

“History never teaches anyone anything”

Russian neo-Stalinist defends Partido Obrero’s “refounding” of Fourth International

Bill Van Auken
24 September 2018

More than three months have passed since the *World Socialist Web Site* published an exposure of the conference held last April in Buenos Aires in the name of the “Committee to Refound the Fourth International,” which advanced the reactionary conception that the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938, could be “refounded” in alliance with nationalist, neo-Stalinist organizations in Russia.

The Workers Party (Partido Obrero, PO) invited a leader of one of these groups, Darya Mitina, the secretary of international relations of the United Communist Party of Russia (OKP), to deliver one of the main speeches to a rally held at the close of the conference. The PO’s longtime leader, Jorge Altamira, praised her as a “comrade who speaks in the name of communism in Russia, which for her would be Stalinism.” Cynically rejecting the building of the world socialist movement on the basis of Trotskyist principles, Altamira declared that seeking unity with Stalinists was far superior than attempting to build a “do it yourself” International.”

Mitina is a Stalinist who views the late dictator as a man without equal in history and goes twice a year to lay flowers at his tomb. She travels the world as a political agent of the government of Vladimir Putin. Seeking to garner international support for Russian foreign policy, Mitina meets not only with Stalinist and Maoist organizations, but also with parties that claim an association with Trotskyism. Mitina adjusts her rhetoric according to the political sensibilities of her audience. When appearing before military forces in Eastern Ukraine, Mitina speaks as a defender of Russian nationalism. When addressing the members of organizations that claim to be left, she skillfully dresses up Putin’s foreign policy as a form of anti-imperialism.

The WSWS’ exposure of the political significance of the relationship between Altamira and Mitina raised concerns among rank-and-file members of the Partido Obrero. Unable to provide a principled explanation of its association with Mitina, the Partido Obrero has published not another word about its April conference to “refound” the Fourth International in alliance with Russian neo-Stalinist nationalism. It has removed all postings and questions on its websites relating to these matters.

The only effort to explain and justify the PO’s actions has come in the form of a statement posted on Mitina’s blog, written by her husband and political partner, Said Gafurov.

Gafurov has the closest ties to the Russian state. In a 2014 interview with *IA Regnum*, a pro-Kremlin information agency, he was introduced as a “political scientist, economist, scientific head of the Institute of Applied Studies of the East and Iran, advisor to the president of the Russian Federation.” The precise nature of his present relationship with Putin is

unclear. Gafurov has held posts in various state ministries, and he has served as the deputy chief editor of a Russian monthly economic journal known for its strong support for Putin. He is a commentator for the pro-Putin *pravda.ru.*, where he writes columns and makes broadcasts promoting Russia’s geo-strategic interests.

Gafurov’s statement, posted by Mitina on June 27, defended her attendance at the conference in Argentina, describing the Partido Obrero as a party that “is very successful in parliament” (it holds a single seat in the 329-member body) and boasting that his wife was “a real star, thousands of delegates applauded her at a mass meeting.”

He dismisses the exposures published by the WSWS as “angry, but unintelligible” and goes on to claim that the initial article “accused comrade Mitina personally of ‘rivers of blood’ and the Stalinist purges (I too was accused of those three terrible crimes, but together with cde. Mitina, -- of ‘rivers of blood’, the Stalinist purges, and of the fact that I’m married to a bloodstained ... Stalinist).”

The reference made in the *World Socialist Web Site* article was to Trotsky’s statement, written in 1937, that Stalin’s Great Purge, launched the year before, had drawn “between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood.”

For Gafurov, the “river of blood,” i.e., the political genocide carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy in which hundreds of thousands of communists, including the entire leadership of the October 1917 Revolution, were liquidated, along with the Soviet intelligentsia and nearly the entire command of the Red Army—crimes that led to the deaths of millions—is a subject for levity and of no current political relevance.

