

Cuba conference tailors Trotsky to the politics of bourgeois nationalism

Bill Van Auken
13 June 2019

On May 6 through 8, a conference was held in Havana, Cuba, titled “International Academic Event Leon Trotsky.”

The convening of a conference in Cuba on this subject has an undeniable significance, given that the ruling Cuban Communist Party, the instrument of the bourgeois nationalist government long headed by Fidel Castro and his brother Raul, had suppressed Trotskyism and justified the crimes of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy against the co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International.

The Cuban Trotskyists were ruthlessly repressed by the Castroite leadership, their members jailed and their press smashed.

As soon as he was released from a Mexican jail in 1960, Trotsky’s assassin and agent of the GPU, the Soviet secret police, Ramon Mercader, flew to Cuba, where he was greeted at the Havana airport by Che Guevara and warmly welcomed by Fidel Castro. He regularly traveled between Moscow and Havana, where he died in 1978.

In the 1960s, his mother, Caridad Mercader, who played a principal role in organizing the Trotsky assassination, was employed by the Cuban government as director of public relations at its embassy in Paris.

In 1966, in a speech delivered to the Tricontinental Congress in Havana, Fidel Castro viciously attacked Trotskyism, describing it as “repugnant and nauseating” and “a vulgar instrument of imperialism and reaction,” echoing the language of the Moscow Trials.

Despite, or more likely because of, this official campaign by the Castro regime against Trotskyism, there is great interest among the Cuban public in the life and legacy of Leon Trotsky. This was made evident in the popularity of the novel *The Man Who Loved Dogs*, written by Cuban author Leonardo Padura and published in 2009, centered on the Trotsky assassination. Padura was inspired to write the novel after visiting the Trotsky museum in Mexico City and seeing the room where Trotsky was killed. He recounted returning to Cuba and finding a total of two books in the library on the revolutionary leader, *Trotsky the Renegade* and *Trotsky the Traitor*.

Setting the record straight on the role of Trotsky and Trotskyism in maintaining the historical continuity of the struggle for socialist internationalism would clearly have immense political significance in Cuba. The Cuban working class is confronting a deepening social and economic crisis created by unrelenting imperialist pressure on the island and the growing social inequality created by the Cuban government’s attempt to buttress its rule through deals with foreign capital.

This was not, however, the purpose of the conference in Havana. With its subject matter and guest list vetted by the Cuban authorities, the gathering’s purpose was diametrically opposed to political clarification. It served the interests of the government in providing a harmless left academic cover as the ruling stratum turns ever-more steadily to the right.

The character of the conference was determined by who was invited to participate and who was barred from attending.

The collection of pseudo-lefts and Pabloite revisionists brought to Havana to deliver presentations had one overriding mission: to suppress

the revolutionary content of Trotskyism and render a portrayal of Trotsky’s role in history that would accommodate the interests of Cuba’s ruling elite.

Presenting themselves as academics, either citing faculty positions or calling themselves independent researchers, virtually all those in attendance trace their political pedigrees to those who split from the Trotskyist movement in 1963 in order to capitulate to petty-bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism, while conducting a drive to liquidate the Fourth International all over the world.

International Committee of the Fourth International barred

Barred from the conference, on completely spurious grounds, was the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which led the fight against Pabloite liquidationism. It was told that it could neither make a presentation nor even attend the event, as its presence would decrease the “participation capacity of the Cuban public, to whom the event is directed.”

As the event’s organizer was compelled to admit at the end of the conference, barely a handful of Cubans attended, among them “minders” sent by the government to ensure that the proceedings did not stray into proscribed areas.

The Cuban government knew very well whom it was inviting and whom it was excluding. It was quite conscious that if representatives of the ICFI had been allowed to participate, they would have raised the fundamental questions posed by the split within the Trotskyist movement in 1963 and the sharp differences over the implications of the Cuban Revolution.

A central role in the event’s organization was played by the “Centro de Estudios Socialistas Carlos Marx,” a front for the International Marxist Tendency led by Alan Woods. The Cuban organizer paid a special tribute to the “Centro,” and Woods delivered a closing statement to the conference via video from London.

In its report on the conference, the IMT includes the following revealing passage: “The ideas of Leon Trotsky shine with their own light, but we can not say the same of many who declare themselves Trotskyists, who are really groups with a narrow and sectarian mentality. ... There was a serious danger that the seminar would get out of control, but fortunately the organisers dealt with these hurdles correctly.”

Clearly, the principal hurdle was the exclusion from the conference of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which represents the continuity of Trotsky’s struggle. This was a decision taken deliberately, dishonestly and in bad faith. Only those who were associated with Pabloite revisionist capitulation to Castroism and Stalinism were allowed to attend.

