

Socialist Equality Party (UK) 2016 Congress resolutions

For a new socialist movement against militarism, austerity and war

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
14 November 2016

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) held its Third National Congress in Sheffield from October 28 to October 31. The Congress unanimously endorsed the February 18, 2016 statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, "Socialism and the Fight Against War," and adopted two additional resolutions: "For a new socialist movement against militarism, austerity and war," and "Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party: The strategic lessons."

The following is an edited version of the first resolution, "For a new socialist movement against militarism, austerity and war."

1. The Third National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (UK) endorses the February 18, 2016 statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), "Socialism and the Fight Against War: Build an International Movement of the Working Class and Youth Against Imperialism!"

2. A quarter century has passed since the apologists for capitalism hailed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 as the "end of history" and the final victory of the free market and liberal democracy. Instead, the drive to establish a new world order has succeeded only in creating global disorder: a series of unending wars; entire countries devastated; millions killed, maimed and/or turned into refugees; the re-emergence of fascistic tendencies and the pursuit of brutal class war policies in an "age of austerity."

3. Far more rapidly than most people are aware, US imperialism is preparing a direct military confrontation with its geopolitical rivals. At a "Future of the Army" panel in Washington this October, Army Chief of Staff General Mark A. Milley declared that war between nation states "is almost guaranteed... Our army and our nation must be ready." The Atlantic Council think tank urges preparations by the US to fight "major and deadly" wars between "great powers," identified as Russia and China, entailing "high levels of death and destruction" and the possibility of "a nuclear exchange."

4. Plans for a major military escalation in Syria are integral to Washington's offensive to secure hegemony over the Eurasian land mass. Realising this geo-strategic goal demands the dismemberment of Russia and its reduction to semi-colonial status, while the US "pivot to Asia" is aimed at encircling and neutralising China as an economic rival. Consequently, the entire world has become a tinderbox. With 60 nations presently involved, the Syrian civil war threatens to become the flashpoint for a broader conflagration in the Middle East. At the same time, NATO forces have advanced to the very borders of Russia, while the Far East is an arena for military confrontation between both regional and imperialist powers, such as Japan and Australia. Washington's showering of strategic favours on India so as to harness it to its anti-China pivot has overturned South Asia's "balance of terror" and greatly exacerbated tensions between India and Pakistan—the rival, nuclear-armed states created by the

1947 communal partition of the subcontinent.

5. The US is at the forefront of this eruption of militarism, but the same tendencies are present in every country. Britain's June 23 vote to leave the European Union (EU) is a turning point in the resurgence of national tensions that are tearing Europe apart, heralding intensified trade war measures and militarism. Every one of the major European powers is participating in the conflict in Syria, each with their own competing national objectives. All the relations that have existed in Europe since the Second World War have been thrown into question. Whether the UK's "special relationship" with the US can endure, whether Germany will be content to accept a US hegemony that runs counter to its own interests, and the exact line-up of relations between the major powers on the continent is yet to be determined. But, however events unfold, what is certain is that a new world war is inevitable without the independent intervention of the international working class.

6. The drive to war emerges as a result of the intractable crisis of capitalism as a world system. The fundamental contradiction between the globalisation of production and the capitalist nation state system, based on private ownership of the means of production and class exploitation, is fuelling social and political discontent, destabilising traditional mechanisms of rule, throwing bourgeois politics into a state of upheaval and flux, and preparing a global catastrophe. This danger is made all the more immediate by the deepening crisis of the capitalist profit system, which is the source of war.

7. All efforts to overcome the financial meltdown of 2008—through bank bailouts and austerity—have not only failed, they have sharpened class tensions and prepared the way for a new economic crash. According to the International Monetary Fund, total global debt now stands at \$ 152 trillion, equivalent to 225 percent of world GDP—the largest debt bubble in the history of humanity. The quantitative easing programmes employed by the US Federal Reserve Board, Bank of England, European Central Bank and Bank of Japan have overwhelmingly benefited the super-rich. The balance sheets of the world's central banks have risen from \$6 trillion in 2007 to \$21 trillion today. The collapse of this debt bubble will send entire economies into meltdown.

