

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

## Part Seven

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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 Third Congress of the ICFI

157. In April 1966, the International Committee held its Third World Congress with the aim of consolidating the existing forces of Trotskyism and laying the foundations for constructing parties throughout the world. But the congress itself became an arena of struggle against two tendencies that had been invited to attend, in order to determine whether principled political collaboration with them was possible—Voix Ouvrière from France and Robertson’s Spartacist tendency. Both groups rejected the significance the International Committee placed on the struggle against Pabloism, with Robertson dismissing what he insisted was a dispute between small groups, with no real consequence for the working class. Against this, the International Committee insisted in the aftermath of the congress:

“The first prerequisite is to grasp that the fight against Pabloism was a fight to develop Marxism and at the same time to defend every past conquest of Marxist theory.... The 1966 Conference of the IC expressed this clearly in insisting that the IC, through its struggle inside the FI, represented the continuity of the movement. Against Voix Ouvrière and Robertson, we insisted that only in the fight against Pabloism had Marxists preserved and developed the theory of the revolutionary party, of Bolshevism.”[60]

158. The congress revealed that positions similar to Robertson’s were emerging within the International Committee, evincing a political scepticism in the viability of the Fourth International following the break with the Pabloites. The French section, the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), had supported the SLL against Robertson and Voix Ouvrière, but argued that the Fourth International had to be “reconstructed.” By 1967, it was to press for the International Committee

to concentrate its energies on forging “united fronts” with other left forces. In response, the SLL issued a prescient warning to the OCI leadership:

“Now the radicalisation of the workers in Western Europe is proceeding rapidly, particularly in France.... There is always a danger at such a stage of development that a revolutionary party responds to the situation in the working class not in a revolutionary way, but by adaptation to the level of struggle to which the workers are restricted by their own experience under the old leaderships, i.e., to the inevitable initial confusion. Such revisions of the fight for the independent Party and the Transitional Programme are usually dressed up in the disguise of getting closer to the working class, unity with all those in struggle, not posing ultimatums, abandoning dogmatism, etc.”[61]

159. This warning went unheeded. Instead, the demand for the “Reconstruction of the Fourth International” became the means through which the OCI distanced itself from the International Committee. Flowing from the revolutionary events of the May-June 1968 General Strike, the OCI experienced a period of growth for the first time in decades. It responded to the opportunities presented, however, with a deepening orientation to reformist and Pabloite forces. During the strike, the OCI pursued an essentially syndicalist line, failing to conduct a political struggle against the French Communist Party and the trade union bureaucracy. It never called for the bringing down of the Gaullist government and the establishment of a workers’ government pledged to socialist policies. From 1968, it was involved in manoeuvres with future president Francois Mitterrand to establish the French Socialist Party. Amongst those working to facilitate this alliance was the future prime minister, Lionel Jospin.

### The global revolutionary crisis of 1968-1975

160. The escalating conflict between Trotskyism and revisionism unfolded against a backdrop of global economic and political instability. Nowhere was the gulf separating the SLL from the Pabloites more evident than in its ability to pierce the contradictory appearance of the post-war boom and foresee the systemic crisis that was to grip world capitalism between 1968 and 1975.

161. The SLL explained that the emergence of the “dollar crisis” at the

end of the 1960s exposed the basic contradiction at the heart of the Bretton Woods arrangements—between the global expansion of production, trade and investment, and currency systems still grounded on the national state. For a time, the overwhelming economic superiority of the US had been able to overcome this contradiction, with the dollar functioning as the global currency. But with its world position deteriorating due to the growing challenge from its competitors, the US faced a chronic balance of payments deficit. It was this economic crisis that lay behind US imperialism's war against Vietnam, and which was the driving force behind the development of major class battles. The building of revolutionary parties had to be based on this understanding. A statement of January 1, 1968, stressed:

