Eighty Years of the Fourth International: The Lessons of History and the Struggle for Socialism Today

David North
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On October 7, David North, International Editorial Board chairman of the World Socialist Web Site, *delivered the following lecture to a well-attended public meeting in Colombo, organised by the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka). The meeting, the second of two held in Sri Lanka, was called to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the Fourth International and the 50th anniversary of the SEP in Sri Lanka.*

It is a pleasure and an honor to have the opportunity to lecture in Sri Lanka on the history of the Fourth International. The heroic role played by Ceylonese revolutionary socialists in the early years of the Fourth International is well known by Trotskyists throughout the world. In the face of immense difficulties, the pioneer Trotskyists who founded the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in 1935, and later, in 1942, the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India, opposed the political agents of imperialism in the Indian and Ceylonese national bourgeoisie. Their political perspective was based on the theory of permanent revolution, which had been elaborated by Leon Trotsky in the first decade of the twentieth century, and which provided the political strategy that guided the Russian working class to victory in 1917.

In 1939, Trotsky addressed a letter to the workers of India. With his characteristic grasp of history and the dynamic of the class struggle, Trotsky summed up the essential strategical issues that confronted the masses of the Indian sub-continent:

> The Indian bourgeoisie is incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle. They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromises with British imperialism no matter what the price and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. The leader and prophet of this bourgeoisie is Gandhi. A fake leader and a false prophet!

Trotsky denounced the treacherous role played by the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, which demanded, under the banner of the so-called "People's Front," the subordination of the working class to the national bourgeoisie. He wrote:

> What a mockery of the people! "People's Front" is only a new name for that old policy, the gist of which lies in class collaboration, in a coalition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In every such coalition, the leadership invariably turns out to be in the hands of the right wing, that is, in the hands of the propertied class. The Indian bourgeoisie, as has already been stated, wants a peaceful horse trade and not a struggle. Coalition with the bourgeoisie leads to the proletariat's abnegating the revolutionary struggle against imperialism. The policy of coalition implies marking time on one spot, temporizing, cherishing false hopes, engaging in hollow maneuvers and intrigues. As a result of this policy disillusionment inevitably sets in among the working masses, while the peasants turn their backs on the proletariat, and fall into apathy.

The founders of the LSSP heeded this warning, opposed the national bourgeoisie, and created a powerful revolutionary party of the working class in Ceylon. But in 1964, with tragic consequences, the LSSP turned its back on its founding principles, and entered into a coalition with the SLFP government of Madam Bandaranaike. It was in struggle against this "Great Betrayal" that the Revolutionary Communist League—the predecessor of Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—was founded in 1968. For a half century, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee has waged an uncompromising struggle to overcome the legacy of the betrayal of 1964. But in waging this fight, it has never forgotten the great contribution that the founders of the BLPI and LSSP originally made to the cause of revolutionary socialism, not only in Sri Lanka, but throughout the world.

The importance of studying history

My lectures in Sri Lanka are part of an international celebration of the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International. The Trotskyist movement is, of necessity, conscious of history. In the absence of a historically-grounded perspective, political analysis is degraded to the level of eclectically selected impressions. Serious politics—and revolutionary activity is politics at its most serious—requires a scientific method. In navigation there is an instrument called the sextant. Its invention enabled a captain to precisely establish his ship's position by measuring the angular distance between the visible horizon and an astronomical object. In the process of political navigation, the revolutionary party must correlate the visible political horizon with a critical historical reference point.

A political opponent of the International Committee by the name of Said Gafurov—who is also a supporter of the Putin government in Russia—has recently protested against our harping on the crimes and betrayals carried

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out by the Stalinists. Why can we not just let bygones be bygones, and find ways to work together with the political heirs of Stalin? Why should we let past crimes and betrayals get in the way of collaborating today? After all, our opponent complains, Trotsky was assassinated in 1940, seventy-eight years ago; and Stalin died in 1953, sixty-five years ago. The Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, twenty-seven years ago. Why is it still necessary to recall Trotsky's references to the "river of blood" that divided the Fourth International from the Stalinists, who, during the late 1930s, carried out a campaign of political genocide against the finest representatives of revolutionary Marxism in the Soviet Union?