His statement posted on Mitina’s blog declares that “the differences and contradictions between Trotskyism and Stalinism have only a historical, not a political character...” He continues: “They are important to study but only for the sake of historical lessons (and history, to be honest and slightly cynical, never teaches anyone anything.)”

Gafurov’s contempt for history is entirely in line with the attitude of Russia’s ruling oligarchy, which has absolutely no interest in any inquiries into its own historical origins, which lie in the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy, culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the criminal looting of state property.

His claim that history has erased the “differences and contradictions” between Trotskyism and Stalinism is clearly disingenuous. His wife Mitina, after all, is laying her wreaths at Stalin’s tomb, not outside Moscow’s old Lubyanka prison, in whose cellars so many of those who led the October 1917 Revolution were shot to death.

To prove the “irrelevance” of the struggle of Trotskyism against Stalinism, Gafurov refers to such questions as “the Kulaks and the

peasantry,” “the pace of Bolshevik industrialization” and “inner-party democracy.”

What he ignores is the essential character of Stalinism as a vicious bureaucratic nationalist reaction against the October 1917 Revolution. In the anti-Marxist program of “socialism in one country,” Stalinism represented the explicit repudiation of the socialist internationalist perspective that guided the October Revolution, summed up in Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which insisted on the primacy of the perspective of world socialist revolution in the determination of national policy.

Stalinist nationalism—which had its social base in the growing bureaucratic elite—separated the fate of the Soviet Union from the fight for world socialism, turning the Communist Parties throughout the world into mere instruments of the Soviet Union’s counterrevolutionary foreign policy and leading to the betrayal of revolutions and catastrophic defeats for the working class in Spain, Germany and many other countries.

Anyone who believes that a revolutionary party can be built in the working class without understanding this history and the role of Stalinism—as well as the revolutionary alternative that existed to it, in the Left Opposition and the Fourth International—is delusional.

Outside this history of the crimes of Stalinism, it is impossible to understand the absence of mass revolutionary socialist parties today and set about to resolve the acute crisis of revolutionary leadership within the working class.

But then, this is not the aim of Gafurov and Mitina and the party that they represent. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR and the liquidation of the socialized property forms established by the October Revolution upon which the bureaucracy had rested, what is Stalinism today?

On the one hand, it is Putinism, the rule of the KGB adapted to the interests of a ruling clique of billionaires.

On the other hand, it is the various factions of the Russian Communist Party, which are only a variant of Russian nationalism, prepared to align themselves with the most right-wing forces. When they hold their demonstrations in Moscow, placards bearing the face of Stalin are carried alongside banners waved by fascists emblazoned with swastikas.

There is an unmistakable logic to the repudiation of history and such political alliances. Gafurov argues that “three generations have already passed since the ‘river of blood.’”

One might ask: How many generations have passed since the death of Adolf Hitler and the closing of Auschwitz? By this logic, agreements can be made on the basis of practical political aims with neo-Nazis in Europe and elsewhere. And, indeed, as the political itinerary of Darya Mitina has made clear, such alliances are being actively pursued in the interests of the Putin government’s foreign policy.

As the WSWS revealed, Mitina, working with the Izborsky Club, a far-right Russian “think tank,” was an active participant in a 2014 conference in Yalta that gathered leaders of neo-Nazi and fascist parties from throughout Europe.

Using the same logic advanced by Gafurov, one might also ask: How many years have passed since the crimes of Pinochet and Videla and since the Argentine Navy’s Higher School of Mechanics (ESMA) was turned from a torture and extermination center into a museum? How many years have gone by since Peronist trade union officials, some of them still in the leadership of the unions, organized the first death squads in the Triple A (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance) to murder left-wing activists and militant workers? Is that history, too, irrelevant, and can practical agreements be forged with such elements today?

In Argentina, as in Russia, the approach to history advanced by Gafurov as well as the so-called Committee to Refound the Fourth International lays the foundations for a Red-Brown coalition, uniting pseudo-left organizations with far-right factions under the auspices of the bourgeoisie.

