

Berlin rally commemorates 75th anniversary of the Fourth International

Our correspondents
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Leading representatives of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) of Germany and the Socialist Equality Party of Britain spoke at a November 30 meeting in Berlin to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International. Among those who gathered in a lecture hall at the Technical University to mark one of the central historical events of the 20th century was a delegation from France.

The meeting made two things clear above all. First, in the midst of the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s, the political perspectives of the Fourth International are finding increasing resonance among workers, students and intellectuals. Second, 75 years after the Fourth International was founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938, its historical continuity is represented solely by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its sections.

Four comprehensive reports provided an overview of the history of the Fourth International and its significance for today. The focus was on the continuous theoretical and political struggle of orthodox Trotskyists in defence of the principles of the Fourth International against all varieties of political opportunism.

In his presentation, Ulrich Rippert, chairman of the PSG, detailed Trotsky's struggle against centrism in the years leading up to the founding of the Fourth International. At the centre of Trotsky's struggle was his insistence on the need to establish a new international socialist party of the working class.

Rippert explained that the conclusion Trotsky drew from the German catastrophe of 1933—the coming to power of Hitler without any resistance by the major workers' parties—and the fatal policy of the German Communist Party and the Communist International that had made Hitler's takeover possible, was that the Third International was dead for the purposes of socialist revolution. To preserve the revolutionary cadres and the struggle for Marxism, Trotsky insisted it was essential to found a new, Fourth International.

Centrist parties such as the German SAP (Socialist Workers Party), the Spanish POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) and the British ILP (Independent Labour Party) would at times express sympathy or even agreement with one or another aspect of Trotsky's analysis, but rejected the struggle to fight for a new revolutionary International.

Rippert explained that they did not fundamentally agree with the assessment that “the political situation as a whole is mainly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat,” as is stated in the founding programme of the Fourth International. This statement, Rippert continued, was “not only correct for the conditions of 1938, but also elucidates the core problem of modern history.”

The socialist revolution was not simply the inevitable result of objective economic conditions, Rippert stressed. “It requires that the working class intervene consciously in the historical process on the basis of an independent socialist programme and a clearly elaborated strategic plan. Herein lay the historical significance of the revolutionary party and the Fourth International.”

Using the example of Willy Brandt, Rippert illustrated the class issues that were involved in the struggle against centrism. As a member of the SAP and head of its exiled youth organization in Norway, Brandt had systematically worked against the founding of the Fourth International. He had excluded the Trotskyists of the International Youth Bureau and accused them of the “worst sectarianism.” What drove Brandt and other centrists was their rejection of socialist revolution. Rippert stressed that Brandt's hostility towards Trotskyism prepared him for his later role as chancellor and leading representative of German imperialism.

In the second report, Johannes Stern, a member of the PSG National Committee and a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, spoke on the subject of the 60th anniversary of the 1953 “Open Letter” and the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Stern stressed the critical role in the aftermath of World War II played by the “Open Letter” in the defence of the historical continuity of Trotskyism and the political independence of the working class.

Pabloism was an opportunist tendency that had developed within the Fourth International after the war. It attacked the political and historical perspective of Trotskyism and worked for the liquidation of the Fourth International.

“Its leaders, Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, directed the sections of the Fourth International to dissolve themselves into the Stalinist and social democratic parties, or into the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois national movements,” said Stern. “The ‘Open Letter’ issued by James P. Cannon and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the United States defended the Marxist principle that ‘the working class was the only truly revolutionary class in society,’ and that a revolutionary party had to be built in each country to resolve the crisis of leadership.”

On the one hand, Stern explained, the stabilization of post-war capitalism and the strength of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies were powerful objective factors underlying Pabloism. They placed great pressure on the cadres of the Fourth International. The Pabloites adapted to this pressure and finally capitulated to the bureaucratic labor apparatuses.

At the same time, Stern pointed out, Pabloism was an expression of a broader ideological offensive against Marxism. After the Second World War, views increasingly took root in sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia that referred to the defeats of the working class in the 1920s and 1930s to place a question mark over Marxism and the revolutionary potential of the working class.

Philosophical movements such as the Frankfurt School explained these defeats not as a consequence of weaknesses and later of counterrevolutionary policies on the part of the Communist parties, but from the social character of the working class itself.

Stern stressed that one thing linked Pabloism, the Frankfurt School and other anti-Marxist intellectual currents: the rejection of the working class as an independent revolutionary force.

At the end of his contribution, Stern explained that the immense

pressure bearing down on the Fourth International in the post-war period was most clearly expressed by the fact that shortly after they launched the struggle against Pabloism, Cannon and the SWP adapted to the same class forces to which the Pabloites had previously capitulated. In the course of the Cuban Revolution, the SWP developed openly Pabloite positions and in 1963 it united with the Pabloite International Secretariat on a completely unprincipled basis.

However, the “Open Letter” has lost none of its historical significance, Stern said. “For the orthodox Trotskyists of the ICFI, first under the leadership of the British Socialist Labour League (SLL) of Gerry Healy and later under the leadership of the Workers League (WL) and David North in the US, the “Open Letter” remained a crucial basis for the defence and advancement of Trotskyism, and is still a key document of our movement.”