This opponent declared that "today the differences and contradictions between Trotskyism and Stalinism have only a historical, not a political character," no more relevant to the present than the differences "between Robespierre and Hébert or Danton which are only of interest to historians." These differences, our opponent asserts, "are important to study, but only for the sake of historical lessons (and history, to be honest and slightly cynical, never teaches anyone anything.")

The argument being made by our opponent is that history and politics exist in different and unrelated spheres. The study of history may be of some abstract intellectual interest. But it teaches us nothing that is of any particular value for our present day practical political activity. Those who argue in this way have absolutely nothing in common with Marxist politics. The revolutionary movement develops its program and activity through the continuous critical reworking of historical experience. Without a historical reference point, it is impossible to navigate through the turbulent currents of the class struggle. Moreover, how can a revolutionary party train its young cadres, and the working class as a whole, without studying the monumental revolutionary events of the past century?

The twentieth century was the most revolutionary in history. On every continent the oppressed masses were drawn into the vortex of struggle against capitalism and imperialism. The century witnessed, in 1917, for the first time in history, the conquest of political power by the working class, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party. Mass communist parties emerged throughout the world, reflecting the desire and determination of the working class to put an end to capitalism and establish a socialist society.

And yet, by the end of the century, despite all the struggles and sacrifices, the capitalist class held power throughout the world. The Soviet Union, which arose out of the 1917 revolution, had been dissolved by its own government. In China, the ruling Communist Party became the most ferocious advocate of capitalist economics. We now live in a world of staggering levels of social inequality. How is this process of political regression to be explained?

All over the world, outrage over existing conditions is mounting. "Capitalism" is once again becoming a dirty word. There is a renewal of interest in socialism, as an alternative to the existing social order. But, it must be stated bluntly, what is clearly absent amidst this progressive striving is knowledge of the great political experiences and revolutionary struggles of the past century. The very word "revolution" lacks substantial content, in terms of an understanding of its social foundations, class dynamics and political strategy.

Young people, born in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in China, have little knowledge of how these events came about, let alone a detailed knowledge of the histories of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. They are not familiar with the actual theoretical and political content of terms such as Stalinism, Maoism, or, for that matter, Castroism. Of course, young people all over the world are familiar with the romantic and evocative image of Che Guevara, but they know nothing of his political strategy and program—which were, if I may speak frankly, utterly bankrupt.

The impact of academic attacks on Marxism

Of course, young people cannot be blamed for their limited knowledge of the revolutionary upheavals of the past century. From whom and from where are they to acquire the necessary knowledge? The capitalist media certainly will not dispense knowledge that may contribute to the overthrow of the existing social order. But what about the universities, with their many learned professors? Unfortunately, the intellectual environment has been for many decades deeply hostile to genuine socialist theory and politics. Marxist theory—rooted in philosophical materialism—was long ago banished from the major universities.

Academic discourse is dominated by the Freudian pseudo-science and idealist subjectivism of the Frankfurt School and the irrationalist gibberish of post-modernism. Professors inform their students that the "Grand Narrative" of Marxism is without relevance in the modern world. What they actually mean is that the materialist conception of history, which established the central and decisive revolutionary role of the working class in capitalist society, cannot and should not be the basis of left-wing politics.

For the theoreticians and practitioners of middle-class pseudo-left politics, there is no need to study the history of the revolutionary struggles of the past. Its lessons contradict all their politically opportunist and reactionary nostrums. Indeed, Trotsky is anathema in these intellectual circles. But it is impossible to fight for socialism in the twenty-first century without studying and assimilating the lessons of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism in the twentieth century. This remains the fundamental theoretical and political struggle of the last century, of the most profound and immediate significance to every critical issue of political strategy that confronts workers and all those seeking seriously the correct path of struggle against capitalism in the contemporary world. That is why it is necessary to give a brief summary of the historical and political origins of the Fourth International.

