Public meetings in Australia mark 75th anniversary of Leon Trotsky's murder

Our correspondents
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Politically powerful and well-attended public meetings were held by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne last week on Why and How the GPU Murdered Trotsky, commemorating the 75th anniversary of Leon Trotsky's assassination by an agent of Joseph Stalin's secret police in Mexico in 1940.

There was intense and appreciative interest among the workers, students and retirees who attended, as leaders of the SEP—the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world party of socialist revolution founded by Trotsky in 1938—explained the significance of Trotsky's life and struggle, and the elaborate lengths to which Stalin went to organise Trotsky's murder.

As the interviews conducted after the meetings demonstrated, many in the audience were deeply affected—and shocked—by the detailed and documented material that revealed the manner in which the operation to murder Trotsky was carried through, the subsequent extensive coverup within the American Trotskyist party itself, and the ensuing takeover and destruction of that party, the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP), by FBI agents.

Audience members included regular readers and supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site*, as well as workers, students and youth attending their first SEP public meeting, including some who came on the basis of the party's extensive campaign and posters on campuses and in working class areas. At the meetings were photographic displays of Trotsky's life and of the *Security and the Fourth International* investigation conducted by the ICFI into his murder.

Chairing the Sydney meeting, SEP assistant national secretary Cheryl Crisp explained that it was part of a series being held around the world by the ICFI to address the political questions posed by Trotsky's assassination in Mexico by an agent of Stalin's secret police on August 20, 1940—"one of the most politically consequential crimes of the 20th century."

Trotsky's murder had robbed the international working class of the most conscious representative of its historical interests, Crisp said, and was the culmination of a campaign of terror waged by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union that saw the elimination of the entire Bolshevik leadership that had participated and led the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The opening speaker in Sydney, WSWS International Editorial Board member and former SEP national secretary Nick Beams, provided an overview of the scope and significance of Trotsky's life and the contemporary relevance of his perspective to the fundamental issues of war, austerity and dictatorship facing the international working class today.

"He was a leader of the Russian Revolution of 1905, at the age of just 26; the co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution of 1917; the founder and builder of the Red Army, which defeated the 14 armies of imperialist intervention that sought to overturn the first workers' state; and the leader of the political struggle from 1923 onward, until his murder in 1940, against the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy, which had usurped political power from the Soviet working class." In his work, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky had provided the only scientific analysis of Stalinism's origins and evolution.

Before Trotsky was killed, Beams emphasised, he had made what he regarded as his most important contribution—the founding of the Fourth International. Today, led by the International Committee, the Fourth International is the only tendency in the world that seeks to continue and develop the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism through the world socialist revolution, the task begun in the October Revolution of 1917.

The inner core of all Trotsky's achievements, Beams explained, was that he was the foremost strategist of the perspective of world socialist revolution, summed up following the 1905 Russian revolution in his path-breaking theory of permanent revolution. "This represented a fundamental shift of perspective and orientation, based on the understanding that the Russian Revolution, which had now emerged, could only be conceived and understood, not as a national phenomenon, but as a component part of the developing world socialist revolution, the objective preconditions for which had been created by the global development of the capitalist system."

Beams stressed the fundamental contradiction, identified by Trotsky, between the global development of the productive forces and the outmoded nation-state system, which divided the world into rival and conflicting powers. Imperialism attempted to solve this problem through war. The working class had to solve it by means of the world socialist revolution—the overthrow of the entire reactionary system of nation-states and the private ownership of the means of production.

At the outset of World War II, Stalin was acutely aware of the danger posed by Trotsky and the Fourth International. "Unlike the various historians and bourgeois commentators who write off the significance of Trotsky's struggle, Stalin had actually passed through a revolution and knew how fast the situation could change," Beams explained.

Security and the Fourth International

Linda Tenenbaum, a leading member of the SEP National Committee, delivered a detailed report, authenticated by quotes, documents and archival material via a PowerPoint display, of the evidence laid bare by the ICFI's investigation into *Security and the Fourth International* regarding the infiltration of the Trotskyist movement by Stalin's secret police, the GPU, and the subsequent move, by one of its key agents, SWP leader Joseph Hansen, into the FBI.

"Security and the Fourth International was initiated and conducted in the rigorous and uncompromising tradition established by Trotsky himself in his exposure of the Moscow Trials," Tenenbaum explained at the outset. "Its aim was to investigate and uncover the network of GPU agents,

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infiltrated by Stalin into the Trotskyist movement, in order to assassinate Leon Trotsky. What it discovered was not only the identity and modus operandi of the Stalinist agents who carried out this monstrous crime, but how, over the ensuing three and a half decades, the Socialist Workers Party, the American Trotskyist Party, was taken over and destroyed by the combined agencies of both Stalinism and American imperialism."

