

Resolution of the SEP (UK) Fourth National Congress

The resurgence of the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party (UK): Part One

The Socialist Equality Party (UK)**3 December 2018**

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The resurgence of the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)

1. The world situation is characterised by an immense crisis of the capitalist profit system and acute social and political discontent. All the measures taken to offset the 2008 financial crash and bailout the super-rich, through the imposition of permanent austerity, have changed class relations irrevocably. Capitalism is increasingly discredited, as many recognise that the present economic system is fatally flawed and in need of drastic remedy—even if they do not yet understand how this should be done. This is finding expression in a global resurgence in the class struggle, which immediately involves a conflict with the traditional political mechanisms of class rule—especially the labour and trade union bureaucracy. In response, the bourgeoisie is aligning the state apparatus more directly with the interests of the financial oligarchy, turning towards police state methods and deliberately cultivating far-right forces. As imperialism spirals into protectionism, trade war and militarism, the conditions associated with the 1930s are returning, at an even more advanced and explosive level.

2. The ever-tightening grip of the financial oligarchy and its ultra-wealthy periphery over the world's resources threatens the survival of humanity and the planet. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is now the richest person in history, at \$150 billion and rising, with his wealth ballooning last year alone by \$35.1 billion—more than one million times the average pay of an Amazon employee. The top 10 percent of society owns over 70 percent of total wealth, while the bottom half of the world's population—3.5 billion people—owns less than 2 percent. In 2017, nearly all the growth in global wealth—72 percent—went to the top one percent, while the bottom 50 percent received nothing. The vast majority of the world's population toils under conditions of poverty, hunger and disease. But calls for even a modest reallocation of resources to meet social needs meets furious resistance from a financial elite that enforces its dictates through the official political parties, trade unions and the mainstream media. Capitalist democracy is a fraud, a cover for the rule of the billionaires.

Social and political discontent is routinely dismissed as the outcome of “fake news,” “conspiracy theories,” and “foreign meddling” by state actors—usually Russia—to be dealt with by intimidation, censorship and repression.

3. The fundamental contradictions within capitalism—between socialised production and the private ownership of the means of production; and between a global economy and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states—is fuelling trade war, military rearmament and the threat of a third world war, fought with nuclear weapons. The ruling elite in every country is embracing nationalism, authoritarianism and fascist reaction. Writing in the 1930s, five years before the outbreak of World War II, Leon Trotsky explained that the interdependence of every country in the global economy meant that the programme of economic nationalism was a reactionary utopia “insofar as it set itself the task of harmonious national economic development on the basis of private property. But it is a menacing reality insofar as it is a question of concentrating all the economic forces of the nation for the preparation of a new war.” (*War and the Fourth International*)

4. The epicentre of the eruption of imperialist violence is the United States, which is seeking to counter its economic decline and the challenge from rival powers by asserting its dominance over the Eurasian landmass. The fascist bully in the White House embodies the criminality and parasitism of the entire US ruling class. Recklessly destabilising the institutions through which the US exercised its hegemony in the post-war period, President Donald Trump enacts trade war measures targeting much of the globe—including America's European allies—while issuing bellicose threats of war against China, North Korea and Iran. His efforts to cultivate a fascist movement at home, through nationalist demands for “America First” and the mass round-up of immigrants, is directly responsible for the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, the largest act of anti-Semitic violence in US history. Notwithstanding the civil war in the American state apparatus, his Democratic Party opponents are no less reactionary. Their utilisation of sex scandals to effect a change in the White House expresses their own contempt for democratic rights. As the political mouthpiece for the CIA and the Pentagon, their conflict with Trump is over foreign policy—whether the US war drive should be directed, in the first instance, against Russia or China.

5. Trump's presidency marks an unprecedented deterioration in post-war relations between the US and Europe, above all with Germany. America's post-war relationship with Europe between 1945 and 1991 was determined by the overriding need to enforce the isolation of the Soviet Union and prevent social revolution, at a time when the European working class was extremely militant and highly politicised. Now, powerful

tendencies within the US ruling elite have concluded that the dissolution of the Soviet Union means there is no longer any reason to prop up the European bourgeoisie, who are viewed as strategic competitors and rivals. Trump praised Britain's decision to exit from the European Union (EU), which he denounced as a vehicle for German domination, declaring the NATO alliance "obsolete." Regardless of the notes of caution by leading Democrats, the US is being objectively driven into conflict with Europe as it seeks to counter the threat to its global hegemony posed by the rise of China and other rivals.