“The present stage of the crisis cannot be reduced merely to ‘economic’ factors. The offensive of the working class throughout Europe and North America is now the decisive factor standing in the way of the capitalist class as it attempts to find some temporary way out of its world crisis.”[62]

162. This statement anticipated the most explosive developments since the end of the Second World War. In country after country, the interaction of economic contradictions with working class struggles produced political upheavals, and a significant growth of left-wing and socialist movements. At the start of 1968, the US suffered a severe military and political setback in Vietnam, while the assassination of Martin Luther King in April led to ghetto uprisings. The outbreak of the French General Strike in May placed the seizure of power by the working class on the agenda. It was the Stalinist French Communist Party that was to come to the rescue of President Charles de Gaulle and the capitalist state.

163. Repeated efforts to overcome the dollar crisis failed, and on August 15, 1971, US President Richard Nixon took the dollar off the gold standard, destroying the underpinnings of the post-war system. In October 1973, war broke out in the Middle East, leading to a quadrupling of oil prices by the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and triggering the worst recession since the Great Depression. In April 1974, the fascist dictatorship of Salazar in Portugal collapsed, followed in July by the fall of the Greek military junta. In August, US President Richard Nixon was forced to resign rather than be impeached as a result of the Watergate scandal and the exposure of illegal military actions ordered by his administration in Cambodia. In April 1975, Vietnamese Liberation Forces entered Saigon in their final defeat of US operations in Indo-China.

164. The ability of the bourgeoisie to survive this challenge to its rule was only made possible by the treachery of the Stalinists and social democrats, in which the Pabloites played a vital auxiliary role. The LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government in Ceylon would prove to be only the most infamous manifestation of Pabloite opportunism during this period.

## **Pabloism and Northern Ireland**

165. British imperialism had maintained its control of Northern Ireland through its policy of Protestant Unionist ascendancy and a state apparatus based on anti-Catholic discrimination. The deepening economic crisis, combined with attacks by the Ulster Volunteer Force, saw the development in 1968 of a mass civil rights movement. On August 14, 1969, the Wilson government dispatched British troops to Ulster, on the pretext of defending the Catholic minority.

166. The SLL was alone in unreservedly opposing the sending of troops, warning that they would inevitably be turned against the very people they were supposedly protecting. In contrast, Wilson's move was openly welcomed by the IMG, the Cliff Group and the CPGB. The September 11, 1969, edition of Cliff's *Socialist Worker* editorialised, “The breathing space provided by the presence of British troops is short but vital. Those who call for the *immediate* withdrawal of the troops before the men behind the barricades can defend themselves are inviting a pogrom which will hit first and hardest at socialists.” The IMG wrote in the *International* the same month that the demand for the withdrawal of British troops was purely “educational” and that “[T]he emphasis given at a particular time to this slogan is a tactical question.” The considerations involved were the IMG's relations with the petty-bourgeois leadership of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), which supported the troop deployment.

167. Against the IMG, Cliff Slaughter replied:

“The capitalist state consists, Marxists say, of bodies of armed men for the defence of capitalist property, however this state may be dressed up with democratic rights, representative government, and so on. This principled question cannot be altered in any way by “tactical” considerations. There are no situations in which troops and police are not used by the state for this purpose.... Those who are unable to fight for the withdrawal of British troops now will be utterly incapable, as they are now, of carrying through the fight against the British ruling class and its agents. [emphasis in the original]”[63]

168. The Pabloites were complicit in the tragedy that subsequently unfolded. The year 1969 was the start of a major offensive by the British state, as Northern Ireland became the laboratory for testing counter-insurgency measures with a view to their use across the UK. Mass arrests, internment without trial, Diplock no-jury courts all followed in its wake, as did torture and assassinations. On January 30, 1972, 14 civil rights demonstrators were shot dead by British troops on Bloody Sunday. This was only the worst example of a campaign of state terror that spanned three decades.

