

The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

Part five

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The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany held its Founding Congress May 22-24, 2010 in Berlin. The Congress adopted the document “The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit” on May 23.

We are publishing the document in serialized form. Below is the fourth of eleven parts.

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XII. The Centrism of the SAP

85. The five years that lay between Trotsky’s call for a new International and its founding in September 1938 were devoted to a process of intensive clarification. At its centre was a struggle against centrism, which sought to find a kind of middle road between Stalinism and Trotskyism, between reformist and revolutionary politics. The events in Germany had discredited the perspective of peaceful development and democratic reforms and unleashed a process of fermentation in the ranks of the reformist and Stalinist parties, a process that Trotsky sought to influence. “Reformism gives place to the innumerable shades of Centrism, which now, in the majority of countries, dominate the workers’ movement,” he wrote. “The new International cannot form itself in any other way than that of struggle against centrism. Ideological intransigence and flexible united front policy are, in these conditions, two weapons for attaining one and the same end.” 46

86. In the article “Centrism and the Fourth International”, Trotsky elaborated the most important characteristics of centrism: in the sphere of theory it is impressive and eclectic, avoids theoretical obligations as much as possible and inclines “(in words) to give preference to ‘revolutionary practice’ over theory; without understanding that only Marxist theory can give to practice a revolutionary direction.” In the sphere of ideology, centrism leads a parasitic existence. It utilises the arguments of the reformists against the Marxists and the arguments of the Marxists against the right, whereby it avoids the practical conclusions and dulls the tip of Marxist criticism. It detests “the revolutionary principle: State that which is”, and inclines “to substituting, in the place of political principles, personal combinations and petty organizational diplomacy.” It remains spiritually dependent on the right and hides its hybrid nature “by calling out about the dangers of ‘sectarianism’; but by sectarianism it understands not a passivity of abstract propaganda but the anxious care for principle, the clarity of position, political consistency, definiteness in

organization”. It does not understand “that one cannot build in the present period a national revolutionary party save as part of an international party”; and in the choice of his international allies the centrist is “even less particular than in his own country”. The centrist “swears by the policy of the united front as he empties it of its revolutionary content and transforms it from a tactical method into a highest principle.” The centrist “gladly appeals to pathetic moral lessons to hide his ideological emptiness” without understanding “that revolutionary morals can rest only on the ground of revolutionary doctrine and revolutionary policy”. 47

87. All these characteristics were present in the Socialist Workers Party of Germany (SAP). In autumn 1931, the SAP was formed as a left split from the SPD and developed as a home for various currents that had found neither a place in the SPD nor in the KPD—left Social Democrats, former leaders of the USPD (among them Georg Ledebour), residues of the KAPD, defectors from the Leninbund and the KPD opposition (Brandlerites), and radical pacifists. For the masses “centrism is only a transition from one stage to the next”, wrote Trotsky, however for individual politicians it became second nature. He characterized the leadership of the SAP as “a group of desperate Social Democratic functionaries, lawyers, and journalists.” However, “a desperate Social Democrat still does not mean a revolutionist.” 48

88. The SAP did not have its own political programme. It did not rest on a common understanding of great historical events, whose lessons were inculcated in the flesh and blood of its cadre. The place of the programme was taken by the united front policy, which it transformed from a tactic into a strategy. Instead of fighting for a thought out revolutionary perspective, it advocated unity at any price, which led inevitably to adaptation to social democracy. Characteristic was its reproach that the KPD was splitting the trade unions by building the revolutionary trade union opposition (RGO). Trotsky, who also rejected the RGO policy, answered: “The fault of the Communist Party does not lie in that it ‘splits’ the ranks of the proletariat, and ‘weakens’ the Social Democratic unions. That is not a revolutionary criterion because, under the present leadership, the unions serve not the workers, but the capitalists. The Communist Party is guilty of a crime not because it ‘weakens’ Leipart’s organization but because it weakens itself. The participation of the Communists in reactionary unions is dictated not by the abstract principle of unity but by the concrete necessity to wage battle in order to purge the organizations of the agents of capital. With the SAP this active, revolutionary, attacking element in the policy is made subservient to the bald principle of the unity of unions that are led by agents of capital.” 49

