

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

## Part Four

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*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.*

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### Tony Cliff and the origins of the International Socialists

81. The factional struggle within the RCP occasioned the entry into British political life of Tony Cliff, a supporter of Shachtman's state capitalist thesis. Cliff was to build his own tendency by recruiting from amongst disaffected RCP members. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 proved a test case for the adherents of state capitalism. Provoked by US imperialism in response to the Chinese revolution the previous year, the conflict presaged an enormous intensification of the Cold War, including the remilitarisation of Europe. In just three years, three million Koreans were killed. British imperialism participated actively in the conflict, with the Labour government extending military conscription to two years as part of its mobilisation of some 70,000 soldiers, and raising health care prescription charges in order to fund it.

82. Adapting to official anti-communist hysteria, Cliff rejected the defence of North Korea. Insisting that the war was between rival imperialist powers—the USSR and the US—he argued for neutrality. This position provided the origins of the International Socialists' exhortation, "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but International Socialism". At a time when the British Trotskyists were working within the Labour Party and the trade unions to mobilise opposition to the Korean War, Cliff intervened against their efforts. He had been working with a secret faction of former Haston supporters within the RCP, based in Birmingham, who had agreed to assist him in splitting the Trotskyist movement. To this end, they decided to use a Trades Council meeting to publicly repudiate the line of the Fourth International on Korea. Group members later admitted that their action was intended to catch Healy in "a trap". They knew that such an open break with party discipline would leave him with no alternative but to expel them, enabling them to posture as "martyrs" in the hope of waging a factional struggle internationally.<sup>21</sup>

83. Cliff was to argue that the Stalinist dictatorship was only the most finished expression of a new stage in the evolution of world capitalism, which was partially expressed by Labour's post-war nationalisations and those conducted by the newly independent colonial regimes. He placed the intelligentsia alongside the Stalinist bureaucracy as the midwife of yet another variety of state capitalism. The industrial working class had "played no role whatsoever" in the Chinese revolution, while in Cuba,

"middle-class intellectuals filled the whole arena of struggle". From this, Cliff declared that Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution was wrong because, "While the conservative, cowardly nature of a late-developing bourgeoisie (Trotsky's first point) is an *absolute law*, the revolutionary character of the young working class (point 2) is neither absolute nor inevitable... Once the constantly revolutionary nature of the working class, the central pillar of Trotsky's theory, becomes suspect, the whole structure falls to pieces."<sup>22</sup>

84. For Cliff, the Labour bureaucracy articulated the social interests of the entire working class. He wrote, "An inevitable conclusion following upon Lenin's analysis of Reformism is that a small thin crust of conservatism hides the revolutionary urges of the mass of the workers," whereas, the history of reformism in the UK and elsewhere proved its "solidity, its spread *throughout* the working class, frustrating and largely isolating all revolutionary minorities". Reformism was not simply based on an aristocracy of labour, but infused the working class, which, Cliff argued, benefited in its entirety from capitalist expansion. "We go up together", he proclaimed, "not only an infinitesimal minority, but the whole of the working class."<sup>23</sup>

85. He concluded: "To a large extent, what makes the Labour Party tick is what makes the British people tick". Consequently, "Marxists should not set themselves up as a party or embryo of a party of their own. They should remember that the working class looks to the Labour Party as the political organisation of the class (and no doubt when a new wave of political activity spreads among the working class millions of new voters will flock to its banner and hundreds of thousands will join it actively)."<sup>24</sup>

86. Notwithstanding terminological differences between Grant and Cliff, both attributed to the Stalinist bureaucracy a legitimate position within Soviet society, and projected the historic viability of Stalinist-type states. In the ensuing years, they would again and again find themselves in a political alliance against the Healy group.

### The emergence of Pabloism

87. The theoretical revisions of Grant and Cliff would prove to be only a foretaste of those associated with Pabloism, the most pernicious and politically dangerous tendency to emerge from the Fourth International as a result of the political pressures bearing down upon it in the post-war years.

88. The SWP and the International Executive Committee, based in Europe under the leadership of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, had taken a united stance against the Morrow/Goldman tendency and its supporters in Britain. But from 1949, in response to the consolidation of US hegemony in the west and the formation of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and China, Pablo began to shift his position—writing of the transition from capitalism to socialism taking place through "centuries" of "deformed workers' states". He asserted that the conflict between the US and the USSR would herald a global civil war, in which the Soviet

bureaucracy would be forced to carry through the socialist revolution. “For our movement”, Pablo declared, “objective social reality consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world.”

