not a question of just being right. Cannon was completely correct in his assessment of Pabloism in the Open letter, Healy was correct in the struggle of 1961-63. But in both cases the orthodox Trotskyists faced even greater difficulties, despite being correct.

In assessing the outcome of the struggle of 1985-86, the ICFI focused on the process of globalisation. That analysis prepared the ICFI for the next great turn in events: the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It explained that the end of the Stalinist regimes was not the end of socialism—much less the death of Marxism—these bureaucracies were neither socialist nor Marxist. Rather, it signified the historical unviability of national-based programs and organisations.

From this analysis, the ICFI drew the most far-reaching conclusions. It was not just the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union that proved to be unviable, but all the organisations that dominated the labour movement. What followed from this analysis was a transformation in the work of the world party and its sections. The struggle for socialism could not be carried forward by raising demands and placing them upon the old organisations and demanding that they carry them out. Rather, we recognised that the achievement of socialism required the building of new parties. No one was going to carry this out but ourselves. Accordingly, the ICFI began the transformation of its leagues into parties.

This was not a question of a name change but the beginning of a vital process. In 1998, the ICFI founded the *World Socialist Web Site*, a truly unique response to the new situation, providing, above all, an international centre for political analysis and the integration of the work of the different sections of the ICFI on a world scale.

Ten years after establishing the WSWs, the founding of parties began. The SEP in America held its founding congress in August 2008 on the eve of the eruption of the global financial crisis. The Australian SEP held its founding congress in January of this year. The German section, the PSG, held its founding congress in May to be followed by similar congresses in other sections of the ICFI. The next stage of our work is well under way—the preparation of a program of transitional demands aimed at providing the ICFI and its sections with the means to intervene in the mass struggles of the working class that are directly ahead.

What is the meaning of this history? Where do we stand in the historical struggle? There is an objective logic at work here. The globalisation of capitalist production over the past 25 years has raised all the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production to a new peak of intensity. Explosive social and class struggles are starting to erupt all over the world. And the work of the ICFI has been in line with these developments.

We are seeing the intersection of the long and difficult struggle for Marxism and the actual movement of the working class. Such a coincidence means that we are entering a new epoch of social revolution. The complex decades-long struggle waged by the Trotskyists against all forms of national opportunism, has prepared the Fourth International to build the new mass parties of the working class. We urge that you engage in this struggle by joining the SEP. Build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the world party of socialist revolution and fulfill the perspective that Leon Trotsky set out.

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