The significance of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism

The founding of the Fourth International in September 1938 is a critical milestone in the history of the Trotskyist movement, the political culmination of the struggle that Leon Trotsky had waged over the previous fifteen years—beginning with the formation of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union in October 1923—against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Communist Party under the leadership of Stalin.

The far-reaching international implications of Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist regime emerged in late 1924, when Stalin advanced the claim that it was possible to build socialism in the Soviet Union apart from the international struggle against the world capitalist system, and without the successful revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist ruling class in the major imperialist centers of Western Europe and North America.

The program of "socialism in one country"—a fundamental break with the internationalist strategy that underlay the Bolshevik Party's conquest of power and the subsequent founding of the Communist International in 1919—gave political expression to the interests of the growing bureaucracy within the Soviet Union, whose privileges were derived from its usurpation of political power and the exploitation, in its own interests, of the resources of the nationalized economy created in the aftermath of 1917. The totalitarian dictatorship established by Stalin was the political means—murderously suppressing Marxist revolutionaries and employing police terror as its basic instrument—by which the bureaucracy defended

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its privileges and enforced social inequality within the Soviet Union.

The nationalist degeneration of the Soviet regime found its most devastating impact in the transformation of the Communist International into an instrument of Soviet foreign policy. In seeking to defend the nationalist orientation implicit in the theory of socialism in one country, the Stalinist bureaucracy claimed that socialism could be built in the USSR, as long as military intervention by the imperialist powers was forestalled. Thus, the aim of the Communist International was redirected toward the search for and cultivation of foreign allies, even if the forging of these alliances came at the expense of the revolutionary struggles of the working class in the countries where the Stalinist regime was seeking alliances with bourgeois and petty bourgeois forces.

The tragedy of the Chinese revolution

The political consequences of the subordination of the Communist International to the national opportunism of the Soviet bureaucracy found tragic expression in China, where Stalin had insisted that the Chinese Communist Party accept the political authority of the bourgeois Kuomintang and its leader, Chiang Kai-shek. Stalin had come to view Chiang as a potential ally, and portrayed him as a trusted leader of the anti-imperialist struggle in China. The working class, Stalin argued, was obligated to support the progressive sections of the national bourgeoisie. Trotsky rejected Stalin's efforts to portray the national bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development as more revolutionary than the capitalist class in the advanced countries. Trotsky stressed that this view—in essence, a revival of the position of the Russian Mensheviks prior to 1917—was based on a false assessment of the class dynamics in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. He wrote:

> The powerful role of foreign capital in the life of China has caused very strong sections of the Chinese bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy and the military to join their destiny with that of imperialism. Without this tie, the enormous role of the so-called "militarists" in the life of modern China would be inconceivable.
>
> It would further be profound *naiveté* to believe that an abyss lies between the so-called comprador bourgeoisie, that is, the economic and political agency of foreign capital in China, and the so-called "national" bourgeoisie. No, these two sections stand incomparably closer to each other than the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants.

Trotsky's analysis was vindicated by events. Chiang proceeded in April 1927 to carry out the slaughter of the Communists in Shanghai and Canton, delivering a blow from which the Chinese Communist Party never recovered. In the aftermath of this catastrophe, the Chinese Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, retreated from the cities and moved into the countryside. This shift profoundly changed the class composition and orientation of the Chinese Communist Party, which, from 1927 on, based itself primarily on the rural peasantry, rather than the urban working class. The Maoist orientation would prove, in subsequent decades, to be a source of grave political disorientation and strategic errors by those organizations, including the JVP here in Sri Lanka, that adopted the peasant orientation of the Chinese CP.

