

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

Part Five

15 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 1956 intervention into the Communist Party

103. The split in the Fourth International took place at a time of gathering crisis within world Stalinism. Now, the significance of the issues involved in the struggle against the Pabloites emerged into the open. The sudden death of Stalin in March 1953 led to the outbreak of factional warfare within the Soviet Politburo. The ousting from power and execution of Lavrenti Beria, head of Stalin's secret police, was aimed at shoring up the bureaucracy's parasitic position within Soviet society by lifting the constant threat of arrests and executions from over the state and party apparatus. But the machinations of the bureaucracy were threatened by a more dangerous challenge from the growing discontent of workers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

104. In June 1953, a rising by the East German working class was suppressed by Soviet military forces. In its aftermath, a section of the bureaucracy sought to project a "reform" course. At the 20th Congress of the CPSU on February 25, 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev delivered his "secret speech" in which he acknowledged some of Stalin's crimes. His main claim was that the majority of the party leadership had remained loyal to the principles of Bolshevism, blaming everything on a "Cult of Personality" developed by Stalin.

105. While Pablo and his supporters hailed Khrushchev's speech as the beginning of a process of self-reform by the bureaucracy, the Healy tendency seized the opportunity to clarify the counter-revolutionary character of Stalinism. For all the problems the British movement confronted materially in the aftermath of the split with Pablo, it intervened energetically into the ranks of the CPGB, publishing a series of pamphlets and circulating copies of Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*. Healy travelled the country visiting CPGB members, urging dissidents to demand of the leadership a full accounting of Stalin's crimes.

106. On October 23, 1956, Hungarian workers and youth rose up against the Stalinist regime. When demonstrators were killed, workers began to arm themselves and formed workers' councils. The movement was bloodily suppressed by Russian troops, with the loss of 20,000 lives. The CPGB denounced the uprising as "white terror" and "fascism", leading to an exodus of thousands of members. When dispatches from Hungary by *Daily Worker* correspondent Peter Fryer were censored and suppressed,

The Club circulated his material and organised a series of meetings for him to address. During a special congress of the CPGB, held in April 1957, The Club published a daily bulletin. Interventions were made at meetings organised by the Socialist Forum, an umbrella grouping, at which Healy patiently explained the meaning of recent events, and urged a study of the history of the Soviet Union and the writings of Trotsky.

107. Healy's group was the only tendency to make any gains from the crisis in British Stalinism. The CPGB retained a core of support amongst those who were indifferent to the revelation of the crimes perpetrated by Moscow, and whose membership of the party was based upon agreement with its reformist nationalism and opportunist manoeuvring in the trade unions. The majority of dissidents either dropped out of politics, or found their way into the Labour and trade union apparatus. But those forces genuinely animated by the ideals of Lenin and the Bolsheviks found a new home in the ranks of British Trotskyism. Those recruited including intellectuals, the most important of whom was Cliff Slaughter.

108. In January 1957, the *Labour Review* was re-launched to deepen discussion on the crisis of Stalinism and the way forward for the socialist movement. This was followed in May that year with the publication of a weekly newspaper, the *Newsletter*. The *Labour Review* described the type of Marxist movement it intended to build:

"Not a group of embittered doctrinaires without roots or perspectives or the ability to learn from their mistakes; not a coterie of well-meaning university Dons and writers who have something to say on every subject except the class struggle taking place under their noses; not a party paying lip-service to Marxism but in fact dominated by whichever faction happens to be in control in Moscow. No, the Marxist movement to whose construction *Labour Review* is dedicated will be rooted in the pits and workshops and on the building sites; it will unite the efforts of workers for whom 'intellectual' is not a dirty word and intellectuals who have no dearer wish than to serve the working class in struggle; it will carry forward those traditions of revolutionary ardour, discipline, steadfastness and internationalism to which the word 'Bolshevik' is properly applied, and will marry them, in new conditions, to all the best traditions of our native working-class struggle. The Marxist movement in Britain will be the worthy heir to the Chartists, the Clydeside strikers, the councils of action, the Communist Party of 1920-24, the national minority movement, the Marxist groups of the 30s and the Revolutionary Communist Party of the 40s."³⁸

109. The *Labour Review* conducted a theoretical offensive against Stalinism, and the various ideological trends that emerged from its collapse, which became collectively known as "Western Marxism". Foremost amongst them was the publication *New Reasoner*, which in 1960 became the *New Left Review*. Founded by former CPGB historian E.P. Thompson, its supporters claimed to be developing a "humanist" and English version of Marxism that repudiated Lenin's theory of the

vanguard party, which was blamed for the emergence of Stalinism.

