

## Socialist Equality Party (UK) 2016 Congress resolutions

# Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party: The strategic lessons

**The Socialist Equality Party (UK)  
15 November 2016**

*The Socialist Equality Party (UK) held its Third National Congress in Sheffield from October 28 to October 31, 2016. 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 second resolution, “Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party: The strategic lessons.”*

1. The Third Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (UK) must draw the necessary lessons from the events surrounding the election and re-election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader, and outline a socialist response for workers and young people. Part of an international process that witnessed the Bernie Sanders campaign in the United States and the rise to government of Syriza in Greece, it is the initial, distorted manifestation of the political radicalisation of the working class following the 2008 financial crash. Corbyn won support based upon his stated goal of reversing the pro-business, pro-war policies associated with Tony Blair and “New Labour.” Many of his supporters are youth and students, for whom his criticisms of neo-liberalism stand as a refreshing change to 30 years of right-wing domination. However, a Labour backbencher for 32 years, Corbyn insists that the only legitimate form of opposition is one that is subordinated to Labour and the trade unions, and directed through parliament. His mantra that party unity matters above all else is a declaration of solidarity with an organisation that has proven itself, time and again, to be the principal political opponent of socialism in Britain.

2. Corbyn is supported by the Stalinist Communist Party and the pseudo-left groups, with which he has extensive relations stretching back over decades. But far from representing the rebirth of Labour, as they maintain, the “Corbyn phenomenon” expresses its last, desperate gasp. The Labour Party is not the solution to the problems facing the working class—it is directly responsible for the social catastrophe that workers confront. The wave of capitalist triumphalism following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was used by the bourgeoisie—especially its agencies in the social democratic and trade union apparatuses—to mount a counterrevolution against the gains and conditions of the working class in the interests of the financial oligarchy. In Britain, this was spearheaded by the Labour Party under Blair and his successor Gordon Brown. In alliance with the Bush administration in the United States, Britain’s ruling elite participated as junior partner in a series of criminal military adventures that have cost the lives of millions and laid waste to countries in an attempt to reorder the world under their hegemony. This was accompanied by Labour’s invocation of a “war on terror” that has overturned centuries-old democratic rights and, in alliance with the US, consolidated a vast network of domestic and global surveillance with GCHQ at the centre.

3. The financial crash of 2008 shipwrecked the New Labour project. The party was held in contempt for having facilitated the unbridled speculation that led to the crash—exemplified in the declaration that Labour was “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich.” Its £1 trillion bailout of the banks and introduction of austerity measures to pay for this operation saw its support collapse to such an extent that it has lost two general elections in a row. In the May 2015 election, despite the Liberal Democrats’ wipe-out at the polls due to their 2010 coalition with the Conservatives, Labour suffered a rout. Its message of “austerity-lite” saw it haemorrhage seats across the country, most spectacularly in Scotland—its former stronghold—where it was reduced to just one MP. The party lost many of its leading figures, with party leader Ed Miliband forced to stand down. This enabled Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron to return to office, with the support of just 24 percent of the electorate, and announce that his government would pursue its austerity agenda with renewed vigour.

4. Under conditions of enormous social polarisation, the danger confronting the ruling class was that political opposition would develop outside parliament and in opposition to the establishment parties. Since the 2007/2008 crisis, UK workers have suffered the largest fall in real wages among leading Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Wage freezes, cuts and the growth of part-time and zero-hours contracts have seen wages fall by 10.4 percent, a decline equalled only by Greece. In the sixth richest economy in the world, a massive assault on welfare has led to the growth of food banks, as the government sought to slash public spending to approximately 35 percent of GDP, equivalent to the US and the lowest level in Britain since the 1930s. The gulf between the super-rich and the mass of working people has assumed monstrous dimensions. In England between 2012 and 2014, there was a 60 percent increase in the number of poor households, while the number of middle-income households went down by 27 percent. The top 10 percent of households—all worth more than £1 million—saw their wealth grow three times faster than the bottom 50 percent, while the top 1 percent possess as much wealth as the poorest 57 percent. According to government figures, from 1991, under Labour and the Tory-Liberal coalition, the wealth share of the top 10 percent increased from 59 percent to 66 percent and the wealth share of the top 1 percent from 19 percent to 23 percent.

## The 2015 Labour leadership contest

5. Labour’s response to its electoral debacle was to declare that its

manifesto had been too left-wing. The 2015 Labour leadership contest was intended to seal a further lurch to the right. The Labour “left” was in such a state of collapse that initially it could find no candidate willing to stand and could not meet the level of support in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) to achieve ballot status. At the last minute, Corbyn stood for nomination, backed by just 15 MPs out of 232, including the nine remaining members of the Socialist Campaign Group. He achieved ballot status only thanks to the endorsement of some of his opponents, who wanted to preserve the illusion among workers that Labour remained a “broad church.” Instead, as an unintended consequence of changes to electoral rules aimed at supplanting the union block vote, 120,000 people signed up under the new category of Labour supporters, attracted by Corbyn’s anti-austerity, anti-militarist stance. Horrified that their neo-liberal agenda was in jeopardy, the right-wing went on the attack. But the interventions by Blair and others, coupled with the rotten record of his opponents, only consolidated Corbyn’s support. “Operation Icepick” was put into motion, with 70 staff employed by the National Executive Committee to weed out those not considered loyal to the New Labour credo. Even so, Corbyn secured 59.5 percent of the vote, more than the combined total of his three opponents. Liz Kendall, the most Blairite contender, received a humiliating 4.5 percent of the vote, underscoring the lack of any significant support for New Labour even within the party.

