

The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

Part nine

8 October 2010

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 ninth of eleven parts.

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XXIII. From the student movement to the Greens

179. The petty bourgeois conceptions prevailing in the post war period found their most concentrated expression amongst the leaders of the 1968 movement. The student radicalisation had a number of causes: a rebellion against conservatism in the universities and society as a whole, opposition to rearmament and the Emergency Laws, protest against the Vietnam war and the regime of the Shah of Persia, and, in particular, reckoning with the heritage of Nazism and its crimes, which had been suppressed during the era of Chancellor Adenauer. The revolt by students was closely bound up with the offensive by the working class, but their political and theoretical conceptions cut them off from the working class. The German student movement was not only one of the biggest in the world numerically speaking—it was also one of the most productive in terms of ideology. A decisive influence came from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and other tendencies of the New Left. The writings of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Karl Korsch, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich found a large audience.

180. Instead of capitalist exploitation, the leading figures of the New Left placed at the heart of their social analysis the concept of alienation, which they interpreted in a psychological or existential manner. The working class was no longer regarded as a revolutionary class, but, rather, as an apolitical, or even backward mass, thoroughly integrated into bourgeois society via the mechanisms of consumerism, the domination of the media and repressive forms of education. Herbert Marcuse, Heidegger’s pupil and a member of the Frankfurt School, even detected a “proto-fascist syndrome in the working class”. 99 The “revolution” would proceed not from the working class, but from the young intelligentsia, social fringe groups or guerrilla movements. Its driving force was not the class contradictions of capitalist society, but critical thinking and the actions of an enlightened elite. The goal of the revolution was not—or was not primarily—the overthrow of the existing relations of power and ownership, but the changing of social and cultural—including

sexual—habits. The representatives of the New Left considered such a cultural change to be the precondition for social revolution. Student leaders such as Rudi Dutschke and Daniel Cohn-Bendit stressed the significance of provocative action aimed at shocking the mass of the population out of their inertia.

181. The Frankfurt School transformed Marxism from a theoretical and political weapon of the proletarian class struggle into a form of supra-class cultural criticism, expressing the political pessimism, social alienation and personal frustration of sections of the middle classes. Max Horkheimer and his closest collaborator, Theodor Adorno, reverted to philosophical traditions that Marxism had opposed—the critical theory of Kant, the “critical criticism” of the Young Hegelians and various forms of philosophical subjectivism from Schopenhauer to Heidegger. Traumatized by the experience of National Socialism, they denied the revolutionary potential of the working class. Contrary to Marx, in whose view the development of the productive forces blew apart capitalist property relations and unleashed an epoch of social revolution, in their opinion, the development of the productive forces plunged society into barbarism and solidified capitalist rule. “The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers, but the logical consequence of industrial society”, they claimed, and further: “The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression”. The only way out of this social dead end was critical thinking: “It is the servant which the master cannot control at will”. 100 The revolutionary subject, therefore, according to these theorists, was the “enlightened individual” and not the proletariat.

182. The German student revolt reached its high point in the summer of 1968. After that, the SDS broke apart into competing factions. The glorification of guerrilla warfare led a small minority to draw fatal conclusions and turn to individual terrorism. Others joined anarchist organizations and so-called K-groups, which discovered a replacement for a socialist perspective in the Stalinism of the Maoist variety. The large majority embarked upon a “march through the institutions” (Dutschke) and turned to the SPD. At the end of the 1970s, they all assembled in a new party that within 20 years would become a principal support for German imperialism—the Greens.