169. The IMG's antics in Ireland made it increasingly difficult to distinguish where petty-bourgeois adventurism ended and political provocation began. The organisation was to become an unabashed cheerleader for the IRA, with its Irish co-thinkers piloting the “urban guerrilla” Republican movement Saor Eire. Involved in bank robberies and the murder of an Irish policeman, the group was a vehicle through which Irish state forces intervened in the conflict in the North. The USec's activities resulted in the brutal murder of its member, Saor Eire leader Peter Graham, and the laying of criminal charges against a number of others. On August 19, 1973, Gerry Lawless, a leading member of the IMG, presented himself to Scotland Yard, where he made a statement fingering the Provisional IRA for a series of fire bombings in London. Hansen and the USec defended Lawless and ruled out any inquiry into his actions.

## **Security and the Fourth International**

170. Most revealing was the response of the Pabloites to the events surrounding the political desertion, in late August 1974, of Tim Wohlforth from his post as national secretary of the Workers League. Wohlforth had

been suspended after it emerged that he had concealed from the International Committee the fact that his companion, Nancy Fields—who had been elevated into the national leadership of the Workers League—had close family connections with high-ranking personnel in the CIA. As the Workers League began an investigation into Fields's background, Wohlforth resigned, publicly attacked the International Committee, and rejoined the SWP. Hansen made a vitriolic denunciation of Healy, describing the treatment of Wohlforth as an example of his "paranoia".

171. Hansen's belittling of the need for security in the revolutionary socialist movement was extraordinary. As he was well aware, the Trotskyist movement had paid a devastating price for its infiltration by agents of the Stalinist bureaucracy. He had been a witness to the assassination of Trotsky by Mercader, and had authorised the entry of the GPU agent into Trotsky's home. Moreover, Hansen's defence of Wohlforth's negligence came at a time, following the resignation of Richard Nixon, when evidence was emerging of massive state spying and the infiltration of radical and socialist organisations. Documents would later reveal that the SWP had been a target for the FBI, which had sent hundreds of agents and informers into the organisation between 1961 and 1975.

172. The International Committee determined that the attacks by Hansen and Wohlforth were best answered by reviewing the historical experience of the Fourth International in relation to security. In 1975, it launched the Security and the Fourth International investigation into the circumstances surrounding Trotsky's murder. The investigation uncovered a 37-year conspiracy to suppress information about the assassination and the infiltration of police and Stalinist agents into the Fourth International. Documents revealed that following Trotsky's killing, Hansen had established secret relations with high-level US agents. A lawsuit by SWP member Alan Gelfand against the US government, alleging state control of the SWP, forced the release of further documents confirming that Hansen had been a GPU agent inside the SWP from at least the mid-1940s, before he was turned by the FBI.

173. The response of the USec and other opportunist organisations to these findings was universally hostile. Ignoring all the evidence, they defended Hansen and other proven agents against what they described as "Healy's Big Lie". The International Committee's request to the Pabloite groups to establish a parity commission, consisting of equal numbers from each organisation, to examine the evidence, went unanswered. Instead, on January 14, 1977, opponents of the International Committee assembled a "Platform of Shame" in London to attack the findings as a witch-hunt. Signatories to a statement denouncing the investigation included leading Pabloites Ernest Mandel, Tariq Ali, Ken Coates, Charlie van Gelderen, Pat Jordan and Bob Pennington.

### **The mass movement against the Heath government**

174. The global crisis plunged Britain into a period of intense class conflict, which brought it closer to revolution than at any time since the 1926 General Strike. As a major finance centre, it was especially vulnerable to the sweeping capital movements that took place following the break-up of Bretton Woods. The Wilson government was forced into a series of devaluations and major spending cuts. In 1969, it brought forward the White Paper, "In Place of Strife", to enforce legal sanctions against strikes.