89. Behind his apocalyptic vision of “war-revolution”, Pablo consolidated the impressionistic positions that had emerged within the world movement into a liquidationist tendency, which wrote off the working class as a revolutionary force and reduced the Fourth International to the role of a pressure group on the Stalinists, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist movements. At the Third World Congress of the Fourth International in 1951, Pablo explained:

“What distinguishes us still more from the past, what makes for the quality of our movement today and constitutes the surest gauge of our future victories, is our growing capacities to understand, to appreciate the mass movement as it exists—often confused, often under treacherous, opportunist, centrist, bureaucratic and even bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships—and our endeavours to find our place in this movement with the aim of raising it from its present to higher levels... to reject these movements out of hand, to label them as reactionary, fascist or no concern to us, would be proof of the old type of ‘Trotskyist’ immaturity and of a dogmatic, abstract, intellectualistic judgment of the mass movement.”<sup>25</sup>

90. On this basis, Pablo formulated what came to be defined as *entrism sui generis* (of a special type). Whereas previously the entrism tactics pursued by the Trotskyists had been subordinate to the building of independent organizations, this conception was now ruled out in favour of pushing these parties to the left:

“There is not now a single Trotskyist organization, which, either as a whole or in part, does not seriously, profoundly, concretely understand the necessity of subordinating all organizational characterizations, of formal independence or otherwise, to real integration into the mass movement where it expresses itself in each country, or to integration in an important current of this movement which can be influenced.”<sup>26</sup>

#### **Healy Joins the Struggle Against Pablo**

91. Neither Cannon nor Healy initially appreciated the extent of Pablo’s theoretical revisions. But the full implications of his line became clear as he tried to force the sections of the Fourth International to dissolve themselves into whatever tendency dominated the working class in a given country. In Britain, Pablo’s supporters, led by *Socialist Outlook* editor John Lawrence, sought to subject Healy to a Stalinist-style “gagging order” to prevent him raising his opposition to their trajectory. In response to these efforts at censorship, Cannon wrote to Healy:

“You are at a decisive turning point in your whole lifetime activity as a revolutionary right now. All the fruits of all your previous work and struggle to consolidate a principled cadre are threatened by this disloyal attempt to intimidate you by pointing the pistol of an opposition faction at your head...

“It is particularly necessary now for the members of your movement, the newly recruited ones as well as those who come from the past, to recognize that the organization through which they did this work did not fall from the sky. The conditions for all their constructive work in recent times, in an atmosphere of internal unity and harmony, were prepared by your long-drawn-out, exhausting and at times discouraging, factional struggle against the Hastons and others who were not much better than the Hastons. You have a fight on your hands now again. And you will not have internal peace and the possibility to develop another long period of constructive work, unhindered by factionalism, until you have settled accounts with this new faction which has risen up to challenge you.”<sup>27</sup>

92. Healy played an invaluable role in supporting the struggle of the SWP against Pablo and Mandel, while working patiently in the face of constant provocations by their supporters in Britain. An important ally in Healy’s fight was Michael Van Der Poorten (Mike Banda), then a 20-year old member of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India, who arrived in Britain from Ceylon in 1950. The lessons learnt by Healy from his earlier

struggles were brought to bear in the fight against the Pablo faction. His correspondence with Cannon manifested great sensitivity to the political complexities of assembling and educating a revolutionary cadre, a clear rejection of Pablo’s line and a concern for its disorienting impact on the ranks of the Fourth International. In a letter to Cannon on July 21, 1953 Healy wrote:

“Experience has taught us that the construction of a cadre takes time and many experiences. In spite of the inflammable international situation you cannot short-cut cadre building. In fact, the two things are dialectically related. The more explosive the situation, the more experienced a cadre must be in order to deal with it. The long time taken in developing a cadre then begins to pay off big dividends. What appears previously to be a long difficult process now changes into its opposite.”

In another letter to Cannon on September 7, 1953 Healy described how a meeting with Pablo had convinced him:

“we are engaged in the greatest struggle in the whole history of our movement to defend our basic principles. Pablo attacked your conception of our international with great bitterness. This man proceeds with all the old cominternist vices. His methods sickened me to the point that it almost made me physically unwell. Many things flashed before my mind whilst we talked. They hate the old cadres of our movement. They want an international of spineless creatures who will accept revisionism to the point where they become the left cover for Stalinism. These are hard words, but if you went through what I did, you would, I know, agree.”<sup>28</sup>

93. On September 19, the National Committee of the British section voted 11 to 6 to oppose Pablo’s line. Healy issued an internal document, *The Struggle Against Revisionism*, in which he declared:

“What is at stake is nothing less than the fate of Trotskyism, that is, of the Marxism, the revolutionary socialism of our time... Is the theory that has guided our movement for more than a quarter of a century now outlived, dated, and obsolete? Have the new facts, the ‘new realities’ of the recent period basically changed such concepts as we have held up to now of the Soviet bureaucracy, of Stalinism, of their relationship to the big contending classes in present-day society? And, if they have, must we not also change our own function, our role, as we have conceived it up to now—as a Fourth International, as the nucleus of an indispensable revolutionary party still to be built to carry the proletarian revolution to its ultimate victory over capitalism? ... The only logical, consistent conclusion that can follow from this revisionism is the liquidation of the Fourth International as we have conceived it up to now.”<sup>29</sup>

