

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

Part Nine

19 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 Workers League's critique of the WRP

212. The pronounced shift in the WRP's political orientation had led to a growing divergence with the Workers League in the United States. The Workers League had responded to Wohlforth's desertion by deepening the struggle against Pabloism, placing the assimilation of the historical experiences of the Trotskyist movement at the centre of its work. This was manifested in the central role played by the Workers League in the Security and the Fourth International investigation, as well as its consistent orientation to the working class, based on the fight to develop socialist consciousness and Marxist leadership.

213. Concerned at the WRP's political drift, Workers League National Secretary David North set out to initiate a discussion within the International Committee. In 1982, he submitted a detailed critique of Healy's *Studies in Dialectical Materialism* and its relationship to the party's shift away from its Trotskyist axis. North wrote:

"For several years (in my opinion, this began in 1976 and only began to predominate in 1978), in the name of the struggle for dialectical materialism and against propagandism, the International Committee has drifted steadily away from a struggle for Trotskyism".⁶⁹

214. Referring to the WRP's relations with bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East, he continued:

"A vulgarisation of Marxism, palmed off as the 'struggle for dialectics', has been accompanied by an unmistakable opportunist drift within the International Committee, especially in the WRP.... Marxist defence of national liberation movements and the struggle against imperialism has been interpreted in an opportunist fashion of uncritical support for various bourgeois nationalist regimes".⁷⁰

215. Subsequently, Slaughter and Banda were to claim that the revisions of Marxist philosophy and the political opportunism accompanying them were solely Healy's responsibility. But, as International Committee secretary and WRP general secretary respectively, Slaughter and Banda played a critical role, as part of a clique within the WRP leadership, in suppressing any discussion of North's critique. They threatened to immediately sever relations with the Workers League unless the criticisms were withdrawn. The class content of their actions was revealed in a December 1983 letter from Slaughter to the Workers League, in which he

attacked the US Trotskyists for their "heavy emphasis on the 'political independence' of the working class".

216. In a letter to Banda dated January 23, 1984, North restated that the Workers League had become:

"deeply troubled by the growing signs of a political drift toward political positions quite similar—both in conclusions and methodology—to those we have historically associated with Pabloism.... Rather than a perspective for the building of sections of the International Committee in every country, the central focus of the IC's work for several years has been the development of alliances with various bourgeois nationalist regimes and liberation movements. The content of these alliances has less and less reflected any clear orientation toward the development of our own forces as central to the fight to establish the leading role of the proletariat in the anti-imperialist struggle in the semi-colonial countries. The various conceptions advanced by the SWP in relation to Cuba and Algeria, which we attacked so vigorously in the early 1960s, appear with increasing frequency within our own press".⁷¹

217. North returned to the issues in a report to the ICFI delivered on February 11, 1984, in which he called for a "serious and honest discussion" in order to resolve political differences. Once again, the WRP leadership threatened a split. In a letter to Healy, dated February 16, 1984, Slaughter hailed the "defeat" of the "attack from the US section" and promised to go forward together "also if necessary, with no holds barred".

The WRP explodes

218. The WRP leadership's refusal to countenance any discussion within the International Committee only prepared the way for an explosion of factional warfare within the organisation. During the miners' strike, Healy had declared that Thatcher had been transformed into a Bonapartist dictator, and that the dispute would end in either socialist revolution or a fascist dictatorship. The miners' defeat unleashed a ferocious reaction from the WRP leaders. Echoing the rightward movement of broad swathes of the middle class in the 1980s, they concluded that they had wasted their lives in pursuit of a chimera. As North later wrote:

"For years they had repeated again and again, without making any serious analysis of the changes in the economic conjuncture or the concrete development of the class struggle, that the social revolution in Britain was imminent. Now—and this is the heart of their perspective—they no longer believe in the possibility of revolution either in this century or in the opening decades of the next one".⁷²

219. A covert faction at the party's headquarters mounted a political "dirty tricks" operation—using a financial crisis it had helped create, and revelations of improper sexual conduct by Healy, to destabilise the party. The principal concern of the conspirators was to avoid any discussion that might have led to a questioning of the leadership's policies. By blackmailing Healy, they hoped to force him to step aside and to assume

control of the party and its assets. Healy was open to an organisational settlement, having decisively turned away from his own past struggles.

220. On this basis, the WRP leadership was still able to present a united front. On August 17, 1985, Healy, Banda and Slaughter, together with Assistant National Secretary Sheila Torrence, summoned the International Committee to London, where they lied about the source of the financial crisis in the party and extorted tens of thousands of pounds in pledges. However, as the political crisis in the WRP leadership spiralled out of control, the sections of the International Committee became aware of the internal conflict and were able to intervene. Their intervention was to prove critical, as the contending factions of the WRP moved towards an organisational split. When the delegates of the International Committee assembled in London on October 23, 1985, they rejected the efforts of the WRP leaders to use the international movement for their opportunist ends. The IC insisted that the crisis in the WRP was rooted in a long-standing drift away from the programme and perspective of Trotskyism.

