

Opening report to the Fifth National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US)

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This report was delivered by David North, the national chairperson of the Socialist Equality Party (US), to open the Fifth National Congress of the SEP, held July 22-27, 2018.

The Fifth Congress of the Socialist Equality Party is being held amidst the explosive interaction of political, economic and social processes.

International alliances among the imperialist powers, which have served as the foundation of world geopolitics since the end of World War II, are breaking down. Longtime allies are turning into enemies and building up their military forces. The contradiction between the interdependent character of the global economy and the capitalist nation-state system is leading inexorably to world war. The principal protagonist in this crisis is American imperialism, which ruthlessly deploys its superior military power to offset its long-term economic decline.

The xenophobic America-First rantings of Donald Trump are the crudest expression of the determination of the American ruling class to uphold the global hegemony of the United States. Despite the really vicious conflict among different factions that comprise the American oligarchy, it would be a grave political mistake to believe that there exist fundamental differences in the strategic objectives of Trump and his Democratic opponents and their allies in the intelligence agencies. There is certainly no tendency within these conflicting factions that represents the interests of the working class. Deciding who is “worse”—Trump or his Democratic Party opponents—is like being asked whether you prefer to be bitten by a cobra or strangled by a boa constrictor.

At one moment one may think that no one could be worse than Trump. But then, one watches Democratic Party Senator Mark Warner threaten war against Russia and House Democrats bellowing “USA, USA!” and, in comparison, Trump appears almost civilized. The only appropriate answer, therefore, is that suggested by Shakespeare: “A plague on both your parties!”

However bitter the differences over tactics, all sections of the US financial-corporate oligarchy agree on the strategic goal: the preservation of the global hegemony of the United States. Whether with NATO, or against it; whether through war in alliance with Germany against Russia, or in alliance with Russia against Germany; or whether through the application of economic pressure or military force against China, the United States will employ whatever means it considers necessary against whatever country it views as a threat to its interests. As Trotsky, with astonishing prescience, wrote in 1928: “*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.*” [1]

All the major powers are engaged in a frantic buildup of their military forces. The growth of militarism and the advanced state of preparations for war intensify the economic burdens on the working class and require ever-greater restrictions on traditional constitutional protections. The crisis of bourgeois-democratic forms of rule is apparent all over the world. The Egyptian counterrevolution of 2013 provided a brutal example of how the ruling elites will respond to a mass left-wing popular upsurge. Even if

compelled at one moment to buy time with concessions, the ruling classes will strike back savagely at the first opportunity. But, in any event, they have no intention of allowing the working class to gain the initiative. Right-wing political forces in every part of the world are growing in strength, a tendency the traditional mainstream capitalist parties welcome and encourage.

In Germany, the neo-Nazis of the *Alternative für Deutschland* have emerged as a significant political force. In 1949, in the desperate aftermath of World War II, the Reichstag became the Bundestag. The old building was refitted recently with a modernistic dome. But it sits atop a building whose deputies speak in an all-too-familiar political language that Hitler and Göring would have understood and approved of. And, in a tragic mockery of the victims of Nazism, the ultraright-wing government of Israel, which maintains close ties with fascist and anti-Semitic politicians and regimes throughout the world, has implemented the legal equivalent of a constitutional amendment that grants special and heightened legal status exclusively to Jewish people.

These are but two examples of a global tendency. Capitalist states are acquiring an authoritarian character and strengthening the repressive powers of the intelligence agencies and increasingly militarized police forces. Efforts to censor information on the Internet, and block access to socialist and anti-war websites, especially the WSWS, are being intensified. In London, which in the 19th century heyday of bourgeois democracy provided asylum to countless refugees fleeing persecution, Julian Assange remains a political prisoner, threatened with instant arrest if he ventures outside the Ecuadorian embassy. Millions of people throughout the world, made homeless by the ravages of imperialist wars and the consequences of extreme economic exploitation, are being stripped of their most minimal human rights and treated brutally. In the United States, children are torn from their parents and placed in detention centers.