Despite the political disaster in China, Trotsky continued to fight for the reform of the Soviet Communist Party. In 1928, Trotsky—who had been expelled in 1927 from the Russian Communist Party and from the Communist International—was living in exile in Alma Ata, a town in Soviet Central Asia, near the border of China. But even in remote exile, thousands of miles from Moscow, Trotsky remained a master of revolutionary strategy. He obtained a copy of the program that had been drafted by Nikolai Bukharin—who was then allied with Stalin—as the main document of the upcoming Sixth Congress of the Communist International. Trotsky subjected this document, based on the theory of socialism in one country, to a devastating critique; and upheld revolutionary internationalism, the foundation of the theory of permanent revolution, as the basic strategic orientation of the Marxist movement. He wrote:

> In our epoch, which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e., of *world* economy and *world* politics under the hegemony of finance capital, not a single communist party can establish its program by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country. This also holds entirely for the party that wields the state power within the boundaries of the USSR. On August 4, 1914 [The beginning of World War I], the death knell sounded for national programs for all time. The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism. An international communist program is in no case the sum total of national programs or an amalgam of their common features.

Trotsky continued:

> The international program must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole in all its connections and contradictions, that is, with the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts. In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not *vice versa*. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.

Even after the passage of 90 years, Trotsky's analysis of the dynamic of socialist revolution, of the primacy of international over national conditions, remains the essential strategic principle of the struggle for socialism.

As the fortuitous result of a bureaucratic error, Trotsky's *Critique of the Draft Program* was translated into English; and it came accidentally into the possession of an American and a Canadian delegate to the Sixth Congress, James P. Cannon and Maurice Spector. They smuggled Trotsky's document out of the USSR. This led to the formation of the International Left Opposition. The fight against the Stalinist national degeneration of the Soviet Communist Party was expanded into a struggle against the degeneration of the Communist International.

Germany: "The key to the international situation"

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Between 1928 and 1933, the International Left Opposition considered itself a faction of the Communist International. Its activities were directed toward the revolutionary reorientation of the Stalinist dominated International and parties. Trotsky was not willing to abandon the Communist International as long as there remained the possibility of bringing about a change in its policies. A major factor in Trotsky's political calculations was the crisis in Germany, which he described as "the key to the international situation."

In January 1929, Trotsky was deported from the Soviet Union to the Turkish island of Prinkipo. He now lived as a stateless exile on what he referred to as "a planet without a visa." But despite his isolation on an island off the coast of Istanbul, Trotsky developed an analysis of the situation in Germany that was extraordinarily prescient. He called for the formation of a united front of the German Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party against the fascist menace.

The Nazi party had become a mass movement. Were it to come to power, Trotsky warned, the results would be a political catastrophe for the international working class. Everything had to be done to block the Nazis' march to power. But this required a change in the reckless, utterly disoriented, and unbelievably stupid policies of the German Communist Party. Following blindly the line set in Moscow, the German Communist Party not only refused to form a united front with the other mass workers party, the Social Democratic Party, it claimed that the SPD—which still commanded the support of millions of workers—was a "social-fascist" organization, all but identical to the Nazis. As there was, it claimed, no difference between the SPD and the Nazis, no common defensive actions between the two mass workers' parties against Hitler's forces were permissible.

As Trotsky had warned, the policies of the Communist Party cleared Hitler's path to power. With the critical support of high-placed bourgeois politicians, Hitler became chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. The Nazi regime moved quickly to destroy—without any organized resistance—the mass organizations of the working class. Despite this historically-unprecedented political disaster, the Communist Party—without any opposition within the Communist International—continued to insist that its policies had been correct. The German catastrophe compelled Trotsky to alter his approach to the struggle against Stalinism. He concluded that the reform of the Communist International was impossible. The Third International was dead as a revolutionary organization. It was necessary to build the Fourth International.