The founding of the Socialist Labour League

110. Under conditions of a developing movement in the working class, the crisis in British Stalinism opened up a space for The Club. It played a noteworthy role in major industrial struggles and within the Labour Party, especially the movement in opposition to the development of the H-Bomb. In 1958, the youth paper *Keep Left* was relaunched as a monthly, and members were sent into the Labour Party's youth movement, the Young Socialists.

111. Within the Labour Party and the trade unions, the Trotskyists centred their work on combating illusions in the "lefts", demanding that they break with the right wing and take up the struggle for a Labour government pledged to socialist policies. In November 1958, the *Newsletter* held a rank-and-file industrial conference attended by 500 workers from the mines, railways, ports, engineering factories and bus depots. A comment in the *Financial Times* noted, "Already the group seems to have acquired some degree of influence.... This initial success of the Newsletter Group has only been possible because of the growing weakness and lack of appeal of the official Communist Party. This has created an ideological vacuum among the militants in the unions."

112. The Labour Party responded by mounting a witch-hunt aimed at crippling the Trotskyists, threatening to expel those associated with the *Newsletter*. Healy went on the offensive and, in March 1959, the Socialist Labour League (SLL) was formed as an open political tendency. In an internal bulletin, he explained that over the preceding period the relative quiescence of the working class had meant that the Trotskyists had been isolated within the Labour Party, and its leading cadre exposed to constant attack. The opening up of a new wave of industrial struggles meant that the Trotskyists would be able to strengthen their work within the Labour Party—providing they were prepared to adjust their tactics to this change in the political situation, and establish the organisational framework for countering expulsions, and training and educating the new forces they were winning:

"Instead of allowing our people to disappear into the wilderness as a result of expulsions, we now saw the opportunity to reorganise them more openly as the core of the SLL itself. In other words the formation of the SLL was a strategic modification of our total entry policy to a new situation which could not have been foreseen when our movement entered the Labour Party in 1947."³⁹

113. The founding of the SLL was the product of the struggle against Pabloism, directly countering its efforts to liquidate the Trotskyist movement into the Stalinist and social democratic parties. On behalf of the Pabloites, Grant denounced the SLL's formation in a March 1959 statement, *Problems of Entrism*:

"All history demonstrates that, at the first stages of revolutionary upsurge, the masses turn to the mass organisations to try and find a solution for their problems, especially the young generation, entering politics for the first time. With the tiny forces we are able to mobilise at the moment, it would be laughable to suppose that the development of the revolution in Britain will follow any other course.... Our job in the preparatory period, which still exists, is the patient winning of ones and twos, perhaps of small groups, but certainly not the creation of a mass revolutionary current, which is not possible at the present time."⁴⁰

114. Grant invoked tactical considerations of maintaining a base in the Labour Party to justify political prostration before the bureaucracy. This was the same argument he had used to sanction his group's advocacy of an explicitly reformist programme, claiming that socialism could be achieved by the Labour Party in parliament. Inside the SLL, the Pabloites and the SWP, together with the Cliff group, formed secret factions amongst those who feared that the formation of an open tendency would disrupt their relations within the Labour Party and its periphery. Ellis Hillman wrote a document denouncing the SLL's formation. A London

County Councillor, he refused to associate himself publicly with the SLL and was expelled. He then joined Grant's RSL and became a founder member of the editorial board of *Militant*.

115. The Stamford Group, headed by Peter Cadogan, had the support of Peter Fryer, John Daniels, Ken Coates and Alasdair MacIntyre. This secret faction was working with Tony Cliff. Cadogan later described how his group "became quite famous in the Trotskyist world. Three of us wrote long papers about the condition of the SLL which Pablo republished, so that the Trotskyist world all knew about the Stamford faction, it was the first real split in the Trotskyist movement after 1956."⁴¹ Cadogan advertised his group's denunciation of Healy, *The 1959 situation in the SLL*, in the *Tribune*, providing ammunition for the Labour leadership's attack on the Trotskyists. Cadogan, Coates and MacIntyre subsequently joined Cliff's International Socialists. Announcing his resignation in the *Guardian*, Fryer famously claimed to have no political disagreements with the SLL—only with its supposedly undemocratic treatment of Cadogan. A tendency led by Bob Pennington factionalised with the state capitalist *Socialisme ou Barbarie* journal. When the faction was proscribed, it founded the "Solidarity" group, which merged with the Cliff group. Pennington later became a leading Pabloite.