6. The European ruling elites are responding to this geostrategic shift by preparing their own challenge to the US, seeking an end to their military subordination to Washington. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (Social Democratic Party) says it is necessary to recalibrate the NATO alliance and build the EU as a counterweight to the US. French President Macron and German Chancellor Merkel agree that the US can no longer be relied on as an ally and have called for the development of a "genuinely European army" to protect European interests. However, their ability to formulate such a coordinated response is undermined by the deepening of national antagonisms, which the EU only held in abeyance but never overcame. The corollary of Trump's "America First" agenda is demands to put "Britain First," "Germany First" and "France First," portending the fracturing of Europe into competing power blocs.

7. The project of European unification under capitalism is being stripped of its liberal pretensions. Right-wing movements are being assembled as a shock force against the working class, and the doors of state office thrown open to the likes of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Italy's Lega. Seven decades after the death of Hitler, the fascistic AfD is the main opposition party in the German parliament. Despite receiving just 12.6 percent of the vote, it sets the tone in federal politics, while its supporters physically attack immigrants, Muslims and Jews with impunity, because of the tacit support of the Grand Coalition and the highest echelons of the state. In Poland, the government marches alongside neo-Nazis, while in France, President Macron pays tribute to the leader of the Nazi collaborationist Vichy regime, Marshal Pétain. Alongside the attack on workers' jobs, wages and living standards goes the brutal reinforcement of national borders, as migrants fleeing unending wars of western intervention are left to drown in the Mediterranean or herded into prison-camps. The official parties and media pollute society with the poison of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim xenophobia, while demanding an increase in military budgets.

8. Brexit was only an initial expression of this disintegration of the post-war European order. Having seized on the 2016 referendum to try and settle a factional conflict within the right-wing of the Tory Party and its fringes, the unexpected vote to leave the EU has provoked an existential crisis for the British bourgeoisie. Throughout the post-war period, the ruling elite sought to offset the decline of Empire through the transatlantic alliance, acting as a bridge between the US and Europe, at the centre of which was NATO. The growing divide between Washington and Europe's capitals—especially Berlin—means this balance can no longer be sustained. Whatever their differences over foreign policy, all factions of the ruling class and its political parties are united in their determination to try and resolve this crisis through a ratcheting up of militarism, paid for by the gutting of social and democratic rights. The fate of the working class, not only in Britain, but across Europe, once again hangs in the balance. The continent that was the crucible for two world wars and the extermination of European Jewry is once again being torn asunder.

9. These conditions are driving forward a renewed interest in socialism, which the ruling elites believed they had banished to the history books, thanks to the crimes of Stalinism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Internationally, the decades-long suppression of the class struggle is being challenged by a revival of militant protests and strikes. This includes anti-austerity protests in Iran, strikes throughout China, India, Latin America

and the Middle East, and state-wide action by educators in the US. In Europe, coordinated walk-outs by Ryanair and Amazon workers express the elemental striving by the working class to internationalise its struggle against global corporations. In Britain, after industrial disputes hit a record low in 2017, this year saw a spate of actions, including by rail workers, lecturers and council employees, and a doubling of disputes in the private sector to a 20-year high. The greatest threat to the bourgeoisie and its plans is the development of the political understanding, in wide sections of the working class, above all the youth, that its enemy is the entire capitalist system.

10. Whether the working class can rise to its historic task of socialist revolution in time, or be crushed by reaction, will be decided in the course of the class struggle. The decisive role will be played by the Marxist party. In its resolution, "The resurgence of the class struggle and the Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party," the Fifth National Congress of the SEP (US) recognised:

The relation between the objective crisis of the global capitalist system and the class consciousness of the working class is not static, but dynamic. There will be no shortage of explosive events—above all, those arising out of the actual experience of class conflict—that will undermine traditional beliefs and radicalize social consciousness. Only a Marxist party, conditioned by theoretical insight and historical knowledge, can detect, analyze and prepare for the deep-rooted processes that will "suddenly" assume the form of mass revolutionary struggles. The task of the revolutionary party, therefore, is not to speculate as to whether a revolutionary movement can be built. What can and cannot be achieved will be determined in struggle...

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, which excludes the impact of the intervention 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 80th anniversary of the Fourth International

11. The fight for a socialist alternative to the prevailing capitalist chaos must be informed by historical knowledge. The answer to questions such as "What is socialism? Can it be achieved, and by what methods?" requires an understanding of the strategic lessons of the 20th century. At the centre of the Socialist Equality Party's active intervention in the class struggle, therefore, must be educating workers and youth in the history of the Fourth International, founded 80 years ago in September 1938 by Leon Trotsky, to take forward the struggle for world socialism against Stalinism, Social Democracy and all forms of pseudo-left politics. Trotskyism is the Marxism of the 21st century, led for 65 years by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Contained in its history and in the programme and perspective of the ICFI are all the essential prerequisites for international socialist revolution.