The drive toward war and dictatorship was intensified by the Wall Street crash of 2008. The present global crisis is the outcome of the policies pursued by the ruling elites in response to the crash, which, notwithstanding the recovery of the stock exchanges, have solved none of the underlying contradictions that led to the breakdown a decade ago. As is increasingly evident, the methods employed by the financial oligarchy to contain the crisis, and enrich itself in the process, have only delayed the day of reckoning.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 set into motion a worldwide crisis that led to the international radicalization of the working class. But the political degeneration of the Soviet regime, and the betrayals of the working class in Europe by the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties, above all in Germany, France and Spain, guaranteed the victory of fascism and led, within 10 years, to the outbreak of World War II.

The United States was also the scene of massive social struggles. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which—as the pseudo-left prefers to forget—emerged in 1935 as an insurgency against the American

Federation of Labor (AFL), became the focal point of a movement of millions of workers. The American ruling class, far richer than its European counterparts, chose—though not without embittered opposition within its own ranks—to respond to the challenge of the American working class with the reform program of Roosevelt’s New Deal, rather than with the varieties of American-style fascism advanced by Huey Long, Henry Ford, Boss Frank Hague, Father Coughlin and Charles Lindbergh. But in return for the implementation of the reformist New Deal option, Franklin Delano Roosevelt demanded and received the unqualified support of the newly organized industrial trade union movement for the “war effort” of US imperialism.

Unlike the aftermath of 1929, the American ruling class, following the 2008 crash, did not advance a reform option. The Obama administration did not shake its fist at “the malefactors of great wealth” and threaten, as Roosevelt had, to “drive the money changers out of the temple.” Instead, Obama invited the representatives of the moneychangers into his government and made the malefactors of great wealth richer than ever. The government-orchestrated bailout of the banks completed a process that had been developing for several decades: the institutionalization of a political-economic system in which the stock exchanges, with the full support of the state, serve as the medium for the transfer of wealth, on a massive and unprecedented scale, to the corporate-financial oligarchy. This system of extreme parasitism reflects, in the final analysis, the global decline in the world position and productive power of American capitalism.

As the Socialist Equality Party warned in March 2009, just six weeks after Obama became president:

The policies of the Obama administration are determined entirely by the interests of the corporate and financial aristocracy. In this sense, those who compare Obama to Roosevelt are engaged in either public deception or self-delusion. Despite the gravity of the economic crisis, the immense economic resources of the United States in the 1930s still allowed Roosevelt to experiment with social reforms. That option no longer exists today. Contemporary capitalism lacks such resources. [2]

The Obama administration bailed out the rich. But in the process, it discredited the political system in the eyes of millions of working people. Obama’s promise of “change you can believe in” proved to be a cynical fraud. It prepared the way for the emergence of Trump, who—like Le Pen in France, Gauland in Germany and Salvini in Italy—employs right-wing populist demagoguery to exploit widespread anger over deteriorating living conditions.

The United States is now in the throes of its greatest political crisis since the end of the Civil War in 1865. It is difficult to think of any past historical experience to which the present situation can be compared. The “irrepressible conflict” that erupted in 1861 arose, in the final analysis, out of the powerful capitalist development of the United States. A dynamic, progressive and even revolutionary faction of the American bourgeoisie confronted the reactionary insurrection of slave owners. Nearly 160 years later, the present crisis is the product of the far-advanced decline in the global position of American capitalism and testifies to the degeneracy of all sections of the American ruling class. I repeat: There is no progressive tendency within any of the competing factions of the ruling capitalist-imperialist oligarchy.

As this conflict intensifies, the political legitimacy of all the institutions through which the American ruling class has exercised political power within the United States and asserted its dominant position throughout the world is being called into question. The conflict between hostile factions

at the highest levels of the state is on the verge of assuming an overtly violent character.

An unprecedented concentration of wealth in the richest five percent of the population, in the United States and all other major capitalist countries, underlies the growing social anger. The recent outbreak of strikes, especially in the United States, is the initial indication of a resurgence of class struggle. Under conditions of extreme social polarization, the working class is being radicalized and beginning to express interest in a socialist alternative to capitalism. Though still limited in its political understanding and objectives, the dynamic of this development will acquire an ever more explicitly anti-capitalist and revolutionary socialist orientation.

The organizations that once claimed to advance a progressive agenda have responded to this crisis by moving to the right, not the left. Led by executives who are paid annual salaries in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, the trade unions—better described as corporate workforce management syndicates—intensify their efforts to suppress, disperse and demoralize working-class opposition. The pseudo-left organizations—and in particular those that trace their political lineage to Shachtmanism and Pabloism—operate ever more openly as agents of the bourgeois parties and supporters of imperialism. Such forces as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party in Britain seek to deflect and suppress the growing social opposition among the masses. Their acquisition of political influence leads invariably to their integration into the state and their betrayal of the working class.