Woods’s own presentation via video stressed Trotsky’s isolation in the

years preceding his assassination. He referred to him as “one man against the world.” He declared that the “great ideas of Leon Trotsky live on in our minds, our hearts and our souls.” That Trotsky founded the Fourth International as a world revolutionary party in his struggle against Stalinism remained a closed book.

Other presentations largely adhered to this outlook. Susan Weissman, an ex-Pabloite who has gone into the Democratic Socialists of America, spoke on Victor Serge, favorably comparing him to Trotsky, whom she portrayed as hopelessly isolated and cut off from the “general intellect” of Bolshevism during his struggle to build the Fourth International.

Others advanced the argument that Trotsky had made a political blunder by not uniting with the right opposition of Bukharin against Stalin, a nationalist tendency that reflected the influence of the peasantry and the threat of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union.

The role of Ernest Tate

Particularly odious and reactionary was the presentation delivered by Ernest Tate, the veteran Canadian Pabloite, best known for a provocation against the International Committee in 1966 and Gerry Healy, the leader of its then-British section, the Socialist Labour League (SLL).

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

Acting as an agent of the Pabloite United Secretariat and the US Socialist Workers Party in Britain, Tate deliberately staged an altercation outside an SLL meeting on the tenth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, when he and others selling political literature outside the venue were asked to not block the entrance. While the others moved to the side, Tate refused and initiated a physical confrontation with SLL stewards.

Immediately, Tate went to the petty-bourgeois left press in England with a lying account of the incident, denouncing the SLL as “violent,” comparing Healy to the English fascist Oswald Mosley and claiming that he and the SLL were suppressing free speech.

The entire provocation was staged in close cooperation with SWP and the International Secretariat for the purpose of vilifying the ICFI and the SLL and preventing any discussion of the differences over Cuba and Pabloite liquidationism.

Those who printed Tate’s slander were subsequently compelled under the threat of legal action to publish retractions and apologize for suggesting that Healy and the SLL “employ violence or seek to curtail freedom of expression.”

Tate ostensibly delivered his remarks in Cuba on Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution. However, he managed to transform Trotsky’s theory, which poses above all the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class under the leadership of an international Marxist party, into a handbook for conducting solidarity campaigns on behalf of bourgeois nationalist movements, first and foremost, Castroism in Cuba.

Tate cites Trotsky’s “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Working Class,” also known as “The Transitional Program,” as an example of the Theory of Permanent Revolution’s supposed focus on “solidarity” with the liberation struggles in the colonial world.

He quotes from “The Transitional Program”: “But not all countries of the world are imperialist countries. On the contrary, the majority are victims of imperialism. Some of the colonial or semi-colonial countries will undoubtedly attempt to cast off the yoke of slavery. Their war will not be imperialist, but liberating. It will be the duty of the international proletariat to aid the oppressed countries in war against oppressors.”

Tate deliberately ignores what follows, however, which is the stipulation that “In supporting the colonial country...in a war, the proletariat does not in the slightest degree solidarize...with the bourgeois government of the colonial country. ... Giving aid in a just and progressive war, the revolutionary proletariat wins the sympathy of the workers in the colonies...strengthens there the authority and influence of the Fourth International and increases its ability to help overthrow the bourgeois government in the colonial country.”

Tate’s presentation went on to present a lying account of the Cuban revolution’s significance in the struggle within the Fourth International, extolling the role, in particular, of Joseph Hansen, the FBI agent and informer, in making the defense of Cuba against US imperialism the “central political priority” of the Socialist Workers Party, then the Trotskyist party in the United States.

He also called attention to the SWP’s involvement in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, a notorious CIA front, praising it as “entirely in the spirit of Trotsky’s Theory of the Permanent Revolution” and “the template later in the decades of the sixties and seventies for organizing support for third world peoples. ...”

This account was designed to deliberately conceal from any Cuban audience the struggle that took place within the Fourth International over the Cuban revolution. The coming to power of Fidel Castro as the result of a guerrilla war waged by a petty-bourgeois nationalist movement was seized upon by the SWP leadership under Hansen as the basis for the reunification with the Pabloites, with whom it had broken a decade earlier.

The aim of this reunification was the dissolution of the Fourth International into the swamp of left middle-class politics. Efforts to build an international socialist movement of the working class, based on Marxist theory and guided politically by the heritage of Trotsky’s struggle against the betrayal of the October Revolution, were to be abandoned. The fate of the socialist revolution was to be entrusted to an array of bourgeois nationalists and petty-bourgeois radical organizations allied with or dependent upon, in one form or another, the Soviet bureaucracy.

The Pabloites proclaimed that the coming to power of Castro at the head of a nationalist guerrilla movement had opened up a new path to socialism, one that did not require the building of revolutionary Marxist parties, not to mention the conscious and independent intervention of the working class.