8. It is in preparation for this that the bourgeoisie is attempting to effect a political readjustment: a pre-emptive strike against what it fears above all—a unified struggle by the international working class that challenges its rule. In the United States, the fascistic demagogue and real estate billionaire Donald Trump was able to win the presidential election under conditions where his Democratic Party challenger, Hilary Clinton—the favourite of Wall Street and the military-industrial complex—arrogantly dismissed social concerns in favour of the promotion of reactionary racial and sexual politics and attacks on Trump from the right for his stated opposition to waging war on Russia. In Europe, the elevation of fascistic

and xenophobic parties such as the National Front in France is accompanied by the promotion of forces such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and Jeremy Corbyn in Britain as a supposed “left” alternative.

9. Among workers and youth there exists a powerful desire for peace and social equality that finds no organised expression. The building of a conscious anti-war movement requires that the working class develop a scientific understanding of the objective roots of the crisis, based on a precise assessment of the economic and class interests that are driving the policies of their “own” bourgeoisie and its rivals. Only then will the working class be able to delineate its independent class interests, in solidarity with its class brothers and sisters the world over, in irreconcilable opposition to the bourgeoisie’s promotion of “national unity” as the ideological basis for war.

Brexit and the promotion of nationalism

10. This is the fundamental lesson to be drawn from the June referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union. The crisis of the global economy following 2008 exacerbated divisions within the ruling elite between those who viewed EU membership as vital to projecting their economic and political interests and those for whom EU moves towards greater integration, under German domination, threatened the City of London and its ability to exploit the new centres of economic growth such as China. It was in a bid to placate anti-EU sentiment in the Conservative Party and counter the growth of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) that then-Prime Minister David Cameron agreed to a referendum on EU membership. The aim was to exploit anti-EU and anti-immigrant rhetoric to channel social discontent in a rightward direction and force concessions from the EU that would block plans for closer economic and political union. Oblivious to the alienation of millions from the existing institutions, the ruling class was shocked when its arguments for a Remain vote—based on warnings of financial collapse and economic insecurity—had little traction among those who felt they had nothing to lose.

11. Through its call for an active boycott of the referendum, the Socialist Equality Party was alone in advancing an independent political perspective for the working class. Based on a sober evaluation of the balance of class forces and the lessons of history, especially of Germany in the 1930s, its starting point was to define a policy that upheld the interests not only of workers in Britain, but in Europe and internationally. Explaining that both the Remain and Leave camps were equally hostile to the working class, the SEP made clear its irreconcilable opposition to the EU as an instrument of the major powers in imposing austerity, in facilitating the attack on immigrants through its Fortress Europe policy, and in backing militarism across the continent. But it rejected any support for a Leave campaign dominated by right-wing xenophobes and Thatcherites for whom “national sovereignty” was a banner for trade war, based on deepening the offensive against working people.

12. Crucially, the SEP warned that the referendum was the most advanced expression of the failure of the post-Second World War project of European unification through which the “ruling elites had sought to resolve the fundamental contradiction that had twice in the 20th century plunged the continent into war—between the integrated character of European and global production and the division of the continent into antagonistic nation states... But unity within the framework of capitalism could never mean anything other than the domination of the most powerful nations and corporations over the continent and its peoples. Rather than national and social antagonisms being alleviated, they have

taken on malignant forms.” The SEP stressed, “The EU is breaking apart and cannot be revived. It is only through the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe, established as an integral component of a world federation of socialist states, that the vast productive forces of the continent can be utilised for the benefit of all.”