116. The SLL also took a stand against the tendency led by Brian Behan, which called for the formation of an essentially syndicalist party. In the pamphlet, *What is revolutionary leadership?* Cliff Slaughter replied to this position:

"Somehow, it is assumed, the working class will develop revolutionary consciousness because it is exploited. But the ideological struggle within the working class is real, it has to be bitterly fought and won before the class can be fully mobilised for battle. When we say that the long-drawn-out crisis of British imperialism rots away the social basis of reformist politics, that is not to say that the reformists simply leave the scene and leave a vacant place for a naturally radicalised working class desiring a new form of party. Such a party has to be built in the course of struggle with the reformists, and it has to be built by those who grasp the historical process theoretically; it does not grow 'naturally' or 'organically' out of the economic base."⁴²

117. The SLL applied to the Labour Party for political affiliation and was rejected. The organisation was proscribed and dozens of its leading personnel, including Healy and Slaughter, were expelled. In November 1959, a National Assembly of Labour organised by the SLL attracted 800 delegates and visitors.

A determined orientation to the working class

118. What characterised Healy's work was his determination to seize every opportunity to encourage the independent political activity of the working class. Even his enemies are forced to acknowledge the inexhaustible drive, organisational flair and initiative with which this fight was conducted. But it was indissolubly connected with his firm conviction that he was building a party that would lead the working class in the revolutionary seizure of power. For Healy's opponents, this occasioned only hatred; for workers, it was a powerful source of attraction.

119. The early 1960s was a time of global economic growth. Even though the underlying tendency was a continuing deterioration in Britain's world position, especially in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis, the majority of workers were experiencing, for the first time in decades, rising living standards. This development stimulated increased self-confidence and militancy, and a desire to extend the advances embodied in the post-war reforms. Britain was in ferment as "winds of change" swept the country. Culturally, there was a sense of growing alienation from a sclerotic, hide-bound establishment and the social deference, cant and hypocrisy with which it had been associated.

120. The political radicalisation of broad layers found expression in the SLL winning the leadership of the Young Socialists (YS) in the Labour Party. Harold Wilson became Labour leader in 1963, after the sudden

death of Hugh Gaitskell. He sought to adapt himself to rising social aspirations by advancing Labour as the party of a new “meritocracy”, which would offer the possibility of advancement in a more liberal and forward-looking Britain. But Wilson entered on a collision course with the working class when his government sought to rationalise and merge industry, while defending the pound from devaluation, caused by the country’s spiralling debt. Pledging himself to oppose “restrictive practices” and “outdated measures” in industry, Wilson set out to cut labour costs through enforced wage controls.

121. The SLL and the YS led the opposition to Wilson’s right-wing agenda. With the general election imminent, the Labour leadership again responded by suspending *Keep Left* supporters and proscribing the paper. When, at the 1964 conference, *Keep Left* supporters won a majority and passed resolutions demanding that an incoming Labour government carry out socialist policies, Wilson closed down YS branches and expelled *Keep Left* supporters. Riot police were called against a *Keep Left* lobby of the Labour Party National Executive Committee, and YS members were physically thrown out of Transport House. Following a 4,000-strong demonstration on September 27, 1964, the SLL launched the independent Young Socialists.

122. The Grant and Cliff groups did nothing more than issue for-the-record protests against the witch-hunt—always shrouding such statements with criticisms of the SLL’s “provocative” behaviour in refusing to kowtow to the bureaucracy. They published a common paper, *Young Guard*, which was allowed to circulate freely as a counterweight to the SLL in the Young Socialists. The Labour Party’s official youth section was re-organised as the Labour Party Young Socialists, and the Grant group assumed its leadership as the loyal advocate of left reformism.

123. In October 1964, Labour was elected for the first time in 13 years. Wilson’s prices and incomes policy provoked a wave of industrial action, which was overwhelmingly unofficial due to the unions’ pact with the government. Through its intransigent struggle against the bureaucracy, and the Stalinists in particular, the SLL won an important base in sections of the working class, such as at British Leyland in Cowley, Oxford. In September 1968, the All Trades Union Alliance was established as the party’s industrial wing.

The SLL opposes unprincipled reunification with the Pabloites

124. It is to Healy’s credit that at the very point when the movement was involved in this difficult fight in Britain, it took the courageous decision to oppose moves, initiated by the SWP in early 1957, towards an unprincipled reunification with the Pabloites. Cannon had reversed his earlier position and begun discussions with Colvin De Silva of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Ceylon, which had opposed the Open Letter and had been moving openly towards an adaptation to Ceylon’s bourgeois nationalist movement. He justified this rapprochement by declaring that differences with the Pabloites were lessening, and that unification talks could take place based on “concrete” agreement on immediate goals and tasks.

