

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

Part Two

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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 Left Opposition and the struggle against centrism

26. The call for the building of the Fourth International was made under conditions of a deepening crisis of world capitalism, which caused significant sections of workers to break from social democracy at a time when the Stalinist parties could not, and would not, advance a genuinely revolutionary alternative. This political conjuncture produced a host of centrist tendencies advocating a “middle road” between reform and revolution, nationalism and internationalism. Trotsky’s approach to these groups was politically farsighted. Recognising that their influence expressed a leftward political shift in the working class, he insisted that the Left Opposition politically engage with them and challenge their semi-reformist leaderships. Otherwise, their persistent subordination of international principle to short-term tactical expediency would block the development of a genuinely revolutionary party and inevitably end in their retreat back into the camp of social democracy or Stalinism. Trotsky wrote:

“On the international field the centrist distinguishes himself, if not by his blindness, at least by his shortsightedness. He does not understand that one cannot build in the present period a national revolutionary party save as part of an international party; in the choice of his international allies the centrist is even less particular than in his own country.”⁸

27. The largest centrist formation in Britain was the Independent Labour Party (ILP), led by James Maxton and Fenner Brockway. In June 1929, a Labour government came to power under Ramsay MacDonald. Faced with global recession and mass unemployment, MacDonald urged cuts in wages and public spending and a 25 percent devaluation of the pound. His proposals split the cabinet and in August 1931, MacDonald resigned, forming a National Government with the Conservatives and the Liberals, which imposed austerity measures, signalling the beginning of the “Hungry Thirties”. The ILP quit the Labour Party in 1932 and a year later established the International Bureau of Revolutionary Socialist Unity, or London Bureau, bringing together seven left parties in Europe.

28. The London Bureau rejected the formation of a Fourth International and advocated, instead, a broad, “non-sectarian” international organisation—one that would leave it free to pursue its own national orientation. Trotsky’s supporters intervened to insist that the necessary unity of the working class, in the face of capitalist depression, fascism and

war, could only be achieved by combating the wrecking actions of the Second and Third Internationals. The “Declaration of the Four”—the International Left Opposition, the German Sozialistische Arbeiter Partei and two Dutch organisations—was to provide the basis for the establishment of the International Communist League, the forerunner of the Fourth International. In Britain, a minority of the Communist League entered the ILP as the Marxist Group, where it successfully fought to prevent a merger with the CPGB, as advanced by the pro-Stalinist Revolutionary Policy Committee.

29. The evolution of the ILP confirmed Trotsky’s warnings. At its 1936 conference, it officially repudiated the Fourth International and moved to expel the Trotskyists. It oriented to the CPGB in a series of anti-fascist campaigns that anticipated the role of the POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unification) in the Popular Front government in Spain. The price paid by the working class for the centrist politics of the London Bureau was the defeat of the Spanish revolution, which was preceded by the murder of the POUM’s leader Andrés Nin. During the three Moscow Trials of August 1936 and March 1938, the ILP acted as an apologist for the Stalinists’ brutal suppression of the representatives of revolutionary Marxism. It opposed the demand for an international commission of inquiry into the trials, with Brockway proposing instead a commission to investigate the political activity of Leon Trotsky.

30. The fight in the ILP provided an invaluable lesson in how to evaluate a social type that has bedevilled the British labour movement. Baron Brockway was the archetypal representative of an upper petty-bourgeois, and even bourgeois, layer that has included such figures as Beatrice and Sidney Webb (Baron Passfield), their nephew Stafford Cripps (Lord Parmoor), and latterly Tony Benn (formerly Viscount Stansgate). Gravitating to the labour movement as a result of the collapse of Liberalism under the impact of an acute class divide, they have utilised left reformist phraseology only to uphold the sanctity and supposed perfectibility of the bourgeois state.