The rapid growth of the Democratic Socialists of America is the product primarily of the desire of politically inexperienced youth for an alternative to the Democratic Party. But the DSA has never been independent of the Democratic Party. It has been promoted by the *New York Times* and sections of the Democratic Party to preempt the development of a left-wing movement outside the orbit of bourgeois politics. Presently, the DSA is inflating like a balloon, but this expansion—sustained by nothing but hot air—will lead inevitably to political and organizational crisis. The most serious left-wing elements among the student youth who have been drawn to the DSA will learn that this organization is an appendage of the Democratic Party and is opposed to a struggle against capitalism.

Eclectic political improvisations and shabby opportunist maneuvering are a poor substitute for a scientifically grounded and historically informed Marxist program. Humanitarian appeals for a kinder and more considerate capitalism will not halt the inexorable drive toward dictatorship and war. The DSA, predictably, is celebrated in the media. But its hope of finding a solution to the crisis upon capitalist foundations, and with, no less, the approval of the Democratic Party, is politically and intellectually bankrupt. The “theoreticians” of the DSA—such as those who publish *Jacobin*—pride themselves on their indifference to the revolutionary experiences and lessons of the past century. But this combination of ignorance, smugness and cynicism leaves the DSA theoreticians totally incapable of understanding the present-day world.

The alternatives that confront the working class are not “Reform or Revolution,” but rather “Revolution or Counterrevolution.” Trotsky’s warning in the *Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, written on the very eve of World War II, resonates with even greater force in the present-day world: “Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.” [3]

An entire decade has passed since the Founding Congress of the Socialist Equality Party was held in 2008. Actually, the transformation of the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party had been decided upon and announced in June 1995. That decision was taken in response to the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991 and the political collapse of all the old traditional organizations—parties and trade unions—of the working class.

The efforts of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) had to be directed toward creating the parties that would organize and educate the working class, and create the foundations for the renewal of the conscious struggle for socialism.

In November 1991, only weeks before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the International Committee held a conference in Berlin at which it identified the essential historical implications of the irrevocable discrediting of Stalinism and its apologists:

This Berlin conference marks a new stage in the development of the Fourth International. The International Committee today constitutes the only bona fide world Trotskyist organization in the entire world. The International Committee is not merely a specific tendency within the Fourth International, but it *is* the Fourth International as such. Starting with this conference, the International Committee will assume leadership responsibilities for the work of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution. [4]

However protracted the objective historical process, the International Committee had to introduce the necessary changes in its political work. This objective imperative underlay the transformation of the leagues into parties. The “league” form of the sections of the International Committee was rooted in a lengthy historical period when the main tactical initiatives consisted of placing “demands” on the mass party and trade union organizations, whether led by the Social Democrats, Stalinists or even, as in the United States, supporters of the Democratic Party. This tactic did not imply any sort of adaptation to, let alone reconciliation with, reactionary leaderships. Rather, it was determined by the dominant role of these mass organizations in the active struggles of the workers, and their still very substantial influence among the most class-conscious and militant sections of the working class. The placing of socialist demands was seen as both necessary and unavoidable in overcoming the still considerable illusions of masses of workers in their leaders and organizations. The demand “Labor to power based on socialist policies” in Britain, “For a CP-CGT government” in France, and, in the United States, “For a Labor Party based on the trade unions” set out to awaken and counterpose the anti-capitalist aspirations of the working class to the class-collaborationism of the bureaucracies.

But the unbroken chain of betrayals by the old bureaucratic organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, and the dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, changed the relationship of these organizations to the working class, both in an objective and subjective sense. A failure to recognize this change carried with it the danger that a tactic that had been developed to overcome illusions in the old organizations would be transformed into a futile and self-defeating effort to sustain and even encourage such illusions.

The SEP recognized that this orientation would require new forms of work. This led to the launching, in the closest collaboration with the sections of the International Committee (which also transformed their leagues into parties) of the *World Socialist Web Site* in February 1998.

During the next ten years, the Socialist Equality Party made substantial advances, both politically and organizationally. After many years of very limited growth, the party began to attract and recruit new forces. Of course, this was connected to the political opposition generated by the stolen election of 2000, the launching of the War on Terror after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But the potential within the objective situation could be realized only to the extent that it was recognized and acted upon. The SEP’s political and organizational initiatives were of critical importance.

