

British Trotskyist leader addresses Australian SEP congress

Chris Marsden
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Chris Marsden, national secretary of the SEP (UK), delivered the following greetings to the Second National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), which was held in Sydney from April 18–21, 2014.

Let me first state my support for the two resolutions put before this congress. I cannot speak on them at length, but they are clearly the product of intense discussion within a party rooted in the Australian working class and able to draw upon the historic lessons of the international workers movement, embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International, in order to provide a perspective for that class.

I would like to focus my remarks on Ukraine. What we are essentially seeking to do as a world movement is identify the implications of the new turn in the international situation—almost a quarter century after the end of the Soviet Union—that has brought us closer to a devastating war on the European continent, and on a world scale, than at any time since 1945.

Because we took a historically informed approach when the crisis erupted in Ukraine, the ICFI was able to outline the essential questions posed. Its March 3 statement, for example, stressed:

“All of the claims that the dissolution of the Soviet Union signalled the end of the 20th century era of wars and revolutions have been blown to pieces by the events of the past several days. The 20th century was the ‘unfinished century,’ whose unresolved economic, social and political contradictions underlie the explosive tensions of the present century. One hundred years after the outbreak of World War I and 75 years since the beginning of World War II, mankind is again facing the dangers of world war and fascism.”

We described “well-advanced plans for the geopolitical isolation and carve-up of Russia.... There is no question but that Russia is confronted with an existential threat. The integration of Ukraine into the expanding anti-Moscow alliance would render Russia more vulnerable to imperialist aggression and destabilisation. Future operations will unfold not only on the periphery of Russia, but within its borders.”

But we also insisted that, “the dangers confronting Russia—which threaten its dismemberment and reduction to semi-colonial status—cannot be lessened, let alone overcome, by the Putin regime’s resort to military force. No support can be given to the actions of Putin. His response to the aggressive actions of US and German imperialism is bereft of any progressive content.

“Putin represents oligarchs who enriched themselves by plundering state industry following the dissolution of the USSR ... The Putin regime is an organ of capitalist restoration and the product of the degeneration and overthrow at the hands of Stalinism of the economic and social foundations of the workers’ state established by the 1917 October Revolution. It is a comprador regime with no real independence from imperialism.”

What then are the central features of the Ukraine crisis?

Firstly, Russia and China are now the overt targets of US aggression.

Secondly, NATO is being strengthened as the main mechanism for asserting US hegemony in Europe and internationally.

Thirdly, the period in which European, and above all, German imperialism pursued its own ambitions primarily by economic means has come to an end. We are witnessing the opening stages of a re-militarisation of Europe without precedent since the 1930s.

On NATO, the US, Germany, Britain, etc. have all junked their commitment—especially during the Georgian crisis—not to move militarily into Russian spheres of influence. Now the talk is of Article 5 mutual defence commitments being extended to NATO and non-NATO members alike, and for the incorporation of the states making up Russia’s “near abroad” into NATO and the European Union.

A NATO summit in September is due to discuss the position of four countries—Georgia and the former Yugoslav republics of Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia—under the alliance’s “Open Door” policy.

Alongside the aggression towards Russia is the driving of Europe into militarism—a phenomenon that takes its most extraordinary expression in Germany’s move from “soft” to “hard power” policies. But all the major European powers are involved.

Today the US accounts for 73 percent of NATO’s military spending, with only a handful of other member states spending the notionally required 2 percent of GDP on their military. That is all changing. Everywhere the talk is of reversing spending cuts and meeting responsibilities.

Whatever happens next, this will not be reversed.

Of course this offensive was all prepared in advance. One should recall that back in November, at the same time Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, was admitting that the US had dished out \$5 billion to fund opposition groups in Ukraine, NATO was staging Steadfast Jazz, its biggest military exercise in seven years, in the Baltic countries and Poland. Involving 6,000 soldiers from the alliance as well as from non-members Sweden, Finland and Ukraine, this was based on a fictional scenario in which troops from the imaginary state of Bothnia invaded Estonia in a crisis sparked by competition for energy resources and economic collapse.

And if one wanted to answer how far they are prepared to go, a question we recently posed in a perspective, then consider what Eric Edelman, a former under secretary of defense for policy, and ambassador, said to the *Financial Times* on March 20.

Edelman “says NATO should revisit its pledge to not station substantial combat troops in former Soviet bloc members, such as Poland and should seek to boost their defence capabilities with anti-tank and anti-aircraft systems. It might also consider equipping Polish military aircraft to carry nuclear weapons,” the FT reported. “‘I am not talking about a large, provocative, conventional military build-up,’ he adds.”