The Fourth International and the Workers International League

31. The Trotskyist movement exercised extreme patience and dedicated precious resources to its efforts to unite the half-dozen groups in Britain claiming allegiance to the Fourth International. It did so by combating political relations characterised by factionalism and clique politics. Tensions were worsened by the siege environment suffered by the Trotskyists. The persecutions and assassinations perpetrated by the Stalinist bureaucracy included the murder of Trotsky’s son Leon Sedov, in February 1938 in Paris, and in July, his secretary Rudolph Klement, who was to have chaired the founding conference of the Fourth International. In Britain, the CPGB was the most enthusiastic supporter of Stalin’s political repression. During the Moscow Trials, the *Daily Worker* demanded, “Shoot the Reptiles”. Stalinist thugs frequently attacked Trotsky’s supporters, denouncing them as “fascist agents”, and

encouraged others to do likewise.

32. In February 1937, preparatory to the founding conference of the Fourth International, discussions were held with three groups in Britain. Another four rounds of unity talks were led by Trotsky's secretary, Erwin Wolf, who was later also assassinated by the Stalinist secret police, the GPU. In July 1938, Cannon travelled to Britain for further talks on behalf of the American Socialist Workers Party. This culminated in a national conference of Bolshevik-Leninists in London on July 30-31, 1938, where the majority of groups agreed to a Peace and Unity Agreement that formed the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL).

33. Of the groups refusing to endorse the Peace and Unity Agreement, the most significant was the Workers International League (WIL), led by Ted Grant and Jock Haston. The WIL cited no political differences to justify its refusal to affiliate with the RSL, other than its insistence that affiliation was dependent on agreeing to a common tactical orientation in Britain. A recent recruit to the WIL, of a few months standing, was Gerry Healy. Born in Ireland, he had left for England aged 14 and worked as a ship radio operator, joining the CPGB in 1928. Events in Germany and Spain led Healy to join the WIL in 1937.

34. The founding conference of the Fourth International took place in September 1938. It recognised the RSL as its British section, but invited the WIL to attend and state its case. Instead, the group sent a letter rejecting any decision of the conference that failed to comply with its demands. In a sharply worded statement written by Trotsky, the Fourth International insisted that there was no justifiable political basis for the separate existence of the WIL:

"The present conference signifies a CONCLUSIVE delimitation between those who are really IN the Fourth International and fighting every day under its revolutionary banner, and those who are merely 'FOR' the Fourth International, i.e. the dubious elements who have sought to keep one foot in our camp and one foot in the camp of our enemies... Under the circumstances it is necessary to warn the comrades associated with the Lee group [the WIL] that they are being led on a path of unprincipled clique politics which can only land them in the mire. It is possible to maintain and develop a revolutionary political grouping of serious importance only on the basis of great principles. The Fourth International alone embodies and represents these principles. It is possible for a national group to maintain a consistently revolutionary course only if it is firmly connected in one organisation with co-thinkers throughout the world and maintains a constant political and theoretical collaboration with them. The Fourth International alone is such an organisation. All purely national groupings, all those who reject international organisation, control and discipline, are in their essence reactionary."⁹

Preparing the Fourth International for war

35. Within a year the world was plunged into the Second World War. In May 1940, an emergency conference of the Fourth International appealed once again for the WIL to "realise the serious need of a single section". Three months later, the Stalinist campaign of political genocide achieved its ultimate aim with the murder of Trotsky by GPU agent Ramon Mercader at Coyoacán, Mexico.

36. The last years of Trotsky's life had been dedicated to preparing the Fourth International for the coming war. Of fundamental importance was his opposition to a number of tendencies that began to designate the Soviet bureaucracy as a new, exploiting class, defined variously as "state capitalism" or "bureaucratic collectivism". Trotsky wrote *In Defence of Marxism* against a faction in the SWP led by James Burnham and Max Shachtman, who shared much with others such as Bruno Rizzi in Italy and the Urbahn group in Germany. The conflicting issues of perspective raised during Trotsky's political and philosophical struggle against Burnham and Shachtman were to recur again and again within the Fourth International.

37. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, written in 1936, Trotsky had stressed

that the proper starting point for defining the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state was its origins in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class. While its subsequent isolation had allowed the unchecked growth of a bureaucracy, this layer rested upon the property forms created by the October Revolution, based upon collective planned production rather than private ownership and the market. Using the apparatus of the state, the bureaucracy appropriated the lion's share of production. But its control of distribution did not extend to ownership of the productive forces. Its existence was parasitic on the body of the workers' state, rather than integral to it. The task facing the Soviet workers was to overthrow the bureaucracy in a political revolution, so as to safeguard the economic foundations for the development towards socialism and prevent the restoration of capitalism. The still existing gains of the October Revolution had to be defended by the international working class against imperialist overthrow.