It is also necessary to emphasize the theoretical work undertaken by the party in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR. This work was necessarily concentrated on the clarification of history. As was explained at the Twelfth Plenum of the International Committee in March 1992:

We strive to develop the political consciousness of the proletariat on the basis of an assimilation of the entire history of the Russian Revolution. Right now, there is tremendous confusion in the working class. Its views are not based on a correct historical consciousness. This false consciousness is rooted in previous historical experiences through which masses have passed—experiences that it is not able to assimilate without the intervention of the party.

The great lies employed to disorient millions are that Stalinism is Marxism and that the collapse of the USSR proves the failure of socialism and Marxism. It is necessary to refute these lies and prove that Stalinism was the antithesis of Marxism, the product of the most terrible counterrevolution in history. [5]

Following the Twelfth Plenum, the International Committee launched the “Offensive against the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification,” in which our late comrade Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin played such an important and inspiring role. Between 1995 and 1998, the International Committee sponsored lectures given by Comrade Rogovin in the United States, Britain, Germany and Australia. A critical milestone in this theoretical work, which directly preceded the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site*, was the “summer school” held in Sydney under the auspices of the Australian section of the ICFI in early January 1998. The lectures given at that school were a summation of fundamental historical, political, philosophical and aesthetic issues upon which the cadre of the ICFI had been working throughout the 1990s.

The school included lectures that refuted the claim that there was no realistic alternative to Stalinism in the Soviet Union, applied Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution to a critique of Castroism and related forms of bourgeois nationalism, examined the contradictions of capitalism at the conclusion of the twentieth century, analyzed the relation of trade unions to the revolutionary struggle for socialism, and explained the place of art in the critique of capitalist society.

It must also be noted that Mehring Books published in 1998 *Art as the Cognition of Life*, a volume of the writings of the Left Oppositionist Alexander Voronsky, translated by Comrade Fred Williams. The publication and study of this volume, and, particularly, its critique of Freudianism, contributed immensely to the party’s appreciation of the chasm between Marxism and both the Frankfurt School and Post-Modernism. This clarification would prove to be of decisive importance in combating the pernicious theoretical influence and reactionary middle-class politics of the pseudo-left, centered on the elevation of individual ethnic, racial, gender and sexual identity above social class.

In August 2005, the SEP, in conjunction with the ICFI, sponsored a series of nine lectures on the subject of “Marxism, the October Revolution and the Historical Foundations of the Fourth International.” Less than six months later, in late January 2006, the Australian SEP sponsored a meeting of the International Editorial Board at which 13 reports were delivered. These reports provided an expansive overview, from a Marxist standpoint, of the world political situation.

In May 2006, a detailed critique of Professor Rockmore’s attack on Engels and philosophical materialism was published. One month later, in June 2006, I sent a lengthy letter, bearing the title “Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness,” to Steiner and Brenner. Its primary purpose was not to convince them of the errors of their ways, but to further clarify the

essential connection between the defense of materialism against all forms of subjective idealist irrationalism and the building of the revolutionary party of and in the working class.

In May 2007, the *World Socialist Web Site* published its detailed refutation of the slanderous anti-Trotsky biographies written by the British academics Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain. All the aforementioned work was carried out alongside the daily publication of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The purpose of recalling this work, carried out in advance of the founding congress of the Socialist Equality Party, is to emphasize the critical connection between theoretical, political and organizational work. The experience of the ICFI and SEP in the period between 1995 and 2008 demonstrated the essential truth that major political and organizational advances require sustained theoretical preparation. Lenin was correct: “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.”

By 2008 there had clearly been sufficient preparatory work to justify the holding of an official founding congress. To be perfectly frank, it could probably have been held several years earlier. However, by 2008 there was a very strong consensus within the party leadership that the holding of a founding congress—at which the political program and organizational rules would be formally adopted—could no longer be delayed. The basis of the consensus was our appraisal of the developing economic crisis and its political implications. On January 11, 2008, the WSWS published the text of the report that I had given a week earlier at a national aggregate of the SEP, held in Ann Arbor. The report began:

2008 will be characterized by a significant intensification of the economic and political crisis of the world capitalist system. The turbulence in world financial markets is the expression of not merely a conjunctural downturn, but rather a profound systemic disorder which is already destabilizing international politics.