There is no going back from this type of shift. As CNN noted April 17, “Two of Ukraine’s leading political parties, ‘Fatherland’ and ‘Strike,’ have jointly introduced a bill in Parliament that calls for the rejection of

the country's 1994 accession to the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty ...

"Mustafa Dzhemilev, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament since 1998, recently said he had spoken directly with Putin and told him that because of Russia's breaking of the Budapest Memorandum, 'such arrangements will not be trusted by anyone anymore, and that each country that has financial capacity to acquire its own nuclear weapons will be aspired [sic] to go down that path, and Ukraine is no exception.'"

As your first resolution makes clear, Russia is by no means the only target of US aggression. Washington is far from being reconciled to the retreat it was forced to make in Syria, or to Syria continuing as an ally of both Iran and Russia. But, aside from Russia, the most significant target is China.

We are clearly not talking about an incident in Ukraine, but a new period in world affairs—the end of the post-war era and the start of a pre-war period. Contained in any of the growing number of conflict flashpoints is the possibility of a catastrophic escalation.

We do not respond to this shift in a panicked fashion. We are making a sober warning to the working class, especially the younger generation, in order to mobilise antiwar sentiment—not on the basis of pacifist appeals, but on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.

We know what the bourgeoisie wants and where it is being driven by its crisis. But we also know that its agenda has no popular support whatsoever. Workers and youth, who have been hammered year after year—denied jobs, basic provisions and a future—in order that the oligarchy can continue its grotesque self-enrichment, are now being told that more is required to stave off the Russian and Chinese "threat."

The notion may be, as Peter Schwarz stated in a recent perspective, that this will provide the basis through which the social tensions threatening to tear capitalism apart—not just in Europe but everywhere—can be mitigated, or turned outwards. But that is the worst and most stupid calculation imaginable.

The more likely outcome—the one on which we base ourselves—is that the fight against austerity and militarism will be combined, and become the essential basis for the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class to end capitalism once and for all.

In the next period, we anticipate that the consciousness of broad masses will undergo the most profound shift that does not stop at a reaction against capitalism and its horrors, but which embraces the perspective of world socialist revolution defended and articulated by the ICFI. Arming the working class with that perspective, securing its political independence from the bourgeoisie, is our task.

The pseudo-left groups play the most pernicious role in this situation. But here, also, the basis of our political fight has undergone a profound change. We are no longer involved, primarily, in exposing the socialist pretensions of the Pabloites and state capitalist groups, etc., though this must still, on occasion, be done. Rather we are explaining the significance of their transformation into apologists for, and direct participants in, imperialist intrigues against the working class—into agents of counter-revolution.

We have noted especially the significance of calls by Ilya Budraitskis, a leader of the Pabloite Russian Socialist Movement (RSM), for the construction of a Left Sector in the Maidan movement to complement—and I use the word deliberately—the fascist Right Sector. After all, Budraitskis has nothing but praise for the Right Sector's actions, if not its ideology. He writes, "Without the ultra-right proponents of a 'national dictatorship' from the Right Sector, there would never have been any barricades on Hrushevskogo, or occupied ministries turned into 'headquarters of the revolution.'"

He makes clear that his proposal for a working relationship with the fascists is no "one off," declaring that "this conversation—about the possibility of a 'Left Sector' and its struggle for hegemony in the

protest—is important not only in the Ukrainian context, but also for the future, in which we will face similar (if not worse) circumstances every time."

To illustrate the full significance of their posture, however, consider the March 7 statement by the Ukrainian Left Opposition, "Ukraine will be saved from intervention by solidarity." It calls for full participation in a civil war in Ukraine and a war against "Russia" under the slogans, "Down with the bandit office holders who have become separatists! Down with Russian imperialism!"

The statement apologises for "inept tactical mistakes on the Euromaidan and the stoking of interethnic hostilities"—such as "provocative slogans like 'Glory to the nation! Death to its enemies!'"

But this is done only begrudgingly, and only because "The Kremlin's manipulation of these slogans has frightened the people of the East and South."

The Ukrainian Left Oppositionists then insist, "However, the aggression initiated by the Russian Federation is patently imperialistic and aimed against the revolutionary republic ..."

To defend the supposedly "revolutionary republic"—the pro-Western regime of oligarchs and fascists installed by a coup—they call for Russian speakers in Ukraine to "sabotage the mobilisation and movement of occupying armies," to "Form workers self defence detachments" and offer help in this task by creating "international brigades" that, among other tasks, must "oppose the disarming of Ukrainian armies."