Tenenbaum outlined the development of the ICFI's investigation, from its establishment in 1975 to the disclosures produced by "a truly extraordinary legal case, the Gelfand Case, which ran from 1979 to 1983. That case, initially brought by Alan Gelfand, a Californian lawyer and member of the SWP, and then supported by the ICFI, established that the central leadership of the SWP had become dominated by FBI agents and that the government takeover of that party had its origins in the preparations of the GPU for the assassination of Leon Trotsky."

The speaker explained that from 1936, as Stalin began, through the Moscow Trials, to exterminate his political opponents—that is, anyone who represented a link to genuine Bolshevism and its revolutionary internationalist program—he set up a special bureau to flood GPU spies and assassins into the Left Opposition to disrupt its work, to prevent the founding of the Fourth International, and above all, to eliminate Trotsky.

The initial victims were leaders of the Fourth International in Europe, including Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son and closest collaborator, editor of the journal *Bulletin of the Fourth International* in Paris, two of Trotsky's secretaries and a defector from the GPU who had informed Stalin of his support for the Fourth International. International.

Tenenbaum reviewed how Trotsky's assassin, Ramon Mercader, alias Frank Jacson, had developed a relationship, orchestrated by the GPU, with a young female member of the SWP. It was through that relationship that he eventually gained access to Trotsky's household. On the fateful day, August 20, 1940, Mercader was, astonishingly, allowed to enter Trotsky's study and remain there, alone, with the great revolutionist. After Trotsky had sat down at his desk, the assassin took a small icepick from under his coat and slammed it into Trotsky's brain. Trotsky's scream alerted the guards, who were able to prevent Mercader from escaping.

Yet, after Trotsky's assassination, which had followed an initial assassination attempt in May 1940, led by the Mexican Stalinist and painter, David Alfaro Siqueiros, the SWP, which had been responsible for security arrangements in Mexico, conducted only a limited investigation, "despite the fact that the assassination was clearly the product of an immense and highly organised global operation and, equally clearly, had involved a major breach of security."

Tenenbaum explained the circumstances, 35 years later, which led to the launching of *Security and the Fourth International*, the first thorough investigation into this global operation. It was initiated after Tim Wohlforth, the national secretary of the Workers League, predecessor of the American SEP, was suspended from the movement over an elementary security question, involving his personal companion Nancy Fields. Before a scheduled inquiry had even taken place, Wohlforth resigned from the movement and joined Joseph Hansen, political leader of the SWP, in publishing slanderous denunciations of Gerry Healy, then leader of the ICFI, as "mad" and "paranoid" because of his uncompromising attitude to security.

The responses of Wohlforth and Hansen, the speaker explained, were "politically and historically highly significant." Wohlforth had played a leading role in founding the Workers League in 1966, after being expelled from the SWP for opposing its political and ideological degeneration into a Pabloite organisation that was advocating support for bourgeois nationalists such as Castro in Cuba, and for Stalinist and reformist parties. Yet now, just eight years later, he was rejoining it.

As for Hansen, his attack on Healy's concern for party security raised serious questions about his own role in 1940. Responsible for security at Trotsky's household, he had witnessed the assassination and knew how Mercader had gained access to Trotsky. Hansen had also later played a key political role in opposing orthodox Trotskyism in the SWP's split from the ICFI in 1963 and its reunification with the Pabloites.

"Moreover, in the 1970s, information was surfacing about the extent of government infiltration of the SWP, as part of revelations of domestic spying by the CIA and FBI under the COINTELPRO program. The FBI publicly admitted that it had placed 1,600 agents in and around the SWP between 1961 and 1975 and that its agents routinely made up 10 percent of the party's membership."

Once the ICFI launched *Security and the Fourth International*, it rapidly became clear that the SWP had simply ignored the mountain of information that had been available since the late 1940s and early 1950s on the GPU's penetration of the Trotskyist movement. That information revealed the central role of GPU agent Mark Zborowski, alias "Etienne"—who had been instrumental in organising the European assassinations of leading members of the Fourth International—and of Sylvia Franklin (also known as Sylvia Caldwell), a GPU agent who had been secretary to James P. Cannon, the veteran American Trotskyist and SWP leader at the time of Trotsky's murder.