The report continued:

The bursting of the housing market bubble in the United States, which had been fueled by uncontrolled speculative investments in sub-prime mortgages, has resulted in global losses of hundreds of billions of dollars for international banks and other financial institutions. The murky alphabet soup of financial instruments—i.e., SIVs (structured investment vehicles), CDOs (collateralized debt obligations), etc.—had been devised to “securitize” sub-prime mortgages, conceal their dubious character, and spread risk among a large number of institutions. The result is an international financial crisis which, in the words of one analyst, has called into question the viability and legitimacy of the Anglo-American system of capitalism.

This analysis led to the following conclusions: First, the United States and the world were on the brink of the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s. Second, this crisis would lead to an upsurge of class struggle. Third, the intensification of class struggle would radicalize the working class, revive interest in socialism and Marxism, and create unprecedented opportunities for winning the most advanced sections of the working class to the program of the International Committee, to Trotskyism.

The Founding Congress opened on August 3, 2008. The delegates adopted a party constitution, a statement of principles and the main congress document, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*. In its opening section, this document explained

the place of history in the work of the SEP:

Revolutionary socialist strategy can develop only on the basis of the lessons of past struggles. Above all, the education of socialists must be directed toward developing a detailed knowledge of the history of the Fourth International. The development of Marxism as the theoretical and political spearhead of socialist revolution has found its most advanced expression in the struggles waged by the Fourth International, since its founding in 1938, against Stalinism, reformism, the Pabloite revisions of Trotskyism and all other forms of political opportunism.

Political agreement within the party on essential issues of program and tasks cannot be achieved without a common evaluation of the historical experiences of the 20th century and their central strategic lessons. Rosa Luxemburg once described history as the “Via Dolorosa” of the working class. Only to the extent that the working class learns from history—the lessons of not only its victories but also its defeats—can it be prepared for the demands of a new period of revolutionary struggle. [6]

The Founding Congress concluded on Saturday, August 9. Exactly five weeks and two days later, September 15, 2008, Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy and the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 504 points. Strenuous efforts to stabilize the markets temporarily halted the precipitous fall in share prices. But on September 29, the bottom fell out of the market, heralding the worst recession since the 1930s. In the months that followed, Congress doubled the national debt and the Federal Reserve committed hundreds of billions of dollars to bail out Wall Street investors. The market began a spectacular recovery after reaching its post-crash low in March 2009. The burden of the crisis was shifted over entirely to the working class, in the form of home foreclosures, savage wage cuts, the destruction of millions of jobs, and the slashing of spending on social programs.

To what extent have the events of the past decade confirmed the prognosis made by the SEP at the beginning of 2008? The party’s anticipation of a massive economic crisis was, without question, fully realized. The upsurge in the class struggle, though it has developed more slowly than in the 1930s, is clearly under way. The slower pace of its development is to be explained by several historically conditioned factors, above all, the long-term impact of the past betrayals of Stalinism and Social Democracy on the political consciousness of the working class. For decades Stalinism falsified history, carried out monstrous crimes, presented to the world a perverted and corrupt distortion of Marxism, and alienated the working class from socialism. Finally, the rapid dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 led to a deep-rooted pessimism about the very possibility of an alternative to capitalism.

The decline in class-consciousness, particularly after 1991, reflected a broader cultural and intellectual degeneration of bourgeois society. In its war against Marxism, the ruling class gained a Pyrrhic victory, for it was left with a barren intellectual environment, bereft of significant ideas and perspective, incapable of inspiring serious cultural work, and dependent on the services of the cynical and cowardly post-modernist pseudo-intelligentsia of the universities.

All the worst features of this social milieu—endless self-absorption, obsession with personal wealth and status, elevation of personal concerns over social responsibility, indifference toward democratic rights, and a deep-rooted hostility to the working class—find their expression in identity politics. This politically and intellectually reactionary environment—in which historical, progressive social and democratic consciousness is

suppressed—has been a significant factor in retarding the development of the class struggle.

The cultural and intellectual factors are exacerbated by the corporatist trade unions in the physical suppression of every effort of the working class to defend itself and fight back against capitalist exploitation. The immense resources controlled by the bureaucracy—allied with the corporations and the state—have been ruthlessly deployed over the past 30 years to prevent strikes, the most elemental form of working-class struggle.