Real, patriotic Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, meanwhile, would join in a "citizens war" led by "those forces who uphold internationalist, left and democratic positions ... [who are] for the preservation of a united Ukraine, as a unique cultural phenomenon"—supposedly providing that "The Ukrainian army should act under citizens' control."

The Pabloites are committing a political crime of historic proportions. The policy they advocate is one of bloody fratricidal civil war in Ukraine, in which they line up behind the major imperialist powers, and alongside fascists, and even lead military detachments of the Ukrainian "people's army."

I have previously written on Alex Callinicos, the theoretical leader of the British Socialist Workers Party and its international co-thinkers. But let me cite how he justifies an anti-Russian, anti-Chinese and pro-US position in a March 31 piece, "Imperial delusions" by portraying both as imperialist powers and aggressors in the conflict now emerging with the US:

Callinicos argues, "The relative decline of US power that has become evident since Iraq and the crash is opening up a period of more fluid competition, in which the weaker imperialist states begin to assert themselves. Putin's strategy has reflected this for some time. Potentially a much more important conflict is developing in Asia, as China's economic rise encourages its ruling class to flex their muscles geopolitically, in particular by building up the military capabilities to exclude the US Navy from the 'Near Seas' along their coasts. The clashes between China and Japan over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands are harbingers of more to come."

He then concludes:

"In this era of growing inter-imperialist rivalries political clarity among revolutionary Marxists is vital. In New York, London and Moscow the main enemy is at home (a slogan Karl Liebknecht coined in response to a great inter-imperialist war whose centenary we will soon be remembering). But acknowledging this is no reason to apologise for our own rulers' rivals."

No one will accuse Callinicos of such cardinal errors as upholding the essential political principles of the socialist movement.

Let me state clearly that we are not apologists for Putin, nor do we advocate ethno-linguistic civil war in Ukraine. The movement against Kiev in east Ukraine is not a Russian invention, and it has support in the

working class. However, it is not a proletarian movement and its policy is not ours.

We are for the unification of the Ukrainian, Russian and international working class in the struggle for socialism, and we do not entrust the fight against the puppet regime in Kiev or the NATO powers to either Putin or to protests that are often led by local business figures, Stalinists, “National Bolsheviks,” ex-soldiers and former Birkut riot police.

Those who do embrace Putin and Russian nationalism as a basis for opposing US aggression are advancing a policy fatal to the working class, and which can assume extreme right variants. I was struck in this regard by the statement of one of the Cossacks involved in the protest at Slavyansk’s occupied town hall, who declared, “We don’t want Ukraine. Ukraine doesn’t exist for us. There are no people called Ukrainians ... There are just Slav people who used to be in Kievan Rus, before Jews like Trotsky divided us. We should all be together again.”

I would point to another important element in the political role of the pseudo-left groups. Time and again they declare that support for Marxism, socialism and Trotskyism—and any perspective based upon the working class—is beyond the pale. As Budraitskis stated most prosaically, “Plainly speaking, if you say at Maidan Square that you are a Marxist, you run the risk of getting bashed ... It means that I may have to leave my beloved red flag at home because it doesn’t get a good reception. So what?”

This attack on Marxism is coupled at all times with efforts to rewrite the history of the 20th century. On March 26, for example, *International Viewpoint* posted, “The springtime of the peoples arrives in Europe,” by Polish Pabloite Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski—a long-time leader of Solidarnosc. He proclaims on Ukraine having an “extraordinary burden of several centuries of national oppression, mainly Polish and Russian.”

There follows a denunciation of “Russification” by “the Stalinist regime, behind which Russian imperialism was hidden.”

But he says not one word about the Nazi invasion of Ukraine and the crimes perpetrated by them, which he dismisses with the words, “After the Second World War, Russification affected all the Ukrainian lands, now reunited; although in western Ukraine, previously under the Polish colonial yoke, a vigorous anti-Soviet resistance was maintained until the mid 1950s.”

This is an oblique reference to Stepan Bandera’s Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B), which, from 1944, was based in Berlin and supplied by the Nazis with arms and equipment to conduct terrorist and intelligence activities behind Soviet lines.

Wikipedia notes, “According to Stephen Dorril, author of *MI6: Inside the Covert World of Her Majesty’s Secret Intelligence Service*, OUN-B was re-formed in 1946 under the sponsorship of MI6,” while “One faction of Bandera’s organization, associated with Mykola Lebed, became more closely associated with the CIA.”

“Pseudo-left” as a term is itself becoming problematic. These are movements in which open advocates of counter-revolution reside. Our criticism of them, in any event, is not that they are not adequately “left,” but that they are the political instruments of imperialist reaction. They have followed a course of political integration into the bourgeois order, following the collapse of the authority of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies, on which they have always rested.

