

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

## Part One

10 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.*

Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4 | Part 5 | Part 6 | Part 7 | Part 8 | Part 9 | Part 10 | Part 11

### The principled foundations of the Socialist Equality Party

1. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the British section of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 and led today by the International Committee. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) represents the continuity of the struggle waged by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky to forge an independent revolutionary party of the working class for the overthrow of the capitalist profit system. This heritage is outlined in *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*, published by the SEP (US) in 2008, which also constitutes the programmatic basis for the work of the SEP in Britain.

2. The construction of a revolutionary tendency is possible only on the basis of an internationalist perspective. As Leon Trotsky insisted in 1928:

“In our epoch, which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e., of world economy and world politics under the hegemony of finance capital, not a single communist party can establish its programme by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country.... In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism”.<sup>1</sup>

3. Trotsky’s words, written in the midst of the protracted breakdown of world capitalism that spanned the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are even more relevant today. Beginning with the crash of 2008, world capitalism has entered a new period of systemic crisis. The multi-trillion dollar bailout that was meant to rescue the global finance system has brought national economies to the verge of bankruptcy. The ruling class has seized on this crisis to launch an offensive against the social position of the working class. Its aim is not only to place the burden of the bank bailouts onto working people. In Britain and throughout Europe, the ruling elites intend to smash up every remaining vestige of the welfare state measures enacted following the Second World War and to introduce levels of exploitation hitherto impossible outside of fascist or military dictatorships.

4. At the centre of this crisis is the United States. American capitalism is in an advanced state of decay. Its decline as the premier global power is

the single most destabilising factor in international politics, as it seeks to counteract its diminished economic position through militarism and colonial wars of conquest. The global integration of economic life means that no country is sheltered from the storm. The fundamental contradictions at the heart of the capitalist system, between globalised production and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states based on private ownership, are reasserting themselves. All claims that China can replace the US as the engine of the global economy are false. China relies heavily on the US and Western European markets. This interdependence only fuels the growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms between the US, China and the European powers that lead to trade and ultimately military war.

5. The assault on the livelihood of billions signifies the re-emergence of the class struggle as the decisive force in world history. At the same time, globalisation has created vast new battalions of the working class, which face a common enemy and are bound together by productive processes that transcend national boundaries. Their struggles must be consciously unified and directed to the conquest of political power. The state apparatus of the ruling class must be brought down and replaced by workers’ governments that will re-organise economic life on socialist foundations.

6. The perspective of proletarian internationalism involves not merely invoking solidarity between workers in different countries. It must take organisational form through the construction of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of the working class. No national organisation can develop and maintain a revolutionary orientation except through constant collaboration with its international co-thinkers. All tendencies that reject this strategic conception, in the name of maintaining national independence and freedom of action, only “free” themselves to capitulate to the national bourgeoisie and world imperialism.

7. The Socialist Equality Party is the product of a protracted, decades-long struggle to forge a socialist and internationalist party in Britain. An examination of this history must address the long political career of Gerry Healy, the most significant figure to emerge from the British workers’ movement. Healy was a powerful orator and an organiser of great talent and drive. But what set him apart, and made him tower over his contemporaries, were his determined efforts to establish the political independence of the working class from the Stalinist and social democratic apparatuses, under the highly unfavourable conditions that faced the Trotskyist movement during the post-war period.

8. The subsequent political degeneration of Healy and the tendency he led neither detracts from, nor negates the significance of, a principled struggle waged for more than two decades, which constitutes an essential foundation of the work of the Socialist Equality Party today. While so many others were to abandon a revolutionary perspective, Healy for many years played a critical role in the fight against Pabloite opportunism, which sought to liquidate the Fourth International. It was this stand that

preserved the continuity of Trotskyism. This continuity has nothing in common with concepts of infallible leaders or of apostolic succession. As with all history, that of the Trotskyist movement involves conflict, sharp breaks and even splits. It is a history of struggle. But this complex process is the necessary means through which the working class becomes conscious of itself as a revolutionary force. Its study is the essential basis for the education of a new generation of socialists.

