

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

Part Six

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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.

It is being published on the WSWs in 11 parts.

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The 1963 Reunification and the “Great Betrayal” in Ceylon

132. In a letter of January 2, 1961, to the SWP leadership, the SLL outlined its essential standpoint. The letter stated:

“It is because of the magnitude of the opportunities opening up before Trotskyism, and therefore the necessity for political and theoretical clarity, that we urgently require a drawing of the lines against revisionism in all its forms. It is time to draw to a close the period in which Pabloite revisionism was regarded as a trend within Trotskyism. Unless this is done we cannot prepare for the revolutionary struggles now beginning”.⁴⁷

133. This principled position of the British Trotskyists cut across the steady rightward drift of the SWP. Efforts by the International Committee to work out a common attitude towards the Pabloites proved futile. Cannon denounced the formation of the SLL, stating that Healy was on an “Oehlerite binge”—a reference to Hugo Oehler, the leader of a sectarian tendency in the US Trotskyist movement in the 1930s.

134. In June 1963, the SWP held a unification congress with the Pabloites to form the United Secretariat (USec). There was no discussion on the split of 1953, which was deemed irrelevant in the context of a “new world reality”. The conference produced a document co-authored by Hansen and Dobbs, “Reunification of the Fourth International”, explicitly rejecting the building of Trotskyist parties. Hailing the Cuban revolution as “the opening of the socialist revolution in the Western Hemisphere”, Hansen and Dobbs denounced Healy for his “simple-minded sectarian pattern of thought”, for maintaining that “It is impossible to carry a revolution forward to the successful establishment of a workers state without the *preceding* construction in every instance of a revolutionary-socialist party”.

135. Within a year the SWP’s opportunist course was to exact a terrible price, when the LSSP entered the bourgeois coalition government of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike.⁴⁸ “The Great Betrayal” of the LSSP rescued the government from imminent collapse, discredited Trotskyism amongst the Sinhala and Tamil masses and paved the way for a bloody civil war spanning a quarter of a century. The Pabloites had prepared the way for the LSSP’s capitulation, writing in September 1960, “We accept that it is possible for a revolutionary party to give critical support to a non-working class government [whether middle class or

capitalist] in a colonial or semi-colonial country”. The Pabloites refused the SLL’s demands for a discussion on the LSSP’s actions. Healy travelled personally to Sri Lanka to intervene at the LSSP congress, whereas the USec insisted that any criticism of the LSSP would only “put in jeopardy, if not destroy, fraternal relations between the United Secretariat and the leadership of the LSSP”.⁴⁹

136. An illustration of the patient approach taken by the SLL during this fight was its political mentoring of a minority tendency within the SWP, led by Tim Wohlforth. Healy cautioned the SLL’s American supporters to avoid factional conflicts over secondary issues, recognising they were involved in a struggle to clarify the cadre of the SWP and reorient the International Committee on issues of political principle. This advice was heeded by Wohlforth’s group, in contrast to a minority tendency led by James Robertson, which proceeded on the basis of its own factional interests. The Wohlforth minority continued to work inside the SWP after the 1963 reunification congress, until it was suspended from membership for calling for a discussion on the roots of the LSSP’s betrayal.

The SLL assumes leadership of the International Committee

137. The SLL had risen to the challenge posed by the SWP’s renegacy. It had defeated the attempt by petty bourgeois forces to liquidate Trotskyism and had assumed the leadership of the International Committee. It emerged from this struggle immeasurably strengthened. The documents produced at this time testify to the political advances made by the SLL, and still constitute a major contribution to the development of Marxism.

138. In 1961, the SLL published *World Prospects for Socialism*, drawing a balance sheet of the significance of revisionism in the Fourth International and its relationship to the developing crisis of world capitalism. In contrast to the abstract formulae employed by the Pabloites, it made a concrete appraisal of the post-war period. The SLL’s opposition to Pabloism was rooted in an examination of the objective role it played in politically disarming the working class and subordinating it to the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies and the leaders of the bourgeois national movements in the colonial and former colonial countries:

“Reformists and opportunists of all varieties echo the spokesmen of the bourgeoisie in supposing, and hoping, that the separate manifestations of the fundamental world crisis can be taken one by one and separately remedied. Marxists claim that this is impossible. All such problems are related because of the inextricable connections between them established by imperialism itself. They do not assume, however, that imperialism will somehow collapse because the contradictions which it secretes will eventually bring the system to a halt. Such an idea of automatic downfall is no part of Marxism. The history of the last 40 years has driven home the lesson so often repeated by Lenin and Trotsky, that there are no impossible situations for the bourgeoisie. It survived the challenge of revolution and economic depression between the wars by resort to

fascism. It survived the Second World War with the complicity of the Stalinist and Social Democratic leaderships—which ensured that the working class would not make a bid for power—and used the breathing space to elaborate new methods of rule and strengthen the economy. Even the most desperate situations can be overcome if only the active intervention of the workers as a class for themselves, with a party and leadership with a perspective of overthrowing capitalism, is not prepared in time”.⁵⁰

