

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

Part Eleven

22 March 2011

This document, The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain), was adopted unanimously at the founding congress of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), held in Manchester between October 22 and 25, 2010. It reviews and examines the most critical political experiences of the British working class, centring in particular on the post-war history of the Trotskyist movement.

It is being published on the WSWS in 11 parts.

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The Socialist Equality Parties

262. The renaming of the International Communist Party as the Socialist Equality Party in 1996 was conceived within the framework of a discussion by the International Committee to draw the necessary conclusions from its analysis of the collapse of the old workers' organisations. In the post-war period, until the formation of the WRP, all the sections of the International Committee had adopted the form of leagues. This was in recognition of the fact that the Stalinist and social democratic parties held the allegiance of many socialist-minded workers, intellectuals and youth. The task of constructing a revolutionary party, therefore, could only proceed through a systematic struggle to dispel illusions in the socialist character of these parties, including their left representatives, and work for a radicalisation within their ranks and those of the trade unions they controlled.

263. A sea-change had now occurred in the relationship between the working class and these organisations. They no longer enjoyed the active and militant support of advanced workers, who viewed them as overt representatives of big business. Consequently, it was not a question of exposing illusions in other tendencies, but of directly establishing the right of the Trotskyist movement to lead the working class.

264. The formation of a party was not simply a question of a change in name, but a process that was begun in anticipation of a mass rebellion against the old organisations. Its aim was to bring the sections of the International Committee into an alignment with this emerging situation. The name Socialist Equality Party was adopted, after extensive discussion, in order to reconnect the working class with the essential goal of the socialist movement since its inception—the elimination of class oppression. It set the International Committee in direct opposition, not only to the terrible inequalities developing within contemporary society, but to all those tendencies that misuse socialist phrases to legitimise support for capitalism and bureaucratic privilege, and who make ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation the axis of politics.

265. A particular task facing the SEP is to clarify the political role being played by the Pabloites and other ex-left groups in opposing the development of a genuine socialist alternative to the moribund former workers' organisations. To the extent that they are forced to distance

themselves politically from the right-wing policies of the bureaucracy, these groups insist that any struggle must be led by supposedly "left" sections of the trade unions and the social democrats. This is the essential role of the New Anti-Capitalist Party, formed by the French section of the USec, and of Die Linke in Germany, formed through an alliance between the former East German Stalinists and a faction of the social democrats.

266. This relationship to the bureaucracy, not the pseudo-socialist rhetoric they use, defines and determines the character of these tendencies. They are not representatives of the working class, but a petty-bourgeois stratum that occupies a position overwhelmingly based in the public sector and in academia. Their claim that socialism can be achieved through the "blunt instrument" of one or another of the national bureaucracies has been the mechanism through which they have not only been incorporated into the upper echelons of many unions, but have also assumed governmental positions within the capitalist state.

The World Socialist Web Site

267. The greatest achievement of the International Committee in the period of transition from leagues to parties was the launching in 1998 of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS). Seizing advantage of the revolutionary developments in computer technology, the Trotskyist movement was able, for the first time, to establish a medium through which it could speak with one voice to a world audience. The WSWS allows the International Committee to bring to bear the accumulated theoretical capital of the party, embodied in its cadre, to provide a Marxist appraisal of contemporary world events. It provides the necessary locus for the party's work to unify the working class internationally.

268. The WSWS is grounded in a historically derived understanding of the pre-requisites for the development of a revolutionary movement. These were elaborated by David North in a report to the 18th plenum of the ICFI in July 1998:

"(1) The insistence of the ICFI on the primacy of internationalism as the basis of the political strategy and tactical organisation of the working class. (2) The uncompromising character of the struggle waged by the ICFI against the domination of the working class by the reactionary labour bureaucracies. (3) The emphasis placed upon the revival of a genuine socialist political culture within the working class as an essential intellectual and, one might add, 'spiritual' premise of a new international revolutionary movement. This is the essential intellectual substance and precondition of socialist revolution. (4) The struggle against spontaneism and political fatalism in relation to the development of the crisis of capitalism, the class struggle, and the socialist revolution".⁸⁶

Imperialist War and Militarism

269. The analysis made by the International Committee of the implications of globalisation, the decline of US capitalism and the degeneration of the old workers' organisations prepared the international movement for the eruption of militarism and war that followed the

dissolution of the USSR. The International Committee was able to detect, in the outburst of US aggression in the Balkans, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, the contradictions that were eroding the foundations of the entire imperialist order.

270. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the chief obstacle that had prevented the US exercising its global domination was gone. But this coincided with the historic eclipse of the US as the world's premier economic power. Washington determined to use its military superiority to offset its weakening economic position against its major rivals and establish control of the world's most strategic regions and resources. Though the US plays the pre-eminent role in the drive towards militarism, at the roots of this drive are the geopolitical and economic tensions arising objectively out of the capitalist nation state system. Competition between the US, Japan, Russia, and the European powers, as well as China and India, mean that further predatory wars for geopolitical dominance and control of energy resources are inevitable.

271. In its much reduced world position, the British bourgeoisie has generally understood that it must accept the leading role of Washington, and work under the NATO umbrella, in projecting its global interests as a military power. But this took on greater urgency following the collapse of the East European Stalinist states. Reunification had consolidated the position of Germany as the continent's leading power, while the Franco-German alliance worked to the detriment of UK influence across the European continent. It was to offset the challenge posed by Britain's European rivals that the Blair government functioned as the most enthusiastic ally of US imperialism in its policy of "pre-emptive war" and associated crimes. Behind the British bourgeoisie's insistence on the need to preserve and deepen the "special relationship", it was determined to secure its share of the spoils of conquest. All the institutions of the state—parliament, the civil service, the intelligence agencies and the armed forces—were given over to wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the name of the "war on terror", the judicial framework for a police state was established.