38. The theorists of state capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism repudiated Trotsky's appraisal. Following the signing of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact on August 23, 1939, Burnham and Shachtman urged the SWP to drop its unconditional defence of the USSR against imperialist attack. Their position echoed that of a layer of pro-Democratic Party intellectuals, at a time when the Roosevelt administration was in favour of entry into the war against Germany.

39. The political retreat of this petty-bourgeois layer confirmed Trotsky's insistence that its definition of the Soviet Union involved a political prognosis that threw into question the revolutionary character of the working class and the prospects for socialism on a world scale. The renewed drive to imperialist militarism demonstrated that the crisis of capitalism had reached extreme limits, and that a new system for the planned development of the productive forces was required. But according to the advocates of state capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism, the working class had proved incapable of accomplishing such a social transformation. Instead, its place had been taken by a bureaucratic elite, which would replace the decayed bourgeoisie as a new ruling class, not merely in the Soviet Union but on a world scale.

40. After splitting with the SWP in 1940, Shachtman established the Workers Party, which took a "third camp" position during the war. Burnham quickly left the workers' movement altogether, joining the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, and later became a leading advocate of the Cold War and a prominent Republican.

Britain's wartime government of "National Unity"

41. Until August 1939, a significant section of the British bourgeoisie had been sympathetic to Nazism. Regarding it as a bulwark against Bolshevism, they had hoped that the target of German rearmament would be the Soviet Union. It was this that lay behind the policy of "appeasement". In the end, however, Hitler's global ambitions meant that war was inevitable.

42. The outbreak of hostilities saw the incorporation of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy into the state apparatus. With a large section of the bourgeoisie compromised by its accommodation with Hitler, Winston Churchill depended on the Labour Party and the trade unions to form his wartime government. Labour leader Clement Attlee, Transport and General Workers Union leader Ernest Bevin and the doyen of the left, Stafford Cripps, were among five Labour members of the Cabinet. The Labour Party was effectively shut down for the duration of the war, and the trade unions policed the banning of strikes under the Essential Work Order, which allowed for the military direction of labour.

43. This "patriotic front" was reinforced by the CPGB. Following the collapse of the Stalin-Hitler pact, the Soviet bureaucracy swung behind the policy of alliance with the "democratic" powers. It closed down the Communist International in 1943 as a pledge to its imperialist allies that it was not in the business of organizing socialist revolution. The CPGB became the strongest advocate of suppressing industrial action and, by the

war's end, would even argue for the continuation of the national government under Churchill to "organize the peace".

44. An example of CPGB propaganda was the pamphlet *Clear out Hitler's agents!* It began by declaring, "There is a group of people in Britain masquerading as socialists in order to cover up their fascist activities... They are called Trotskyists." It accused the Trotskyists of doing "everything they can to dampen down the peoples' enthusiasm, resolution and will to win, by their lies about the aims for which this war is being fought... All they want to do is to stop everyone pulling together in the fight against fascism. They want to disrupt the unity of the British people. They want the workers to fight Churchill instead of Hitler... They know that to defeat Hitler, every section of the people, Conservative, Liberal, Labour and Communist workers, middle-class and capitalist class, must fight as Allies in a united struggle against their common enemy." The pamphlet urged, "They should be treated as you would treat a Nazi... Remember that the Trotskyists are no longer part of the working-class movement."

Healy takes up the struggle for the Fourth International

45. As war raged across Europe, Cannon and the SWP continued their efforts to clarify the issues at stake with the WIL. Their struggle underscored the political maturity acquired by the US party over the preceding period. The unity of the British Trotskyists was not simply an organisational matter. It was impossible to ascertain with any degree of political or theoretical certainty the nature of the tensions between the RSL and the WIL, which centred on various tactical disputes. Moreover, there were differences within the WIL, with Haston, Grant and Healy in continuous conflict. Only within a unified organisation, and as part of an international movement, could these differences be fought out and clarified.

