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

Part Eight

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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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The founding of the Workers Revolutionary Party

187. Slaughter's *In Defence of Trotskyism*, published in January 1973, was intended as an analysis of the break with the OCI. However, it unintentionally made clear that the theoretical formulations developed by the SLL during that struggle—the claim that the struggle for Marxist theory was more fundamental than questions of programme and perspective—were opening the party to a corrosive scepticism regarding the historic significance of the Fourth International. In it Slaughter asked:

"Will revolutionary parties able to lead the working class to power and the building of socialism, be built simply by bringing the programme of Trotskyism, the existing forces of Trotskyism, on to the scene of political developments caused by the crisis? Or will it not be necessary to conduct a conscious struggle for theory, for the negation of all the past experience and theory of the movement into the transformed reality of the class struggle?"[66]

188. The political implications of the question mark Slaughter now threw over Trotskyism were made apparent by the manner in which the transformation of the SLL into the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) was carried out in November 1973. Founded at the height of the mass movement against Heath, the decision to launch the WRP had proceeded without any discussion in the International Committee, much less a thoroughgoing review of the political lessons of the struggle against Pabloism. Its formation was based on an adaptation to anti-Tory sentiment, and was conceived almost exclusively as the product of the numerical growth in support for the SLL. The WRP's declared aim was to "undertake a specific political task: to unite the working class behind a socialist programme to throw out the Tory government and replace it with a Labour government."

189. While this call provided the possibility of taking workers through the experience of a political struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, it made impermissible adaptations to reformist illusions. The WRP advanced an essentially electoral programme, which made only the most minimal reference to the party's Trotskyist character, its international perspective and the International Committee. The programme of demands outlined was framed as a series of "basic rights"—for employment, a higher standard of living, social benefits and better housing, and to "change the system" in an unspecified way. This watering down of the historically developed programme of Trotskyism, in order to accommodate the trade union level of consciousness in the working class, was to have major ramifications, especially under conditions where the bourgeoisie was able to rely on the still considerable political resources of the labour bureaucracy.

190. The anti-Tory movement culminated in the coming to power of a minority Labour government under Wilson. The WRP had calculated that the spontaneous movement would continue and deepen, immediately bringing the working class into conflict with the Labour government. It declared in September 1974, "The expectations of the working class are high—way beyond anything that the minority Labour government can possibly fulfil… In the fight for basic rights, the working class established itself as a class… When the Tories and their Fabian agents try to destroy basic rights they are simultaneously invoking the revolutionary history of the oldest and most powerful working class in the world."

191. The statement's emphasis on the supposedly peculiar character and traditions of the British working class placed the WRP on a national axis, while the fight for "basic rights" did not rise above the level of trade union militancy. In addition, it involved a serious miscalculation regarding the tempo of development of the class struggle. Wilson settled the miners' pay claim, abolished the Industrial Relations Act and raised pensions and social security benefits. These measures were accompanied by its Social Contract, piloted by leading left Michael Foot, which involved a deal between the government and the trade unions for voluntary wage restraint.

192. An ebbing of the class struggle followed, posing new political problems for the WRP under conditions in which it was prioritising sustaining the momentum of growth in Britain, over the struggle for clarity on perspectives. When the WRP responded to the renewed illusions in Labour by sharpening its offensive against the Wilson government, tensions were generated within the party's membership—particularly amongst those who had been attracted on the basis of the anti-Tory fight. This discontent was actively exploited by the OCI, whose supporters secretly made contact with Alan Thornett, who headed the WRP's trade union work and its Cowley factory branch at British Leyland. The Thornett faction was an unprincipled, anti-party tendency. Its documents were largely written by the OCI, with the intention of blowing up the WRP and removing Healy from leadership.