272. Labour sought to legitimise the return to neo-colonialism under the guise of "humanitarian" interventions and the pursuit of Western "democratic values". The contemporary invocation of the "white man's burden" was taken up by a substantial layer of what once had constituted the middle class liberal, "left" milieu. During the 1960s and 1970s, this layer had based its leftism not on the independent struggle of the working class but on the Stalinist and social democratic apparatus. The collapse of this apparatus removed the essential prop for such protest politics. It meant that the liberal "lefts" no longer identified their own social advancement as in any way bound up with the workers' movement. On the contrary, they were among the beneficiaries of the speculative boom and the dismantling of the welfare state inaugurated by Thatcher and carried forward under New Labour.

273. A pernicious role was also played by those petty-bourgeois groups that came to the leadership of the mass protests against the Iraq war in 2003. Once again, the SWP, the Stalinists and others united behind pacifist appeals to the United Nations, the European powers and Britain's Liberal Democrats. The abject failure of this movement, and its subsequent collapse, underscores that the fight against war demands a unified political movement of the international working class for the overthrow of capitalism and its nation state system.

The world economic crisis and the tasks of the SEP

274. At the start of the 21st Century, the ruling elite has assumed the characteristics of the *Ancien Régime* in pre-revolutionary France—a cancerous growth contributing nothing to society. The one-time "workshop of the world" has become a playground for financial speculators and oligarchs, and the world's largest offshore tax haven, while the City of London is the premiere global centre for swindling and racketeering. This parasitism is the culmination of the long process of

decline and putrefaction of British capitalism. Infecting the entire political superstructure, it finds its fullest expression in the Labour Party and the trade unions, which function as the unalloyed representatives of the financial aristocracy and the enforcers of ever-widening social inequality.

275. Labour's warmongering was accompanied by a transfer of social wealth from working people to the super-rich on a scale without historical precedent. Every aspect of life was subordinated to the market. Freed from any restraint, social assets were ransacked, pension funds raided and corporate profits handed over in the form of massive share options and bonuses. The acceptance of all the nostrums associated with Thatcherism was epitomised in Gordon Brown's declaration that Labour had succeeded in ensuring there would be no return to "boom and bust" economics.

276. There are few more telling examples of political myopia in modern history. The economic "upswing" of the 1990s rested on unstable foundations—a massive accumulation of fictitious capital, unrelated to any actual development of economic production, and the resulting explosion in credit-fuelled debt. Beginning in 1997, a series of shocks struck the major stock markets, each one more serious than the last. In 2008, the entire edifice of international capital almost came crashing down—precipitating the most severe economic recession since the 1930s. As SEP (Australia) national secretary Nick Beams explained:

"The vast shifts in the structures of global capitalism—the implosion of the financial system, the collapse of credit and financial markets, and the bankruptcy of major banks and investment houses—are the outcome of changes that have been taking place beneath the surface of economic life over years, and even decades.

"A breakdown does not mean that capitalism comes to a halt. It signifies the opening of a new period of history, in which old structures, both economic and political, as well as ideologies and ways of thinking, give way, and new forms of political struggle develop, in which the fate of society itself is up for decision".⁸⁷

277. In the final analysis, the domination of the British working class by the reformist bureaucracies rested upon expanding production, and the conditions of relative prosperity created by it. That period is now at an end. In the aftermath of the greatest financial collapse in three-quarters of a century, the bourgeoisie is set on driving down the living standards and conditions of workers the world over to meet the dictates of the transnational corporations and the international financial oligarchy.

279. The SEP will seek to encourage the development of the class struggle and the creation of new, independent organisations, through which the working class can advance its interests. In these class battles, the primary focus of the revolutionary movement must be to overcome the gulf between the maturity of the objective situation and the present level of political consciousness in the working class. There can be no let-up in the struggle to overcome the debilitating political and organisational grip of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and its apologists, due to a mistaken belief that the objective drive towards revolution will, by itself, resolve the crisis of leadership and perspective in the working class. The influence of bureaucracies that still possess massive resources, and function as essential props of capitalist rule, can only be overcome through the assimilation of the strategic lessons of the struggle waged by Marxists to construct a revolutionary party of the international working class.

280. Only the International Committee of the Fourth International, which embodies the programmatic, tactical and organisational lessons derived from the international workers' movement over the past 150 years, can secure the political and ideological homogeneity of the revolutionary vanguard. Only this provides the basis for the working class to become conscious of its historical and international revolutionary role, and organize itself to carry out the world socialist revolution. The Socialist Equality Party states with Trotsky:

“The advanced workers, united in the Fourth International, show their class the way out of the crisis. They offer a programme based on international experience in the struggle of the proletariat and of all the oppressed of the world for liberation. They offer a spotless banner”.⁸⁸

Concluded

Footnotes:

⁸⁶ David North, 18th plenum of the ICFI, July 1998, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/mar2010/ih11-m11.shtml>

⁸⁷ Nick Beams, *The World Economic Crisis: A Marxist Analysis* (October 2008), <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/nbe1-o04.shtml>

⁸⁸ Leon Trotsky, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International, The Transitional Program* (1981), Labor Publications



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[wsws.org/contact](http://www.wsws.org/contact)