6. While solidarising with the leftward sentiment expressed in Corbyn’s victory, the Socialist Equality Party warned that those hoping it would “provide an alternative to austerity will be cruelly disappointed. The real measure of his campaign must be judged not on stated intentions, but on the essential criterion of the class interests served by the party and the programme he defends. Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party. It is complicit in all the crimes of British imperialism and has functioned as the principal political opponent of socialism for more than a century ...” [*What does the “Jeremy Corbyn phenomenon” represent?* (August 15, 2015)]

This appraisal was confirmed by the direct intervention of Britain’s military in opposition to any threat to Labour’s historic role. Within a week of Corbyn’s election, Murdoch’s *Sunday Times* published a statement by a “senior serving general” that warned of “a mutiny” in the event of him becoming prime minister. Elements within the military would be prepared to use “whatever means possible, fair or foul... You would see a major break in convention with senior generals directly and publicly challenging Corbyn over vital important policy decisions such as Trident, pulling out of NATO and any plans to emasculate and shrink the size of the armed forces.” In November, the head of the UK’s armed forces, Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Nicholas Houghton, told the BBC that Corbyn’s statement that he would never authorise the use of nuclear weapons “would worry me if that thought was translated into power.”

7. These threats mark a milestone in the degeneration of British democracy. As someone involved in politics throughout the 1970s, at a time of rising industrial militancy that culminated in the bringing down of the Conservative government of Edward Heath in 1974, Corbyn is well aware of their implications. This was the period in which the civil service, the police and the Ministry of Defence were secretly placed on alert and military manoeuvres were carried out at Heathrow airport and other strategic locations. Moreover, he is of a generation for whom the 1973 CIA-backed coup against the Chilean government of Salvador Allende was a formative experience. But rather than alerting the working class and insisting on Houghton’s removal, Corbyn sent a polite letter to Defence Secretary Michael Fallon stating, “It is essential in a democracy that the military remains politically neutral at all times.” The government rushed to support Houghton with a spokeswoman for Cameron stating that “as the principal military adviser to the Government,” it was “reasonable” for him “to talk about how we maintain the credibility of one of the most important tools in our armoury.”

## Corbyn retreats on Syria, NATO and Trident

8. Lord West, the former first sea lord and ex-Labour minister, has made clear the broader concerns of the ruling class over the growth of popular anti-war sentiment, warning that Corbyn “should not lead the nation” because his criticism of militarism might get “the unthinking masses to vote for him.” But rather than mobilise workers against militarism and war, his response has been abject capitulation. On every key issue—war in Syria, NATO’s military build-up against Russia and the renewal of Britain’s nuclear weapons programme—Corbyn has given way to the dictates and demands of his right-wing critics. Rather than declaring war on the architects and supporters of New Labour, he selected a shadow cabinet that included many of those who would, within months, attempt a putsch against him. This included retaining Hilary Benn as shadow foreign secretary and appointing Maria Eagle as shadow secretary of state for defence. In December 2015, Corbyn handed the initiative to the warmongers by authorising a free vote on military action in Syria. Benn had already pledged to overturn Labour’s August 2013 position of opposition, which had helped scupper a planned US-led assault. Almost a third of Labour’s MPs, 66, backed the government, which won by 397 to 223 votes. As Cameron denounced those planning to vote against as “terrorist sympathisers,” in the House of Lords Labour peer Jeffrey Rooker demanded that the party “get rid” of Corbyn, identifying Islamic State’s “innate intolerance” for the “British way of life” with the “anti-British Trots in the Labour Party.” Benn was allowed to close the parliamentary debate for Labour. Within the hour, Tornado bombers flew from their base in Cyprus in the first foray in British imperialism’s latest bloody military venture.

9. Corbyn’s next strategic retreat was over Trident. The US-backed right-wing putsch in Ukraine, aimed at installing a virulently anti-Russian regime, has been followed by the deployment of thousands of NATO troops in Eastern and Central Europe and the expansion of the US nuclear missile arsenal in the region targeting Russia. Trident’s renewal is integral to this US-led NATO offensive. The government had delayed a parliamentary vote on Trident for fear of public opposition to the programme. Washington had pressed hard for its renewal, with US Defence Secretary Ash Carter stressing that it is an “important part of the deterrent structure of NATO,” and warning that if Britain wanted to continue to play an “outsized role on the global stage,” it had to maintain a commensurate “military power.” Corbyn prepared for the Trident vote in July by abandoning his opposition to NATO membership and telling Labour’s conference, “We’re not going to divide and ruin ourselves as a party over this.” He allowed Labour MPs their second free vote since taking office, and three-quarters (140 to 47) backed Trident’s renewal. This *volte-face* has placed Britain in the front line, in Europe, of a potential nuclear war with Russia. In response to a question as to whether she would personally authorise a nuclear strike, Prime Minister Theresa May replied, “Yes... the whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it...”