183. The programme of the Greens drew liberally from the Frankfurt School, such as the rejection of the class struggle, a concentration on questions of lifestyle, and scepticism towards technological progress. The anti-capitalist rhetoric of the SDS had disappeared and given way to pacifism, environmentalism and the revival of bourgeois democracy. Ingenious forms of rank and file democracy were supposed to prevent the party being corrupted by power. In reality, they freed the leadership from any control by the membership, so that the most cynical and unscrupulous representatives of the Greens were finally able to win the highest positions in public office. At heart, the Greens were retrogressive and conservative. This was most clearly shown in their economic programme, which

advocated a “turn away from the national and international division of labour” and “consumer-oriented production locally and regionally”. 101

184. In their social composition, the Greens were a party of the academically educated middle class. Their leadership layer consisted—and still consists—predominantly of ex-members of the student movement and various anarchist and Maoist groups. They found their followers in the more than one thousand groups belonging to the *Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz* (BBU, Federal Association of Civic Initiatives for Environmental Protection). They have achieved their best election results in the middle class districts of major cities and university towns, while Green Party members have the highest average income and level of education of all parties.

185. The assumption of government office by the Greens has irrevocably destroyed the myth that they represent an alternative to the daily grind of bourgeois politics. They have systematically proved that one cannot change the existing society in a progressive manner without encroaching upon capitalist private property. In the state of Hesse, the greatest level of environmental pollution by the Hoechst company occurred under Green Environment Minister Joschka Fischer. The Greens have supported the dismantling of public sector jobs and cuts in welfare benefits (Berlin), the building of new prisons (Hesse), the establishment of camps for asylum seekers (Lower Saxony) and factory shutdowns (Brandenburg). In Hamburg, they are now governing as coalition partners of the CDU. In 1998, the Greens entered the federal government. The former pacifists took over the task of overcoming the deeply entrenched opposition to foreign military missions by the Bundeswehr. To this end, the prestigious foreign ministry was entrusted to the former street fighter Joschka Fischer. In the meantime, the Greens have become the most enthusiastic proponents of German militarism. Together with the SPD, they have also implemented the most comprehensive welfare cuts since the founding of the Federal Republic, creating a huge low wage sector.

XXIV. The WRP breaks with the International Committee

186. While the British WRP increasingly shifted away from the principles it had once defended against Pabloism, in the course of the 1970s, the American Workers League moved in the opposite direction. In response to a political crisis that led to the resignation of the WL’s National Secretary Tim Wohlforth in 1974, the party made a deliberate turn towards the working class and intensified its efforts to work through the history of the Fourth International. This emphasis on the historical experience of the Trotskyist movement, within the context of the objective development of world capitalism and the international class struggle, emerged as the essential political characteristic of the Workers League. In its perspective resolution of November 1978, the Workers League stated, “The foundation for revolutionary practice, the indispensable basis for any real orientation to the working class from the standpoint of the struggle for power, is the thorough assimilation of the entire body of historical experiences through which the International Committee has passed since 1953. The training of Trotskyist cadre is only possible in the struggle to base every aspect and detail of the party’s political work on the historical conquests of the International Committee, derived from the battle against revisionism”. 102

187. The Workers League also played the leading role in the investigation “Security and the Fourth International”, in which the International Committee continued its offensive against Pabloism by uncovering the extent to which the Pabloites had covered up and were implicated in the murder of Leon Trotsky and other crimes committed by Stalinism. The investigation provided clear evidence that Joseph Hansen,

who had played a leading role in the breakaway of the SWP from the International Committee in 1963, had worked as an agent inside the Trotskyist movement.

188. The emphasis it placed on the history of the International Committee brought the Workers League increasingly into conflict with the WRP. In 1982, the secretary of the Workers League, David North, undertook a systematic critique of the opportunist policies of the WRP. He began with the philosophical conceptions that dominated political debate inside the WRP and had completely replaced the study of historical and political issues. North wrote a critique of Gerry Healy’s “Studies in Dialectical Materialism” and demonstrated that Healy’s presentation of the dialectic rejected materialism and returned to the subjective idealist philosophy that Marx had overcome in the 1840s in his critique of the Young Hegelians.