89. Under the blows of the Nazis, the SAP moved temporarily to the left. Max Seydewitz and Kurt Rosenfeld, two left Social Democrats, were replaced as party leaders by Jacob Walcher and Paul Frölich, two founding members of the KPD, who came from the KPD opposition led by Brandler. In August 1933, the SAP, together with the International Left

Opposition and two Dutch parties, called for the formation of the Fourth International. The signatories of the “Declaration of Four” declared categorically, “that the new International cannot tolerate any conciliation towards reformism or centrism. The necessary unity of the working-class movement can be attained neither by the blurring of reformist and revolutionary conceptions nor by adaptation to the Stalinist policy but only by combating the policies of both bankrupt Internationals. To remain equal to its task, the new International must not permit any deviation from revolutionary principles in the questions of insurrection, proletarian dictatorship, soviet form of the state, etc.” 50

90. But in practice, the SAP sabotaged the construction of the Fourth International from the outset, openly moving away from it when the Stalinist parties turned towards the popular front. Under the title “Trotskyism or revolutionary Realpolitik” the SAP now stated that the establishment of the International did not yet lie in the realm of the possible. The vanguard could not jump over the stages of development of proletarian consciousness. “It would be senseless to believe that the masses would spontaneously one day—if not today then tomorrow—recognise the correctness of these principles and gather around them.” The homogeneity necessary for the International could result only from common experiences. “Abstract swearing by superficially acquired principles or by the figure of a leader” would only result in “a ridiculous caricature of real unanimity”. The theoretical basis of the new International consisted not of some pre-existing formulae, but could only be formed in the process of its emergence. In countries with a developed proletariat “the vanguard is formed not by the proclamation of some ‘correct’ but abstract principles, but through the permanent participation in the concrete daily struggles of the proletariat.” 51

91. “Trotskyism or revolutionary Realpolitik” was the SAP’s answer to an open letter that Trotsky had addressed to all revolutionary groups and organizations in the summer of 1935. In it, Trotsky stressed that the construction of new parties and of the new International were the key to the solution of all other tasks. The speed and the timing of a new revolutionary development depended on the general process of the class struggle. “Marxists, however, are not fatalists. They do not unload upon the historical process those very tasks which the historical process has posed before them. The initiative of a conscious minority, a scientific program, bold and ceaseless agitation in the name of clearly formulated aims, merciless criticism of all ambiguity—those are some of the most important factors for the victory of the proletariat. Without a fused and steeled revolutionary party a socialist revolution is inconceivable.” 52

92. Among the SAP members who attacked Trotsky most aggressively was Willy Brandt, who later became German Chancellor and SPD chairman. At the time, the 22-year old was in charge of the headquarters of the SAP youth federation in Oslo, which he represented at the International Bureau of Revolutionary Youth Organizations. Brandt oversaw the expulsion of the Trotskyists from the International Youth Bureau and wrote articles accusing Trotskyism of the “worst sectarianism”. “In our opinion, the main distinction—a distinction of a principle nature—between us and the Trotskyists regards the development of the proletarian party and the relationship between party and class”, wrote Brandt. “For the Trotskyists, the task is to create an ideologically aligned ‘vanguard’ over the working class. For us, we face the duty of participating in the creation of a truly communist proletarian mass organisation, on the foundations of the European workers’ movement, out of the practical lives and traditions of the working class in our country.” 53

93. Brandt’s “foundations of the workers’ movement” were highly contaminated by Stalinism and social democracy. He defended the popular front politics of the Stalinists and endorsed collaboration with social democratic parties. In Spain, where he travelled in 1937 as a war correspondent, he criticized the centrist POUM from the right. Its errors

were “mainly of an ultra-left, sectarian nature”, he claimed. It had not gone far enough in supporting the popular front. “The slogan should not be ‘against the popular front’, but ‘beyond the popular front’.” 54 The school of the SAP—and its furious attacks on Trotskyism—prepared Brandt for his later role. In 1969, as the first social democratic chancellor of the Federal Republic, Brandt succeeded in integrating a majority of rebellious students into bourgeois society, while he marginalised leftwing elements with the *Radikalenerlass* (decree against radicals).