125. Cannon’s organisational approach was opposed by the British Trotskyists. While accepting discussions on unity, Healy argued that:

“the basic methodological differences between ourselves and Pablo remain and have not been eradicated despite the favourable objective situation. We should be completely clear on this score, and under no circumstances seek to minimise them. That could lead to serious miseducation.”⁴³

126. In a letter to Cannon of May 10, 1957 Healy wrote:

“Recently we have been reviewing the internal documents of our world movement since the end of the war, and it is quite clear that an objective study of that period is extremely important for the education of our cadres in the future.... [T]he strengthening of our cadres is decisive in this present period and this can only be done in a thorough-going education around the problems of revisionism.”⁴⁴

127. Bill Under Hunter’s *Stalinism* (1957) showed how the crisis within Stalinism had served to deepen the liquidationist revisions of Pabloism. In the name of the “political revolution”, the International Secretariat postulated a process of “irresistible evolution”, “liberalisation” and the emergence of “proletarian” and “reform” tendencies from within the Stalinist apparatus under the “pressure of the masses”. Even in the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution, the Pabloites had not made a single call for the construction of Trotskyist parties in the USSR, China or Eastern Europe.

128. In June 1957, the 13th Congress of the British section adopted the resolution, “The Situation in the World Trotskyist Movement”. Proposing a parity committee, made up of representatives of the International Committee and the International Secretariat, tasked with drawing up a “memorandum of agreement on the issues where there is basic agreement” it stressed that any international unification of tendencies claiming to be Trotskyist:

“must be based upon fundamental agreement on the principles and programme of the Fourth International as elaborated by the late Leon Trotsky and the 1938 Founding Congress of the Fourth International. This means rejection of all forms of revisionism of the state capitalist, Shachtmanite and Pabloite-Deutscher varieties.”⁴⁵

129. In June 1958, a conference of the International Committee was held in Leeds, attended by Farrell Dobbs on behalf of the SWP. The conference resolution summed up the principles on which the struggle against Pabloism had been based. Rejecting “all conceptions that mass pressure can resolve the question of leadership by forcing reform of the bureaucratic apparatus”, in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, it maintained that any

“regroupment of forces which are moving in a revolutionary direction [must be] coupled with an ideological offensive against Stalinism, social democracy, centrism, trade union bureaucracy and the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships of national movements in colonial and semi-colonial movements.”⁴⁶

130. Upon receiving this resolution, the SWP instructed Dobbs to return to the United States. The moves towards reunification expressed a political shift of the SWP away from its proletarian axis. This found its most finished expression in the SWP’s adaptation to Fidel Castro’s 26th of July movement in Cuba. Having initially defined Castro’s regime as bourgeois nationalist in 1959, over the next year, under the leadership of Joseph Hansen, the SWP redefined Cuba as a workers’ state. Hansen argued that the nationalisations conducted by Castro proved that social revolution could be accomplished with the “blunted instrument” of guerrilla warfare, under the leadership of “unconscious Marxists”. On this basis, the SWP oriented its cadre to work in the “Fair Play for Cuba Committee”—an organisation later revealed to be run by the CIA.

131. To assert that the class character of the Cuban state could be determined on the basis of the nationalisations carried out by Castro was a fundamental revision of the Marxist theory of socialist revolution. It rendered irrelevant the struggle of Marxists to organise the proletariat independently of all other classes, including the peasantry. Not only did the Castroite movement have no significant connection to the working class, there did not exist any identifiable organs through which the proletariat could exercise its class rule. The universal significance of soviet power and the identification of Marxist parties with the proletariat were called into question.

To be continued

Footnotes:

³⁸ Cited in *Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International*, David North (1991), Labor Publications, p. 30

³⁹ Gerry Healy, *Some Reflections on the Socialist Labour League*, March 1960, cited in *What Next?* <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/Healy/Sll.html>

⁴⁰ Ted Grant, *Problems of Entrism*, March 1959,
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/grant/1959/03/entrism.htm>

⁴¹ Cited in *Communist History Network Newsletter*, Issue 20,
<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/chnn/CHNN20DUN.html>

⁴² Cliff Slaughter, *What is revolutionary leadership?* (1960) *Labour Review*. Available at
<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/slaughter/1960/10/leadership.html>

⁴³ Cited in *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, David North (1988), Labor Publications, p. 331

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 332/333

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 335

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p. 334



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