While waging a principled defense of Cuba against imperialist aggression, the ICFI rooted its analysis of Castroism within a broader assessment of the role of bourgeois nationalism in the epoch of imperialism.

Cuba and the Theory of Permanent Revolution

Cuba, like many other oppressed countries in the aftermath of the Second World War, provided a confirmation of Permanent Revolution, but in the negative. That is, under conditions in which the working class lacked a revolutionary party, and therefore was incapable of providing leadership to the masses of oppressed, representatives of the national bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie were able to step in and impose their own solution. Nasser, Nehru, Peron, Ben Bella, Sukharno, the Baathists and, in a later period, the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, were all examples of this process.

In a document sent by the Socialist Labour League to the SWP in 1961, the British Trotskyists sharply criticized Hansen’s adulation of the petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships.

Defending Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, the SLL wrote: “It is not the job of Trotskyists to boost the role of such nationalist

leaders. They can command the support of the masses only because of the betrayal of leadership by Social-Democracy and particularly Stalinism, and in this way they become buffers between imperialism and the mass of workers and peasants. The possibility of economic aid from the Soviet Union often enables them to strike a harder bargain with the imperialists, even enables more radical elements among the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaders to attack imperialist holdings and gain further support from the masses. But, for us, in every case the vital question is one of the working class in these countries gaining political independence through a Marxist party, leading the poor peasantry to the building of Soviets, and recognizing the necessary connections with the international socialist revolution. In no case, in our opinion, should Trotskyists substitute for that the hope that the nationalist leadership should become socialists. The emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves.”

In the “Transitional Program,” Trotsky had anticipated the possibility that, “under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances... the petty-bourgeois parties, including the Stalinists, may go further than they themselves wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie.”

The founding document of the Fourth International went on to insist that the task of its sections was to “aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class character of these politics, destroy reformist and pacifist illusions, strengthen the connection of the vanguard with the masses and prepare the revolutionary conquest of power.”

In relation to Cuba, the Pabloites pursued precisely the opposite course, seeking to sow illusions in Castro’s petty-bourgeois nationalist leadership and subordinate the workers to it.

The ICFI insisted that Castroism represented not a new road to socialism, but rather one of the most radical variants of bourgeois nationalism, which had come to power in many of the former colonial countries in the 1960s. Many of these regimes carried out wide-ranging nationalizations.

The Pabloites’ proclamation of Cuba as a “workers state” based upon the nationalizations carried out under Castro’s petty-bourgeois nationalist government, which involved no independent mobilization of the working class and no form of workers’ control over the nationalized industries, was completely antithetical to Marxism.

Two decades before the Cuban Revolution, Trotsky had explicitly rejected the superficial identification of nationalizations undertaken by petty-bourgeois forces with the socialist revolution. In response to the expropriations carried out by the Stalinist Kremlin bureaucracy in the course of its invasion of Poland (in alliance with Hitler) in 1939, Trotsky wrote: “The primary political criterion for us is not the transformation of property in this or another area, however important these may be in themselves, but rather the change in the consciousness and organization of the world proletariat, the raising of their capacity for defending former conquests and accomplishing new ones.”

In combatting the Pabloite perspective, the International Committee warned that its rejection of the central and leading role of the working class in the socialist revolution, and of the need to build a Trotskyist party to develop within the working class the consciousness required for the conquest of political power, could only lead to new betrayals. If such a party was not necessary in Cuba, as the Pabloites claimed, why would it be necessary anywhere else in the world?

Basing itself on Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, the International Committee insisted that the struggle for liberation from imperialist oppression in the colonial and former colonial countries could be won only under the leadership of the working class, its conquest of power and the extension of the revolution internationally. The principal task flowing from this perspective is that of building independent revolutionary parties of the working class in a relentless struggle to break the grip of all those tendencies seeking to subordinate the workers to bourgeois nationalism.

Castroism as a “new road to socialism”: a balance sheet

The warnings made by the International Committee were tragically vindicated as Castroism was proclaimed the new model for socialist revolution, with catastrophic consequences throughout Latin America. The Pabloites instructed their own followers in the region to abandon the fight for revolutionary leadership in the working class and instead throw themselves into “technical preparations” for “armed struggle” in the countryside.

What were the results of this perspective? The most radicalized sections of youth as well as younger workers were diverted from the fight for revolutionary leadership in the working class, helping to solidify the counterrevolutionary grip of the Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist bureaucracies. These youth themselves were thrown into suicidal combat with the military forces of the Latin American capitalist states, leading to the deaths of thousands. And the failed guerrilla adventures were invoked by the military in one country after another as the pretext for the imposition of fascist-military dictatorships and the wholesale repression of the working masses.

The fate of Che Guevara, who embarked on his fatal adventure in Bolivia that ended in his capture and execution in October 1967, was a tragic anticipation of the disastrous consequences of Castroism and Pabloite revisionism.