10. Corbyn’s portrayal of militarism and war as matters of individual conscience is nothing more than a reincarnation of the “poor, wretched, feeble-minded Fabianism” described so scathingly by Leon Trotsky:

“Renouncing violence, the Fabians believe only in the power of the ‘idea.’ If a wholesome grain can be sifted out of this trivial and hypocritical philosophy then it lies in the fact that no regime can maintain itself by violence alone. This applies equally to the

regime of British imperialism. In a country where the overwhelming majority of the population consists of proletarians, the governing Conservative-Liberal imperialist clique would not be able to last a single day if it were not for the fact that the means of violence in its hands are reinforced, supplemented and disguised by pseudo-socialist ideas that ensnare and break up the proletariat.” [*The Fabian Theory of Socialism*, Leon Trotsky, 1926]

## Corbyn and Brexit

11. Corbyn again proved his readiness to abandon political positions he had held for over four decades when, in the June 23, 2016 referendum on UK membership of the European Union (EU), he junked his opposition to lead Labour’s Remain campaign. This played a vital political role, given that the official Remain campaign was led by Prime Minister David Cameron and was shaped by the strategic concerns of the City of London and the need to preserve the UK as a bulwark of NATO within Europe. The Leave vote was a devastating setback for the British bourgeoisie. The severing of relations with the EU not only threatens vital commercial interests, particularly London’s role as a centre for global financial speculation. It severely undermines Britain’s value to the United States, which is the essential precondition for its ability to project its global interests. Reversing the vote is therefore considered a strategic imperative, with newspapers and politicians across the official political spectrum denouncing the result as an outcome of “mob rule” and demanding variously a second referendum, a parliamentary vote so that the pro-EU majority at Westminster can vote down the terms of Brexit negotiated with the EU, or, if necessary, the calling of a general election. Giving voice to these concerns within days of the result, US Secretary of State John Kerry indicated discussions were underway on how to “roll back” the vote, saying, “I think there are a number of ways. I don’t, as secretary of state, want to throw them out today. I think that would be a mistake. But there are a number of ways.”

12. Washington was not just planning, it was acting, and it did so through the Labour Party. Two days earlier, a right-wing cabal of Labour MPs, working in collusion with the highest levels of the British state, the US State Department and the CIA, set into motion a coup plot against Corbyn. With the Tory Party committed to Brexit, any move to overturn the referendum has to involve Labour. But whether instigated by a Labour government, or with Labour in a “progressive alliance” with sections of the Tories, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, this agenda depends on the party being solely accountable to the dictates of the ruling elite. With Corbyn considered to be “lukewarm” on Europe and having ruled out a second referendum, this meant activating long-planned moves against him, and, more importantly, against the hundreds of thousands of workers and young people who had rallied in his support.

## Anatomy of an attempted putsch

13. The ferocity of the PLP’s attempted leadership coup is only a pale indication of the police state methods that would be employed against a genuine leftward break from Labour. It exposed the chief claim made by Corbyn and his ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, that the toxic legacy of New Labour could be reversed and that, through “discussion,” the PLP could be persuaded to lead a new “grassroots” movement for

“social solidarity.” The political forces mobilised against Corbyn included some of the most hated figures in British politics. Led by the architects of the Iraq War—Blair himself, Peter Mandelson, Alastair Campbell, David Blunkett and Jack Straw—they worked directly with sections of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire and found their main propagandists in the professional purveyors of identity politics and postmodernism employed by the *Guardian*, who lined up to denounce the referendum result as an expression of “backward, insular nationalism,” and to decry Corbyn as a disaster for British Labour.

14. Within hours of the referendum result, a motion of no-confidence was submitted by two Labour MPs, for which Benn declared his support and was sacked. The staged resignation of more than 60 members of the shadow cabinet was followed by 81 percent of Labour MPs voting in support of the motion, with only 40 MPs backing Corbyn. This triggered a leadership contest that saw the right wing try, without success, to exclude Corbyn from the ballot through legal action. The National Executive Committee then set out to bar 130,000 new members from voting on a technicality, winning the backing of the High Court, and hiked up the cost of being a registered supporter from £3 to £25. This was accompanied by a McCarthyite witch-hunt, with Labour’s Orwellian Compliance Unit trawling through social media postings to make bogus charges of anti-Semitism, misogyny, racism and intimidation against Corbyn supporters and suspend their membership, denying them the right to vote in the leadership contest. Corbyn’s challenger, Owen Smith, pledged to restore UK membership of the EU. Asked what position he would take in the event of a Russian attack on a NATO member, he evoked Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, committing to war in the event a member state is attacked, and linked this to the need to “be at the heart of the European Union” as “the greatest bulwark against Russian aggression.”