189. North summarized his critique of the political evolution of the WRP as follows: “The ‘Studies in Dialectics’ has brought into the open a crisis that has been developing within the International Committee for a considerable period of time. For several years (in my opinion, this began in 1976 and only began to predominate in 1978), in the name of the struggle for dialectical materialism and against propagandism, the International Committee has drifted steadily away from a struggle for Trotskyism”. In particular, North attacked the the WRP’s opportunist relations with bourgeois national regimes in the Middle East: “A vulgarization of Marxism, palmed off as the ‘struggle for dialectics’, has been accompanied by an unmistakable opportunist drift within the International Committee, especially in the WRP. The Marxist defence of national liberation movements and the struggle against imperialism has been interpreted in an opportunist fashion of uncritical support for various bourgeois nationalist regimes”. 103

190. The WRP attempted to isolate the Workers League and suppress its criticisms, but the WL responded with a further analysis of the political line of the WRP. In a letter dated January 23, 1984, to Michael Banda, the general secretary of the WRP, North wrote that the International Committee “has for some time been working without a clear and politically-unified perspective to guide its practice. Rather than a perspective for the building of sections of the International Committee in every country, the central focus of the IC’s work for several years has been the development of alliances with various bourgeois nationalist regimes and liberation movements. The content of these alliances has less and less reflected any clear orientation toward the development of our own forces as central to the fight to establish the leading role of the proletariat in the anti-imperialist struggle in the semi-colonial countries. The very conceptions advanced by the SWP in relation to Cuba and Algeria which we attacked so vigorously in the early 1960s appear with increasing frequency in our own press”. 104

191. North amplified the Workers League’s criticism in a report to the ICFI on February 11, 1984: “It is clear that by mid-1978 a general orientation toward relations with nationalist regimes and liberation movements was developing without any corresponding perspective for the actual building of our own forces inside the working class. An entirely uncritical and incorrect appraisal began to emerge ever more openly within our press, inviting the cadres and the working class to view these bourgeois nationalists as ‘anti-imperialist leaders’ to whom political support must be given”. North singled out for particular criticism the WRP’s support for Saddam Hussein’s repression of the Iraqi Communist Party, the praise given to the Iranian regime of Ayatollah Khomeini and the uncritical support for the leader of the Libyan Jamahiriya, Muammar al-Gaddafi. He also cited the relations that the WRP had established with sections of the Labour Party, including Ken Livingstone and Ted Knight, and the Greater London Council. 105

192. The Workers Revolutionary Party refused to discuss the differences raised by the Workers League. Instead, it issued threats to sever relations

with the Workers League if it persisted in its criticisms. This unprincipled and opportunist course had, ultimately, devastating consequences for the WRP. In 1985, shortly after the defeat of the one year long miners' strike, a crisis broke out inside the WRP, which quickly led to its break with the International Committee and its complete destruction. The WRP's crisis created conditions where the critique undertaken by the WL could be discussed within the entire International Committee. Prior to this, sections were either not informed of the Workers League's critique or, as was the case for the IC delegates of the BSA, confronted such organisational pressure and political provocations that a serious study of the critique was not possible. In the autumn of 1985, delegates of the Australian, Sri Lankan and German sections met with David North in London and supported the critique made by the WL. In the weeks that followed, the entire membership of the BSA supported Workers League's critique. Inside the WRP itself, a minority emerged, led by Dave Hyland, which also supported the International Committee.

193. The ICFI delegates refused to be utilized for the nationalist purposes of the competing WRP factions. They insisted that a political recovery of the WRP from its crisis was possible only to the extent that it returned to the principles of the ICFI and accepted the discipline of the international movement. With the exception of the internationalist minority, no faction was prepared to do so. Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter, who had fallen out with Healy, shared his opportunist and nationalist perspective and sought to avoid any examination of the political causes of the WRP's crisis. They would not accept international constraints upon the political alliances and activities of the WRP by recognising the authority of the ICFI.