94. The fateful consequences of centrism finally became clear in the actions of the POUM in the Spanish civil war. The party of Andres Nin, which, like the SAP, belonged to the centrist London Bureau, subordinated itself to the Stalinists on all important questions, and joined the popular front government in Barcelona at the high point of the revolution. It served as a left fig leaf for the coalition of republicans, socialists, Stalinists and anarchists that was destroying the Spanish revolution, and thus blocked the way to a revolutionary perspective for the workers, who were continually rebelling against their old leaders. The defenders of the POUM, who ascribed the Spanish defeat to the supposed “immaturity” of the masses, were answered by Trotsky as follows: “The historical falsification consists in this, that the responsibility for the defeat of the Spanish masses is unloaded on the working masses and not those parties which paralyzed or simply crushed the revolutionary movement of the masses. The attorneys of the POUM simply deny the responsibility of the leaders, in order thus to escape shouldering their own responsibility. This impotent philosophy, which seeks to reconcile defeats as a necessary link in the chain of cosmic developments, is completely incapable of posing and refuses to pose the question of such concrete factors as programs, parties, personalities that were the organizers of defeat. This philosophy of fatalism and prostration is diametrically opposed to Marxism as the theory of revolutionary action.” 55

XIII. The founding of the Fourth International

95. In September 1938, on the outskirts of Paris, the founding congress of the Fourth International took place. The founding document “The death agony of capitalism and the tasks of the Fourth International (the Transitional Programme)” was written by Trotsky. It stated that “The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only ‘ripened’; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.” 56

96. The sceptics and centrists who regarded the construction of a new International as premature, and held that such an organization must come out of “great events”, were answered in the Transitional Programme: “The Fourth International has already arisen out of great events: The greatest defeats of the proletariat in history. The cause for these defeats is to be found in the degeneration and perfidy of the old leadership. The class struggle does not tolerate an interruption. The Third International, following the Second, is dead for purposes of revolution. Long live the Fourth International!” Even if the Fourth International was weak in numbers, “it is strong in doctrine, program, tradition, in the incomparable tempering of its cadres.” The Transitional Programme declared “uncompromising war” on the “bureaucracies of the Second, Third, Amsterdam and Anarcho-syndicalist Internationals, as on their centrist satellites”, and stated: “All of these organizations are not pledges for the future, but decayed survivals of the past.” 57

97. In order to overcome the gulf between the maturity of the objective,

revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard, the Transitional Programme formulated a set of economic and political demands—such as a sliding scale of wages, the nationalization of industry, the banks and agriculture, the arming of the proletariat, the formation of a workers’ and peasants’ government. These transitional demands represented a bridge, “stemming from today’s conditions and from today’s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.” They had the task of developing the revolutionary consciousness of the working class and were not meant to be an adaptation to the predominant consciousness. “The program must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers”, Trotsky emphasised. “It must reflect society as it is and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to overcome and vanquish the backwardness.” 58

98. Revisionist currents have repeatedly tried, ever since, to interpret the Transitional Programme in an opportunist manner by taking individual demands out of their context. Thus the American revisionist George Novack called the Transitional Programme a “versatile toolbox”, from which one could select, “like a good craftsman” the tool suitable for a certain task. In this way, every opportunist manoeuvre could be justified. But this is precisely not the sense of the transitional demands, which must never contradict the socialist perspective upon which they are based.