15. It is a measure of popular hostility to this right-wing agenda that despite the demand by every major newspaper and TV channel for his removal, on September 24, 2016, Corbyn secured an increased majority as a flood of new supporters raised Labour’s membership to over half a million. But this was a pyrrhic victory. As the Socialist Equality Party had warned, it is the upper-middle class clique that constitutes the PLP—and which is accountable only to the military-intelligence state apparatus—that determines Labour’s class character, not its members. The possibility of converting Labour’s right-wing husk into a vehicle for “social justice” and “peace” is as bankrupt as the illusion that the financial oligarchy can be peacefully persuaded to agree to a fairer redistribution of wealth. Instead, Labour’s special conference passed a composite motion pledging Labour to try to thwart or overturn Brexit, while leading figures such as Andy Burnham demanded that the party oppose the free movement of labour in Europe and recognise that working people “have a problem” with “unlimited, unfunded, unskilled migration.” Most tellingly, Corbyn’s then-shadow defence secretary, Clive Lewis, publicly endorsed the renewal of Trident and pledged that a Labour government would “fulfil our international commitments, including those under Article 5” of NATO’s constitution, effectively committing Britain to support a US-led war against Russia.

16. There can be no retreat from the offensive to refashion Labour as a pro-NATO, pro-EU party because the divisions within ruling circles over Brexit have only deepened in the aftermath of the referendum and will become more intractable as the descent into trade and military war escalates. While the Tories are adopting UKIP’s policies and morphing into the English equivalent of Marine Le Pen’s National Front, the Blairites hope their call for a “progressive pro-EU alliance” will consolidate a social base in the upper stratum of the “cosmopolitan” petty-bourgeoisie. Their marrying of appeals based on race, gender, sexual orientation and various life-style choices with pro-NATO, pro-war rhetoric is a stark confirmation of the reactionary character of identity politics.

## A vindication of the Marxist method

17. The appraisal made by the Socialist Equality Party of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party has been entirely confirmed. This is a vindication of the Marxist method, which analyses political tendencies not according to what they call themselves but on the basis of their history and programme and the social interests they represent. In its very first statement following Corbyn's 2015 leadership victory, the SEP explained:

"No one can seriously propose that this party—which, in its politics and organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name—can be transformed into an instrument of working class struggle. The British Labour Party did not begin with Blair. It is a bourgeois party of more than a century's standing and a tried and tested instrument of British imperialism and its state machine. Whether led by Clement Attlee, James Callaghan or Jeremy Corbyn, its essence remains unaltered." [*The political issues posed by Corbyn's election as UK Labour Party leader*, September 14, 2015]

18. This is in sharp contrast to the pseudo-left, who are regrouping around Labour. The Socialist Party hails Corbyn's victory as a step towards Labour's re-founding "as a democratic, socialist, anti-austerity party." It has wound up its Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) electoral front and has applied to affiliate to Labour. The Socialist Workers Party seeks to corral workers and youth involved in industrial struggles, including against Labour councils implementing Tory attacks, behind support for a Corbyn-led Labour government. "Corbyn's position will be immeasurably strengthened if the level of struggle rises—and, in fact, this path offers the most certain route to creating an electoral majority for Corbyn," it declares. The Left Unity project has all but collapsed, with the bulk of its membership, including Alan Thornett's Socialist Resistance group, liquidating into the pro-Corbyn Momentum movement. Thornett declares a Corbyn-led Labour Party as the best chance in "generations" for "reshaping politics on the left and making a difference at the level of government." Meanwhile, the Alliance for Workers Liberty follows Corbyn in appealing for unity with the right wing, declaring, "no consistent and sincere democrat could insist that members on the right of the party, and even within the PLP, simply 'put up or shut up.'"

19. The pseudo-left groups all pass over more than a century of the history of the Labour Party, in which every effort to push it to the left has ended in defeat or capitulation. Keir Hardie, Labour's founder, died an ostracised and broken man in 1915, just one year after Labour declared its support for the First World War. George Lansbury, Labour's Christian pacifist leader between 1933 and 1935, was forced out by the trade union bureaucracy as the party geared up to support British imperialist interests in the run-up to the Second World War. Having formed a National Unity government with the Tories at the outbreak of hostilities with Germany in 1939, and suppressed strikes throughout the war, the post-1945 supposedly "socialist" government of Clement Attlee played an essential role in the formation of NATO, facilitated the sectarian partition of India and committed British troops to the Korean War. More substantial figures than Corbyn on the Labour left have performed no better. In 1957, Aneurin Bevan, who had led protests against Britain's development of the H-bomb, notoriously reversed his support for unilateral nuclear

disarmament, saying, "It would send a British foreign secretary naked into the conference chamber." Michael Foot, a founder of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, distinguished himself as Labour leader (1980-1984) by supporting Thatcher's war against Argentina over the Falklands/Malvinas Islands, in the process helping her secure a second term in office, before he resigned a few days later.