But the recent wave of strikes carried out by rank-and-file teachers without official authorization marks the beginning of a rebellion against the unions. There is a rising tide of class struggle, and, as anticipated by the SEP in 2008, this is accompanied by a renewal of class-consciousness and interest in socialism. It is with the challenges—theoretical, political and organizational—arising from the upsurge of class struggle and the radicalization of working-class consciousness that the perspectives resolution—*The Resurgence of Class Struggle and the Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party*—is principally concerned.

The International Committee and the Socialist Equality Party view the present situation realistically and with optimism. The two elements do not contradict one another. Both are essential components of a revolutionary perspective. If, as the draft perspective states, pessimism is “the most shortsighted and useless form of ahistorical subjectivism,” optimism is grounded in an understanding of the historical laws that find expression, in however complex and contradictory a manner, in the workings of human society. Optimism, it must be stressed, is not a matter of hoping for the best and expecting, like Mr. Micawber, that “something will turn up.” We are materialists, and therefore understand that we play a significant role in determining the outcome of events. As the draft perspective states:

Within this historical situation, the revolutionary party is itself an immense factor in determining the outcome of the objective crisis. An evaluation of the objective situation and realistic appraisal of political possibilities that excludes the impact of the revolutionary party is utterly alien to Marxism. The Marxist revolutionary party does not merely comment on events, it participates in the events that it analyzes, and, through its leadership in the struggle for workers’ power and socialism, strives to change the world.

The paragraph that I have quoted introduces the section of the document titled “Eighty years of the Fourth International.” There is much in the perspective resolution that is new. It represents a significant development in the party’s understanding of the political situation and reflects and draws upon the experience of the party’s active participation, within the United States and internationally, in major political and social struggles. Moreover, the document clarifies the relationship between the objective development of the class struggle and the activity of the party and identifies precisely the political and practical initiatives that must be undertaken by the party following the conclusion of this congress.

But I believe that the sections of the draft that deal with the history of the Fourth International represent the theoretical and political core of the document. This section of the draft perspective summarizes concisely the historical experience, program and principles upon which the work of the Socialist Equality Party is based.

The attention that our party gives to anniversaries is not an expression of an academic interest in history, a formal acknowledgment of a political lineage, or, least of all, a sort of sentimental remembrance of things past. Rather, anniversaries are an occasion for reexamining the critical experiences through which the working class and the revolutionary movement have passed in the light of existing conditions. The working

through of past experiences has always been, for Marxists, an essential preparation for future struggles.

The most critical chapter in Trotsky’s *Results and Prospects*, which formed the basis for the elaboration of the theory of permanent revolution, is titled “1789-1848-1905.” This historical review of the evolution of the bourgeois revolution over a period spanning nearly 120 years led Trotsky to a profound insight into the new role of the working class in the struggle against autocracy, with far-reaching implications for Marxist revolutionary strategy in the twentieth century in Russia and throughout the world. Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, written in the summer of 1917, consisted primarily of a detailed examination of the writings of Marx and Engels on the Paris Commune of 1871. The conclusions drawn by Lenin from this review formed the theoretical foundation of the struggle that he waged, in September and October 1917, to win support within the Bolshevik Party for the seizure of power.

The International Committee and its sections introduce into the struggles of the working class not only slogans and a set of demands. These are of considerable importance, but they are insufficient for the education of the working class and the raising of its political consciousness to the level necessary for the carrying out of the socialist revolution. To comprehend the crisis and the tasks with which it is confronted, the working class must understand the nature of the historical epoch in which it lives and fights.

Moreover, for the development of revolutionary strategy and the appropriate tactics, the working class must acquire a sufficient level of knowledge of the major political events and revolutionary struggles of the past century. Finally, for the working class to evaluate the organizations and tendencies that claim to represent its interests, it must know their history, their political lineage, and the role they have played in past struggles.

The International Committee of the Fourth International embodies a vast historical experience. Its continuous study of history, the assimilation of its lessons, and the role of historical knowledge in the formulation of program and direction of practice demarcates the ICFI from every other political organization and tendency that claims to be socialist.