193. The WRP's critique of Thornett's positions was correct, but Healy repeated the mistake of moving to an organisational settlement before clarifying the political issues involved. As a result of the confusion the split engendered, the party lost its most important industrial base. Neither did the WRP make any attempt to involve the International Committee. Had it done so, it would have fundamentally changed the political dynamic. By resuming the struggle against the OCI and the resurgence of Pabloite revisionism, represented by Thornett's right-centrist line, the WRP leadership would have politically rearmed the world movement in

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the face of the sharp shift that was emerging in the political situation internationally.

The global capitalist counteroffensive

194. The WRP failed to appreciate that the betrayals of the Stalinists, social democrats and Pabloites had, in fact, provided the bourgeoisie with the breathing space necessary to stabilise its fragile rule and prepare a global counteroffensive against the working class. Around the world, the ruling class demanded the abandonment of Keynesian-style economic regulation and the programme of class compromise based on concessions to the working class—the pursuit of full employment and the provision of social welfare measures. Instead, to offset the tendency of the rate of profit to decline, production was to be enormously concentrated into ever-larger conglomerates, and capital and production exported to those areas of the world economy that offered the cheapest labour and lowest taxes. What had begun as multi-national companies, over time, took on the character of transnational corporations, organizing production on a global basis and able to dictate the policies of national governments.

195. A measure of the WRP's disorientation was its increasing tendency to invoke what it declared to be the "undefeated nature of the working class" as the essential premise for its analysis of every phenomenon, no matter how disparate. Even if the WRP had been correct in its claim that the working class was "undefeated", the elevation of such a conjunctural estimation to the status of a timeless axiom represented a political break with essential elements of Marxist analysis. A correct definition of the "nature" of the working class can only be derived from the historical understanding of its role as a revolutionary class, by virtue of its propertyless and stateless position within the capitalist order. It is this that makes it the bearer of new and higher social relations of production, regardless of the ebbs and flows of the class struggle and whether or not it has suffered defeats in an immediate, or even historic, sense.

196. Moreover, the history of the post-war period was far more chequered than the WRP's formulation suggested. In Indonesia in October 1965, up to one million workers and peasants were slaughtered in a CIA-organised army coup led by General Suharto. This was followed by the installation of a military junta in Greece in April 1967, and the CIA-backed coup against the social democratic government of Salvador Allende in Chile, in 1973.

197. The "undefeated nature of the working class" was a Pabloite formulation. It diverted the party away from a serious examination of what Trotsky had insisted was *the* fundamental problem facing mankind: the "crisis of revolutionary leadership". The struggle to break workers from their existing leaderships and win them to Marxism was replaced by objectivist commentary, in which every development—including defeats—was interpreted as a fresh confirmation of how the working class remained "undefeated".

The WRP's ultra-left turn

198. In July 1975, the WRP called an emergency conference to adopt a Political Committee statement calling on the working class to bring down the Wilson government. As the International Committee later wrote, this policy was so far removed from the actual development of the working class that it could not be explained as simply a political error:

"The resolution signified a fundamental programmatic break with the proletarian orientation for which the British Trotskyists had fought for decades. To call for the bringing down of a Labour government, under conditions in which the revolutionary party had not yet won the allegiance of any significant section of the working class and in which the only alternative to Labour was a Tory government which the working class had brought down little more than a year before, was the height of adventurism. At the very point when the Labour Party was being compelled to turn openly against the working class, creating conditions for a powerful intervention within its mass organisations, the WRP presented an impossible ultimatum. At a very early stage of this confrontation, the WRP proposed to pre-empt the struggle within the working class organisations with a campaign that would place the fate of the Labour Party in the hands of the national electorate."[67]

199. While the WRP's condemnation of Labour was able to find some support amongst politically untrained workers and youth hostile to reformism, it was a disturbing expression of the class shift that had taken place within the party leadership. With the party having lost an important section of its working class base, Healy had been forced to rely ever more on those artists he had recruited in the late 1960s, such as Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, along with a number of journalists, such as Alex Mitchell, to sustain his efforts to "build the party". In place of systematic work to educate and train these forces through an apprenticeship in the class struggle, they were rapidly elevated into the central leadership of the WRP and thrust into practical activity associated with maintaining and funding a daily paper. This was to provide a contributory political impulse to the watering down of the Trotskyist identity of the party, which found expression in the transformation of the *Workers Press* into the more "popular" and politically centrist *News Line* in May 1976.