13. Underscoring these dangers, the referendum campaign saw an unprecedented intervention of the Armed Forces and the security services, MI5 and MI6. Both sides proclaimed their commitment to NATO and its offensive against Russia and China: The Remain camp argued that British EU membership strengthened NATO, while the Leave camp declared that plans to create a European Army would undermine the US-led alliance. Cameron described EU membership as essential to combating a “newly belligerent Russia,” marshalling the support of senior military and security chiefs as well as US President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and five ex-NATO secretaries-general. Obama warned that UK membership was vital in keeping the “EU open, outward looking, and closely linked to its allies on the other side of the Atlantic,” ensuring that NATO meets its “overseas commitments from Afghanistan to the Aegean,” and to “reassure allies who are rightly concerned about Russian aggression.” The campaign for a UK exit was backed by a dozen former senior military officers, with Major General Julian Thompson, who led the 1982 Falkland Islands/Malvinas war, describing the EU as a security threat because it includes “many members who cannot be trusted due to their close relationship with Russia.”

14. The principled approach taken by the SEP delineated a genuinely socialist, internationalist standpoint from both the pseudo-left apologists for the EU such as Left Unity, who joined Labour and the trade unions in supporting Remain, and the “Left Leave” advocates of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Communist Party of Britain (CPB) and Socialist Party (SP). The SEP stressed, “The biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly ‘left nationalism.’” The politically criminal character of this policy was made clear by George Galloway, who appeared alongside UKIP leader Nigel Farage to call on the left and right to “march together.” As the SEP stated, the advocates of Left Leave “are wholly indifferent to the actual forces being strengthened by the Leave campaign. In reality, they are subordinating the working class to an initiative aimed at shifting political life even further along a nationalist trajectory, thereby strengthening and emboldening the far right in the UK and across Europe, while weakening the political defences of the working class. Having helped release the genie of British nationalism, they are politically responsible for its consequences.”

Brexit unleashes a carnival of reaction

15. This warning was prophetic. The narrow 52 percent vote in favour of Leave has been seized on by the most right-wing sections of the Tory Party as an opportunity to complete the Thatcherite social counterrevolution. Cameron was replaced by Theresa May, who campaigned to remain in the EU but has since come forward as a strident advocate of a “hard-Brexit.” Echoing the spurious claims of the “Left Leave” pseudo-left, she has described the result as a rebellion by “ordinary, working class people” against the “international elites,” and is using it as the basis for invoking “patriotism” and whipping up British nationalism. Her government has adopted the policies of UKIP in all essentials, including calls to phase out the employment of foreign doctors and nurses in the National Health Service and other vicious anti-immigrant measures. The collapse in sterling has been welcomed by these right-wing pyromaniacs as a means of further slashing living standards. A

comment in the London *Evening Standard* gave an indication of their agenda when insisting, “Brexit means this: Work Harder.” “Ironically, we all will have to learn to be more like immigrants now... If we want British jobs for British workers we are going to have to stop being choosy.”

16. Opposition to Brexit continues to enjoy the support of powerful sections of Britain’s ruling class, as well as the US. A minority position within the Tories—the desire to ameliorate or, if possible, overturn the referendum result—unites the majority of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) and the Greens. Concerted efforts, backed by legal action, are being made to create the basis for parliament to vote down any agreement triggering Article 50 (which begins the UK’s formal exit from the EU) and/or force a second referendum or a general election. The formation of a “progressive” pro-EU alliance or even a new party is also being discussed.

17. This has been given additional weight by the reigniting of a constitutional crisis that threatens the break-up of the UK. Only two years after the defeat of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, the SNP administration has said it will hold a second referendum in the event of a hard-Brexit, and is seeking an alliance with various parties in the devolved administrations of Wales and Northern Ireland to block or limit exit from the EU. Sectarian conflict is also threatened in Ireland. Northern Ireland voted by 56 percent to remain in the EU. The Democratic Unionist Party favours Brexit and the smaller Ulster Unionist Party, which opposed it, says it will defend the all-UK vote. But Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Alliance Party all support remaining in the EU and are uniting with the Republic of Ireland government in voicing concern over its economic impact and the possibility that a hard border will be reinstated between the north and south. This would also undermine the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and raise the issue of Ireland’s partition once again, over which a civil war and decades of violent conflict have taken place within the past century.