99. The persecution of Trotsky and the Fourth International escalated following the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. The revolutionary consequences of the First World War were still fresh in the minds of the leaders of the imperialist powers and the Soviet bureaucracy. Stalin feared that the war could unleash a revolutionary movement capable of bringing Trotsky back to power. In order to liquidate Trotsky and hinder the growth of the Fourth International, Stalinist agents penetrated the Trotskyist movement and murdered Trotsky’s close collaborators, including his son Leon Sedov. Trotsky himself was struck with an ice-pick in his house in Coyoacan, near Mexico city, by the GPU agent Ramon Mercader on August 20, 1940. He died one day later. With his death, international socialism suffered a severe blow. The most important figure in the Russian Revolution after Lenin, Trotsky was an irreconcilable opponent of Stalinism, the founder of the Fourth International and the last and greatest representative of the political, intellectual, cultural and moral tradition of classical Marxism, which had inspired the revolutionary workers’ movement at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

XIV. The Second World War

100. Like the First, the Second World War was an imperialist war. “It derived its origin inexorably from the contradictions of international capitalist interests”, Trotsky wrote in 1940. “Contrary to the official fables designed to drug the people, the chief cause of war as of all other social evils—unemployment, the high cost of living, fascism, colonial oppression—is the private ownership of the means of production together with the bourgeois state which rests on this foundation.” So long, however, as the main productive forces of society were held by isolated capitalist cliques, Trotsky continued, “and so long as the national state remains a pliant tool in the hands of these cliques, the struggle for markets, for sources of raw materials, for domination of the world, must inevitably assume a more and more destructive character. State power and domination of the economy can be torn from the hands of these rapacious imperialist cliques only by the revolutionary working class.” 59

101. As in 1914, the initiative in the struggle to re-divide the world

emanated from Germany. Arriving on the imperialist world stage later than its rivals England and France, it tried in 1914 to create room for its dynamic productive forces by reorganizing Europe at the expense of its rivals—and thereby failed. The second attempt was better prepared—by a regime that suffocated every internal resistance and concentrated all its economic resources on the setting up of an enormous military machine.

102. However, the tremendous aggressiveness of German imperialism did not make the Allies’ war an anti-fascist one. In both the British and American ruling elite there had been substantial sympathy for Hitler before the outbreak of war, while the French ruling elite, after its military defeat, came to an arrangement with the German occupying forces. With the exception of the Soviet Union, the Allies pursued their own imperialist goals. England fought for the defence of its colonies and former supremacy. The United States intervened in order to secure its global hegemony in Europe and the Pacific. Hitler’s goal of smashing the Soviet Union was met in the US and England with considerable sympathy. But in view of the threat of German supremacy, they allied with the Soviet Union—which made the biggest sacrifices in the war—and postponed their confrontation with the USSR to a later date.

103. For its part, the Stalinist bureaucracy did everything to prove to its allies that it had no revolutionary intentions. From 1935 onwards it had supported “democratic” bourgeois regimes in the name of the popular front against fascism. Then, in 1939, Stalin entered into a pact with Hitler and handed over to him numbers of German Communists. After Hitler had broken the pact and attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the communist parties unconditionally supported the warring bourgeoisie and suppressed every expression of the class struggle. In the occupied countries, they subordinated the anti-fascist resistance to rightwing bourgeois figures such as General de Gaulle. In the colonial countries they demanded that the national movements provide support to their colonial oppressors in the war. And in the Soviet Union they appealed not to the class consciousness of the workers, but to Russian nationalism. Up to this day the Second World War is still identified in Russian by the Stalinist term the “Great Patriotic War”.

104. The Trotskyists conducted a courageous and heroic struggle against fascism and war. Persecuted by the Nazis and Stalinists, they participated in the anti-fascist resistance and strove to place it on a proletarian class basis. The German Trotskyists, who from October 1933 called themselves the International Communists of Germany (IKD), had early on prepared for illegality. They had approximately one thousand supporters when Hitler seized power. Some well-known leaders, who had to reckon with their arrest, went into exile. A committee abroad led the work in close co-operation with the International Secretariat under Leon Sedov. It published the newspaper *Unser Wort (Our Word)*, which was distributed illegally into Germany. In particular, members of the Dresden group of the IKD smuggled many of the most important works of Trotsky over the Czechoslovakian border for underground distribution in Germany—at the risk of their lives.