The draft perspective states:

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International in September 1938. For sixty-five of the eighty years of its existence, the work of the Fourth International has been developed under the leadership of the International Committee. From the vantage point of 2018, there is no question but that the historical analysis, principles, and program upon which the Fourth International was founded in 1938, and which were upheld in the issuing of the Open Letter that established the International Committee in 1953, have been vindicated by the entire course of historical development.

Trotsky’s writings retain extraordinary relevance because the political issues with which he grappled remain, in an objective sense, those of the present historical period. Moreover, the program and principles for which he fought have been continuously developed in the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The history of Trotskyism has as its essential content a continuous and intense relationship with the struggles of its time. The history of the Fourth International records the conscious response of the most advanced section of the working class to political issues and conflicts arising from the crisis of the world capitalist system and its reflection in the class struggle and the consciousness of the working class.

The International Committee is able to give a detailed account of its history. It can not only provide a record of what happened, but also an

explanation of the underlying social and political causes of the major political conflicts, the significance of the political differences that arose within the Fourth International, and their relationship to objective social processes and political conflicts involving and affecting millions of people.

In the preface to the new edition of *The Heritage We Defend*, I call attention to the efforts of historians Daniel Gaido and Velia Luparello to glorify the Morrow-Goldman faction as the heroic leaders of an opposition within the SWP that was cruelly victimized by James P. Cannon. Gaido and Luparello go so far as to declare that the victory of the Cannon faction doomed the Fourth International to impotence. On this basis, the entire post-Morrow-Goldman history of the SWP, and that of the International Committee, is dismissed as more or less meaningless. They write:

If this analysis is correct, then the crisis of the Fourth International began, not as often argued, with the controversy sparked off by Michel Pablo's "deep entrism" tactics in 1953, but ten years earlier, due to the SWP leadership's inability to adapt its tactics to the new situation that developed in Europe as a result of the fall of Mussolini, and the consequent adoption of a policy of democratic counterrevolution by the capitalist classes of Western Europe and by US imperialism. [7]

Gaido and Luparello note in passing that Morrow and Goldman favored the reunification of the SWP with the Workers Party formed by Max Shachtman after the petty-bourgeois minority split from the SWP in 1940. They also refer cryptically, without elaboration, to the "inglorious end" of the Morrow-Goldman tendency. They fail to explain that the "inglorious end" consisted of the passage of Morrow and Goldman, along with their ally Jean Van Heijenoort, into the camp of pro-imperialist anticommunism. Nor do they discuss the political evolution of Max Shachtman and his Workers' Party. This is a matter of not merely antiquarian and academic interest, inasmuch as the spirit and politics of Shachtman live on in the politics of the International Socialist Organization, the Democratic Socialists of America and, we must add, much of the contemporary neo-Conservative movement.

In 1953, Shachtman wrote an essay that was published in *Labor Action*, the newspaper of the Workers Party. It began:

The foreign policy of the United States is a disaster. It was that under the late Roosevelt's War Deal, it remained that during Truman's Fair Deal, and it has got worse in the first 100 days of the Eisenhower administration.

Shachtman continued:

In the course of the Second World War, the Stalinists succeeded in conquering and consolidating their totalitarian power in a dozen countries of Europe and Asia. It is hard to recall another example in history of the establishment of an empire of comparable dimensions and significance at such speed, with so little resistance, and at such low cost, hardly a shot being fired. All this changed the face of the earth, perhaps more radically than in any comparable period of history.

And yet: the leaders and statesmen of all the capitalist powers, including the mighty US, stood by, helpless to prevent these

Stalinist victories, unable to do more than lift a finger to tear out their own hair. There is nothing in our lifetime to equal this.

And yet: the truth is that the more-or-less responsible reactionaries have no alternative to the foreign policy of yesterday. That policy is today what it was under Roosevelt and Truman—a policy of imperialism as adapted to the particular position and needs of American imperialism.

Whoever tries to apply an imperialist policy in the world today, where the outstanding common characteristic is hatred of imperialism and determination to be rid of it, is bound to reap disaster and nothing else. And this holds true even if the policy is directed against Stalinism, which is itself the most despotic and imperialistic power in the world.

Because there is no practical reactionary alternative to the present Washington policy, it does not follow that the fight against Stalinism is hopeless. There is an alternative to the Eisenhower-Truman-Roosevelt policy.

Its name is: a democratic foreign policy.

In reality, Shachtman was proposing nothing other than providing American imperialism with a new ad campaign, in which the headquarters of the State Department and the CIA would be given a fresh coat of paint, and the old signposts that bore the insignia of imperialism would be replaced with new ones with the insignia of democracy.