94. The Pabloites, he continued, claim:

“Because of some real or alleged new facts about Stalinism, we must forget all about the past, about the whole evolution of this social phenomenon—as though what has been involved in Stalinism is some accidental aberration of individuals who are now in the process of self-reform! There have been many such attempts in the Marxist movement—with regard to the nature of capitalism and the capitalist class—from [German Social Democrat Eduard] Bernstein down to [Labour politician John] Strachey. In fact, the official ideology of the labour movement in this country is that the capitalist class has more or less reformed and accepted the need of a Welfare State just as the Labour leaders have accepted the need for a ‘mixed’ economy with capitalists in it.”<sup>30</sup>

#### **The Open Letter**

95. Recognising that the very physical existence of the FI as an independent entity was at stake, on November 11, 1953 the SWP issued its Open Letter as a rallying call to orthodox Trotskyists internationally. The first six points reiterated the essential foundations of the movement:

“The death agony of the capitalist system threatens the destruction of civilization through worsening depressions, world wars and barbaric manifestations like fascism. The development of atomic weapons today underlines the danger in the gravest possible way.

The descent into the abyss can be avoided only by replacing capitalism with the planned economy of socialism on a world scale and thus resuming the spiral of progress opened up by capitalism in its early days.

This can be accomplished only under the leadership of the working class in society. But the working class itself faces a crisis in leadership although the world relationship of social forces was never so favourable as today for the workers to take the road to power.

To organize itself for carrying out this world-historic aim, the working class in each country must construct a revolutionary socialist party in the pattern developed by Lenin; that is, a combat party capable of dialectically combining democracy and centralism—democracy in arriving at decisions, centralism in carrying them out; a leadership controlled by the ranks, ranks able to carry forward under fire in disciplined fashion.

The main obstacle to this is Stalinism, which attracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them either into the arms of the Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism. The penalty for these betrayals is paid by the working people in the form of consolidation of fascist or monarchist forces, and new outbreaks of wars fostered and prepared by capitalism. From its inception, the Fourth International set as one of its major tasks the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism inside and outside the USSR.

The need for flexible tactics facing many sections of the Fourth International, and parties or groups sympathetic to its programme, makes it all the more imperative that they know how to fight imperialism and all its petty-bourgeois agencies (such as nationalist formations or trade union bureaucracies) without capitulation to Stalinism; and, conversely, know how to fight Stalinism (which in the final analysis is a petty-bourgeois agency of imperialism) without capitulating to imperialism.”<sup>31</sup>

96. Cannon explained how:

“In place of holding to the main course of building independent revolutionary socialist parties by all tactical means, [Pablo] looks to the Stalinist bureaucracy, or a decisive section of it, to so change itself under mass pressure as to accept the ‘ideas’ and ‘programme’ of Trotskyism...

To sum up: The lines of cleavage between Pablo’s revisionism and orthodox Trotskyism are so deep that no compromise is possible either politically or organisationally. The Pablo faction has demonstrated that it will not permit democratic decisions truly reflecting majority opinion to be reached. They demand complete submission to their criminal policy. They are determined to drive all orthodox Trotskyists out of the Fourth International or to muzzle and handcuff them... The time has come for the orthodox Trotskyist majority of the Fourth International to assert their will against Pablo’s usurpation of authority.”<sup>32</sup>

#### **The struggle against the Lawrence Group**

97. The Open Letter became the founding statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The Pabloite International Secretariat responded by expelling all those who had endorsed it. Explaining the significance of the split, Cannon said:

“The first concern of Trotskyists always has been, and should be now, the defence of our doctrine. That is the first principle. The second principle, giving life to the first, is the protection of the historically-created cadres against any attempt to disrupt or disperse them. At the best, formal unity stands third in the order of importance. The cadres of the ‘old Trotskyists’ represent the accumulated capital of the long struggle. They are the carriers of the doctrine; the sole human instruments now available to bring our doctrine—the element of socialist consciousness—into the mass movement. The Pablo camarilla set out deliberately to disrupt these cadres, one by one, in one country after another. And we set out, no less deliberately—after too long a delay—to defend the cadres against this perfidious attack. Our sense of responsibility to the international movement imperatively required us to do so. Revolutionary cadres are not indestructible. The tragic experience of the Comintern taught us that.”<sup>33</sup>