In his contribution, Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain, addressed the thirty-year “civil war” that developed within the Fourth International between the orthodox Trotskyists and various forms of petty-bourgeois anti-Marxism, until the orthodox Trotskyists of the International Committee finally gained the upper hand in 1985-1986.

He began his contribution by noting that for a long time, the SLL had been the most important political tendency in the world, because it embodied the struggle for the continuity of Trotskyism and the political independence of the working class. It was for this reason it was so hated by the revisionists. “It [the SLL] was not prepared to abandon the perspective of socialist revolution and join the inexorable march to the right embarked upon by the petty-bourgeois left all over the world.”

Healy and the SLL had rejected the claim of the SWP and the Pabloites that the petty-bourgeois guerrilla fighters under the command of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were conducting a “proletarian revolution” in Cuba as “unconscious Marxists,” Marsden said. “The SLL opposed the unprincipled reunification with the Pabloites and launched an offensive for orthodox Trotskyism.”

The most important result of this struggle was the founding of new sections of the International Committee in several countries. In 1966, the Workers League was founded in the US; in 1968, the Revolutionary Communist League was established in Sri Lanka; in 1971, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter was founded in Germany; and in 1972, the Socialist Labor League was established in Australia.

Marsden then addressed the contradictory development of the SLL, which had renamed itself the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1973, and which increasingly adopted Pabloite positions.

“Healy gradually ascribed greater significance to the organizational development of the British section than the theoretical and political struggle against Pabloism and the construction of new sections of the ICFI,” said Marsden.

This development, Marsden said, was in part based on a false reading of the Russian Revolution. “Healy’s underlying premise was that he could emulate the way in which the Bolshevik seizure of power had provided the impulse for the growth of the Third International. But the Russian Revolution was primarily the product of international, not national, factors, and was prepared through the struggle waged by Lenin against the opportunism of the Second International and fought on the basis of the international revolutionary strategy developed by Trotsky.”

Marsden then addressed the decisive battle conducted by the orthodox Trotskyists within the ICFI, led by David North and the Workers League, against the opportunist drift of the WRP.

In 1982, in a detailed criticism, North showed that the theoretical concepts of the WRP represented a “vulgarisation of Marxism,” which was “accompanied by an unmistakable opportunist drift within the International Committee, especially in the WRP.” Marsden noted that in internal documents and letters, the Workers League and North expressed

their concern that the WRP was adopting increasingly Pabloite positions and uncritically orienting itself to national movements in the Middle East.

In the split with the WRP in February 1986, the Trotskyists gained the upper hand inside the International Committee. The decisive importance of the split would soon become clear. The fight against the WRP represented nothing less than the defence of the continuity of Trotskyism. At issue was the question of revolution and counter-revolution, Marsden said.

While the leaders of the WRP—Gerry Healy, Cliff Slaughter and Mike Banda—went openly into the camp of Stalinism and imperialism, the Trotskyist majority of the International Committee was able to defend and develop Marxism at a time of the capitalist triumphalism accompanying the end of the Soviet Union.

The International Committee analysed the process of globalization, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the transformation of the trade unions and social democratic and Stalinist apparatuses into direct instruments of counterrevolution, and drew far-reaching political conclusions. A key step in the development of the world Trotskyist movement was the establishment of the Socialist Equality parties in several countries in the mid-1990s and the founding of the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998.

“Today,” Marsden said, “the WSWS is the recognised and authoritative voice of revolutionary Marxism. With a monthly readership in excess of two million, it has more followers than the Left Party in Germany, Syriza in Greece, the New Anti-capitalist Party in France, the Pabloite *International Viewpoint*, and the two largest pseudo-left tendencies in the UK, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, combined.”

Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the Fourth International and chairman of the German editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, followed Marsden, elaborating the contemporary significance of the historical heritage of the Fourth International.

Schwarz began by speaking about the political situation in Europe and internationally, which was characterized by mounting social inequality, militarism and the destruction of democratic rights. “Seventy-five years after the founding of the Fourth International, it is clear that capitalism is again—or remains—in a global death crisis,” he said. “All the mechanisms and buffers with which the ruling class sought to ameliorate class antagonisms in the past have collapsed.”

He stressed that the construction of the ICFI as a revolutionary leadership was now the most urgent task facing workers and youth internationally.

Schwarz cited the example of the Egyptian revolution to show how decisive the question of revolutionary leadership is. “The objective pre-conditions for a socialist revolution developed very rapidly in Egypt. However, the problem was the development of a political leadership. The mass uprisings in Egypt have brought down individual rulers and destabilized the political elite. But they did not succeed in dis-empowering the military and ending capitalist exploitation and oppression, or abolishing the capitalist state.”

Schwarz explained that the construction of the ICFI “is possible only in an irreconcilable struggle against the pseudo-left organisations, which stand in the way of an independent movement of the working class. Like the Left Party, Marx21 and the SAV in Germany, the Socialist Workers Party and Left Unity in Britain, the NPA in France, Syriza in Greece, and the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt have become direct pillars of support for capitalism and imperialism.

At the end of his presentation, Schwarz stressed that the crisis of revolutionary leadership of the working class cannot be resolved by a regroupment of the pseudo-left. Such manoeuvres were carried out to block the building of a revolutionary leadership, he said.

“The building of a new, revolutionary leadership is possible only on the programmatic and theoretical basis defended and developed by the Fourth International and the International Committee over its 75-year history.”



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