The alliance of the Partido Obrero with Russian Stalinism—and through it with the Putin government—says more about this party’s politics than any of the opportunist national tactics it advances in pursuit of parliamentary posts and positions in the trade unions.

Altamira and the CRFI share the reactionary, anti-Marxist attitude toward history advanced by Gafurov. As the WSWS previously pointed out, “The CRFI was founded on the ‘principle’ that there was to be no discussion of past differences or the historical development of the various tendencies that adhered to it.”

In his speech to the April conference that was also addressed by the Russian Stalinist Mitina, Altamira advanced this same essential perspective, with his rejection of “building a ‘do it yourself international’” and the proposal to “refound” the international in alliance with Russian Stalinism.

As the WSWS stated, “With these words, Altamira repudiates not only the historically rooted program and principles of the Fourth International, but the significance of history itself. What he is saying amounts to a declaration that what happened in the past is of no significance for the present. That the Stalinist regime murdered hundreds of thousands of communists, presided over countless betrayals and led ultimately to the destruction of the Soviet Union should not stand in the way of collaborating with present-day Stalinists in the reconstruction of the Fourth International.”

While Altamira and the Partido Obrero have made no further mention of their relations with the Russian Stalinists invited to help “refound” the Fourth International, the PO leader did provide a glowing report of a conference held in Athens in July under the auspices of the “Christian Rakovsky Balkan Socialist Center,” with what Altamira refers to as the “support of the Committee to Refound the Fourth International (CRFI).”

While not mentioned in the report published in the PO’s *Prensa Obrera*, Darya Mitina and Said Gafurov were active participants in the conference. Altamira notes that two organizations from Russia were present: Mitina’s OKP and the RPK (Russian Party of Communists), another neo-Stalinist group that emerged out of the breakup of the CPSU following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In a July 23 posting on her blog, Mitina notes that “Yesterday evening the presidium of the conference, consisting of Greek, Turkish, Argentine and Russian comrades, sat until 2 in the morning.”

The Greek, Turkish and Argentine “comrades” consist of the three sections of the Committee to Refound the Fourth International (together with the PO’s satellite party in Uruguay) which organized the April CRFI conference in Buenos Aires. That the Russian neo-Stalinists participate alongside these parties in the leadership of the conference in Greece is an indication of the close alliance forged by Altamira with these elements. The slogan “Building the International” was featured on a banner placed prominently at the conference. Clearly, this “international” is being forged in an alliance with right-wing Stalinists allied with the Putin regime.

In a video posted subsequently on her blog, Mitina offered a revealing assessment of the conference in Greece. She dismissed the supposed task of “refounding the Fourth International,” declaring there had been a debate over the problem of the “internationals... which ones to (re)construct, and what number they should have. Some call themselves Fourth, some Fifth International. I feel like this is not a very important question.”

What Mitina did find of importance—and was unquestionably her main reason for attending—was that the majority of the attendees at the conference “evaluate Russia’s role correctly, i.e., dialectically.”

“On the one hand,” she continued, “everyone understands perfectly well that Russia is not the Soviet Union... but at the same time, people don’t demonize Russia, and show class solidarity, and don’t confuse Putin with the country as a whole... They support the Russian population against Putin, but also support Putin on the international arena, in the cases in

which he, in fact, deserves support...”

The Christian Rakovsky Balkan Socialist Center is a political front for the Greek EEK (Workers Revolutionary Party) of Savas Michael-Matsas, serving as a means of making relations with various pseudo-left, Stalinist and nationalist elements. It likewise is of interest to elements like Mitina and Gafurov who are looking to secure alliances with both right-wing and pseudo-left organizations in furtherance of the foreign policy interests of the Kremlin.