## Lenin on the Labour Party

20. The role of the pseudo-left is to provide a political apologia for subordinating the working class to the Labour Party and the trade unions. To this end, they seize on Lenin's designation of Labour as a "bourgeois workers party" to claim that its class character remains an open question. In reality, Lenin's definition flowed from the non-socialist character of the party's leadership that was bound up with its origins in the trade unions. But the broader significance of his analysis of the opportunist character of the Labour Party became clear in his appraisal of the degeneration of all the parties of the Second International as revealed by their support for their own ruling class in the First World War.

21. Lenin advocated an implacable struggle against these forces to prepare the way for the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class through the building of a Third (Communist) International. In December 1916, Lenin wrote of:

"[T]he monstrous and disgusting victory opportunism (in the form of social-chauvinism) has gained over the labour movement in Europe... objectively the *opportunists* are a section of the petty bourgeoisie and of certain strata of the working class who *have been bribed* out of imperialist superprofits and converted to *watchdogs* of capitalism and *corruptors* of the labour movement... The fact is that 'bourgeois labour parties,' as a political phenomenon, have already been formed in *all* the foremost capitalist countries, and that unless determined and relentless struggle is waged all along the line against these parties—or groups, trends, etc., it is all the same—there can be no question of a struggle against imperialism, or of Marxism, or of a socialist labour movement." [*Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*, 1916, V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23.]

22. Lenin stressed that to describe Labour as the "political expression of the trade union movement" was erroneous:

"Of course, most of the Labour Party's members are workingmen. However, whether or not a party is really a political party of the workers does not depend solely upon a membership of workers but also upon the men that lead it, and the content of its actions and its political tactics. Only this latter determines whether we really have before us a political party of the proletariat. Regarded from this, the only correct, point of view, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because, although made up of workers, it is led by reactionaries, and the worst kind of reactionaries at that, who act quite in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie, which exists to systematically dupe the workers with the aid of the British Noskes and Scheidemanns." [*Speech On Affiliation To The British Labour Party*, August 6, 1920]

23. Lenin's reference to the murderers of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the leaders of Germany's communists, makes clear that when he urged the young British Communist Party to seek affiliation to Labour and work for it to come to power, this was in order to hasten the break by workers from it. Explaining that "since revolution is impossible without a change in the views of the majority of the working class, a change brought about by the political experience of the masses, never by propaganda alone," Lenin wrote that the experience of a Labour government would mean "the majority will soon become disappointed in their leaders and will begin to support communism." The Communist Party of Great Britain applied for affiliation and was rejected. Lenin described this as a positive outcome that showed the masses exactly where the Labour Party stood. There is no point of connection between the pseudo-left and Lenin's revolutionary approach to the Labour Party or to the trade unions. He set out to break the working class from Labourism and from the political stranglehold of the trade unions. They seek to reinforce both.

### Trotsky on the Labour Party

24. Like Lenin, Trotsky understood that given the political allegiance of millions of workers to the Labour Party and their membership of the trade unions, the building of a revolutionary leadership depended upon patient work to expose any misplaced belief that these organisations offered a path towards socialism. This meant not only opposition to the right wing, but, above all, against the "lefts" who enjoyed the support of the most class conscious workers and kept them tied to a reformist programme. Writing one year before the 1926 General Strike, Trotsky explained that an escalation of the class struggle and the onset of a major crisis for British and world capitalism would lead to the right wing losing all influence, but the "first substitutes" would be the "lefts." Fabianism, MacDonaldism and pacifism, he wrote, "are the main prop of British imperialism and of the European, if not the world bourgeoisie. Workers must at all costs be shown these self-satisfied pedants, drivelling eclectics, sentimental careerists and liveried footmen of the bourgeoisie in their true colours. To show them up for what they are means to discredit them beyond repair." [*Where is Britain Going?* Leon Trotsky, 1925]

25. In the course of the coup against Corbyn, Deputy Leader Tom Watson claimed that the Labour Party was being infiltrated by "Trotskyite entryists." Indeed, if one were to proceed from the appraisal of both the Labour right and the pseudo-left, Trotsky's entire contribution to revolutionary politics in Britain is his advocacy of entryism. In fact, Trotsky advanced this tactic as a means of taking forward the construction of the Fourth International by winning leftward moving forces that were trapped within the old organisations. For this reason, in Britain, he first called for entry not into the Labour Party, but the centrist Independent Labour Party (ILP), which had split from Labour in 1932 after party leader Ramsay MacDonald formed a National Coalition with the Tories and Liberals to impose austerity measures following the Wall Street Crash. The ILP co-founded the "London Bureau" of left-socialist parties, advancing a policy of regrouping forces drawn from within the Second and Third Internationals. Trotsky urged its European affiliates to support the founding of the Fourth International, declaring the Stalinised Third International dead for the purposes of revolution, due to it allowing Hitler to rise to power in Germany without opposition. The British Trotskyists entered the ILP to convince its members to heed Trotsky's warning that the party must "place itself right now under the banner of the Fourth International, or it will disappear from the scene without leaving a trace." However, the ILP came under ever greater influence from Stalinism after the Third International switched to the policy of Popular Front alliances

with bourgeois parties, and spiralled into a terminal decline.