Trotsky's founding of the Fourth International

Trotsky's call for the creation of a Fourth International was linked to his assessment of the Soviet regime. He concluded that the reform of the bureaucratic regime was impossible. The bureaucracy had become a counter-revolutionary social force, ruthlessly defending its privileges through the suppression of the working class within the Soviet Union; and cynically betraying the struggles of the working class beyond the borders of the USSR. The evolution of the Soviet Union toward socialism required the overthrow of the Stalinist regime in a political revolution. Only through a revolutionary uprising of the Soviet working class and the overthrow of the bureaucracy would it be possible to re-establish Soviet democracy and prevent the destruction of the Soviet Union and the reintroduction of capitalism.

The five years between Trotsky's call for the formation of the Fourth International in 1933 and the founding congress in 1938 were among the most tragic in the history of the socialist movement. Despite the unprecedented crisis of the world capitalist system, the working class suffered a series of disastrous defeats. The cause of the defeats was not an absence of the will to struggle. Rather, the years between 1933 and 1938 witnessed an immense upsurge in the class struggle. In 1936 France was convulsed by strikes of an incipiently revolutionary character. In May and June, there were more than 12,000 strikes involving more than two million workers, affecting virtually every section of industry. The most militant actions involved the seizure of factories by revolutionary minded workers. In July 1936, Spanish and Catalan workers responded to an attempted coup d'état by fascist-minded generals, led by Francisco Franco, with a mighty uprising.

But in both France and Spain, the initial victories of the working class ended in demoralization and defeat. The political instrument of the defeats was the "Popular Front,"—that is, the alliance of the Stalinist and social democratic parties and trade unions with the bourgeoisie. The explicit basis of this alliance was the defense of capitalist property against the revolutionary aspirations of the working class. The Stalinists insisted that the fight against fascism consisted of nothing more than the defense of bourgeois democracy. The working class, the Stalinists insisted, could only fight fascism in an alliance with the liberal democratic sections of the capitalist class. It was, therefore, impermissible to advance and fight for a socialist program, for it would alienate the democratic capitalists and drive them into the camp of the fascists.

The counter-revolutionary significance of the Popular Front found its fullest expression in Spain, where the Stalinist party, controlled by agents of the Soviet secret police, the GPU, hunted down and murdered those who insisted that the defeat of Franco required the mobilization of the working class and the peasantry on the basis of a revolutionary program. The Stalinists ensured the victory of Franco.

As Stalin was carrying out the betrayal of the working class beyond the borders of the USSR, his "Great Terror" within the Soviet Union—epitomized by three public trials in Moscow between 1936 and 1938—involved the physical extermination of an entire generation of Marxist revolutionaries.

These were the conditions under which Trotsky founded the Fourth International. His insistence on the necessity of a new International encountered opposition from those who claimed that his condemnation of the Stalinist regime was too uncompromising and absolute. Another criticism was that the Trotskyist movement was too small to establish a new International, and that, moreover, an International could only be founded on the basis of "great events."

Trotsky answered his critics by insisting that the founding of the Fourth International was, indeed, based on "great events": the greatest defeats of the working class in history. These defeats had exposed the treachery and political worthlessness of the old organizations. Moreover, the critical issue was not the size of a party, but the quality of its program—that is, whether or not the program advanced by the Fourth International was based on a correct appraisal of the nature of the historical epoch and the correct formulation of the political tasks of the working class.

Of course, the question of size is not unimportant. The overthrow of capitalism cannot be accomplished through a conspiracy of a handful of people. The socialist revolution requires the conscious participation of great masses of people. But it is an axiom of Marxism that theory can only become a material force, in a historically progressive and revolutionary sense, if the program of the party identifies and articulates objective necessity. Those parties that are based on a false appraisal of objective conditions, whose program does not correspond to the demands of the historical epoch, must eventually suffer, whatever their ephemeral successes, political shipwreck.