139. Healy’s decision to reintroduce the vital questions of philosophical method in the struggle against Hansen’s vulgar pragmatism marked a return to the work conducted by Trotsky in 1939-40 against Burnham/Shachtman. The SLL’s opposition to the Pabloites’ objectivist apologetics for non-proletarian leaderships had conditioned it to appreciate the significance of Lenin’s work on Dialectics in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, when it appeared for the first time in English in 1961 in Volume 38 of the Collected Works. Slaughter’s *Opportunism and Empiricism* opposed the abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution on the basis of “facts”, such as the victory of Ben Bella in Algeria and Castro in Cuba:

“When we attack empiricism we attack that method of approach which says all statements, to be meaningful, must refer to observable or measurable data in their immediate given form. This method insists that any ‘abstract’ concepts reflecting the general and historical implications of these ‘facts’ are meaningless. It neglects entirely that our general concepts reflect the laws of development and interconnection of the process which these ‘facts’ help to constitute.... All this argument that ‘the facts’ are the objective reality, and that we must ‘start from there’ is a preparation to justify policies of adaptation to non-working class leaderships”.⁵¹

140. The International Committee met in September 1963 to draw up the political balance sheet of the struggle against Pabloism. In the opening report, Slaughter explained:

“The fight against revisionism in the Trotskyist movement, particularly in the Socialist Workers Party, has revealed a basic difference in method. The Socialist Workers Party leaders have abandoned Marxism for empiricism, they have abandoned that method which starts from the point of view of changing the world, as against interpreting or contemplating it. The far greater part of the work in the struggle against this revisionism remains still to be done on our part. It is not enough to be able to demonstrate the descent into empiricism by the revisionists—our problem is to build around this fight against revisionism, sections of the Fourth International able to lead the advanced guard of the working class”.⁵²

141. In Spring 1964, *Labour Review* was replaced by a new journal, the *Fourth International*, published by the International Committee. The editorial of the first issue stated:

“The Socialist Labour League must take its place firmly inside the international vanguard of the world party of socialist revolution. It is through the work of our new magazine and the building of that world party that we shall pass from the stage of training cadres from amongst the student and working class youth, to the stage when we shall be able to provide leadership in all the struggles of the day”.⁵³

142. The struggle waged by the SLL against reunification with the Pabloites bore its most important fruit on the international arena. The American Committee for the Fourth International began an extended period of preparation for the founding of the Workers League in 1966. Two years later, the Revolutionary Communist League was formed in Ceylon. In 1971, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter was established as a section of the International Committee in Germany, and in 1972, the Socialist Labour League was founded as the IC’s Australian section.

The role of the International Marxist Group

143. Defeated politically, the Pabloite USec lashed out wildly against the SLL in the aftermath of the reunification congress. Its efforts to

marginalise the British Trotskyists were led by Hansen, who set about recruiting individuals with a record of political hostility to Healy. Hansen’s campaign initially focused on attempts to fuse Grant’s RSL with the “International Group” led by Ken Coates and a smaller faction led by Charlie Van Gelderen and Sam Bornstein. But it soon centred on the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC), established in 1966.

144. The SLL opposed the Wilson government’s support for the Vietnam War, linking the defence of the Vietnamese masses against imperialism with a political struggle against the right-wing Labour leaders, and the building of an anti-war movement centred on the factories. Against this approach, the VSC was set up as a popular front, with pride of place given to the CPGB’s youth movement, the Young Communist League. Its various protests were aimed at convincing Wilson to change course. Unity with the Stalinists was also supported by Cliff’s International Socialists, which abandoned the third camp position it had taken on Korea and declared for a victory for the Viet Cong.

145. The SLL was treated as a pariah because of its opposition to the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, which was using the Vietnamese people as a bargaining chip in its manoeuvres with Washington. At the inaugural meeting of the VSC in August 1966, Healy and other SLL members were prevented from speaking. At the Liège demonstration of Socialist Youth on October 15, 1966, following Stalinist objections, the police were called to remove a Young Socialist banner defending the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Ernest Mandel defended the Stalinists, claiming that the SLL had broken the “united front”.