98. Pablo and Mandel worked with Lawrence in an attempt to destroy the British section. Lawrence attended a faction meeting in Paris, after which he proclaimed his minority as the official section of the Fourth International and organised a conference that “expelled” Healy. With Healy in a minority of one on the four-person editorial board of *Socialist Outlook*, Lawrence pushed the journal towards open support for Stalinism. His faction also sought to sabotage the work at the party’s print shop and to bankrupt it. In a letter dated April 21, 1954 to Leslie Goonewardene of the Ceylonese Trotskyists, Healy explained:

“Right from the start therefore, Pabloism in Britain emerged as a sabotaging unit working to objectively aid Stalinism. Our paper sales went down from 6,000 to 4,500 a week. By temporarily isolating myself on the Editorial Board and in the print shop they thought they would smash orthodox Trotskyism. Their whole strategy was part of a carefully concealed plan. Having been completely repudiated by the overwhelming majority of the group, they struck at the nerve centres of our work at the points where we had alliances with centrists, and it was precisely these alliances which were a big obstacle for Stalinist work inside the LP [Labour Party] left wing.”<sup>34</sup>

99. The viciousness of the Pabloite attack was described by Healy:

“Last Wednesday morning at 8 o’clock he [Lawrence] turned up at the print shop with one of his followers who worked for us as a machine minder. When I drew attention to the fact that he was not complying with the decisions of the Editorial Board, without warning he swung a blow at my face bursting blood from my nose. His henchman started to interfere, but by then Mike [Banda] came to the rescue, and pulled a knife on Lawrence. I immediately took it from him, and Lawrence was put out of the office by the other printers.”<sup>35</sup>

100. Commenting on the political significance of the incident, Healy continued:

“You are aware that we are not weaklings in our group. We have had many faction fights in the past, but never acts of violence. The only people we had these with were Stalinists—nobody else, and it is not an accident that the Pabloites run true to form.”<sup>36</sup>

101. Lawrence supplied information to a Stalinist weekly about The Club’s activities in the Labour Party, which published a witch-hunting exposé that was used to ban *Socialist Outlook*, coupled with the threat to expel its supporters. The Labour League of Youth, effectively controlled by The Club, was shut down. The Club organized protest meetings across the country. A resolution to the Labour Party conference opposing the National Executive Committee’s action secured 1,700,000 votes, but was defeated by the right wing with the support of the trade union block vote. Faced with expulsions, The Club was forced to close down *Socialist Outlook*. A libel action by a subsidiary of the Imperial Tobacco Company was then used to bankrupt the movement’s press.

102. Pablo’s section in Britain lasted less than a year. In June 1954, Lawrence concluded that even a tenuous connection with Trotskyism was an obstacle to his orientation to the Stalinist parties. His group in the Labour Party supported the Stalinists’ crushing of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, after which, in November 1958, he joined the CPGB, having officially recanted his Trotskyist past.<sup>37</sup> It was Grant, and a small number of Pablo supporters in Britain, who replaced Lawrence as the British section of the International Secretariat, forming the Revolutionary Socialist League in 1957. The merger confirmed the political convergence of Grant’s views with those of Pablo and Mandel. As early as June 1950, Jimmy Deane, Grant’s closest collaborator, had noted, “Pablo has made the transition! What a development. He conducts a struggle against us and then ends up with our position more or less.”

*To be continued*

Footnotes:

<sup>21</sup> Cited in *The Methods of Gerry Healy*, Ken Tarbuck, <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/Healy/Walters.html>

<sup>22</sup> Tony Cliff *The Deflected Permanent Revolution*, (1963)  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1963/xx/permrev.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Tony Cliff *Economic roots of reformism* ( June 1957)  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1957/06/rootsref.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Tony Cliff *The Labour Party in Perspective*, (1962)  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1962/xx/labour.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Cited in *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, David North, Labor Publications, 1988] p.194

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 193

<sup>27</sup> *Trotskyism versus Revisionism* (1974) New Park Publications, Volume 1, pp. 259/260

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 267/268

<sup>29</sup> Gerry Healy, cited in *What Next? The Struggle Against Revisionism*, <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/healy/1953.html>

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Open Letter, cited in *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, (1988) David North, Labor Publications, pp. 231/232

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 40

<sup>33</sup> *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism* (1974) New Park Publications, Volume 2, p. 106

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 80

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> The response of the faction within the Labour Party grouped around Lawrence is a devastating indictment of Pabloism. Not only was it collaborating with the CPGB, but its declared aim was to stiffen its resolve to face off outrage over suppression of the revolution. One of Lawrence's converts, David Goldhill, states that in debates held in the Holborn and St Pancras CPGB, many members "were completely disorientated. And as far as I can remember it was the old Trotskyists who were stern about this and said, you can't support this revolution, it's an anti-communist revolution—despite the terrible propaganda coming out you have to support the Soviet Union in attacking this. And I think we in fact felt that our job was to stiffen the Communist Party, which was showing signs of disintegrating completely over this." (quoted in *Red Flag over St Pancras*, Bob Pitt, Revolutionary History).



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