For years the affluent petty bourgeois layers, represented by the pseudo-left, enjoyed a semi-parasitic, and essentially antagonistic relationship with the working class. Their social demands were mediated through the labour and trade union bureaucracies, which lent support to limited struggles in pursuance of welfare reforms and wage rises. These well-off layers were the primary beneficiaries, while, at the same time, they relied on the bureaucracies to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary challenge by the working class that would see it break free from the political domination of the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and their political representatives.

Following the collapse of the USSR, and throughout the sustained capitalist offensive against all the past gains of the working class, the pseudo-left followed the bureaucracies and the upper layers of the middle class in openly embracing capitalism. Like them, they enriched themselves by forging a more direct relationship with the bourgeoisie and by participating in the exploitation of the working class.

This has been the era of stock portfolio acquisition, of widening wage differentials, of house price inflation that made better off homeowners very rich, of a collapse in strike activity and an endless round of betrayals of those strikes that did break out. The beneficiaries of this process stand in the leaderships of all the pseudo-left outfits—well paid senior academics, trade union apparatchiks, high grade civil servants, etc. Obsessed with feminism and other forms of identity politics, as well as various other means of advancing themselves, they are as distant from the working class in their social outlook as is humanly possible.

Matching the pseudo-lefts’ support for the labour bureaucracy as an instrument for imposing social inequality and austerity has been their embrace of imperialist militarism and colonial-style interventions. They function today as an adjunct of, and apologist for, every act of imperialist banditry, lining up behind pro-US fascists and oligarchs in Ukraine, in the most dangerous political and military adventure of the post-World War II period.

What is becoming ever clearer is the political significance of the program and perspective of Trotskyism, as elaborated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, particularly since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

At that time, the decriers of Putin in the pseudo-left were hailing Gorbachev and Yeltsin as the architects of “reform” and of “political revolution” from above. In contrast, we defined Perestroika and Glasnost in the USSR as a counter-revolutionary response to the unviability of the national autarkic economic policies pursued by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The restoration of capitalism was the final act of betrayal by the Soviet bureaucracy as it transformed itself into an exploiting class and reintegrated the territories of the former USSR into the structures of world imperialism. The ICFI repeatedly warned that the liquidation of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism would have catastrophic consequences for the Soviet working class. And how correct we were.

In the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union, of capitalist restoration, we made a series of fundamental political and programmatic reappraisals—above all, relating to the function of the old labour bureaucracies and their transformation into the direct instruments of imperialism.

But I would like to draw attention to the significance of the ICFI’s struggle against the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification. As we explained, the dissolution of the USSR became the occasion for an ideological offensive by the bourgeoisie to repudiate the very conception of a socialist alternative to capitalism and Stalinism. And so began our intensive and increasingly all-encompassing counter-offensive—first to establish that Trotskyism was the revolutionary alternative to Stalinism, and later, to oppose what David North referred to as the “pre-emptive” biographies of Thatcher, Swain and then Robert Service.

At its twelfth plenum in March 1992, the International Committee discussed the relationship between the development of the crisis of capitalism and the class struggle as an objective process, and the development of socialist consciousness:

In his report to the plenum, David North wrote:

“The intensification of the class struggle provides the general foundation of the revolutionary movement. But it does not by itself directly and automatically create the political, intellectual and, one might add, cultural environment that its development requires, and which prepares the historic setting for a truly revolutionary situation. Only when we grasp this distinction between the general objective basis of the

revolutionary movement and the complex political, social and cultural process through which it becomes a dominant historical force, is it possible to understand the significance of our historical struggle against Stalinism and to see the tasks that are posed to us today.

“The renewal of a socialist culture in the international working class, we stressed, required a systematic struggle against the falsifiers of history. It was necessary to educate the working class in the real history of the 20th century, to reconnect its struggles with the great traditions of revolutionary socialism, including the Russian Revolution.”

The past quarter century has underscored the absolute validity of the course charted by the ICFI. In response to the financial catastrophe of 2008, the US has determined that it will no longer accept the uneasy compromise with the Russian and Chinese bourgeoisie, and that it will take more direct control of their vast territories, resources and markets. To do so, it is intent on heaping vile abuse on the October Revolution, and on Lenin and Trotsky. It is also intent on relativising, and therefore rehabilitating, Hitlerite fascism as a supposedly legitimate response to the Soviet threat.