The speaker reviewed the US Grand Jury testimonies, correspondence and archival material unearthed by the *Security and the Fourth International* investigators, led by David North, then national secretary of the Workers League, which ultimately established that Hansen himself was a GPU agent at the time of Trotsky's assassination. Just 11 days later, Hansen met with the FBI in Mexico City to establish what would become a life-long, covert relationship with the US intelligence agency.

Tenenbaum explained that the ICFI was able to verify, in the course of the Gelfand Case, through legal examinations of former SWP Political Committee members, that no leader in the Trotskyist movement at the time knew anything about Hansen's relationships with the GPU or with the FBI. The investigation discovered numerous letters and reports among declassified documents in the US National Archive, in Washington DC, written by Hansen to the FBI and by FBI agents to each other, discussing their dealings with Hansen. Some were written by or to FBI director J Edgar Hoover, who was personally overseeing the FBI-Hansen relationship.

The Gelfand case also unearthed documents, and vital information, through depositions carried out by Gelfand's lawyers with former GPU agents, who were obligated to answer questions under oath. Those deposed included Mark Zborowski and Sylvia Franklin. However, in both cases, the SWP, now thoroughly destroyed as a Trotskyist party, and with its leadership taken over by US government agents, actually collaborated with these GPU criminals and their lawyers. In the case of Zborowksi this enabled him to legally avoid answering Gelfand's questions—meaning that the ICFI had lost the only opportunity the Trotskyist movement would ever have to find out how he and other GPU agents had operated.

Nevertheless, the documents secured through the lawsuit demonstrated that the FBI had known, from at least 1947, that Hansen had been a GPU agent inside the SWP. In that year, Louis Budenz—ex-Communist Party member, GPU agent, ex-editor of the CP's newspaper, the *Daily Worker* and subsequent paid FBI informer—had identified Hansen as a Stalinist spy. Budenz had also named Sylvia Caldwell. But when he *publicly* exposed her as a GPU agent in 1950, in sworn testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he did not do likewise in relation to Hansen—because Hansen had remained in the SWP, functioning as an FBI agent.

This revelation finally made clear why the SWP leadership had vehemently denounced Budenz and had continued to defend Caldwell as an "exemplary comrade" in the face of the irrefutable evidence obtained by the ICFI establishing that she was a GPU agent. To admit the truth of Budenz's allegations against Caldwell would have substantiated his identification of Hansen at the same time as a GPU agent.

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Despite the evidence uncovered by the ICFI, every opportunist, revisionist and Pabloite organisation opposed, slandered and vilified the *Security and the Fourth International* investigation. In January 1977, the Pabloites held in London a public meeting of 1000 supporters to denounce the investigation as a "shameless frame-up." Among the speakers were the leading Pabloite, Ernest Mandel and Tariq Ali, the leader of the British Pabloite organisation.

The ICFI called this shameful event the "Platform of Shame." Tenenbaum explained: "This was the largest pro-GPU rally ever held outside the Soviet Union. Virtually no-one on the platform or in attendance knew anything about the charges made by the ICFI, much less had read the factual evidence. Nor did they care. That was because to expose the crimes of the Stalinist GPU against the Trotskyist movement would cut across the opportunist political relations they all had with Stalinists, reformists and other national opportunists around the world."

The speaker emphasised that this was an international line-up. Meetings in 1977 in Australia, at which David North reported in detail on the findings of *Security and the Fourth International* were denounced and picketed by members of the precursors of today's pseudo-left: Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative, the Spartacist League, and the Socialist Party, who shouted abuse at North as he entered the venues.

Tenenbaum pointed out that 40 years on, the pseudo-lefts remained implacably opposed to the investigation, underscoring their hostility to a genuinely revolutionary attitude to the operations of the state, both Stalinist and imperialist. She highlighted a recent two-part article on Mark Zborowski, written by ex-SWP member, long-time Pabloite and current pseudo-left academic, Susan Weissman, who added a postscript to the second part, written in 2015, denouncing *Security and the Fourth International* as a "bizarre, sectarian smear campaign." Weissman reprised the pro-Stalinist line developed by Hansen and the SWP to justify the infiltration of agents, writing that "agents do good work" and that "agent-baiting" was impermissible.

Tenenbaum emphasised that *Security and the Fourth International* had firmly established that the continuity of Trotskyism had been maintained and defended only by the ICFI and its sections around the world. Referring to Trotsky's assassination, she declared: "In exposing this unprecedented political crime, the ICFI was turning the tables on Stalinism and imperialism, and clearing the path for the renewal and resurgence of genuine Trotskyism, that is of revolutionary socialist internationalism, in the international working class."