175. The SLL warned that the refusal of the Labour left to lead a struggle against Wilson was paving the way for the return of a Conservative government, and the imposition of even more savage measures against the working class. In 1968, Conservative MP Enoch

Powell had been sacked from the shadow cabinet after delivering his notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech, seeking to whip up anti-immigrant sentiments. But Powell's remarks were only the initial expression of a right-wing shift by the Tories, who, by 1970, had adopted a radical, free market agenda. Based on the monetarist economic policies of Milton Friedman, they advocated an end to the "bailout" of inefficient companies, the curtailing of social provisions, and a legal offensive against wildcat strikes.

176. Elected in June 1970, one of the first actions of the Heath government was to press forward with its Industrial Relations Act against the trade unions, targeting in particular unofficial strikes. Over the next four years, Heath was forced to call no less than five states of emergency, as a mass movement involving millions developed against his government. The first national miners' strike since 1926 broke out in January 1972, a year that saw 23.2 million work days lost due to strikes. Mass picketing at the Saltley coke depot in Birmingham, involving thousands, forced the government to grant a 21 percent pay rise.

177. In July, five striking shop stewards on the London docks were arrested for secondary picketing and sent to Pentonville jail. Their imprisonment saw all the major ports come to a standstill, as 170,000 dockers struck. Printers in Fleet Street walked out, stopping virtually all the national dailies, and rolling strikes were implemented by other sections of workers. A blockade of the prison by tens of thousands led to the intervention of the hitherto little-known Official Solicitor, who, using ancient powers, ordered the release of the five.

178. Utilising events in Northern Ireland, Heath had introduced a new system to deal with civil unrest by placing responsibility for emergency powers under the control of the Civil Contingencies Unit. This apparatus was employed in 1974 against a second national miners' strike. In preparation for the confrontation, the government placed industry on a three-day week to conserve fuel supplies, while the civil service, the police and the Ministry of Defence were secretly placed on an alert procedure. Military manoeuvres were carried out at Heathrow airport and other strategic locations.

179. Seeking to mobilise sections of the middle class, Heath called a general election for February 28, 1974, under the slogan, "Who runs Britain, the government or the unions?" But he had badly misread the political mood, particularly the combativeness of the working class. Despite government threats and a vicious media witch-hunt, the miners stayed out on strike for the duration of the election campaign. Their determined response shifted the balance of class forces. Heath failed to secure a majority but, for four days, refused to concede defeat. Though apparently Heath was attempting to form a coalition with the Liberal Party, the former Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Carver later admitted that discussions about military intervention had taken place at the time among "fairly senior officers".

### **Growing political disorientation in the SLL**

180. These were the events for which the British Trotskyists had long prepared. The SLL saw a growth in its influence, due to its determined efforts to develop the mass movement against the Heath government. It made important interventions, such as a challenge to the Stalinist leadership of the 1971 Upper Clyde Shipyards dispute and its perspective of organising a "work-in" to divert from a political struggle against Heath. The SLL also led the fight against the imprisonment on conspiracy charges of the Shrewsbury Two, Des Warren and Ricky Tomlinson, following the 1972 builders' strike. These initiatives enabled it to make organisational advances, including the expansion of the daily *Workers*

*Press*, raising its political profile.

181. Of greater significance for the longer-term development of the movement, however, was the SLL's manifest impatience with the complex problems associated with the construction of the International Committee. This was most clearly expressed in its attitude to the conflict with the OCI. In July 1971, the OCI had invited representatives of the Pabliste Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR) in Bolivia, the Spartacist group and the National Students Association of the US, which had received funding from the CIA, to its youth rally in Essen, Germany. In the course of the rally, the OCI publicly voted down an SLL amendment declaring that the theoretical struggle waged by the International Committee was the only basis for constructing an international revolutionary youth movement. One month later, the Bolivian army staged a coup, overthrowing the left military regime of General Torres. The POR had supported Torres, but the OCI opposed any examination of its political line.