105. Many members of the IKD were murdered by the National Socialists or incarcerated in concentration camps. In autumn 1935, there was a wave of arrests of German Trotskyists. The Gestapo uncovered cells in Gelsenkirchen, Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Kassel, Magdeburg, Dresden and Danzig. Approximately 150 were sent to prison or to concentration camps. In the summer of 1936, the superior regional court in Hamm condemned 23 members of the IKD to a total of 70 years detention. Three prominent members of the Gelsenkirchen group were condemned by the Volksgerichtshof (people’s court). In January 1937, in the free city of Danzig, ten Trotskyists were brought before the court and sentenced. They had called for “the overthrow of fascism by the armed might of the proletariat”. “The organization of workers in the industrial enterprises, in the unemployment offices, and in the forced labor camps to resist and actively struggle against National Socialism—that is the sole

means of overthrowing fascism”, read one of their flyers. 60

106. In 1938, the IKD was represented by two delegates at the founding conference of the Fourth International. In occupied France, German and French Trotskyists jointly circulated the newspaper *Arbeiter und Soldat* (*Worker and Soldier*) among German troops. In contrast to the Stalinists, who subordinated themselves to the bourgeois national resistance, the Trotskyists fought for an alliance of the European workers, which included the German working class. The publisher of *Arbeiter und Soldat*, Widelin (Martin Monat), was later murdered by the Gestapo.

107. Widelin represented the German section in February 1944 at a six-day, secret conference of the Fourth International in occupied France, which elected a European executive committee and agreed upon extensive perspectives resolutions. The conference assumed the war would culminate in a revolutionary crisis. While it rejected alliances of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie, it supported the resistance struggle against the German occupying forces: “The proletariat supports this struggle in order to facilitate and hasten its transformation into a general struggle against capitalism. This position implies the most energetic fight against attempts of the agents of the national bourgeoisie to win the masses and use their support to rebuild the capitalist state and army. Everything possible must be done, on the contrary, to develop the embryonic workers’ power (militias, committees, etc.) at the same time as the most vigorous struggle is pursued against all forms of nationalism.” 61

To be continued

NOTES:

46 Leon Trotsky, *Two Articles On Centrism*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/02/centrism.htm>

47 Ibid

48 Leon Trotsky, *What Next? Vital questions for the German proletariat*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next02.htm>

49 Ibid

50 *The Declaration of Four*, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/1930s/four.htm>

51 *Trotzkismus oder revolutionäre Realpolitik: eine notwendige Auseinandersetzung*, published by the foreign centre of the Socialist Workers Party of Germany. - Paris, approx. 1935

52 *Open Letter for the Fourth International*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/xx/fi.htm>

53 *In Marxistische Tribüne, Diskussionsblätter für Arbeiterpolitik*, published by the SAP, Paris 1935-37

54 Willy Brandt, *Ein Jahr Krieg und Revolution in Spanien, Referat auf der Sitzung der erweiterten Parteileitung der SAP (1937)*, in *Neue Gesellschaft*, Frankfurter Hefte 1/1987, P. 47/48

55 Leon Trotsky, *The class, the party and the leadership*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/xx/party.htm>

56 Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/transprogram.pdf>

57 Ibid

58 Leon Trotsky, cited in *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, Labor Publications 1988, p74

59 *Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War and The Proletarian World Revolution*, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/emergconf/fi-emerg02.htm>

60 Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936-37], *The Trial of the Danzig Trotskyists*, New York 1970, p, 287

61 *Theses on the Liquidation of World War II and the Revolutionary Upsurge*, <http://www.marx.org/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/ww/1945-ww02.htm>



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