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The persistence of the Fourth International

What, then, accounts for the historical *persistence* of the Fourth International? Above all, it is the correspondence of the analysis and program of the Fourth International with the objective character of the epoch. The founding document of the Fourth International defined the present historical epoch as that of the death agony of capitalism. Trotsky wrote:

> The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the state and undermines the unstable monetary systems. Democratic regimes, as well as fascist, stagger on from one bankruptcy to another.

Trotsky's warnings of a catastrophe were realized. The Second World War, which erupted exactly one year after the founding of the Fourth International, claimed more than sixty million lives. With the indispensable assistance of the Stalinist parties, the capitalist class was able to survive—through a combination of political compromises, tactical concessions and, when absolutely necessary, ruthless repression—the upheavals that swept the globe in the aftermath of the war. For several decades, rebuilding upon the ruins of war, capitalism experienced a substantial economic growth. But the fundamental contradictions—between social production and private ownership of the productive forces, between the integrated character of the world economy and the nation-state system—persisted.

The dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was universally hailed by the ruling elites and their media propagandists and academic apologists as the triumph of capitalism over socialism. The triumphalism of the 1990s was based on two lies: that the Stalinist regimes were socialist and that the contradictions of capitalism had been somehow overcome. But, in light of the experiences of the past 30 years, it is evident that the celebrations of capitalism's triumph were, to say the least, premature. The ruling elites had proclaimed that in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Stalinist regimes, capitalism would bestow upon humanity peace, prosperity and universal democracy.

The reality has proved very different. Beginning with the American invasion of Iraq in 1991 and the civil war in Yugoslavia, there has been endless military conflict. The "War on Terror"—launched after the events of 9/11—is now in its eighteenth year, with no end in sight. Rather, the intensification of geopolitical rivalries and conflicts is leading, inexorably, to the outbreak of a Third World War. The United States has made it clear that it will not allow China to replace it as the principal world power, even if it must use military force to counter the rise of China. At the same time, the United States is on a collision course with Russia, which Washington views as an obstacle to its plans to dominate Eurasia and the Middle East. Only last week, the US ambassador to NATO declared that the United States was prepared to carry out a preemptive strike against Russia to counter what it claims to be the illegal development of offensive weapons. Such an open threat is a dangerous escalation of the conflict between the two most heavily nuclear-armed powers. The world is moving to the very brink of a nuclear war, whose lethal consequences defy description.

Against the backdrop of escalating international violence, social tensions are mounting in every country—and especially in the advanced capitalist countries, including the United States. The underlying causes of the tensions are persistent economic crisis and staggering levels of social inequality. Less than a dozen billionaires possess more wealth than half the world's population. Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon, has a personal fortune estimated at $150 billion. In the course of just one hour, the millions that are added to his fortune constitute a substantial multiple of the total amount of money that will be earned by the average worker in the course of a lifetime.

Social inequality and the breakdown of democracy

Social inequality inevitability generates social and class conflict. At a certain point, the social tension becomes so extreme that the mechanisms of democracy begin to break down. This is the situation that is now emerging throughout the world. The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States is the symptom of a systemic breakdown of the long-established democratic political structures through which the capitalist class has ruled. There is widespread discussion of the danger of fascism returning to power.

In *How Democracy Dies*, the authors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt write forlornly:

> Is our democracy in danger? It is a question we never thought we'd be asking … Over the past two years, we have watched politicians say and do things that are unprecedented in the United States—but that we recognize as having been the precursors of democratic crisis in other places. We feel dread, as do so many other Americans, even though we try to reassure ourselves that *things can't really be that bad here*.
>
> Yet, we worry. … Are we living through the decline and fall of one of the world's oldest and most successful democracies?

Madeleine Albright, the former US secretary of state, has written a book, titled *Fascism: A Warning*, in which she provides the following simplistic explanation for the resurgence of the extreme right in the United States:

> If we think of fascism as a wound from the past that had almost healed, putting Trump in the White House was like ripping off the bandage and picking at the scab.