200. In the same year, the WRP began cultivating relations with national movements and bourgeois regimes in the Middle East. From the signing of a commercial agreement with the Libyan government, behind the backs of the International Committee, Healy sought access to the funds required to resolve the party's financial problems and provide a short-cut to political influence. This orientation was to culminate in a wholesale repudiation of the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

201. In Britain, the abandonment of the struggle to unmask the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, and the "lefts" in particular, came just as the conflict between the Wilson government and the working class, which the WRP had anticipated, began to unfold. Labour's offensive was presaged by a state attack on the WRP. During a House of Lords debate on February 26, 1975, on the threat of "subversion and extremism," the Earl of Kimberley stated that the WRP was "by far the most dangerous of the Trotskyist organisations in this country. It is larger, better organised, and, from the point of view of industrial agitation, more intelligently led than its rivals."[68] Taking this cue, Labour's Home Secretary Roy Jenkins authorised a Special Branch raid on the WRP's College of Marxist Education in September, using the pretext of a defamatory article in the *Observer* newspaper.

202. The WRP responded to the police raid with an energetic defence campaign, which won widespread support in the working class, forcing the state to retreat. This could not, however, compensate for the party's turn away from the proletarian orientation that had hitherto characterised its work. Its ultimatist political line meant that it was nowhere near the struggles that were to emerge within the Labour Party and the trade unions against the government's openly rightward shift.

203. Events, as they unfolded in 1976, had the character of an exercise in political engineering, involving the IMF, leading sections of British industry and the City of London, with the collaboration of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. In April, after a campaign of destabilisation by the security services, Wilson resigned and was replaced as prime minister by James Callaghan. With the economy mired in recession, Labour's new leader accepted IMF dictates that it take on the working class through spending cuts and pay restraint. Callaghan told the Labour Party conference that year, "We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists."

204. In March 1977, Callaghan entered a pact with the Liberal Party in order to remain in office against a gathering strike movement. The Labour "lefts" and the trade unions were vital in keeping Callaghan's administration going. As energy secretary, Tony Benn refused to mount a political struggle against the right wing, and had in place emergency

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legislation, including for the deployment of the army, for use during a strike by oil tanker drivers. Industrial action by one-and-a-half million public sector workers during the "Winter of Discontent" in 1978-79 paralysed the country. But without an alternative socialist perspective and leadership, it was the Tories that were able to exploit from the right the frustration and disillusionment of the middle class—culminating in the election of Margaret Thatcher in March 1979.

The Thatcher government

205. Under Thatcher, the bourgeoisie sought to arrest the historic decline in Britain's global position, destroying manufacturing industry and deregulating the City of London so as to expand its ability to speculate on global markets. While seeking to buy off a section of the middle class with the fruits of the speculative binge, described as "popular capitalism", she set out to "roll back" socialism through union-busting, attacks on the welfare state and an aggressive assertion of imperialist interests. The response of the trade unions and the Labour Party was the emergence of what came to be known as "new realism"—an end to what were derided as out-dated notions of class struggle and workers' solidarity, and the embrace of free-market nostrums. A central ideological role was played by the wing of the CPGB grouped around the magazine *Marxism Today*. It argued that Britain was now a "post-Fordist society" in which the working class had been reduced to an insignificant force, and urged Labour to embrace "identity politics" and consumerism to emulate Thatcher's appeal to the aspiring middle class.

206. Time and again, beginning with the 1980 steel strike, the TUC and its affiliated unions refused to mount a political offensive against the government. They abandoned their 1982 commitment to oppose the Tories' anti-union laws and allowed union-busting operations to succeed in the print industry and elsewhere. Within two years of Thatcher taking office, the "Gang of Four"—Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers—split from Labour to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Under the nominally "left" leadership of Foot, the Labour Party responded by expelling the Militant Tendency leadership in order to prove its anti-socialist credentials. In April 1982, Labour supported the Falklands/Malvinas War, helping secure Thatcher's re-election in 1983. That year, Foot was replaced by Neil Kinnock, who set out to reposition Labour as something akin to the SDP, but with the crucial backing of the trade unions.