26. The entry work of the pseudo-left groups in the Labour Party owes its politics not to Trotsky but to Pabloism, the liquidationist tendency that broke from Trotskyism in the aftermath of the Second World War. Rejecting the working class as the revolutionary agency of social change, the Pabloites asserted that the expansion of Stalinist control into Eastern Europe proved that socialism could be arrived at through the "blunt instruments" of the bureaucratic organisations that presently dominated the working class. On this basis, they insisted on the "real integration into the mass movement wherever it expresses itself in each country, or to integration in an important current of this movement which can be influenced." This took the form of "entryism *sui generis*" (of a unique kind)—whereby these groups buried themselves in the Labour Party while functioning as its left apologists.

27. The Militant Tendency was for some time the British section of the Pabloite movement. Having been ensconced in the Labour Party for decades, it rose to public prominence in the 1980s during the struggles against the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. Its record at that time is a devastating exposure of the claim that Labour can be made into a political vehicle for the socialist aspirations of the working class. Broad swathes of workers were hostile to the right-wing trajectory of the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress and were moving toward a break from reformism. Instead of encouraging this development, Militant insisted on workers remaining under the leadership of Labour. It had built a dominant position within Liverpool City Council and won support for rejecting the spending cuts demanded by Thatcher, portraying this as proof that the District Labour Parties would in future assume the role of organs of dual power played by the Soviets, or workers' councils, in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Instead, the Liverpool Labourites agreed to some minor concessions granted by Thatcher to prevent the opening of a second front when she set on crushing the 1984-85 miners' strike. Militant's domination of the city ended in a rout in 1985, when, facing bankruptcy, and having secured an additional £30 million in loans, it carried out what it called an "orderly retreat" by producing a legal balanced budget. This opened the way for a witch-hunt launched by Labour leader Neil Kinnock, which ended in the expulsion of *The Militant* newspaper's editorial board. Over the next few years, Militant's majority, led by Peter Taaffe, were forced to quit the Labour Party.

28. The media and the pseudo-left groups draw a veil over the most significant example of entry work conducted in the Labour Party on the basis of genuinely revolutionary principles—the intervention of the British Trotskyists under the leadership of Gerry Healy in the post-war period. The significance of this work was that it was guided by, and subordinate to, the struggle to build the revolutionary party. The gains it made were the product of the Healy group's support for the Open Letter, issued by James P. Cannon of the US Socialist Workers Party in 1953, defending Trotskyism from the Pabloites' attempts to liquidate the Fourth International. The founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was critical in the political strengthening of the British Trotskyists to intervene in a hostile political milieu. In the crisis in British Stalinism that followed Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956, they were able to win important forces from the Communist Party of Great Britain. This enabled the Healy group to win significant support in the Labour Party and the trade unions, centred on their work to expose the "lefts," demanding that they break with the right wing and take up the struggle for a Labour government pledged to socialist policies.

29. The defining characteristic of this intervention was that when the bureaucracy mounted a vicious witch-hunt against its Trotskyist opponents, Healy was prepared for a decisive organisational break with the Labour Party. In March 1959, the Socialist Labour League (SLL) was formed as an open political tendency. Healy explained: "Instead of allowing our people to disappear into the wilderness as a result of

expulsions, we now saw the opportunity to reorganise them more openly as the core of the SLL itself. In other words, the formation of the SLL was a strategic modification of our total entry policy to a new situation which could not have been foreseen when our movement entered the Labour Party in 1947.” Following the advice of Lenin, the SLL applied to the Labour Party for political affiliation and was rejected, proscribed and dozens of its leading personnel expelled. Again, the SLL went on the offensive, winning the leadership of the Young Socialists (YS). The *Keep Left* youth paper was proscribed and its supporters suspended, YS branches closed down and riot police called against a lobby of the Labour Party National Executive Committee.

## Globalisation and its consequences

30. The pseudo-left groups portray the Labour Party and the trade unions as timeless entities, which, despite their faults, still represent mass organisations of the working class. This not only conceals the historical experience made by working people with these organisations, but also the terminal stage of their degeneration. The ICFI explained that the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the re-introduction of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy was an epochal event that demanded a major reappraisal of the character of all the old bureaucratic organisations and their relationship to the working class. In July 1987, the ICFI drew attention to how the profound changes associated with transnational production and the global integration of finance and manufacturing had “dramatically undermined” the viability of the old labour organisations that were “embedded in the nation-state system.” Confronted with the failure of the national autarkic economic policies pursued in opposition to socialism, the response of the Stalinist bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin was to seek re-integration into the structures of world capitalism and their own transformation into a class of bourgeois exploiters. But this was only the highest expression of an international phenomenon, in which all the trade unions, parties and even states created by the working class “in an earlier period, have been transformed into the direct instruments of imperialism.”