18. The real measure of this “progressive alliance” is its encouraging of divisions in the working class, so long as access to the Single European Market for Britain’s corporations and banks is preserved. Their denunciations of pro-Brexit voters as a “mob” and the anti-democratic character of attempts to overturn the referendum drive threaten to drive sections of workers into the arms of UKIP and other right-wing elements. Moreover, political success for this bourgeois faction would do nothing to lessen the dangers posed to the working class by nationalist reaction and militarism. There can be no turning back the clock to a supposed “golden age” of European unity.

19. In their attempts to prevent the growth of anti-EU sentiment in other countries, the major powers have threatened to punish Britain for its vote—warning that exit from the bloc means losing access to the Single Market. This has been accompanied by a stepping up of plans by the major European powers for the formation of a European Army and the build-up of its internal security forces. According to policy papers drawn up by Germany, France and Italy, the proposed army must be able to “act autonomously if and when necessary” all over the world.

20. The issue, however, is who will command such a force. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has declared that Germany is “too big merely to comment on world affairs from the side-lines.” But Berlin’s efforts to assert its hegemony over the continent will only intensify the disintegration of the EU into competing power blocks, North, South and East. Germany is seen as the natural focus of an alliance of the Benelux, Nordic and Baltic countries. France is flirting with leadership of a southern bloc that includes Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus and Malta as a counterweight to German hegemony, while an eastern bloc centres on Hungary and Poland.

21. What unites the bourgeoisie in Britain with its European counterparts is their agreement on the brutal repression of migrants, the

whipping up of anti-Muslim sentiment, strengthening police-state measures at home, and imperialist war abroad. Obscene arguments over who is responsible for sheltering the victims of Western aggression who have been forced to flee their homes and attempt the often-fatal passage to Europe are an occasion for portraying Islam as an existential threat to European civilisation, based on invocations of Christianity or the secular ideals of the Enlightenment. Far right parties have formed governments in East European countries such as Hungary and Poland, while in Western Europe the hard-right Austrian Freedom Party could yet take the presidency. The Alternative for Germany party has adopted an anti-Islamic manifesto for next year’s German elections, and in France, the National Front of Marine Le Pen is almost certain to go through to the second round in May’s presidential election. Europe’s official parties—whether nominally conservative or social democratic—in turn utilise the growth of the far right to shift their own politics in the same direction.

A resurgence of British imperialist militarism

22. In a bid to contain intractable social, political and economic problems for which it has no progressive solution, Britain’s ruling elite is being driven on a path to war. Even more so than in the past, the bourgeoisie hopes to secure its interests by manipulating international tensions and playing rival powers against one another. Such a balancing act cannot be sustained. The May government’s decision to proceed with Chinese involvement in the building of the Hinkley Point nuclear reactor in England follows on from the UK’s pioneering role in the Beijing-inspired Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. But closer economic relations with China and other rising powers, as a means of counteracting the decline of British capitalism, are incompatible with the UK’s historic dependence on the US.

23. This is especially the case under conditions in which the vote to leave the EU has severely undermined the UK’s use-value to Washington and therefore its continued ability to punch above its weight on the world arena. The prospect of Germany consolidating its domination of Europe following the UK’s withdrawal led to Robert D. Kaplan, an influential member of the US foreign policy establishment and architect of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, warning in the *Wall Street Journal*, “The returning geopolitical chaos is akin, in some respects, to the 1930s... Brexit has undermined a key goal of British geopolitics going back hundreds of years: preventing any one power from dominating the Continent. Yet now Germany is empowered to do just that. Germany could strike a separate bargain with Russia or turn inward toward populist nationalism. Great Britain should reinvigorate its alliance with America. Acting together, the two nations can still project power on the European mainland up to the gates of Russia.”