207. The full extent of the rightward evolution of the trade unions and the Labour Party was displayed during the yearlong miners' strike of 1984-85. In order to subject the most militant and powerful section of the workers' movement to a crushing defeat, the Thatcher government mobilised the police and army in military-style attacks, which left 20,000 miners injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested and 200 imprisoned. Two miners, David Gareth Jones and Joe Green, were killed. A scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) was set up in collaboration with sections of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) bureaucracy in Nottingham, and the NUM had its assets sequestered. The Labour Party and the TUC maintained the isolation of the miners, refusing throughout to organise a single solidarity strike.

208. Neither did the "left" challenge this abject treachery. Instead, Ken Livingstone in London and the Militant-led Liverpool City Council ensured that the fight against the government's assault on local authority services was kept strictly separate from the miners' struggle. The Stalinist trade union leaders, including those in the NUM, made regional agreements to maintain power and steel production, with union executives ordering their members to cross picket lines. The efforts to sabotage the strike from within were reinforced by the position taken by Stalinist NUM leader Arthur Scargill, who never once politically challenged the TUC and Labour leaders.

209. Concealed behind ultra-left rhetoric, the 1980s saw the WRP set about in earnest to build political relations with a faction of the Labour left, led by Greater London Council leader Ken Livingstone, and with the trade union bureaucracy. To this end, it offered an amnesty, in the pages of the *News Line*, to the most naked of betrayals carried out by the union tops. The main slogan of the WRP during the miners' dispute was its demand for the TUC to organise a General Strike. Making the correct observation that such a movement would pose the question of power, it asserted that the next stage in the class struggle would therefore proceed directly to the formation of a "Workers Revolutionary Government," thus bypassing any need to address the role of the Labour Party. The opportunist course of the WRP was most apparent in its abandonment of its previous criticisms of Scargill. It never once attempted to hold him to political account, instead offering to place the entire resources of the WRP at his disposal.

210. The miners' strike ended with the virtual destruction of the industry and the disintegration of the NUM. Over the next period, overtly pro-company unionism of the UDM type became widespread within official TUC affiliates. Kinnock utilised the miners' defeat to press ahead with the refashioning of the Labour Party. Declaring that the greatest struggle before the labour movement was the fight against alien Marxist tendencies, entryist groups and "Trots", he rallied the Stalinist and Tribunite "left" and sought to convince the City of London that Labour could be trusted with its interests. Amongst the future New Labour luminaries who came to prominence at this time was Tony Blair, alongside ex-Stalinists such as Jack Straw and Peter Mandelson. They would later be joined by former IMG members such as Kate Hoey, Alan Milburn and Alistair Darling.

211. The WRP's idealist mystification of Marxism played a central role in facilitating its adoption of an essentially Pabloite perspective. Healy's pamphlet, *Studies in Dialectical Materialism*, published in 1982, became the basis for the party's education work. Its reversion to the type of subjective idealist philosophy overcome by Marx in his critique of the Left Hegelians in the 1840s became the means of avoiding a concrete working-out of revolutionary perspectives, thus undermining the historically derived programme of Trotskyism. This was accompanied by an increasing reliance on politically untrained youth, who were pitted against older cadre—routinely denounced as "abstract propagandists".

To be continued

Footnotes:

[66] Cliff Slaughter, *In Defence of Trotskyism*, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism* (1975) New Park Publications, Volume 6, p. 226

[67] *How the WRP betrayed Trotskyism* (Summer 1986), *Fourth International*, Labor Publications, Volume 13, No. 1, p. 26

[68] Hansard, February 26, 1975, Volume 357, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1975/feb/26/subversive-and-extremist-elements

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