Shachtman had yet another proposal. For the democratic repackaging of US imperialism to be taken seriously overseas, this campaign would have to involve and use the resources of the American trade unions, presenting themselves as the apostles of a free and independent labor movement. As Shachtman proclaimed at the conclusion of his essay:

There is a great chance—but only if the American labor movement, starting with its most progressive elements, takes responsibility for it in its own voice—the voice of the most powerful movement on earth today—and with that voice pledges labor's unremitting dedication to the foreign policy of democracy.

The AFL, which was soon to merge with the CIO, answered Shachtman's call and dedicated massive resources to the implementation of "the foreign policy of democracy." Shachtman and his protégés like Tom Kahn became influential advisers of George Meany, the reactionary president of the newly unified AFL-CIO. Shachtman himself provided telling examples of his commitment to a "foreign policy of democracy" by supporting the Bay of Pigs invasion, which he hailed as the action of militant Cuban trade unionists, and the US invasion of Vietnam. Another cause championed by Shachtman with considerable zeal, in the name of the fight for democratic self-determination, was the liberation of Ukraine from Soviet imperialism.

The foreign policy of the ISO is the contemporary incarnation of Shachtman's "foreign policy of democracy," and it finds its most pernicious application in its campaign for the intervention of US imperialism in Syria.

As explained in the preface to the new edition of *The Heritage We Defend*, only the International Committee is able to identify "the objective social and political processes—arising from the contradictions of world capitalism and the global and national development of the class struggle during and in the aftermath of the second imperialist world war—that underlay the conflicts within the Fourth International."

Looking back over a period of eighty years, it is possible to understand the objective historical significance of all the critical episodes in the

history of the Fourth International: The fight against the petty-bourgeois minority in the Socialist Workers Party in 1940, the rejection of the right-wing social democratic program of Morrow-Goldman in 1946, the issuing of the Open Letter and the founding of the International Committee in 1953, the International Committee's rejection of reunification with the Pabloites in 1963, the opposition that developed within the Workers League between 1982 and 1985 to the opportunism of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, culminating in the International Committee's suspension of the WRP on December 16, 1985 and the final split in February 1986. In each of these critical episodes, the fate of the Trotskyist movement—that is, the survival of the conscious struggle for world socialism—was at stake.

The development of the world crisis and the political evolution of all the tendencies that opposed and sought to revise the strategic conceptions of Trotskyism have vindicated the struggles waged by the Fourth International, which has been led by the International Committee for sixty-five of the eighty years of its existence.

Shachtman's claim that the Soviet bureaucracy represented a new class was decisively refuted by the events of 1989-91. Never in history had a class voluntarily dissolved its state and accepted the destruction of the property forms that formed the basis of its wealth and social identity. As for Pabloism, its attribution of a revolutionary role to the Stalinist bureaucracy—in which socialism would be realized in the form of "deformed workers' states" that would last for centuries—was likewise refuted by the self-dissolution of the Stalinist regimes.

Historical events have vindicated the principles and program of the Fourth International. A vast experience of political struggle, spanning eighty years, is concentrated in the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party. The cadre of this movement are now called upon to consciously utilize this experience in the developing class struggle and win the most class-conscious and militant workers and youth to the program of world socialist revolution.

Notes:

[1] *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder, 2002), p. 29

[2] David North, *The Economic Crisis and the Return of History* (Oak Park: Mehring, 2012) p. 27

[3] *Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years (1933-40)*, New York: Pathfinder, 1973, p. 181

[4] David North, "A Historic Victory for the Working Class and the Fourth International," Report to the World Conference of Workers Against Imperialist War and Colonialism, November 16, 1991, in *The Fourth International*, Volume 19, No. 1, p. 13

[5] David North, "After the demise of the USSR: The Struggle for Marxism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," Report to the Twelfth Plenum of the ICFI, March 11, 1992, in *The Fourth International*, Volume 19, Number 1, p. 75

[6] *The Historical & International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party* (Oak Park: Mehring, 2008), p. 2

[7] Daniel Gaido and Velia Luparello, "Strategy and Tactics in a Revolutionary Period: U.S. Trotskyism and the European Revolution, 1943-1946" in *Science & Society*, Vol. 78, No. 4, October 2014



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