194. When Slaughter asserted that internationalism consisted of "laying down class lines and fighting them through", the WL Political Committee asked, "But by what process are these 'class lines' determined? Does it require the existence of the Fourth International?... The International Committee of the Fourth International is the historical embodiment of the 'whole programmatic base of Trotskyism and the Marxism of Marx and Lenin'. The subordination of national sections to the IC is the organised expression of their agreement with and defence of that program. Those parties which uphold Trotskyism as the contemporary development of Marxist principles and program are organised in the Fourth International and accept the authority of the International Committee. To base one's definition of internationalism on the separation of the program from its organisational expression is to adopt the standpoint of all those revisionist and centrist opponents of Trotskyism who deny the continuity of Marxism, embodied in the ICFI, in order to retain freedom of action within their national theatre of operations". 106

195. On February 8, 1986, the WRP held a rump congress from which all supporters of the International Committee were excluded. The main document prepared for this congress was an anti-Trotskyist diatribe composed by Banda, entitled "27 Reasons Why the International Committee Should be Buried Forthwith and the Fourth International Built." Within months of writing this document, Banda repudiated his nearly 40 year association with the Fourth International and proclaimed his admiration for Stalin. As for the WRP, its various factions disintegrated one by one. Within less than a decade, Slaughter and other former leaders of the WRP were heavily involved in the US-NATO operation in Bosnia. The only viable political tendency in the British organisation that was to emerge from the crisis and collapse of the WRP was the internationalist minority, which upheld the principles of the ICFI. This tendency established the International Communist Party in February 1986, forerunner of the present-day Socialist Equality Party, the British section of the ICFI.

196. The split with the WRP was an anticipation of fundamental changes in world politics that were to shatter the post war order in the ensuing years. After the split, the International Committee undertook an

exhaustive analysis of these changes. The unparalleled integration of the world market and the internationalisation of production had stripped away the basis for the national reformist perspectives upon which both the Stalinists and social democrats had based their politics. The "absolute and active predominance of the world economy over all national economies, including that of the United States", was "a basic fact of modern life". It had "raised the fundamental contradiction between world economy and the capitalist nation-state system, and between social production and private ownership, to an unprecedented level of intensity". The class struggle would now assume an international character not only in content but also in form. "Even the most elemental struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on an international scale...the unprecedented international mobility of capital has rendered all nationalist programs for the labour movement of different countries obsolete and reactionary". 107

197. The split between the revolutionary internationalists of the IC majority and the national opportunists of the WRP corresponded to these objective changes, which had already developed to an advanced stage by 1985. This was why there was rapid support for the standpoint of the WL throughout the International Committee, and why the IC was able to quickly develop a new political orientation. A large proportion of the cadre of the IC had joined the movement in the 1960s and early 70s in response to the international perspective defended by the British section, and had adhered to this perspective despite all the problems thrown up by the degeneration of the WRP. In its conflict with the WRP, the International Committee reworked and renewed the entire theoretical and historical heritage of the Fourth International. 108 This prepared the International Committee for the impending international shocks, and created the conditions for the deepening and development of its perspective.

198. An important gain that arose directly out of the split was the integration of an important layer of Tamil workers into the BSA. The rejection of permanent revolution by the WRP had cut off the IC from winning influence among refugees and immigrant workers who were coming into conflict with petty bourgeois nationalist organisations. The BSA was now in a position to overcome this obstacle and, in close collaboration with the Sri Lankan RCL, break a layer of immigrant workers from the influence of Tamil nationalism. Since then, this group has played an important role in the building of the International Committee in Europe and the production of the Tamil site of the WSWS.

To be continued

NOTES:

99 In: *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, Boston, Beacon press, 1972, p 25

100 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

101 Emil Peter Mueller, *Die Grünen und das Parteiensystem*, p100, 101

102 Cited in *The Historical and International Foundations of the SEP*, 2008, Point 159

103 *Fourth International* (Detroit, 1986), Volume 13, No. 2, Autumn 1986, pp. 16-18

104 Ibid, p 35

105 Ibid, p 43

106 Ibid, p 77

107 ICFI, *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, August 1998, p. 48-49, 7

108 In particular, the systematic review of the history of the Fourth International and the International Committee by David North (*The Heritage we Defend*) and the IC's detailed analysis of the opportunist decline of the WRP (*How the WRP betrayed Trotskyism*).



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