182. On November 24, 1971, the SLL declared a split with the French section. While many of its criticisms of the OCI were correct, it undertook no systematic examination of the crucial questions of perspective that were posed. In contrast to the patient struggle it had conducted against the SWP, the SLL made no attempt to develop a faction within the French section. Healy was reluctant to wage such an exhaustive struggle, because he feared it would cut across the practical interventions of the SLL into the emerging crisis in Britain. His fears were amplified by the fact that positions similar to the OCI's had been voiced within the central leadership of the British section. At the 1966 World Congress, Cliff Slaughter had initially supported the OCI's formulation on "reconstructing" the Fourth International, before being persuaded to change his mind by the political implications made apparent by Robertson's positions. For his part, Banda had repeatedly evinced a political fascination for such figures as Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Gamal Abdel Nasser. In an editorial for the *Fourth International*, Banda had praised the Vietnamese National Liberation Front as being akin to the Bolshevik Party. Healy avoided a conflict with Banda, merely sanctioning a short statement in the subsequent edition of the journal, declaring that the editorial had represented the personal view of its author.

183. The SLL's political evasions centred on its insistence that the issues in dispute with the OCI were merely secondary manifestations of differences over philosophy. In its statement about the split in March 1972, the SLL claimed that it had learned "from the experience of building the revolutionary party in Britain that a thoroughgoing and difficult struggle against idealist ways of thinking was necessary which went much deeper than questions of agreement on programme and policy".[64] This statement directly contradicted Trotsky, who held that "The significance of the programme is the significance of the party," and that this programme consisted of "a common understanding of events, of the tasks..."[65]

184. Its reference to the "experience of building the revolutionary party in Britain" indicated that the SLL was moving away from the lessons derived by the Fourth International in its fight against Stalinism, social democracy and Pablistism, towards national and more empirically determined considerations. Its failure to confront and correct the political mistakes it had made in the split with the OCI left it open to the enormous social pressures that were acting upon it. This undermined the work of the International Committee at precisely the point when a deepening crisis of world capitalism required the greatest possible degree of programmatic clarity in the struggle to train and educate the new forces that had been attracted to the IC in different parts of the world.

185. A further sign of the SLL's drift from its Trotskyist moorings was the statement written by Michael Banda on December 6, 1971, on the Indo-Pak war. In contrast to the SLL's principled stand against the intervention of the British state into Northern Ireland just two years earlier, Banda's

statement lent support to Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's decision to send troops into East Pakistan, ostensibly in support of the Bengali liberation movement. The RCL in Sri Lanka, under the leadership of Keerthi Balasuriya, took an opposed position—insisting in a statement published on December 8, "the task of the proletariat is not that of supporting any one of the warring factions of the bourgeoisie, but that of utilising each and every conflict in the camp of the class enemy for the seizure of power, with the perspective of setting up a federated socialist republic, which alone would be able to satisfy the social and national aspirations of the millions of toilers in the subcontinent."

186. Having been made aware of the SLL's stand, Balasuriya responded in two letters. The first stated, "It is not possible to support the national liberation struggle of the Bengali people, and the voluntary unification of India on socialist foundations, without opposing the Indo-Pakistan War." The second warned that Banda's enthusiastic support for Gandhi's intervention pointed to the danger of an "abandonment of all the past experiences of the Marxist movement regarding the struggle of the colonial masses" that tended to move "in the direction of revising all the capital gains made by the SLL leadership in the fight against the SWP during the 1961-63 period." The RCL's criticisms were not circulated within the International Committee. Instead, the SLL used its leading position to politically isolate the section.

*To be continued*

#### Footnotes:

[60] *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism* (1975), New Park Publications, Volume 5, p. 111

[61] *ibid.* pp. 113-114

[62] *Newsletter*, January 6, 1968

[63] Cliff Slaughter, "Northern Ireland—a touchstone of revolutionary principle," *Workers Press*, October 3, 1969

[64] *Trotskyism versus Revisionism* (1974), New Park Publications, Volume Six, p. 83

[65] Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution* (1977), Pathfinder, pp. 207-208



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