But this political diagnosis ignores the fact that the resurgence of authoritarianism is a world-wide phenomenon. In *The People Versus Democracy*, Yascha Mounk calls attention to the global scale of the revival of fascist movements:

> It is tempting, for example, to see Donald Trump as a uniquely American phenomenon. … And yet, the real nature of the threat Trump poses can only be understood in a much wider context: that of the far-right populists who have been gaining strength in every major democracy, from Athens to Ankara, from Sydney to Stockholm, and from Warsaw to Wellington. Despite the obvious

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> differences between the populists who are on the rise in all these countries, their commonalities go deep—and render each of them a danger to the political system in surprisingly similar ways.

Another recently published book, *How Fascism Works*, by Jason Stanley, calls attention to the global character of the growth of right-wing extremism:

> In recent years, multiple countries across the world have been overtaken by certain kinds of far-right nationalism; the list includes Russia, Poland, India, Turkey and the United States … I have chosen the label 'fascism' for ultranationalism of some variety (ethnic, religious, cultural), with the nation represented in the person of an authoritarian leader who speaks on its behalf.

The most dangerous manifestation of the fascist resurgence is provided by recent developments in Germany, where the Nazis—more than seventy years after the collapse of the Third Reich and end of World War II—are once again emerging as a serious political force. Nazi demonstrators, chanting racist and antisemitic slogans, have marched through the streets of Chemnitz and Dortmund. What makes these demonstrations particularly significant is not their size. The Nazis are still a relatively small political force, and are despised within Germany. But the Nazis enjoy powerful patrons at the highest levels of the German state. Following the demonstration in Chemnitz, the interior minister of the ruling coalition government, Horst Seehofer, expressed his warm sympathy for the Nazi mob. The head of the Ministry for the Protection of the Constitution, Hans Georg Maassen, denied—despite video evidence to the contrary—that the mob had threatened foreign bystanders who were witnessing the demonstration.

What is to account for the revival of Nazism in Germany, the very country which experienced the full horrors of the Third Reich? All over the country there are countless memorials that pay tribute to the memory of the victims of Hitlerism. But, like a disease that has been in remission but not cured, the old symptoms are once again manifesting themselves. Trotsky, who produced the greatest analysis of fascism, insisted that this political scourge was rooted in the contradictions of capitalism, and that the breakdown of bourgeois democracy—beneath the pressure of global economic crisis, international geopolitical tensions, and domestic social conflict—was an irreversible process.

Democracy cannot be rescued and restored to health on the basis of capitalism. All the warnings made by Trotsky in the 1930s, when he denounced the treacherous politics of Popular Frontism—which subordinated the working class to the so-called "liberal" and "progressive" bourgeois parties and, thereby, assured the victory of fascism—acquire immense contemporary relevance. In 1936, Trotsky wrote:

> By lulling the workers and peasants with parliamentary illusions, by paralyzing their will to struggle, the People's Front creates the favorable conditions for the victory of fascism. The policy of coalition with the bourgeoisie must be paid for by the proletariat with years of new torments and sacrifices, if not by decades of fascist terror.

All of Trotsky's warnings were realized. The "People's Front" (or "Popular Front") ended in disasters that cost the lives of tens of millions of people between 1939 and 1945. And yet, the enemies of Trotskyism—i.e., the pseudo-left political frauds who dismiss the lessons of history—advocate today the same policies that were responsible for the catastrophes of the 1930s and 1940s. Professor Chantal Mouffe, who is among the most celebrated of contemporary pseudo-left theorists, advocates a "Left Populism," which is nothing more than the latest version of neo-Stalinist popular front class collaboration. Calling openly for the rejection of "essentialist" left politics based on the revolutionary role of the working class and the centrality of its struggle against capitalist exploitation, Mouffe asserts that Left Populism "does not require a 'revolutionary' break with the liberal democratic regime."