#### **Reform and revolution in British history**

9. Britain is a country with long democratic traditions stretching back to the Magna Carta, an immense and powerful culture, and a world literature. Ruling over the first imperialist country in the world, the British bourgeoisie was able to establish a position of global hegemony dwarfing anything enjoyed today by the United States. The huge wealth accrued from an empire on which “the sun never set” shaped certain negative features in the working class, including a belief in parliamentary reform, a deference to the existing order and a degree of national insularity.

10. Britain’s pre-eminent position found political expression in the domination of the workers’ movement by an “aristocracy of labour”—a more privileged layer of the working class, exemplified above all by the leaders of the trade unions—that preached the virtues of class collaboration and implacable hostility to Marxism and revolution. It was this that ultimately determined the character of the Labour Party, founded by the trade unions in 1906, as a bourgeois workers’ party based on the mass workers’ organisations, but committed to the defence of capitalism.

11. Those who fixate on the conservative tendencies in British history and in the working class, however, do so in order to justify their own agenda. Britain is also a country of abrupt political and social shifts. The bourgeoisie came to power as the result of a civil war that ended in the execution of the King. It was in Britain that capitalism then emerged, as Marx declared, “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt”. Vast inequality and social misery were enforced by every conceivable form of class injustice and repression—opposition to which found revolutionary expression in the great Chartist movement for universal suffrage. This long history has imbued in the working class a strong class identity; a deep trade union consciousness that has prepared it to take stubborn and often heroic action; a powerful sense of democratic rights and a commitment to social justice and the principle of equality.

12. Trotsky insisted that it was in Chartism that the working class had to see “not only its past, but also its future”:

“The era of Chartism is immortal in that over the course of a decade it gives us in condensed and diagrammatic form the whole gamut of proletarian struggle – from petitions in parliament to armed insurrection... As the Chartists tossed the sentimental preachers of ‘moral force’ aside and gathered the masses behind the banner of revolution so the British proletariat is faced with ejecting reformists, democrats and pacifists from its midst and rallying to the banner of a revolutionary overturn.”<sup>2</sup>

13. Trotsky’s words were written during the very opening stages of his efforts to combat the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist Parties affiliated to the Third International. The fulfilment of the revolutionary perspective he invoked would depend on those who rallied to this cause. From this point on, the development of socialism in Britain was inextricably bound up with Trotsky’s fight to defend revolutionary Marxism.

#### **The theory of permanent revolution and October 1917**

14. The guiding perspective of the Russian Revolution in October 1917 was Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky drew on the lessons of the defeat of the 1905 Russian Revolution, in which the working class had played the leading role against Tsarism. Hitherto, the parties of the Second International had viewed revolutions as national events, with their outcome determined by internal socio-economic factors. They assumed that the socialist revolution would begin in the most advanced European countries, whereas those less developed, such as

Russia, would necessarily pass through an extended period of capitalist economic and bourgeois-democratic political development prior to the socialist revolution. The task of Marxist parties, therefore, would be to support and encourage a revolutionary struggle for the establishment of a democratic republic, led by the national bourgeoisie.

15. The 1905 revolution demonstrated the inability of the bourgeoisie to fulfil such a role. It had been integrated within, and was essentially subservient to, a global economic order dominated by the major powers. It was constrained by its hostility to the proletariat, which had emerged as the most dynamic class within Russian society due to the penetration of capital into the major cities. In opposition to the Mensheviks, Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued that the political weakness of the bourgeoisie meant that the revolution would be led by the working class, in alliance with the rural masses, and would establish a “democratic dictatorship of the working class and peasantry”. Lenin’s formulation imparted to the democratic revolution a radical character, implying the destruction of all remnants of feudal relations and an end to autocratic rule. But it did not define concretely the social character of either the revolution or the state it would create.

16. Trotsky’s own appraisal of the nature and tasks of the revolutionary movement marked his emergence as the foremost strategist, not merely of the Russian, but of the world socialist revolution. He insisted that the character of the revolution in Russia would be determined by international rather than national conditions. The immediate tasks that confronted the Russian masses were of a bourgeois-democratic character, but they could not be realised under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie, or within a bourgeois republic. Having taken power, the working class would be forced to carry out measures of a socialist character. To those who argued that socialist goals could not be realised within economically backward Russia, he countered that they would be made possible by the extension of the revolution onto the European and, ultimately, world arena:

“Binding all countries together with its mode of production and commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism... This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and will make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions.”<sup>3</sup>

17. The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 confirmed this appraisal. The war was the result of the eruption of the insuperable contradiction at the heart of the capitalist system—between the nation state and world economy. The historic betrayal of the working class by the parties of the Second International in supporting the war established the full significance of Lenin’s struggle against opportunism within the Russian Social Democratic movement. The collapse of the Second International into social chauvinism and defensism could not be explained by reference to the failings of individual leaders. Rather, the same processes that had given rise to war, had also led to the corruption of the upper stratum within the workers’ movement. The ability of the imperialist powers to plunder resources from the colonies had created the material foundations for the growth of a labour aristocracy, which provided the social basis for opportunism. This found its ultimate expression in an open abandonment of proletarian internationalism and the alliance of the social democratic leaders with their “own” bourgeoisie. As Trotsky later explained:

“On August 4, 1914, the death knell sounded for national programs for all time. The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism. An international communist program is in no case the sum

total of national programs or an amalgam of their common features. The international program must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole in all its connections and contradictions, that is, with *the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts*.”<sup>4</sup>

18. Following the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, Lenin returned to Russia from exile and issued his *April Theses*, which repudiated in practice the previous Bolshevik programme of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. In calling for the working class to oppose the bourgeois provisional government and take power through Soviets, or workers’ councils, Lenin adopted, in all essentials, Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution. This met with bitter opposition from many “Old Bolsheviks”, including Joseph Stalin, Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev who, like the Mensheviks, were advocating critical support for the provisional government and—in Stalin’s case—also for the war effort.

19. On October 25<sup>th</sup> 1917, the working class took power in Russia. For Lenin and Trotsky the revolution was to be the start of a world revolutionary transformation, in which the victory of the working class in Europe—most particularly in Germany—would provide the necessary economic and technological resources for the development of socialism. The establishment of Soviet power over one-sixth of the world’s surface provided a powerful impulse to revolutionary struggles in a number of countries, and in 1919 the Third (Communist) International was founded.

20. The Russian revolution would not have survived without widespread working class opposition—including in Britain, with the “Hands off Russia” movement—to the intervention of the imperialist armies against it. But nowhere outside of Russia had parties of the Bolshevik type been constructed in advance of these events. In their absence, the social democratic parties were able to strangle the revolutionary struggles that erupted in Germany and elsewhere. The resulting isolation of the Soviet Union led to the degeneration of the state and party apparatus. With an economy ruined by civil war, the Bolsheviks were forced to implement the New Economic Policy and make significant concessions to capitalist strata in the towns and countryside. As a result, conservative social forces were strengthened in the country, finding expression in an expanding state and party bureaucracy that presided over generalised scarcity and want. The defeat of the 1923 revolution in Germany provided the immediate impulse for the coalescence of these conservative moods into a political campaign against Trotsky as the most consistent representative of the party’s revolutionary wing.

#### **Stalinism and the degeneration of the Third International**

21. Stalin emerged as the foremost representative of this bureaucratic caste, advancing the theory of “Socialism in One Country”, which asserted that the task was to build socialism within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. From that point, the struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, formed in 1923 to reform Communist Party policy in the Soviet Union and fight for a correct line in the Communist International, was to centre on two irreconcilably opposed conceptions of socialism. Trotsky explained:

“The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable... the socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.”<sup>5</sup>

22. The arena for one of the first strategic conflicts between the Left Opposition and the Stalin faction was Britain. The country had emerged from the First World War in a much weakened position, and the Bolshevik revolution became a pole of attraction for the most advanced workers. The Labour Party tried to combat its influence by introducing Clause Four into its constitution, promising to take the commanding heights of the

economy into social ownership. But the conditions had been created for the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920. Against a background of escalating class struggle, the CPGB’s influence grew—culminating in the formation of the National Minority Movement, encompassing a quarter of all trade union members by 1924. Trotsky paid great attention to developments within the centre of world imperialism. He wrote:

“England’s fate after the war was a subject of absorbing interest. The radical change in her world position could not fail to bring about changes just as radical in the inner-correlation of her forces. It was clear that even if Europe, including England, were to restore a certain social equilibrium for a more or less extended period, England herself could reach such equilibrium only by means of a series of serious conflicts and shake-ups. I thought it probable that in England, of all places, the fight in the coal industry would lead to a general strike. From this I assumed that the essential contradiction between the old organizations of the working class and its new historic tasks would of course be revealed in the near future.”<sup>6</sup>

23. The General Strike that began on May 3, 1926 was provoked by a lock-out of the miners. It developed into a semi-insurgent movement encompassing four million out of the five and a half million workers organised in the trade unions. For nine days, a situation of dual power existed in the country. The political task facing socialists was to unmask the trade union and Labour leaders, in particular their “left” representatives, as the central prop of capitalist rule. Instead, the Soviet bureaucracy, disdainful of the small forces of the CPGB, looked to the trade unions as a more viable means for extending Soviet influence and waging the class struggle in Britain. As Trotsky explained:

“The weaknesses of the British Communist Party gave birth at that time to the necessity of replacing it as quickly as possible with a more imposing factor. Precisely then was born the false estimate of the tendencies in British trade unionism. Zinoviev gave us to understand that he counted upon the revolution finding an entrance, not through the narrow gateway of the British Communist Party, but through the broad portals of the trade unions. The struggle to win the masses organised in the trade unions through the communist party was replaced by the hope for the swiftest possible utilisation of the ready-made apparatus of the trade unions for the purposes of the revolution.”<sup>7</sup>

24. The slogan of the CPGB was “All power to the TUC General Council!” On May 12, the TUC General Council called off the strike, with the full connivance of the left, abandoning the miners to the coal-owners’ revenge. The defeat of the General Strike was a major strategic experience for the British working class. Its demoralising effect was felt for generations. The influence of the CPGB, which lost two-thirds of its membership, was greatly reduced. But the policies pursued by the Stalinist bureaucracy led to even graver setbacks internationally, including the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927 and, most terribly, the events in Germany, where the Communist Party allowed Hitler to come to power unchallenged, in January 1933. This world historic betrayal was accepted by the parties of the (Third) Communist International, signifying that they were dead for the purpose of social revolution. The turn by the leading stratum in Moscow to the defence of its own privileges was now made directly at the expense of the class interests of the Soviet and international proletariat. Trotsky concluded that it was necessary to abandon the perspective of politically reorienting the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and its affiliated parties and begin the construction of a new, Fourth International.

25. The blows inflicted against the international working class further strengthened the Stalinist bureaucracy—culminating in Trotsky’s expulsion from the CPSU in 1927 and his enforced exile from the Soviet Union in 1929. Nonetheless, his penetrating critique of these events found a response within the CPGB, winning the support of the Balham Group, comprising a dozen members, including Reg Groves and Harry Wicks.

The group worked within the CPGB, under the guidance of James P. Cannon and the US Trotskyists. It was expelled from the CPGB in 1932 and reconstituted as the Communist League, the official section of the Left Opposition.

*To be continued*

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky (1972) *The Third International After Lenin*, Pathfinder Press, pp. 3/4

<sup>2</sup> Leon Trotsky (1974) *Where is Britain Going?* New Park Publications, pp. 93/94

<sup>3</sup> Leon Trotsky (1975) *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, New Park Publications, pp. 239/240

<sup>4</sup> Leon Trotsky (1972) *Third International After Lenin*, Pathfinder Press, pp 3/4

<sup>5</sup> Leon Trotsky (1975) *Permanent Revolution*, London New Park Publications, 1971, p155

<sup>6</sup> Leon Trotsky (1979) *My Life*, Penguin, pp. 549/550

<sup>7</sup> Leon Trotsky (1974) *Trotsky's writings on Britain*, New Park Publications, Volume 2, p.241



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**