146. By 1967, Hansen’s efforts to unify his supporters with the Grant group had fallen apart. Grant split with the USec, and in 1968 the International Marxist Group (IMG) became its British section. The IMG was to specialise in denunciations of the SLL, and political apologetics for Stalinism and the petty-bourgeois guerrillaism of Castro and Che Guevara. On October 17, 1968, IMG leader Tariq Ali and YCL leader Barney Davis delivered a “Dear Harold” letter to Wilson, appealing to him to support the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. The Stalinists’ chief expert on anti-Trotskyism, Betty Reid, responded with a eulogy to the VSC in which she noted, “the profound contrast in methods of work, arguments and approach between this group [IMG] and the SLL...the character of the leadership and material produced, and the co-operation of the non-socialist forces...was positive, and resulted in a high degree of unity of all forces excluding the small lunatic fringe”.⁵⁴

147. Hansen’s orientation to the VSC provided him with the possibility of recruiting petty-bourgeois elements politically closer to anarchism than socialism, who could be encouraged in various protest stunts and punch-ups. This was connected to his aim of creating a particular type of leadership and an International that was thoroughly steeped in opportunism. As Slaughter explained in his report to the September 1963 International Conference of Trotskyists:

“Such orientation produces a particular type of national section and a particular type of leadership within the Pabloite International. Around the publications of this group there gather numbers of petty-bourgeois intellectuals who very easily accept a standpoint of ‘principled’ but quite abstract avowals of Marxism, divorced from any struggle to construct a leadership against the enemies of Marxism and of the working class. Such groups seek constantly for ‘alliances’ with all kinds of centrist trends, cultivating the most naïve illusions about the ‘leftward’ tendencies of these ‘allies’ in Parliamentary and Trade Union circles, as in Britain and Belgium. The real task of Marxists, to ‘go deeper and deeper into the working class’ to build a power that will smash the bureaucracy, is an anathema to these circles. To such a political way of life, the message that it is most important to encourage the ‘left centrists’ is a gift from heaven. The leaders of this International are, more and more, men of ‘influence’, men with ‘reputations’ in petty-bourgeois circles and not working-class leaders, not leaders familiar with the intimate and detailed problems of the

working class and the revolutionary party.... In this environment, all the tendencies towards extreme revisionism which we have indicated are assured of a rapid growth; and are now strangling to death whatever remains of the cadres of the Pabloite International".⁵⁵

The political difficulties facing the SLL

148. Healy was determined to take on and defeat the Pabloites in the working class. He began to work on the premise that it would be possible to use what he considered to be—with some justification—a more favourable political situation in Britain, to overcome the unfavourable disposition of international forces in the aftermath of the SWP's renegacy. He calculated that a political breakthrough in Britain would become a pole of attraction for revolutionists around the world, strengthening the authority of the International Committee.

149. The SLL had made important organisational advances after 1956, and by the mid-1960s, was both numerically larger than its Pabloite opponents and possessed of an experienced cadre and a base amongst sections of workers and youth. It was well placed to take advantage of an emerging militant movement of the working class, expressed in wildcat strikes and unofficial rank and file movements. Plans for the first daily Trotskyist newspaper, the *Workers Press*, which was to be launched in 1969, were seen as providing the means to directly politically challenge the Stalinists and social democrats, and transform the SLL into the mass party of the British working class.

150. While it was both correct and necessary to use every opportunity presented in Britain to help strengthen the international movement, Healy's conception was wrong from a strategic perspective. Involving a false reading of the Russian Revolution, Healy's underlying premise was that he could emulate the way in which the Bolshevik seizure of power had provided the impulse for the growth of the Third International. But the Russian Revolution was primarily the product of international, not national factors. It had been prepared through the struggle waged by Lenin against the opportunism of the Second International, and fought on the basis of the international revolutionary strategy developed by Trotsky.

151. The persistence of Pabloite revisionism was a manifestation within the Fourth International of a broader policy pursued by imperialism to cultivate a petty-bourgeois stratum as a social buffer against the working class. The dominant political role played by this layer was an overarching feature of the post-war years. The Soviet Union appeared to be at the height of its power, while the 1949 peasant-based Chinese revolution had led to the emergence of sizeable Maoist tendencies. Under these conditions, Castroism was only one of a number of radical bourgeois national movements that often portrayed themselves as socialist, while relying on the Moscow or Beijing Stalinist apparatus for support. As the editorial of *Labour Review*, Winter 1961, explained:

"The opportunists of all varieties now rest not only upon the labour aristocracy of a few advanced countries but upon new layers of the world's population under modern state monopoly capitalism with its particular relation to the non-capitalist world. The advanced countries have gone through a gigantic concentration of industrial and finance capital, militarization and bureaucratisation of the economy and the state, growing reliance on state intervention in the economy, and consequent creation of a new middle caste of executives, administrators, and bureaucrats of the big banks and the monopolies, the state, the military and security apparatus, 'social services' and the means of manipulation of 'public opinion.' The international needs of capital are faithfully administered by the middle caste".⁵⁶

152. This was the class basis for the growth of numerous intellectual currents, which employed Marxist phraseology while advocating politics based upon a repudiation of socialist revolution, and an orientation to forces hostile to the working class. It was this world situation that accounted for the difficulties faced by the orthodox Trotskyists, and which could not be resolved on the national arena. Healy's unwarranted

generalisations from the particular balance of forces in Britain would cause him to neglect the central lesson of the SWP's capitulation to Pabloism—that the pressure of alien class tendencies can only be overcome through a consistent theoretical struggle against revisionism, in close collaboration with international co-thinkers. To the extent that focussing on the development of the work in Britain meant disregarding the theoretical and political needs of the international movement, this was to lead to the accumulation of political errors and organisational problems in which, over a period of time, Healy and the SLL became trapped.

153. Conceptions were able to take hold in the SLL that contained the danger of a shift towards a national axis for its work. These were expressed in Healy's 1966 document, *Problems of the Fourth International*, where he stated:

"The Socialist Labour League now shoulders an enormous responsibility—that of constructing the mass revolutionary party which will lead the working class to power. By doing so it will inspire revolutionists in all countries to build similar parties to do the same".⁵⁷

154. As David North later explained:

"The idea that the Fourth International would develop only as the by-product of the conquest of power in Britain was false. On the one hand, it rejected the dialectical interaction between the world crisis of imperialism, the international class struggle and their specific expression in Britain: on the other hand, it denied that the organisation of Marxists in any country is possible only as part of the world party of socialist revolution".⁵⁸

155. Healy also made a false appraisal of the roots of the degeneration of the SWP—the result of a subjective reaction to Cannon's betrayal. He claimed that its causes lay not:

"...in the difficult conditions of the Cold War and the boom under which the SWP has been operating in the United States, especially since 1949, although these have played a role, but in the origin of the early Trotskyist movement.... Its founder, Trotsky, went through all the early political experiences of the pre-revolutionary Soviet Union, the revolution itself, when he led and organised the Red Army, the post-Lenin degeneration and the growth of the Soviet bureaucracy under Stalin.

His supporters in the USA and in other countries came mainly from those who entered the Communist movement after the foundation of the Third International in 1919. Their development was conditioned by the post-war World War I defeats of the working class outside the Soviet Union and the growth of Stalinism.... This was precisely the weakness of the Cannon-Trotsky combination".⁵⁹

156. Healy's minimising of the impact of the post-war boom on the SWP, and his focus on subjective political and theoretical weaknesses to explain the emergence of opportunism, were in contrast to the analysis previously made by the SLL. Moreover, in crediting the degeneration of the SWP and the growth of revisionism to the supposedly "non-revolutionary" conditions out of which the Fourth International emerged, Healy was, however unconsciously, giving succour to those centrist tendencies that had opposed its founding on the grounds that a new International could only emerge as the product of a successful socialist revolution. Under conditions in which political differences were emerging within the International Committee, these conceptions were to have a negative impact.

To be continued

Footnotes:

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p. 376

⁴⁸ One of the three LSSP Cabinet members in Bandaranaike's coalition was Anil Moonesinghe, a supporter of Cliff's state capitalist tendency. In the early 1990s he was elected a vice-president of Bandaranaike's SLFP and briefly held the honorary rank of Colonel.

⁴⁹ Cited in *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, David North (1988), Labor Publications, p. 401

⁵⁰ *World Prospects for Socialism*, *Labour Review*, winter 1961, Volume

6, No. 3

⁵¹ *Opportunism and Empiricism*, Trotskyism Versus Revisionism (1974), New Park Publications, Volume 4, pp. 81/82

⁵² *ibid.* pp.187/188

⁵³ *Fourth International*, Spring 1964

⁵⁴ Robert Black, *Stalinism in Britain* (1970), New Park Publications, p. 279

⁵⁵ Cliff Slaughter, *The Future of the Fourth International*, Trotskyism Versus Revisionism (1974), New Park Publications, Volume 4, p. 218

⁵⁶ Cited in *Fourth International*, March 1987, Vol. 14, No. 1

⁵⁷ *Problems of the Fourth International* (1966), cited in *Gerry Healy and his place in the History of the Fourth International*, David North (1991), Labor Publications, p. 47

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 49

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 48



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