She writes that "it is possible to bring about a transformation of the existing hegemonic order without destroying liberal-democratic institutions." The capitalist-imperialist state—the brutal and massively armed guardian of exploitation, oppression, and inequality—should be left intact. And, so, what is Professor Mouffe's alternative to the Marxist program for the revolutionary overthrow by the working class of the capitalist state, the expropriation of the capitalist oligarchs, and the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and finance? She writes: "A left populist approach should try to provide a different vocabulary" and a "different language" that might appeal to supporters of right-wing parties! Is it possible to imagine a more blatant expression of political bankruptcy? Professor Mouffe would have us believe that the danger of fascism can be combatted without mobilizing the working class on the basis of a revolutionary program. It is merely necessary to decorate reformism with a new vocabulary.

The crisis of revolutionary leadership

The political alternatives that present themselves in the epoch of the death agony of capitalism are either fascist barbarism or socialist revolution. The triumph of one or the other will determine the future of mankind. The victory of fascism means the death of human civilization. The victory of the socialist revolution opens up the possibility of a revival and flowering of human civilization on a new and glorious level. That is the choice before us.

Surveying the vicissitudes of the revolutionary struggles of the first decades of the twentieth century, and seeking to explain the cause of the many defeats that had followed the great victory of October 1917, Trotsky identified the "crisis of the revolutionary leadership" as the basic problem of the epoch. The objective conditions existed for the victory of socialism. But what remained was the unresolved problem of subjective leadership. This remains the fundamental task of our epoch.

The opponents of Trotskyism—particularly among the representatives of the countless varieties of petty-bourgeois pseudo-left politics—habitually attack the Fourth International as "sectarian." They cannot abide the refusal of the International Committee to tie itself, as the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left has, to the apron strings of the ruling class.

Incensed by our adherence to principles, our opponents point to the fact that the Trotskyist movement has not recruited millions to its ranks. A refrain popular among our enemies is that "The Fourth International was proclaimed by Trotsky, but never built." With this sentence they separate the evolution of the Fourth International from the entire history of the class struggle over the last eighty years. They prefer to forget that the parties and organizations favored by the pseudo-left—the Stalinists, the Maoists, the bourgeois nationalists, the labor bureaucracies—sought to block the development of the Fourth International by slandering, imprisoning, and murdering Trotskyists.

And what do our opponents offer as an alternative to the Fourth

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International? If they attempted to commemorate the last eighty, forty, or even twenty years of their political activities, to what political achievements could they proudly point? The Stalinists can point to the ruins of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic rape of Russia. The Maoists can point to the transformation of China into a focal point of global capitalism, the home of dozens of newly minted billionaires. The Castroites can point to how Cuba is again a haven for American tourists, whose dollars are essential for the survival of the local economy. The Social Democratic parties are virtually indistinguishable from the traditional right-wing parties of the bourgeoisie. The example of Corbyn in Britain only proves again that the social democratic organizations cannot be transformed into instruments of the struggle for socialism. Indeed, they cannot even be transformed any longer into instruments of mild social reforms. What all these organizations have in common, to recall the phrase employed by Trotsky, is that they are rotten through and through.

The Fourth International was founded by Trotsky to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class. He understood that the political tasks posed in the epoch of capitalism's death agony would not be easily accomplished. In May 1940, just three months before his assassination by an agent of the Stalinist regime, Trotsky wrote:

> The capitalist world has no way out, unless a prolonged death agony is so considered. It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars, and new uprisings. A young revolutionary party must base itself on this perspective.

Mankind has passed, as Trotsky anticipated, through "decades of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars and new uprisings." Defending the heritage of Marxism as a politically-persecuted minority under the most unfavorable conditions, the Fourth International, under the leadership of the International Committee, has accumulated immense experience. Events have vindicated its historical perspective. Now, at this late and very advanced stage of the death agony of capitalism, the conditions now exist to build the Fourth International as the mass World Party of Socialist Revolution.

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