31. This led to a radical shift in the tactical approach taken to the Labour Party. In the past, demands to “make the lefts fight the right wing” had been dictated by the need to disabuse workers of their illusions that any section of Labour offered a vehicle for socialist struggle. However, after the unbroken series of betrayals, beginning with the 1984-85 miners’ strike and the emergence of New Labour under Blair, which repudiated the party’s commitment to social reformism, to continue to place such demands risked introducing rather than combating illusions.

32. This applied with equal force to the trade unions. In his 1998 lecture *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board David North rejected the pseudo-left’s assertion that the development of a mass socialist movement “depends upon ‘winning’ the trade unions, or at least a significant section of them, to a socialist perspective.” The inability of the trade unions throughout the world to defend the living standards of the working class must have “objective causes both in the socio-economic environment within which the trade unions now exist and, even more fundamentally, in the essential nature of the trade unions themselves.” Far from acting as organs of class struggle, “history provides overwhelming evidence that they are far more devoted to its suppression... Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt an essentially hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labour power and determine the general conditions in which surplus value will be

pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obliged to guarantee that their members supply their labour power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. That opposition, moreover, is focussed on the socialist movement, which represents the working class, not in its limited role as a seller of labour power, but in its historic capacity as the revolutionary antithesis of the production relations of capitalism.”

33. This inherent antipathy to the class struggle has assumed a finished form in the response of the trade unions to the development of globalisation. The defence of the capitalist order now demands that in the interests of being globally competitive, they actively impose ever greater levels of exploitation through wage cuts, speed ups and job losses. The degeneration of the Labour Party and the trade unions is such that it is impossible to define them any longer as workers’ organisations in any meaningful sense. The ICFI responded with the decision to form the Socialist Equality Parties. The SEP (UK) explained in its 2010 Historical and International Foundations document that in the past, “the Stalinist and social democratic parties held the allegiance of many socialist-minded workers, intellectuals and youth. The task of constructing a revolutionary party, therefore, could only proceed through a systematic struggle to dispel illusions in the socialist character of these parties, including their left representatives, and work for a radicalisation within their ranks and those of the trade unions they controlled. A sea-change had now occurred in the relationship between the working class and these organisations. They no longer enjoyed the active and militant support of advanced workers, who viewed them as overt representatives of big business. Consequently, it was not a question of exposing illusions in other tendencies, but of directly establishing the right of the Trotskyist movement to lead the working class.” [The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain), p. 116.]

## Marxism versus the pseudo-left

34. The pseudo-left organisations constitute a professional *anti-Trotskyist* detachment of the petty-bourgeoisie. The term pseudo-left denotes “political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class.” The pseudo-left “is anti-socialist, opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society.” It “promotes ‘identity politics,’ fixating on issues relating to nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality in order to acquire greater influence in corporations, the colleges and universities, the higher-paying professions, the trade unions and in government and state institutions, to effect a more favourable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of the population.” It is “pro-imperialist, and utilizes the slogans of ‘human rights’ to legitimize, and even directly support, neo-colonialist military operations.” [David North, *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique*, pp. xxii-xxiii]

35. The international working class has made critical experiences with the pseudo-left tendencies: their role in supporting the ethnic dismemberment of Yugoslavia and fostering of civil war by the imperialist powers; their derailing of the revolutionary movement against the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt; their support for the NATO-led war in Libya and the CIA-backed civil war in Syria; their backing of the right-wing coup in Ukraine; and, above all, the actions of Syriza in Greece. When Syriza came to power in January 2015, as a result of its pledges to oppose EU-backed austerity measures, this was hailed by pseudo-left organizations everywhere as a transformative event that would

change the trajectory of European politics. Instead, Syriza spent months pleading with the EU for paltry concessions on the terms for imposing EU austerity measures before repudiating the landslide vote against further austerity in the July referendum and agreeing to impose even harsher spending cuts than its predecessors. It now engages in direct confrontations with the working class, while serving as a front-line police force for the EU's "Fortress Europe," keeping out refugees fleeing the disasters created by imperialism in the Middle East and Africa. The actions of Syriza have definitively confirmed the role of the pseudo-left as a faction of bourgeois politics, repeated in different forms by Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany and the New Anti-capitalist Party in France.

36. The mendacious character of the pseudo-left's boosting of these parties as a progressive alternative to the old social democratic parties is underscored by their embrace of Corbyn. In his victory speech to Labour's 2016 Special Conference, Corbyn boasted, "Since the crash of 2008, the demand for an alternative and an end to counter-productive austerity has led to the rise of new movements and parties in one country after another... In Britain, it's happened in the heart of traditional politics, in the Labour party, which is something we should be extremely proud of." The pseudo-left have all proclaimed Momentum as the British equivalent of Syriza, with the Socialist Party declaring that its model for a "re-founded anti-austerity Labour Party" is the "Greek party Syriza"—which "went from under 5 percent to winning a general election in just a few years..."