The political and historical work led by David North, in opposing Service and his German co-thinker Jorg Baberowski, has been the essential basis for politically arming the party and the working class to oppose the ideological campaign, centred on the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, to legitimise the revival of militarism in Germany.

Baberowski is utilising his position at Humboldt university to advance the notorious right-wing conceptions of Ernst Nolte, who for three decades has been associated with writings that seek to relativise and diminish the significance of Nazi crimes.

This will not go unopposed. We will oppose it and we will seek to mobilise the considerable opposition to militarism and war that presently finds no outlet. And we will do so armed with a socialist political perspective based on class struggle and a revolutionary challenge to capitalism.

We must understand that this convergence of antiwar sentiment with social and political opposition to capitalism is inherent in the present political conjuncture. Just consider the situation that now exists in Europe.

A Red Cross survey late last year found that 120 million Europeans are living in or at risk of poverty. Of more than 26 million unemployed in the EU, those out of work for longer than a year stands at 11 million, almost double the 2008 figure. Youth unemployment in a quarter of the countries surveyed ranged from 33 percent to more than 60 percent. And as destructive to families is the soaring jobless levels among 50 to 64 year-olds, which has risen from 2.8 million to 4.6 million in the EU between 2008 and 2012.

“The rate at which unemployment figures have risen in the past 24 months alone is an indication that the crisis is deepening, with severe personal costs as a consequence, and possible unrest and extremism as a risk. Combined with increasing living costs, this is a dangerous combination,” the study concluded.

This is the result of deliberate policy. As Maria Damanaki, European Commissioner for Greece, said in an interview with To Vima FM radio:

“The strategy of the European Commission over the past year and a half or two has been to reduce the labour costs in all European countries in order to improve the competitiveness of European companies over the rivals from Eastern Europe and Asia.”

The aim is to return masses of European workers to poverty, in the name of ensuring the competitiveness of European capital against its international rivals.

Now the ruling class wants to throw rearmament, militarism and war into the mix. Not only the ICFI, but the more astute representatives of the bourgeoisie, predict disaster.

Consider what Roger Cohen writes in the *New York Times*, in response to what he calls “Obama’s Anemic Speech in Europe” to the assembled

heads of the EU. He describes Obama’s remarks as being “designed to offset with eloquence a deficit of deeds ... a jejune collection of nostrums about binding values of free-market Western societies and their appeal to the hearts (and pocketbooks) of people throughout the world, not least Ukrainians.”

He then says:

“The problem is not that these propositions are untrue.... The fact is the Western democracies he was exalting have been failing to deliver ... It is not just the soaring unemployment in Europe (likely to prompt a surge by rightist anti-immigrant parties in European Parliament elections this year). It is not just the crisis (contained for now) of the euro and the unresolved issue of how the European integration needed to back the currency is to be achieved. It is not just the widespread disillusionment with a navel-gazing European Union seen as over-bureaucratic and under-democratic. It is not just the growing income disparities in both Europe and the United States, and the spreading middle-class dystopia, and the sense in democracies on both sides of the Atlantic that money has skewed fairness and electoral processes themselves. It is not just the sense that something has gone seriously wrong with a polarised American democracy where scorched-earth Republicans devote their politics to obstruction, and the government can grind to a halt as it did last year, and a CEO can earn \$80 million for a few weeks of work while incomes for most Americans are stagnant. It is not just the National Security Agency eavesdropping and data-vacuuming revelations. It’s not just the loss of a sense of possibility for many young people.

“It is all of this.”

Cohen is advising the ruling elites that if they do not supposedly “level the playing field and rediscover, as Obama put it, the ‘simple truth that all men, and women, are created equal,’ they are going to have a very hard time winning ‘the contest of ideas.’”

Of course, they will do no such thing. It should be understood, rather, that the turn to militarism is, in large part, a response to the perplexity of the ruling class at its inability to halt the fracturing of society, a product of the massive growth in social inequality caused by its economic and social policies.

A society dominated by an uncontrolled oligarchy, incapable of implementing social reforms, becomes dominated by fear of the restive masses below. Combine this with a burning desire for the acquisition of ever-greater wealth and the end result is repression, militarism and war.

The trebling of defence spending now being demanded will see a deepening of the austerity offensive against the working class. And the economic targeting of Russia can easily produce a second European, and even global, recession. Add to this the impact, particularly on the young, of the militarisation of society, through such measures as the proposed reintroduction of conscription, and there must be an eruption of the class struggle.

We base ourselves not on the historically rooted difficulties facing the working class in formulating its response to capitalism’s onslaught, but on these fundamental political realities. The program we advocate is the only conceivable path forward for working people everywhere—something that growing numbers are beginning to understand.



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