The International Committee expels Gerry Healy

221. Having examined the charges against Healy, on October 25, 1985, the International Committee voted for his expulsion. Its resolution of the same date declared:

“In expelling Healy, the ICFI has no intention of denying the political contributions which he made in the past, particularly in the struggle against Pabloite revisionism in the 1950s and the 1960s. In fact, this expulsion is the end product of his rejection of the Trotskyist principles upon which these past struggles were based and his descent into the most vulgar forms of opportunism.

The political and personal degeneration of Healy can be clearly traced to his ever more explicit separation of the practical and organisational gains of the Trotskyist movement in Britain from the historically and internationally grounded struggles against Stalinism and revisionism from which these achievements arose.

In place of his past interest in the complex problems of developing the cadre of the international Trotskyist movement, Healy’s practice became almost entirely preoccupied with developing unprincipled relations with bourgeois nationalist leaders and with trade union and Labour Party reformists in Britain”.⁷³

222. The IC’s objective approach to Healy’s historic role, and its rooting of his personal degeneration in the WRP’s abandonment of the struggle against Pabloite revisionism, cut across Slaughter’s claim that the issue at stake was restoring “revolutionary morality” through a struggle against “Healyism”. The use of this term was deliberate. It provided a gateway for making a direct appeal to other “anti-Healyite” forces—the Stalinists and the Pabloite groups.

223. The expulsion of Healy marked the definitive conclusion of his career as a professional revolutionary, which had spanned half a century. It was an ignominious end for someone who had played such a leading role in defending the Fourth International, its programme and cadre that he now found himself numbered amongst those seeking its destruction. But a revolutionary orientation is not a pathway set in stone that, once embarked upon, cannot be abandoned. It can only be maintained through a constant process of political struggle, conducted alongside fellow thinkers within an international movement. This alone provides the means for overcoming the immense pressures brought to bear by imperialism and its myriad political agencies. Healy’s tragedy was that he turned away from this perspective and sought a shortcut to his fiercely desired goal of social revolution. In doing so, he forgot his own oft-invoked warning that opportunist practices, undertaken for immediate practical gain, involved “mortgaging the future” of the socialist workers’ movement. As the International Committee resolution made clear, even while opposing Healy’s political betrayal, the cadre of the Fourth International was not minded to forget the historic contribution he had once made. Rather, it sought to learn from both his political achievements

and the mistakes that led to his downfall.

The formation of the Workers Revolutionary Party (Internationalists)

224. In a second resolution, the International Committee identified, as the fundamental characteristic of the WRP’s degeneration, the refusal to subordinate itself to the discipline of the international movement. To provide the best possible conditions for political clarification, the resolution called for:

“The re-registration of the membership of the WRP on the basis of an explicit recognition of the political authority of the ICFI and the subordination of the British section to its decisions.

“Full collaboration by every member of the WRP with an International Control Commission to investigate, but not limited to, the corruption of G. Healy, the cover-up by the Political Committee, and the financial crisis of the WRP.

“All charges against members of either the minority or majority factions, which have arisen as a result of the eruption of the crisis in the Party, shall be referred to the International Control Commission”.⁷⁴

225. For three years, the WRP leaders had combined together to suppress the criticisms raised by the Workers League. Their fear throughout was that these criticisms would find support within the British section, and it proved to be well grounded. There had been a number of occasions in the past where oppositional voices had been raised against various aspects of the WRP’s line, but none of these critics had demonstrated any interest in pursuing a struggle within the world movement. Indeed, for the most part, they did not conceive of themselves as members of a world party, but of a national left formation.

226. In the course of the struggle in 1985, a political turn occurred that was to make possible the reorientation of a significant section of the British membership as conscious internationalists. Credit for this goes to Dave Hyland, the Central Committee member for Yorkshire. Having been made aware of Healy’s abuses, Hyland had led the demand for an investigation by the party’s Control Commission. Despite threats from Slaughter and Banda, he had refused to retreat.

227. In early October, Hyland obtained a copy of North’s critique. His response was to reappraise the issues involved in the conflict within the WRP. Hyland now understood that more was at stake than a bureaucratic degeneration in the party’s apparatus, and that a principled opposition had developed within the International Committee to the WRP leadership. His decision to contact the Workers League to request political discussion provided the first opportunity for the International Committee to make direct contact with the WRP’s membership. In the discussions that followed between Hyland and North, agreement was quickly established that the fight to save the WRP as a Trotskyist party could only be taken forward through a resumption of the Fourth International’s struggle against Pabloite revisionism.

228. Hyland and two other Central Committee members sought minority status as the WRP (Internationalists), based upon recognition of the political authority of the International Committee. Their petition was accepted on November 9, 1985. The WRP (I) had significant support within the working class cadre of the WRP and from the majority of the Young Socialists and its leadership. It included individuals representing decades of struggle for Trotskyism in Britain, such as Barbara Slaughter, Chris Talbot and Vicky Short. The support for the WRP (I) confirmed the correctness of North’s refusal to be pushed by the Healy/Banda/Slaughter clique, in 1982 and 1984, into a premature split. Notwithstanding the years of centrist backsliding, it proved that there remained a sizeable constituency for Trotskyism within the WRP.