46. In an open letter to "a young friend", written in 1943, the SWP's Lou Cooper warned the organisation of the implications of its hostility towards the authority of the international movement:

"The general attitude of the WIL on this question serves to miseducate its many new members in the proven method of Bolshevik organisation. This is possibly one of the most serious consequences of any extension of the present WIL attitude. The membership will not know how to deal with future disagreements and divisions in the WIL itself. The way the WIL educated its new members, it is no exaggeration to say that the future may very well see groups of comrades breaking off from the organisation and yelling 'I'm king. Recognise me'.

"Or possibly the WIL believes that future crises of society will affect everyone in its ranks similarly. Possibly there are some who believe that no dissident divisions will ever appear. All I can say at this point is, that if there are responsible comrades with this belief they had better hope and maybe even pray that this miracle occur. At the first real sign of disagreement all the miseducation on this question is going to bounce right back in the faces of the responsible members of the organisation. If you're not going to educate your membership in the spirit of tried, tested and proven Bolshevik organisational methods, you're not going to have Bolshevik-Leninists in time of real crisis."¹¹

47. Cooper's admonishment was to have an impact on Healy, who had come to understand that past factional battles had clarified nothing. His reassessment was to prove crucial, as it marked the first real breach in the WIL's narrow nationalism. In an internal bulletin entitled, "Our Most Important Task", Healy decried the "for the record" approach towards fusion of the WIL, and advocated immediate unity with the RSL:

"If we accept the history of international Trotskyism since 1933 (which is a history of Bolshevik regroupment in the Fourth International), then we must place the question of the International as the most important question before the group. All other questions of group development, such as the press, industrial work or organisational activity are bound up with whatever stand we take on the International. If we accept the political

principles of Bolshevism then we must accept the organisational method. It is not sufficient to say that we accept the programme of the Fourth International and that we expound it better than the RSL if we do not also accept its organisational method, which means that we must be affiliated to the International, accepting its democratic centralist basis; just the same as it is not sufficient to claim to be a Trotskyist and to be more conversant with the policy of Trotskyism than the organised Trotskyists, unless one joins a Trotskyist party accepting its democratic centralist discipline."¹²

48. In opposition, the WIL leadership described the insistence on unity as "nonsensical especially in the present period of mass upsurge within the British labour movement." Its concern was that affiliation to the Fourth International would cut across its freedom of operation within Britain. Repeating the arguments of the centrists against Trotsky in the 1930s, Haston and Grant stated that the attitude towards unity within the Fourth International "is one of tactics and expediency, and not at all a question of Bolshevik principles as such."

49. In their writings, Healy's political opponents attribute the basest motives to his alliance with the SWP and to his support for unification. They denounce it as a manoeuvre aimed at gaining international backing for factional ends. Such subjective interpretations are almost always aimed at discrediting a principled political approach. In Healy's case, the stand he took was arrived at through bitter experiences with the national factional politics that dominated the WIL. In his contact with Cannon and the SWP, he was able for the first time to form relations with substantial figures, grounded in the major experiences of the international Trotskyist movement and with a proven record in the working class. Healy's declaration for the Fourth International was not a pragmatic response that would secure him prestige and reward; it was a commitment to a political struggle that often incurred great hardship. The underlying issues of principle involved determined that it was Healy and the tendency he led that would play the major role in the development of British Trotskyism.

50. Despite the objections of Grant and Haston, the fight conducted by the Fourth International won majority support for unification within the WIL and the RSL, and in March 1944 the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) was formed. Disagreements remained, but these could now be addressed in relation to broader issues of world perspective.

To be continued

Footnotes:

⁸ Leon Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-1934*, (1975) Pathfinder Press, p. 233

⁹ *Founding Conference of the Fourth International 1938*, On Unification Of The British Section

¹⁰ CPGB, *Clear Out Hitler's Agents* (1942), Marxist Internet Archive,

¹¹ Cited in *Gerry Healy and his place in the History of the Fourth International*, David North (1991), Labour Publications, p. 10

¹² *ibid.* p. 11/12



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