24. The UK is already playing a lead role in ratcheting up tensions with Russia and is in open conflict with Germany and France over plans for a European Army, seeking to use its position as the fifth largest nuclear power in the world, and the second largest contributor to NATO’s budget, to provide it with leverage. But its nuclear capability is only operable with US technology and warheads, while the new *Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales* aircraft carriers, the largest ever built in the UK, will be platforms for US-built F-35 stealth fighters and Apache helicopter gunships. Britain’s alliance with the US means it will be drawn inexorably even further into military conflicts anywhere in the world. In Europe, it places it in the front line of the US build-up against Moscow, raising the prospect of a confrontation with Germany and the re-opening of the fault-lines that led to two world wars.

25. The ever-expanding burden of this upsurge in militarism will be borne by the working class. In 2016, the government increased military spending for the first time in six years, to a projected £39.7 billion in 2020/21. This does not include the cost of Trident's renewal, the final cost of which is expected to reach £205 billion—almost two years' spending on the National Health Service. This is only a beginning. In a letter to Defence Minister Michael Fallon, retiring General Sir Richard Barons called for a massive rearmament of Britain's military capabilities, complaining, "neither the UK homeland nor a deployed force... could be protected from a concerted Russian air effort."

The pro-imperialist politics of the pseudo-left

26. The Brexit referendum confirmed the pseudo-left groups as bourgeois tendencies. In its aftermath, the pro-Remain supporters of Another Europe is Possible are lining up behind demands for parliament to reassert its authority over the terms of Brexit and have taken part, alongside the Liberal Democrats and others, in pro-EU demonstrations. For its part, the Socialist Party calls for a campaign to ensure a "socialist, internationalist Brexit" based on support for a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government. But the most degenerate expression of the integration of the pseudo-left into the mechanisms of capitalist rule is their support for militarism and war. There is nothing to distinguish their writings on these issues from that of their imperialist governments. Gilbert Achcar, a member of Socialist Resistance, spoke for a broad section of the pseudo-left groups in a recent attack on the US-Russian ceasefire in Syria. Achcar urged the arming of the pro-Western opposition groups with anti-aircraft missiles and other weapons.

27. The Stop the War Coalition (STWC) does not represent an alternative to the militarist politics of the pseudo-left. An alliance of Counterfire (a break-off from the SWP) with the Communist Party of Britain, it promotes the fatal illusion that the fight against war can be conducted outside of and separate from the class struggle. On this basis, it combines petty-bourgeois pacifist appeals with an anti-American, rather than an anti-imperialist, perspective. Its convenor, Lindsey German, has declared, "We've said for some years that one of our aims as a movement should be to break Britain from following the US in every step of its foreign policy." In 2003, the STWC subordinated the mass protests against the invasion of Iraq to appeals to the United Nations, France and Germany to oppose Washington. Today, the CPB distinguishes itself in being openly pro-Assad and in portraying Russia as a bulwark against both US imperialism and ISIS-inspired terrorism.

28. The SEP rejects the designation by the pseudo-left groups of Russia and China as imperialist states. This false characterisation, torn out of all historical context, is a key means through which they seek to legitimise US and European aggression aimed at subordinating these regions to their direct control. However, our rejection of this designation implies no support for the right-wing capitalist regimes in Moscow and Beijing. The reintroduction of capitalism in both countries was carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy. It was the end product of a social and economic counterrevolution that began with the repudiation of the perspective of world socialist revolution and the destruction of Lenin's Bolshevik party in a series of bloody purges targeting above all Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

29. Representing the interests of a parasitic layer of oligarchs, neither the Russian nor Chinese bourgeoisie have any genuine independence from imperialism and are entirely incapable of principled opposition to the machinations of the US and Europe. Both their diplomatic manoeuvres and military interventions are aimed at securing an accommodation with

imperialism—safeguarding their own ability to continue the brutal exploitation of the working class—that is the defining feature of these societies. The admirers of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, their armed forces and nuclear arsenals only disorient the working class, prevent its independent mobilisation and prepare the way for a catastrophic war.