The WRP breaks with the International Committee

229. Healy responded to the International Committee’s intervention by engineering a split within the international movement. The October 25, 1985, meeting was boycotted by the Spanish and Greek sections, which

declared that the International Committee had no authority outside that of Healy as its “historic founder leader”. Their declaration confirmed that for Healy, the International Committee existed only to provide a rubber-stamp for his national organisational interests. One day later, the representatives of the pro-Healy minority split away.

230. Banda and Slaughter initially supported the International Committee resolution on re-registration, as part of their own factional manoeuvres against Healy. But immediately following the Healy faction’s break, they began in earnest to stoke up a middle class frenzy against the International Committee, declaring that the sole issue in the WRP’s crisis was “revolutionary morality”. Hoping to take advantage of the absence of any real knowledge of the history of the Trotskyist movement within the cadre, Banda and Slaughter argued that all sections of the International Committee were “equally degenerate”. This position was employed to justify a rapprochement with the Pabloites and the Stalinists, beginning with the November 26, 1985, meeting at London’s Friends Meeting House, where Slaughter publicly called into question the Security and the Fourth International investigation and the legitimacy of the 1953 split with Pablo, and made a show of shaking hands with leading Stalinist Monty Johnstone.

231. On December 16, 1985, the International Control Commission presented its interim report. It found that the WRP had “carried out an historic betrayal of the ICFI and the international working class. This betrayal consisted of the complete abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution, resulting in the pursuit of unprincipled relations with sections of the colonial bourgeoisie in return for money”. The resolution noted that whereas “the principal architect of these betrayals was G. Healy, aided by A. Mitchell and V. Redgrave...the political responsibility for the nationalist degeneration which allowed these practices to be carried out rests with the entire leadership of the WRP”. The resolution concluded:

“In order to defend its principles and integrity, the ICFI therefore suspends the WRP as the British section until the calling of an emergency Congress of the ICFI no later than March 1, following the 8th Congress of the WRP”.⁷⁵

232. The passing of the resolution was decisive. It asserted the authority of the International Committee over the national sections. Suspension underscored that there was no place within the International Committee for the betrayal of political principles carried out by the WRP leadership, which would be held to account for its actions. Of the WRP delegates at the meeting, only Hyland voted in favour of the WRP’s suspension. The WRP Central Committee responded with a vitriolic denouncement of the International Committee’s “simon purity” as “frankly nauseating”. From that point on, Slaughter and Banda moved deliberately to organise a split.

233. On January 26, 1986, the WRP Central Committee passed two resolutions. The first declared that “the IC is neither the World Party nor even the nucleus of the World Party”, and “cannot claim political authority as an international leadership. Neither can sections be subordinated to an international discipline determined by the IC”. A second resolution repudiated the registration of WRP members on the basis of recognising the political authority of the International Committee, as had been previously agreed at the special conference on October 27. The political and practical content of these resolutions was to declare a split. Their purpose was to rig the delegate selection process for the Eighth Congress, scheduled for February 8. A substantial section of the Central Committee majority’s supporters had refused to sign the re-registration forms. The Slaughter faction realised it would lose its majority on the CC if the election of delegates was based on party membership as defined by the Special Congress decisions. It ordered the re-registration forms to be withdrawn and delegates to be elected on the basis of unconfirmed membership lists supplied by the branches. These included dozens of people who had not been WRP members for many years, if at all.

234. The political basis for the split was a document prepared secretly by Banda, entitled, “27 reasons why the International Committee should be buried forthwith and the Fourth International built”. The document was published as a special supplement in the February 7, 1986, issue of the *Workers Press*, on the eve of the Eighth Congress, by its unelected “editor”, Dave Good—a Stalinist, who immediately after the split rejoined the Communist Party.

235. The following day, the WRP leadership barred members of the WRP (I) from attending the congress and called the police to enforce its decision. A force of 25 officers responded, and Slaughter was escorted into the bogus congress, where his faction completed its break with the International Committee. The WRP (I) assembled at another location to convene the legitimate Eighth Congress of the British section. The National Committee of the Young Socialists (YS) registered a majority vote supporting the WRP (I) and applauded the International Committee “for their decisive role in their historic fight to defend and develop the principles of Trotskyism”, which had been “supported by the majority of WRP and YS members”. The following month, the WRP (I) and YS formed the International Communist Party (ICP), forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party.

To be continued

Footnotes:

⁶⁹ *Fourth International*, Autumn 1986, Labor Publications, Volume 13, No.2, p.16

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p. 23

⁷¹ *ibid.* p. 35

⁷² David North, *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International* (1988), Labor Publications, p. 15

⁷³ *Fourth International*, Autumn 1986, Labor Publications, Volume 13, No.2, p.52

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*



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