37. As the ICFI explained in its statement, *The Political Lessons of Syriza's Betrayal in Greece*, the pseudo-lefts supported Syriza because they represent "the same affluent layers of 'left' academics, union functionaries, parliamentarians, and professionals, and sought to advance their class interests through similar policies. When the ruling class allowed Syriza to take power, all of them saw this as a model and hoped that they would be given the opportunity to play a similar role in their own countries." Similarly, Corbyn's policies have nothing to do with defending the working class, much less implementing socialism. They are framed around greater government intervention to preserve British industry against its rivals in Europe, the US and China, and the encouragement of "social entrepreneurs," based on cooperatives, investment banks, credit unions and the like that would provide a new niche for the middle class under conditions of an offensive against all the gains and conditions won by workers. Should Corbyn come to power, he will play exactly the same role as Tsipras in Greece.

38. The pseudo-left groups are utterly indifferent to the reactionary role played by Syriza because they are hostile to the working class and its interests. It is no accident that they speak of Labour being "transformed" into the party of the 99 percent. This formulation, which is selected because it omits any reference to capitalism and socialism, seeks to conceal the fundamental class divisions in society. It articulates the outlook of a moderately successful layer of the middle class—from which the pseudo-left is drawn—who feel that the 1 percent's monopoly on private wealth is shutting them out of their entitlements. The anti-capitalism of this layer is motivated more by envy of the super-rich than solidarity with the working class. They desire not the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, much less the expropriation of the City of London, but a more equitable distribution of the income derived from it among the top ten percent of society.

### Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

39. The tasks of the Socialist Equality Party flow directly from the appraisal made by the International Committee of the Fourth International

of the impact of these developments on the class struggle:

"Those parties and personalities that emerge as the initial beneficiaries of political discontent will be overwhelmed by the massive social forces set into motion by the global crisis. The fate of Syriza and its leader Tsipras—universally acclaimed in January 2015 and despised in July—will befall many other political charlatans and mis-leaders. But it is not sufficient to wait passively and allow events to expose the traitors. It is necessary to undertake the building of the genuine revolutionary party equal to the tasks confronting the working class." [*Socialism and the Fight Against War*, point. 57]

40. The Socialist Equality Party seeks to build our party in the working class and above all the younger generation. We are committed to the most energetic and active intervention in the struggles that will inevitably be unleashed by the ever more savage imposition of austerity and as a result of the opposition of millions to the escalation of imperialist military violence. But the development of a new socialist and internationalist leadership is possible only through waging the necessary theoretical and political work to educate working people and youth in the fundamental lessons of history and, in this way, free them from the alien influence of the petty-bourgeois defenders of capitalism and the political stranglehold of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

41. There is no basis for the return to the type of reformist Labour Party promised by Corbyn. An entirely opposed perspective is required by the working class that meets up to the reality of existing social relations. Unlike the 1930s, British capitalism has largely spent the special reserves it drew from Empire, including its most precious political asset, the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, which enabled it to avoid the revolutionary upheavals that swept Europe in the same period. This is underscored by a comment from Labour's Jon Cruddas, published in the *Financial Times*, speculating on the form that a "domestic political realignment" will take in Britain. Cruddas wrote that the "closest historical parallel" to the present crisis in Labour is Berlin in 1918, when, during the revolutionary upheavals occasioned by the First World War, Friedrich Ebert led the German Social Democratic Party into the Weimar Coalition, unleashing the Freikorps to murder Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Cruddas' potted account was littered with inaccuracies, but his overall message was clear—in response to the deepening social and political polarisation, the Labour bureaucracy will respond in the manner of Ebert.

42. This is the significance of the re-emergence of the spectre of Leon Trotsky in the course of the deepening crisis of the Labour Party. Designating the purge of party members as "Operation Icepick"—a reference to the weapon used to assassinate Trotsky—and targeting thousands of "suspect" members as "Trots" shows how acutely aware the ruling elite and its media are of the threat posed by Trotskyism. Whenever capitalism is gripped by crisis and an eruption of social and political conflict involving the working class, Trotsky's presence is always felt. Nowhere is this more so than in Britain, where anti-Trotskyist agitation extends from the mass media's lurid headlines into the less than hallowed halls of academia. The struggle waged by the ICFI against what it called the post-Stalinist school of falsification has centred from 2003 on efforts to rebut a series of "pre-emptive" biographies of Trotsky by British historians Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Robert Service. These academic hatchet jobs—based on a "confluence of neo-Stalinist falsification and traditional Anglo-American anti-Communism"—sought to discredit Trotsky on the eve of new revolutionary convulsions. The full significance of this political work is now clear.

43. On the eve of the 100th anniversary of the October 1917 Russian

Revolution, the necessity for a socialist and international opposition to austerity, militarism and war, based on the mobilisation of the working class and youth, is posed once more. In the next period, the burning issue that must be clarified internationally is that of Trotsky and the movement he built to defend the programme of world socialist revolution against the monstrous nationalist betrayal by Stalinism. A key role will be played by making known the political work conducted by the ICFI, as represented by the four key works: *In Defence of Leon Trotsky*; *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished 20th Century*; *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique* and *A Quarter Century of War*. Every member of the SEP has a political responsibility to build the party's influence as broadly as possible. A premium must be placed on the building of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to ensure that the generation that will take forward the struggle for socialism takes its place within the ranks of the ICFI.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**