30. The rightward lurch of the pseudo-left is not the product of mistaken ideas or the rotten politics of one or another individual. Such a broad political shift into the camp of imperialism has profound social roots. In 1999, David North, international editorial board chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site*, wrote:

"The objective *modus operandi* and social implications of the protracted stock market boom have enabled imperialism to recruit from among sections of the upper-middle class a new and devoted constituency. The reactionary, conformist and cynical intellectual climate that prevails in the United States and Europe—promoted by the media and adapted to by a largely servile and corrupted academic community—reflects the social outlook of a highly privileged stratum of the population that is not in the least interested in encouraging a critical examination of the economic and political bases of its newly-acquired riches." [A *Quarter Century of War: The US Drive for Global Hegemony 1990-2016*]

31. The 2007/08 financial crisis, the plundering of societal wealth to bail out the banks and the super-rich, which in turn is dependent on military aggression abroad and austerity at home, has only served to cement the loyalty of the pseudo-left to imperialism. These groups speak for privileged sections of the middle class that want a bigger share of the wealth of the top 10 percent and more influence and power within the corporate elite, the trade union apparatus and the state.

The ICFI as the revolutionary centre of opposition to militarism and war

32. Against all forms of middle-class, pseudo-left politics, the Socialist Equality Party bases its perspective on the central and leading role of the working class. The working class must adopt its own strategy to counter the efforts of the imperialist powers to save the capitalist order through war. It must follow not the map of imperialist nation-state geopolitics, but the map of the class struggle—basing its strategy on the unification and mobilisation of its forces internationally for social revolution.

33. The objective conditions for such a struggle are rapidly emerging. The same global crisis that drives the bourgeoisie to impose savage austerity, a turn to authoritarian forms of rule and the re-division of the planet and its resources through military force, also creates the conditions of an eruption of the class struggle. But for this to become a conscious political offensive against the capitalist class and its state machinery demands the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary, global centre of opposition to imperialist war.

34. The ICFI takes responsibility for building a mass anti-war movement based on four essential precepts:

- The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.
- The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the

dictatorship of finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.

- The new anti-war movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organisations of the capitalist class.

- The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilising the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism. The permanent war of the bourgeoisie must be answered with the perspective of permanent revolution by the working class, the strategic goal of which is the abolition of the nation-state system and the establishment of a world socialist federation. This will make possible the rational, planned development of global resources and, on this basis, the eradication of poverty and the raising of human culture to new heights.

35. To take forward a continent-wide struggle against war, the strategic orientation of the SEP must be the fight for workers' governments as part of a United Socialist States of Europe. In 1917, explaining the significance of this demand at the height of the First World War, and just months before the October Revolution, Trotsky wrote:

“The United States of Europe is the slogan of the revolutionary epoch into which we have entered. Whatever turn the war operations may take later on, whatever balance sheet diplomacy may draw out of the present war, and at whatever tempo the revolutionary movement will progress in the near future, the slogan of the United States of Europe will in all cases retain a colossal meaning as the political formula of the struggle of the European proletariat for power. In this programme is expressed the fact that the national state has outlived itself—as a framework for the development of the productive forces, as a basis for the class struggle, and thereby also as a state form of proletarian dictatorship. Our denial of ‘national defence,’ as an outlived political programme for the proletariat, ceases to be a purely negative act of ideological-political self-defence, and acquires all its revolutionary content only in the event that over against the conservative defence of the antiquated national fatherland we place the progressive task, namely the creation of a new, higher ‘fatherland’ of the revolution, of republican Europe, whence the proletariat alone will be enabled to revolutionise and to reorganise the whole world.” [Leon Trotsky, *The Programme of Peace*, 1917, *Fourth International*, September 1944, pp. 279-86]

36. The SEP will fight determinedly in the working class to oppose all forms of nationalism and xenophobia. It will work to extend and strengthen the class struggles that will erupt by fighting, politically and organisationally, to develop the bonds of international solidarity that are the necessary pre-requisite for the overthrow of capitalism and the securing of genuine peace. At the centre of this work will be the deepening collaboration with our comrades in Germany and France for the construction of sections of the ICFI throughout Europe, above all through the development of the influence and readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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