12. The founding document of the Fourth International, *The Transitional Programme*, began by insisting, "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." The struggle for the Fourth International was precipitated by the most terrible event of the 20th century—the coming to power of fascism in Germany. Its formation was prepared by the struggle initiated by Trotsky in 1923, with the formation of the Left Opposition to oppose the bureaucratic degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet regime. Under the anti-Marxist banner of building "socialism in one country," the Stalinist bureaucracy subordinated the fight for world socialism to the defence of its own material interests and privileges. Trotsky's struggle assumed international dimensions as Stalin's disastrous policies led to defeats, including the British General Strike in

1926 and the Chinese revolution in 1927.

13. The refusal of the Third International to permit any discussion of the policies of the German Communist Party, which had enabled Hitler to take power without a shot being fired, signified that it had passed irrevocably into the camp of reaction. This was followed by the betrayal of the 1936 Spanish revolution and the wave of counter-revolutionary terror within the Soviet Union. In the fight against centrist tendencies, which refused to break decisively with Stalinism and social democracy, Trotsky warned that the Soviet bureaucracy's role as an instrument of imperialism within the workers' movement threatened the very existence of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state. Unless overthrown in political revolution, the Stalinist counter-revolution would end in the restoration of capitalism.

14. Trotsky's prognosis was vindicated by the events in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China and Vietnam between 1989 and 1991. The Stalinist bureaucracies liquidated the nationalised property relations on which these states rested, and reconstituted themselves as the new bourgeoisie, turning the masses over to imperialism for super-exploitation. History delivered its verdict on all the anti-Trotskyist tendencies that broke from the Fourth International and which, in one form or another, ascribed an enduring historical legitimacy to Stalinism and opposed the fight for the political independence of the working class.

15. The Shachtmanite opponents of Trotsky in 1940 rejected the defence of the Soviet Union against imperialism, declaring that it represented a new form of state-capitalism, headed by a new class of exploiters. In 1953, the Fourth International came under renewed revisionist attack, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. In a seeming reversal of the Shachtmanite line, they claimed that the Stalinist bureaucracies in the Soviet Union, and the regimes established in Eastern Europe and China at the end of the Second World War, could be driven objectively towards the realisation of socialism under pressure from the working class. Both tendencies therefore assigned a world historic role to the Stalinist bureaucracy. Having excluded any role for the Fourth International and the independent revolutionary struggle of the working class, the Pabloites later also hailed Castro in Cuba, Ben Bella in Algeria, and a host of similar bourgeois nationalist and petty-bourgeois radical movements, as "blunted instruments" through which capitalism could be overthrown.

16. The issuing of the Open Letter in 1953 by the leader of the American Trotskyists, James P. Cannon, and the establishment of the ICFI, was critical in ensuring the continuity of Trotskyism. But the split heralded a protracted civil war within the Fourth International between the orthodox Trotskyists and various strains of Pabloism. Behind the theoretical disputes were opposing class interests. The role of the petty-bourgeoisie as a political and social buffer between the working class and the bourgeoisie was greatly strengthened during the post-war boom. The continued domination of the workers' movement by the Stalinist, social democratic and trade union bureaucracies, and the expansion of welfare states, suppressed socialist consciousness and created conditions favourable to petty-bourgeois opportunism. The pressure this exerted led, in the 1970s, to the retreat of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), the ICFI's British section, from the principled struggle it had previously conducted against Pablo and Mandel in 1953, and in opposition to the American Socialist Workers Party's reunification with the Pabloites in 1963.

17. The political and theoretical opposition led by the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US) between 1982 and 1986 to the WRP's Pabloite course won the support of the ICFI majority. The split with the WRP between December 1985 and February 1986 represented the decisive victory of the orthodox Trotskyists. It coincided with the final stage of the terminal crisis of the Stalinist regimes, the repudiation by the social democratic parties and trade unions of any defence of the interests of the working class, and the abandonment of the

anti-imperialist struggle by the bourgeois nationalists.

18. The objective processes which underpinned the crisis of these agencies of imperialism strengthened the position of the International Committee and its relationship to the working class. In the aftermath of the split, the International Committee drew on the wealth of Marxist theory, as distilled in the history of the Trotskyist movement, to initiate a process of political clarification and organisational development. Drawing the most far-reaching conclusions from the decay of the old nationally-based parties and trade unions, the ICFI recognised that the Trotskyist movement must prepare to advance itself as the leadership of a new revolutionary upsurge of the working class.

This was the basis for the decision to end the previous "league" forms of the International Committee's sections, and to establish the Socialist Equality Parties. The establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site* in February 1998 enabled the ICFI to utilise the revolutionary potential of the Internet to vastly expand the audience for revolutionary Marxism and the political influence of the Trotskyist movement globally. By virtue of its principles, programme and history, the International Committee of the Fourth International is now the critical force in uniting the world working class through the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

To be continued



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