Trotsky's significance today

The final speaker, SEP national secretary James Cogan, summed up the contemporary significance of Trotsky's life and death and the historical findings of the ICFI's *Security and the Fourth International* investigation.

"As today's reports have established, Trotsky was murdered because he was, and was recognised as, the strategist of world socialist revolution. Today, the future depends upon the realisation of that perspective," Cogan declared. "The contradictions of capitalism identified by Trotsky in 1905, between world economy and the nation-state, and between globally socialised production and private ownership, have not been overcome."

Since the 2008 financial meltdown, the measures taken to rescue the banks and the financial elite had compounded the underlying contradictions of the world capitalist system, bringing it to the brink of an even more catastrophic breakdown.

"Over the past seven years, the decades-long attack on the conditions of the working class has been vastly intensified. At the same time, the militarism and imperialist violence that has defined American foreign policy since the dissolution of the USSR has likewise reached ominous dimensions."

Cogan warned that the US provocations of Russia in Ukraine and Syria, and its militarist confrontation with China through the "pivot to Asia" could trigger war between nuclear-armed states. "Unable to stem its global decline, US imperialism is seeking to use its still overwhelming military power to dominate the most critical regions of the world economy and dictate the terms of exploitation and the flow of profits."

The speaker referred to the far-sighted assessment made by Leon Trotsky in 1928 of the historical implications of the rise of the United States as the dominant world power. Trotsky wrote:

"In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies primarily at the expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war."

In 2016, Cogan explained, the struggle against the danger of war must preoccupy the most advanced sections of the working class around the world. He stressed: "The aim of everything we do must be to build the world party of socialist revolution, the Fourth International, led by the International Committee, which is necessary to unify the international working class in the common struggle to end capitalism and war on a world scale."

Returning to the significance of the *Security and the Fourth International* investigation, Cogan noted: "There is a basic rule of contemporary politics: the attitude and assessment one has toward questions of history, determines one's position toward the struggle for socialism, toward capitalism, toward the danger of war, and toward what you are prepared to do to defend the working class against the assault on its living standards and democratic rights.

"This can be shown by examining the political positions of the pseudo-left, the organisations that posture as 'anti-capitalist' and even 'socialist,' but in reality are the political representatives of privileged middle class layers with vested interests in the capitalist system and the nation-state.

"All the Pabloite and revisionist organisations that broke from the Fourth International in the post-war decades are part of this pseudo-left. They opposed *Security and the Fourth International* because the ICFI was exposing the full extent of the counter-revolutionary role of both the Stalinist parties and the capitalist state, to which the Pabloites were completely orientated…

"Today, the pseudo-left are the most vociferous opponents of any independent movement of the working class. They insist that the working class can only try to oppose the conditions it faces through the old Stalinist, Labor and trade union bureaucracies. Where that has proven impossible, they have done everything they can to keep the mass hostility toward the existing political setup confined behind new parliamentary traps.

"In the course of 2015, we have passed through a critical strategic experience. In Greece, for the first time, a coalition of former Stalinists and pseudo-left groupings, Syriza, took state power, promising that it could convince the banks and European Union to relax the devastating austerity that has been imposed on the Greek people since 2010. Within months, Syriza utterly betrayed these false promises and deepened the attacks on the working class."

Cogan cited a statement made by the former finance minister of the Syriza government, Yanis Varoufakis, during a recent speaking tour of Australia. Varoufakis declared that the rise of Stalinism demonstrated that the "left" had failed historically and was "neither morally nor analytically capable" of opposing capitalism.

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"These statements are conscious historical lies and falsifications," Cogan said. "Varoufakis excluded the struggle by genuine Marxists, led by Leon Trotsky, against Stalinism in the Soviet Union and internationally, which our speakers have reviewed today. He did so because, far from being the inevitable outcome of the Russian Revolution and Marxism, Stalinism represented the betrayal of socialist internationalism by a privileged bureaucratic layer, headed by Stalin, which usurped power from the working class."

Cogan concluded: "Leon Trotsky described the founding of the Fourth International as his greatest political work because it ensured that the vast strategic lessons drawn from the revolutionary struggles of the past were not lost to history and the working class.

"If you want to fight for the future, for the interests of the working class, then you can make no more important decision than to apply today to join the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution that is based upon, embodies and continues the great heritage of Leon Trotsky and the revolutionary movements of the past."

At the conclusion of the meetings, there were generous collections for the SEP's monthly fund, while nearly a thousand dollars worth of Marxist literature was purchased, including many copies of a newly-published pamphlet by David North, Security and the Fourth International, the Gelfand Case and the deposition of Mark Zborowski.

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