The Castro government, far from providing a new road to socialism, sustained itself as a client of the Soviet bloc, while forging pragmatic ties to the very same bourgeois governments in Latin America that those adopting Guevara’s guerrillaist doctrine were attempting to overthrow. In Chile, Castro extolled the “parliamentary road to socialism,” telling workers to subordinate themselves to the Allende government, even as the military was preparing its coup. He embraced military regimes in Ecuador and Peru and established close ties to the corrupt apparatus of Mexico’s ruling PRI in the immediate wake of its massacre of student protesters in 1968.

Without a knowledge of these decisive strategic experiences and the struggle that unfolded within the Fourth International, it is impossible to understand today’s crisis, not just in Cuba, but throughout Latin America.

Tate, however, passes over all of this in silence, reducing the question of Cuba and the Fourth International to one of petty-bourgeois radical solidarity campaigns.

What he chooses as the model for these operations—Hansen and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee—is itself highly revealing.

The investigation of the circumstances surrounding the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky conducted by the International Committee of the Fourth International under the title “Security and the Fourth International” established the decades-long efforts of the police agencies of imperialism and Stalinism to penetrate and sabotage the Fourth International. Among other things, the investigation uncovered conclusive evidence that Joseph Hansen had functioned as an agent of the state inside the Trotskyist movement.

As for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, Tate ignores the sinister role that it played in the political trajectory of the SWP. The committee’s co-founder was Alan Sagner, an establishment figure who went on to become a trustee of the Democratic National Committee, chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and chairman the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, as well as a board member of Business Executives for National Security.

The FPCC was flooded with and manipulated by FBI agents and informants. It served as the conduit into the SWP for a group of 12

students from Carleton College, a small liberal arts school in Minnesota, where the SWP had conducted no work whatsoever. Led by Jack Barnes (a Republican who had traveled to Cuba on a Ford Foundation fellowship), this clique took over the party's leadership—comprising a majority of its political committee—and expelled hundreds of veteran SWP members.

In presenting this history of betrayals by Pabloite revisionism as the realization of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, Tate sought to deliberately wall off any Cuban audience from the revolutionary legacy of Trotsky and its continuity in the struggle of the Fourth International.

Tate did not bother to explain to his audience what became of the International Marxist Group (IMG), with which he was affiliated and whose politics in Britain he praised in his report. Having staged one police provocation after another, it liquidated itself in 1981, attempting to enter the rightward-moving Labour Party.

Also worth noting was the presence at the conference of a representative of the Revolutionary Workers' Party (Devrimci ??çi Partisi, D?P) of Turkey, who, in his presentation, reveled in having set foot on a "workers state" and hailed Che Guevara as the most outstanding representative of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution.

The D?P, together with the Argentine Partido Obrero (PO) of Jorge Altamira and the Greek Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK) of Savas Michael, is part of the Coordinating Committee for the Refoundation of the Fourth International (CRFI), which has worked to "refound" the Fourth International in alliance with Stalinism. It would appear that this reactionary undertaking now extends to the Castroite government in Cuba.

None of these tendencies nor their representatives, who went to Havana to make presentations denigrating the historical legacy of the co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International and burying the struggle of the Trotskyist movement, bother to make any balance sheet of the Cuban revolution, much less of their own record in proclaiming Castro a "natural Marxist," Cuba a "workers state" and petty-bourgeois guerrillanism a new road to socialism.

The critique made by the International Committee of the Fourth International of these forms of adaptation to Castroism has been thoroughly vindicated.

Far from providing a new road to socialism, the Castroite movement proved incapable of resolving the fundamental historic problems of Cuban society. Six decades after Castro came to power, the island's economy remains increasingly dependent upon tourism and emigrants' remittances. The end of Soviet subsidies following the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the sharp reduction in cheap oil imports from crisis-stricken Venezuela have laid bare the backwardness and dependence of the island's economy, while condemning millions of Cuban workers to poverty.

Sixty years after the rise of Castro, there are no independent organizations of the Cuban working class, much less organs of rule. While Fidel Castro died in 2016, his 88-year-old brother Raúl remains the head of the country's ruling party.

There is no question that popular interest in Leon Trotsky will grow in Cuba as masses of working people face the threat of war alongside increasing attacks on their living standards and growing social inequality as the ruling strata attempt to salvage their privileges through ever closer ties with foreign capital. The attempts by the Pabloites to portray Cuba as a "workers state" have been thoroughly exposed as capitalism ever more clearly dominates the country's economy.

Cuban workers will find a path to a genuine understanding of Trotsky's struggle only by acquainting themselves with its continuity in the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International to defend the program and perspective of revolutionary socialist internationalism against all of its revisionist opponents.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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