The two political constants in the activities of Michael-Matsas, over a period of several decades, have been nationalist provincialism and the most vulgar political opportunism. His relations with Stalinist organizations predate his break with the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1985 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In the 1985 struggle conducted by the International Committee against the opportunist politics of the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain, Savas Michael-Matsas aligned himself with the Healy faction. He refused to attend the meetings of the International Committee that examined Healy’s abuse of authority and corrupt relations with various bourgeois national regimes in the Middle East. Michael-Matsas withheld critical information from the members of his own organization relating not only to Healy’s unprincipled conduct, but also to his own dealings with bourgeois and Stalinist regimes hostile to the working class.

In the immediate wake of his unprincipled split with the International Committee, Michael-Matsas oriented his newly founded EEK to political alliances with Greek Stalinism, elements of the bourgeois party PASOK and the trade union bureaucracy. Internationally, he followed a line of supporting Mikhail Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies for capitalist restoration, portraying them as the advent of the political revolution fought for by Trotsky.

As David North, then national secretary of the Workers League, the predecessor organization to the Socialist Equality Party in the US, wrote in a 1989 article *The Demise of Savas Michael’s “New Era”*:

From 1987 on, *Socialist Challenge*, the newspaper of the WRP [EEK] became the local Athens house-organ of the Gorbachev bureaucracy. There is ample reason to believe that Michael’s services to the Gorbachev regime were financially rewarded. Similar propaganda services rendered by *Socialist Challenge* to Middle Eastern regimes and bourgeois nationalist movements had previously been offered by Michael in exchange for special subsidies of which rank-and-file members were not informed. Indeed, in one of his own documents, Healy noted in passing that Michael has “close contact with the Libyans, the Soviet Embassy, the CP and the PLO.”

This is the politically corrupt figure who serves as the middle man in the political alliance between the Partido Obrero and Russian Stalinism. Such connections should be a cause for alarm for anyone, including among the members of the PO, seeking to wage a fight for Trotskyism in Argentina and throughout Latin America.

A political footnote to this rotten alliance between Savas Michael-Matsas, Jorge Altamira and the agents of influence of the Putin government is to be found in the role of Alex Steiner, whose “permanent-revolution” blog site is dedicated to hysterical denunciations of the International Committee, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.

Whether Steiner, who quit the Fourth International 40 years ago and has since developed into a virulent anti-Trotskyist, was in attendance at the July conference in Greece is unknown. He was present at a similar gathering in 2015, the “Third Euro-Mediterranean Conference,” likewise

organized by the Christian Rakovsky center and the CRFI. There, he most certainly rubbed shoulders with Darya Mitina, who was also present. He has remained conspicuously silent on the International Committee’s exposure of the relationship of Savas Michael-Matsas with Darya Mitina.

As is characteristic of middle-class pseudo-leftism, fueled by a combination of unrestrained subjectivism and a total absence of principles, Steiner’s positions contain the most glaring contradictions. In 2014, he vehemently denounced the International Committee for opposing the US-sponsored coup in Kiev and for refusing to label Russia an imperialist power. He slandered the *World Socialist Web Site* by claiming it had “consistently adapted itself to the maneuvers of Russia in relation to the Ukraine.”

Yet Steiner and his sidekick, Frank Brenner, have no problem allying themselves with Savas Michael-Matsas and his Russian associates, Mitina and Gafurov. While Gafurov was an advisor to Putin during the period of the Ukrainian coup, Mitina was herself in 2014 the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Donetsk People’s Republic in Moscow, working intimately with right-wing Russian nationalists and the Putin regime.

Steiner has recently declared the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party in the US “enemies of the working class” for their refusal to provide unconditional support for the compulsory diversion by state authorities of public workers’ wages to the bureaucratic managers of the corporatist trade unions.

Steiner has no qualms, however, about collaborating with those who lay wreaths at Stalin’s grave and justify the Stalinist bureaucracy’s assassination of Trotsky, virtually the entire leadership of Lenin’s Central Committee, the entire generation that led the October Revolution and hundreds of thousands of dedicated communist workers and intellectuals.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact