

# The Dissolution of the USSR and the Unipolar Moment of US Imperialism

Bill Van Auken  
13 September 2019

*This lecture was delivered by Bill Van Auken, senior writer for the World Socialist Web Site, at the Socialist Equality Party (US) Summer School on July 25, 2019.*

It is now nearly three decades since the deliberate liquidation of the Soviet Union by the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy and the launching of the First Persian Gulf War, which began in January 1991. This war, which involved the deployment of over half a million US troops—more than twice the number sent into the 2003 invasion of Iraq—clearly marked a turning point in the development of US and world imperialism.

It likewise marked a turning point for the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Objective developments, in particular the disintegration of Stalinism, intersected with the protracted struggle of the ICFI against Pabloite revisionism, culminating in the 1985 split and the consolidation of control by the orthodox Trotskyists, for the first time since the founding of the International Committee in 1953. This signaled a fundamental change in the relationship between the Fourth International and the working class.

Grasping that change, the ICFI sought to shoulder the immense political responsibility of leading the international working class, which found concrete expression in the convening of the extraordinarily important “World Conference of Workers against War and Colonialism” held in Berlin in November 1991, to which we will return.

The sharp turn by US imperialism toward unilateralism and militarism, consummated in the Gulf War of 1991, was bound up with the protracted crisis of American capitalism and the relative decline of its domination of the global economy. With the demise of the USSR, US imperialism concluded that it could now offset the challenge that American corporations faced from rivals in Europe and Japan, which had been growing since the 1970s, through the relatively untrammled use of the US armed forces.

In the case of the Persian Gulf, the US military could be used to secure unchallenged American supremacy in the world’s most important oil-producing region, which would put Washington in a position to blackmail its oil-import-dependent European and Asian imperialist rivals with the threat of cutting off their energy supplies. As President George H.W. Bush would declare, in the run-up to the Gulf war, an attack on Iraq would give the US “persuasiveness that will lead to more harmonious trading relationships.”

This was not a development that took us by surprise. In its 1988 Perspectives Resolution, the ICFI warned:

Despite the loss of its economic hegemony, the United States remains, militarily, the most powerful imperialist country, and reserves to itself the role of global policeman. But the conditions which prevailed in 1945 at the beginning of the so-called American Century have been drastically transformed. The loss of the economic preponderance which once made its word “law”

among the major capitalist nations compels the United States to place ever-greater reliance on the brute force of its military strength. [1]

The resolution went on to declare that a prophecy made by Trotsky was about to be vindicated, quoting his *War and the Fourth International* from 1934. “The world is divided? It must be re-divided. For Germany it was a question of ‘organizing Europe.’ The United States must organize the world. History is bringing humanity face to face with the volcanic eruption of American imperialism.” This was confirmed in barely two years.

There is an obvious continuity between these events of nearly 30 years ago and the present global political situation. The struggle to assert US hegemony over the Persian Gulf threatens to ignite a new and even more terrible war against Iran, a country with three times the population and four times the landmass of Iraq. The outbreak of a military confrontation is only a matter of time.

The last three decades have seen the United States engaged in continuous and ever-expanding warfare under both Democratic and Republican administrations. The drive to conquer and subjugate the lands of the Middle East and Central Asia is a consensus policy of the American ruling class. The results have included over a million dead in Iraq and hundreds of thousands more across Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

More and more these various conflicts threaten to metastasize into a Third World War. Preparations for a nuclear confrontation with Russia and China were chillingly described recently by the incoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the military’s No. 1 priority. Meanwhile the Pentagon released a seemingly lunatic “joint doctrine” that goes well beyond Dr. Strangelove. It states: “nuclear weapons could create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability. Specifically, the use of nuclear weapons will fundamentally change the scope of a battle and develop situations that call for commanders to win.”

There is a worried sense within ruling circles that three decades of war have only created a series of debacles, and that US imperialism is confronting what is termed, in military and foreign policy circles, as “strategic competition” from Russia and China. At the same time, ever-sharper conflicts are emerging between Washington and its erstwhile NATO partners, in particular Germany, against which the US fought in two world wars.

The contradiction between the interdependent character of the global economy and the capitalist nation-state system is leading inexorably to a new world war.

Under these conditions, there have been several recent commentaries by US foreign policy analysts bemoaning the end of the “unipolar moment” proclaimed nearly 30 years ago, and looking back upon it with a certain nostalgia.

Among them is a piece published in *Foreign Affairs* by CNN’s multi-

millionaire pseudo-intellectual charlatan Fareed Zakaria, titled “The Self-Destruction of American Power.” He writes:

Ever since the end of World War I, the United States has wanted to transform the world. In the 1990s, that seemed more possible than ever before. Countries across the planet were moving toward the American way. The Gulf War seemed to mark a new milestone for world order, in that it was prosecuted to uphold a norm ... legitimized by international law. [2]

The American way, world order, norms and international law: this is how these layers fondly recall a mass slaughter.

Zakaria pays special tribute to the individual who popularized the concept of the “unipolar moment,” the extreme right-wing columnist Charles Krauthammer, who wrote an article with that title, also in *Foreign Affairs*, in 1991. He promoted an unvarnished perspective of the unilateral use of US military aggression to assert the dominance of American capitalism around the globe.

Our best hope for safety in such times ... is in American strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them,” he wrote.

He went on to present the pretext for the next major US war: “There is no alternative to confronting, deterring and, if necessary, disarming states that brandish and use weapons of mass destruction. And there is no one to do that but the United States.”

He further insisted that if US imperialism proved unable to maintain its unipolar moment it would be “not for foreign but for domestic reasons. ... stagnant productivity, declining work habits, rising demand for welfare state entitlements and new taste for ecological luxuries.” He charged that while “defense spending declined, domestic entitlements nearly doubled.” And, above all, he blamed “America’s insatiable desire for yet higher standards of living without paying any of the cost.” [3]

This, after a decade of unrelenting attacks on working class living standards in the wake of the breaking of the 1981 PATCO strike. The message was clear: imperialist war abroad had to be accompanied by an intensification of social counterrevolution and class war in the US itself.

Bush himself, in the run-up to the Gulf War, proclaimed that the unleashing of US military power, against a relatively defenseless oppressed country, would inaugurate a “New World Order.”

The content of this “new world order” was never explained. The only thing that was clear was that the old world order had broken down and what was to replace it, in the first instance, was an eruption of US military violence.

The catastrophic breakdown of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union—celebrated by facile bourgeois intellectuals as the “end of history” and the “triumph of capitalism”—had removed a key prop of the old post-World War II order. Moreover, the very same forces of globalization of capitalist production and technological development that had fatally undermined the autarchic Stalinist economies were driving the entire world capitalist order into profound crisis.

Our movement clearly understood this. Its attitude toward the collapse of Stalinism and the war crisis in the Persian Gulf stood totally opposed to that of the petty-bourgeois lefts, who were left utterly demoralized by the fall of Stalinism. This was not because of the dangers it posed to the working class, but because the bureaucratic apparatus upon which they,

themselves, had leaned and which served as a means of suppressing the class struggle had disappeared. Proclaiming a new “Midnight in the Century,” they renounced any pretense of socialism or opposition to imperialism.

The attitude of the International Committee to the impending Gulf War was spelled out in the report given by David North, the national secretary of the Workers League, to a special congress of the party on August 30, 1990.

The war which is being threatened by the United States against Iraq is a war of an imperialist bandit against a poor and historically oppressed country ... a war of plunder aimed at securing control over crucial oil reserves of the Middle East and, on that basis, strengthening its position in the affairs of world imperialism.

This was less than a month after Iraqi troops had invaded Kuwait, and under conditions in which the US was pouring troops into Saudi Arabia and warships into the Persian Gulf. At the same time, it was pushing through resolutions at the UN to sanction war, with the full support of other major and minor imperialist powers—who wanted to get in on the plunder—and, most critically, the collaboration of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy led by Gorbachev.

The report goes on to state that the war crisis in the Gulf marked the beginning of a new imperialist carve-up of the world. It stated,

The end of the post-war era means the end of the post-colonial era as well. As it proclaims the ‘failure of socialism,’ the imperialist bourgeoisie is, in deeds, if not yet in words, proclaiming the ‘failure’ of independence as well.

The report debunked the Bush administration’s claims that its massive buildup for war in the Persian Gulf was a necessary response to the Iraqi invasion of “little” Kuwait. Rather, it states, the invasion “merely provided a long-awaited pretext for the implementation of strategical plans that the last three American governments have been working on for more than a decade.”

Indeed, Democratic President Jimmy Carter had proclaimed the so-called “Carter Doctrine” in January 1980. It stated:

An attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.

It justified this threat on the basis of the “overwhelming dependence of Western nations on vital oil supplies from the Middle East.” Carter’s successor, Ronald Reagan, introduced the “Reagan corollary,” vowing that the US would defend these vital oil interests against internal threats to stability as well.

The US government deliberately manufactured the pretext for its military intervention in the Persian Gulf. Tensions between Iraq and Kuwait had been growing since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, in which Washington had provided significant aid to the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. Kuwait’s lowering of oil prices and its demand for debt payments had further undermined an Iraqi economy that had been battered by the war, while Baghdad claimed that Kuwait was carrying out slant

drilling into Iraq's Rumaila oil field, on the border between the two countries.

The US ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, used a meeting on July 25, 1990—just weeks before Bush was to announce his “line in the sand” and launch the drive to war—to assure Saddam Hussein of US friendship and sympathy, while telling him that Washington had “no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait.”

The trap having been laid, Saddam Hussein, driven by desperation over the mounting economic and social crisis in Iraq, quickly walked into it.

Like every US imperialist war waged in the name of liberation and democracy, the Gulf War was based on deception and lies.

The attempt was made to equate Saddam Hussein, whom Washington had only recently courted as an ally, with Adolf Hitler. This demonization would become a standard feature of every succeeding US war. It had, in fact, been used in what amounted to a dress rehearsal for the Gulf War, less than two years earlier. In preparing the invasion of Panama, the US State Department compared the involvement in the drug trade of Manuel Noriega—a longtime CIA asset—with Hitler's invasion of Poland.

A massive propaganda campaign was waged to sway US public opinion toward support for the Gulf war. This infamously included the testimony given by a 15-year-old girl to Congress, in which she tearfully recounted seeing armed Iraqi troops invading a hospital to steal incubators, throwing babies onto the floor to die. Only later was it revealed that the story was a complete fabrication. The girl had not been in Kuwait before, during or after the Iraqi invasion. She was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to Washington and a member of the royal family, sent to read a script written by a major US PR firm.

Finally, Bush justified military intervention by claiming an imminent threat posed by Iraq's massing of 120,000 troops on Saudi Arabia's border. Satellite images subsequently revealed that there was nothing on the Kuwait-Saudi border but desert sand.

A critically important part of the report to the Special Congress of the Workers League in 1990 was the clarification of our attitude toward Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Initial responses within the International Committee had included its condemnation as an “act of aggression” by the British section, in an initial article published in its newspaper. On the other hand, there was a suggestion from within the Australian section, that we support the annexation of Kuwait as a “small step” in advancing “the unfulfilled national and democratic tasks of the Arab revolution.”

The report made clear that we had no reason to condemn Iraqi aggression. Given the economic warfare waged by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia against Iraq in the run-up to the invasion, our concern was not who fired the first shot. Moreover, to take such a position would be to support the territorial integrity of Kuwait, a Sheikdom created by British imperialism, carved out of the southern Iraqi province of Basra, as a means of better dominating the Arabian Peninsula. The same is the case with virtually all the borders drawn by imperialist powers in the Middle East.

At the same time, in response to the suggestion from a member of the Australian section that we support Kuwait's annexation, it affirmed:

To attribute any progressive role to Hussein's invasion would lead the ICFI in a false direction and undermine the theoretical and political gains that have been made since 1985, in our collective struggle against the WRP's betrayal of the program of world socialist revolution.

Of course, this refers to the struggle waged against the Workers Revolutionary Party's abandonment of the Theory of Permanent

Revolution, particularly in relation to its opportunist relations with various Arab regimes, systematically subordinating the independent struggle of the working class to the supposedly anti-imperialist stance of one or another bourgeois nationalist leader.

The report insists that one cannot attribute some progressive role to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait without a clear examination of the class nature and interests of the regime that carried it out. In the case of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the invasion was being carried out by a bourgeois regime that was acting not to “fulfill national and democratic tasks of the Arab revolution” but rather to achieve a more favorable relation between the Iraqi bourgeoisie and imperialism.

Thus, the ICFI defended Iraq, an oppressed former colonial country, against imperialism, in spite of its opposition to the regime and policies of Saddam Hussein and on the basis of an international socialist perspective. It insisted that the struggle against imperialism could be waged only through the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class in both the US and other advanced capitalist countries as well as in the Middle East itself.

As the report states:

The economic and cultural development of the Arab masses requires not merely the elimination of “imperialist enclaves” but the entire capitalist nation state system throughout the Middle East. We seek not the reshuffling of borders, but their elimination. That can be achieved only by the revolutionary proletariat on the basis of a socialist program.

The US launched the Gulf War on January 16, 1991. Operation Desert Storm, as it was dubbed, consisted mainly of one of the most intensive air bombardments in military history. Eighty-eight thousand tons of munitions were dropped on Iraq in the course of just 42 days. This is roughly equivalent to one-fourth of the total bomb tonnage dropped on Germany during the entire Second World War. The Iraqi casualty totals were estimated at 135,000. Much of Iraq's conscript army was wiped out, with soldiers incinerated from the air or buried alive in their trenches. Hundreds of thousands more Iraqis, of course, died as a result of the systematic destruction of the country's infrastructure.

On the so-called Highway of Death, the US launched wave after wave of bombings against a defenseless, miles-long column of vehicles, carrying Iraqi troops as well as civilians withdrawing from Kuwait on the orders of the Hussein government, which announced that it was complying with a UN Resolution demanding the withdrawal.

As we stated in response to this war crime:

The US war against Iraq is among the most terrible crimes of the twentieth century, a slaughter that future generations will look back on with shame. It has demonstrated that the ruling class of so-called democratic America is just as capable of mass murder as the Nazis. [4]

The *Wall Street Journal* responded to the Gulf War with an editorial that stated:

For America's ruling elite, long at each other's throats, the path should be clearer now to reforming a working consensus about the US's world role. Some of the policy-making world's most divisive issues now look settled. Force is a legitimate tool of

policy; it works. For the elites themselves, the message is America can lead, stop whining, think more boldly. Starting now. [5]

We understood this editorial, by the mouthpiece of US finance capital, as an accurate reflection of the pathological triumphalism prevailing within the American bourgeoisie.

The 11th Plenum of the International Committee was held on March 5, 1991, less than a week after the end of the Gulf War. Its opening report stated:

The American bourgeoisie is serving notice that American imperialism will seek through force to overcome problems arising from the protracted economic decline of the US. For all the problems of American capitalism—the decay of its industrial base, the loss of its overseas markets, the massive trade deficits and budget deficits, the collapse of its banking system, the gangrenous growth of social ills—the bourgeoisie believes it has found an answer: Force!

The report quotes the extremely relevant passage from *Anti-Dühring*, written 113 years earlier, in which Engels delivered a Marxist response to Dühring's claim that force was the decisive element in history:

...its own productive forces have grown beyond its control and, as if necessitated by a law of nature, are driving the whole of bourgeois society towards ruin, or revolution. And if the bourgeoisie now make their appeal to force in order to save the collapsing "economic situation" from the final crash, this only shows that they are laboring under the same delusion as Herr Dühring: the delusion that "political conditions are the decisive cause of the economic situation"; this only shows that they imagine, just as Herr Dühring does, that by making use of "the primary," "the direct political force," they can remodel those "facts of the second order," the economic situation and its inevitable development; and that therefore the economic consequences of the steam-engine and the modern machinery driven by it, of world trade and the banking and credit developments of the present day, can be blown out of existence by them with Krupp guns and Mauser rifles. [6]

Substitute computerization for the steam engine and smart bombs and cruise missiles for Krupp guns and Mausers and this statement stands as a fitting refutation of the triumphalist rantings of the US ruling class in the wake of the Gulf War.

In response to the open preparations of Washington for a major war against Iraq, the Workers League advanced the demand for a popular referendum on war. In advancing this democratic demand, the party carried out an important tactical initiative. Its purpose was to turn the perspective of revolutionary defeatism into concrete practices within the working class, under conditions in which widespread opposition to war found no expression within the existing political setup. Both houses of the US Congress carried out near unanimous votes in favor of war. For its part, the AFL-CIO supported the US government and refused to say a word about the impending slaughter.

The decision to advance this demand drew on an important historical precedent in the US Trotskyist movement: the 1937-38 debate within the Socialist Workers Party on the so-called Ludlow Amendment. This was a

bill introduced in the US House of Representatives by Democratic Congressman Louis Ludlow, calling for an amendment to the US Constitution, requiring that any declaration of war by the United States government be voted on first by the American people in a popular referendum. The call for the referendum had gained increasing popular support—opinion polls at the time showed roughly 70 percent of the US population backing it—even as it was vehemently opposed by the Stalinist Communist Party, which was slavishly supporting the Roosevelt administration.

The SWP initially voted against lending any support to the proposal, on the grounds that it would only encourage democratic and pacifist illusions in the working class. Trotsky criticized this attitude and argued that a campaign by the party in support of a popular referendum would provide a lever for mobilizing the working class independently against the coming imperialist war.

In a March 1938 discussion with the SWP leadership, Trotsky explained his approach to the referendum demand. Answering the SWP's argument that a referendum could not stop war, Trotsky acknowledged that of course it was true that only the socialist revolution could put an end to war, but he insisted that, while the party must continuously fight against illusions in capitalist democracy, it did not reject democratic demands, to the extent that such demands served to politically awaken masses of workers and draw them into struggle. Popular support for the referendum demand had a progressive content, in that it reflected the hostility of broad masses to imperialist war, as well as their active distrust of the government and its supposed representatives in Congress.

The SWP shifted its position and called for the party to intervene aggressively in the working class in support of a referendum on war, while combating the pacifist and democratic illusions promoted by its bourgeois reformist sponsors. At the same time, it would fight to extend the struggle beyond the referendum demand into organized mass struggles by the working class, and advance its own revolutionary socialist program against war.

The referendum demand was included in the *Transitional Program*, which predicted that

The more widespread the movement for the referendum becomes, the sooner will the bourgeois pacifists move away from it; the more completely will the betrayers of the Comintern be compromised; the more acute will distrust of the imperialists become. [7]

This referendum initiative by the Workers League encountered vociferous opposition from two comrades in the LA branch, on the basis of a sectarian outlook that dismissed the demand as "utopian" and "futile," essentially dismissing the necessity of advancing any demand or carrying out any practice to develop the consciousness of the working class and create the conditions for its intervention as an independent social force in the struggle against war. Instead, they insisted that the task was to "teach the working class that capitalism inevitably leads to economic collapse, war and barbarism," and that the working class must take power. They offered no proposal, however, as to how masses of workers would come to such a conclusion, outside of the practical intervention of the revolutionary party in the class struggle.

The opponents of the demand further argued that it was impossible to stop war before the deadline announced by Bush for the US invasion and that, in any event, there was no provision in the US Constitution for holding a popular referendum.

An initial reply to these arguments by the Workers League Political Committee noted that, "petty-bourgeois radicalism easily combines

demagogic tub-thumping with democratic philistinism.” In response to their invocation of Bush’s deadline and the Constitution, it added, “What happens in January and after, what is or is not ‘constitutional’ will depend to no small extent on the relation of class forces. As Trotsky would have said ‘struggle will decide.’” [8]

The term “sectarian” is best known to the membership of our movement as an epithet leveled against the party by the Pabloites and other opportunists for our defense of principles and our implacable hostility to politics that subordinate the working class to Stalinism, the labor bureaucracies and bourgeois nationalism.

The fight against sectarianism, however, played no small role in the history of the Trotskyist movement, which was compelled to confront tendencies that bitterly opposed attempts of the movement to find a road to the masses, and to overcome the isolation imposed by the Stalinist and Social Democratic leaderships in the working class. This was particularly the case in 1934, with the French Turn and its application in the US with the entry into the Socialist Party. This tactic, proposed by Trotsky, was aimed at intervening in Socialist Parties, which were growing as a result of a radicalization of the working class, and at the discrediting of Stalinism. It was designed to win the best elements, especially the youth, by exposing the right-wing character of these parties’ leaderships and to involve the Trotskyist parties in mass struggles. In the case of the American Trotskyists, they were able to win over the Socialist Party youth and important sections of workers, creating the conditions for the establishment of the Socialist Workers Party.

Despite the failure of the sectarian opposition to the referendum campaign to gain any support within the party, we did not underestimate its political significance. As David North told a December 31, 1990 national aggregate of the Workers League:

I’ll make no bones about it. If the party were to give the slightest support or even credence to the political criticisms of the comrades from Los Angeles, it would mean the destruction of the party very quickly. And if their criticisms were to find a response within the International Committee, it would lead to the destruction of the international movement. [9]

The referendum demand was also denounced by the remnants of both factions of the British WRP—those who followed Healy and those who went with Slaughter and Banda.

Their argument was that in advancing the referendum demand, we were adapting to US imperialism and abandoning the perspective of “revolutionary defeatism.”

This repeated the same alliance against Trotskyism seen in 1983. Then, in the attempt to suppress the criticisms advanced by the Workers League of the WRP’s increasing turn back to Pabloism, Slaughter issued his cynical denunciation of an article that appeared in the *Bulletin* (then newspaper of the Workers League) on the US invasion of Grenada, ostensibly because it failed to explicitly call for the military defeat of US imperialism. He linked this supposed failure to what he criticized as a “heavy emphasis on the ‘political independence of the working class.’”

A call for military defeat was absurd after US troops had already conquered the island, encountering no resistance outside of a small group of Cuban construction workers. More importantly, the separation of revolutionary defeatism from the independence of the working class was deeply reactionary.

In his report to the 11th Plenum, David North explained the political significance of revolutionary defeatism and the vital lessons that had been learned in the party’s approach to the Gulf War, in terms of clarifying what it means to mobilize the working class against imperialism.

We have rejected the idea that we are some sort of political bystanders calling upon Saddam Hussein to defeat American imperialism. We fight for the political independence of the working class, for the mobilization of the working class against this war. When we speak of the defeat of imperialism in war, we speak of defeat through the instrument of the class struggle. ...

As Trotsky says, the formula, “the defeat of the ruling class at home is the lesser evil,” means the following: it is the lesser evil if it is brought about through the independent mobilization of the working class.

He went on to present the example of World War II, pointing out that an abstract call for the defeat of US forces by Hitler as the lesser evil, that a victory of the Nazis would be a preferable outcome, would be a mockery of Marxism and totally reactionary. To the extent that the defeat of US imperialism was brought about by a successful revolution by the American working class, however, it would represent a preferable outcome, laying the basis for the development of the world revolution and the settling of accounts with fascism by the international working class.

Moreover, in the context of the Gulf War, the call for revolutionary defeatism from the standpoint of fighting the US military to the last Iraqi was senseless and reactionary. The military balance of forces was such that—outside of the revolutionary mobilization of the masses of the Middle East and the working class in the US and beyond—the military victory of the US was virtually assured. More fundamentally, it betrayed a complete disdain for and hostility to the fight against war based upon the struggle of the working class. It was entirely bound up with the Pabloite perspective that one or another form of “armed struggle,” waged by non-proletarian forces, was the substitute for the revolutionary mobilization of the working class internationally, and particularly in the advanced capitalist countries.

The most decisive response of the ICFI to the Gulf War, US imperialism’s “unipolar moment” and the march toward the restoration of capitalism and dissolution of the USSR, was the calling of the Berlin Conference against imperialist war and colonialism.

This was certainly one of the most ambitious and successful initiatives undertaken by the International Committee in its history, with its pamphlet, the manifesto calling the conference, being issued in 18 languages.

The manifesto, issued on May 1, 1991, is an extraordinary document, which places the Persian Gulf War firmly in the context of the long history of the struggle to build the revolutionary socialist movement, in the struggle against war.

It states at the outset that the purpose of the conference is to “renew the great traditions of socialist internationalism betrayed by the social democrats, Stalinists and the other representatives of opportunism.”

Its starting point is that the Gulf War served to expose the complete bankruptcy of all the traditional parties and the trade union organizations of the working class, which systematically suppressed opposition to the war, serving as nothing more than appendages of the capitalist state. This meant that if there was to be a struggle against war, it had to be led by our international party.

The manifesto places necessary emphasis on the indispensable role played by Stalinism in supporting the war. This, it said, had “finally demolished what little there remained of the old myth that the Soviet bureaucracy represented some sort of ‘anti-imperialist’ force in world politics.”

It powerfully makes the case that with the new eruption of imperialist violence, the working class confronted all the great historical and political tasks posed at the beginning of the 20th century, with the rise of imperialism.

The same contradictions, between social production and private ownership, between the world character of production and the nation state system, that resulted in World War I and World War II threatened to produce an even more cataclysmic global conflict. As in the run-up to the previous world wars, the struggle for markets, resources and cheap labor, that led to wars and colonial enslavement in oppressed and defenseless countries, were paving the way to confrontation between the imperialist powers themselves.

The document establishes the inextricable link between the struggle against imperialism and the development of the revolutionary socialist movement. It traces this relationship from the founding of the Second International in 1889, and its passage in 1912 of the Basel manifesto, calling upon workers to unite across national boundaries in struggle against imperialism, and warning that a war would give rise to revolutionary struggles. The relentless growth of opportunism within the Second International, however, led its major sections to side with their own “fatherlands” when war broke out in 1914, voting war credits for their respective governments.

The war ushered in a period of capitalist disequilibrium that would last for three decades, dominated by capitalist crisis and overshadowed by the successful October 1917 Revolution in Russia, calling into question the very survival of the capitalist order.

The absence, however, of revolutionary parties—particularly in Europe—on a par with the Bolsheviks in Russia, allowed the bourgeoisie to defeat a series of revolutionary struggles. But they were unable to create a new equilibrium to replace what was shattered by 1914.

The rise of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, led by Stalin, and the terrible degeneration of the Communist International as it was subordinated to the Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country” and Moscow’s maneuvers with imperialism, led to a series of catastrophic defeats, above all in Germany. The coming to power of the Nazis in 1933, without a shot being fired, exposed the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism, leading Trotsky to found the Fourth International.

The document establishes that the ability of the bourgeoisie to achieve a new equilibrium in the aftermath of World War II, which they could not do following World War I, was based not merely on the rise of US imperialism as a hegemonic power, but also the indispensable role of Stalinism. It opposed and sabotaged the revolutionary struggles of the working class in the aftermath of the war, particularly in Italy, France and Greece. In Eastern Europe, its establishment of so-called buffer states served not only to suppress the working class and any genuine struggle for socialism, but also to pacify a fractious region that had been a source of European instability since the dawn of the 20th century.

The equilibrium established at the end of World War II, however, as the document makes clear, was mined with its own contradictions. Its revival of world trade and rebuilding of capitalism in Europe and Japan led to the gradual decline of US hegemony, leading to mounting US deficits which, by 1985, had transformed America into a debtor nation.

Turning to the crisis in the United States, the manifesto sketches out a portrait that seems altogether contemporary:

Not a single significant piece of social legislation has passed through Congress in more than two decades [now we can say *five decades*]. Massive budget cuts have destroyed what remains of the old social programs. The crime statistics are merely the most obvious symptoms of the malignant state of social relations. Amidst rapidly growing unemployment and, for those who still have jobs, declining wages, the state of education, housing and medical care is nothing less than catastrophic.

A third of the population is functionally illiterate. Not even the mass media can avoid reporting on a daily basis some of the more

spectacular ‘horror stories’ of lives destroyed by the impact of the social crisis: homeless people freezing in cardboard boxes, cancer victims being denied treatment because they have no medical insurance and unemployed workers and their families committing suicide. [10]

In relation to the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the then clearly obvious advance toward capitalist restoration in the USSR—which would be consummated within weeks of the Berlin conference—the manifesto establishes that their root cause was the same fundamental contradictions undermining the post-World War II equilibrium—between the world economy and the nation state system. These regimes proved the most vulnerable, precisely because of their autarkic programs of national economic development. Their crisis and demise represented a powerful vindication of the Trotskyist movement’s unrelenting struggle against the reactionary and anti-Marxist program of “socialism in one country.”

The document also exposed the conditions facing the working class in the oppressed and former colonial countries, in the face of the resurgence of imperialist militarism. It exposed the fiction of formal political independence, which brought no enduring social gains for the masses and preserved the economic domination of imperialism.

While some of the post-colonial regimes were able to utilize the cold war conflict between Moscow and Washington to extract greater concessions from imperialism, the abandonment by the Soviet bureaucracy, under Gorbachev, of its clients in the so-called Third World, lifted whatever restraints existed upon imperialist aggression.

In response, all of the bourgeois nationalists moved sharply to the right, seeking an accommodation with imperialism. This led various regimes, including Saddam Hussein’s fellow Baathist, Hafez al-Assad in Syria, to join the coalition that went to war with Iraq.

The manifesto stressed that the Berlin Conference had been called to prepare a decisive step forward in the resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership.

It made the following decisive point:

The great historical potential of the Fourth International is rooted objectively in the fact that its program corresponds to the inner logic of world economic development and articulates the world historical role of the international proletariat. However, the victory of its program will not be automatically realized as a result of spontaneous development of objective economic processes or the instinctive disgust of the masses with their old leaderships. The revolutionary program must be fought for. [11]

The opening report by comrade North explained, from a historical standpoint, how the changes in the objective situation, intersecting with the long struggle to build the Trotskyist movement in a bitter fight against Stalinism and Pabloite revisionism, had led to the conference in Berlin. It reviewed much the same stages or periods that were discussed in the first lecture of the SEP 2019 Summer School.

Summing up the significance of the conference, the report stated:

We meet today not as one faction of a broad Trotskyist movement. Those who are in this room today are the authoritative representatives of the Fourth International and world Trotskyism. It is now possible for the International Committee to decisively settle accounts with the Pabloites. We have done what Cannon

attempted to do 38 years ago and what the Socialist Labour League said should be done years ago, that is, purged Pabloite opportunism from the Fourth International. [12]

It counterposed the conditions under which the conference had been convened in Berlin to those that prevailed when the Fourth International was founded in 1938. Over the course of the previous 12 months, leading figures in the convening of that founding congress—Trotsky's son Leon Sedov, his political secretary Erwin Wolf and the secretary of the Fourth International, Rudolf Klement—had all been assassinated by the Stalinist secret police, the GPU. There was no opening report to the congress, as the document that was to be delivered had been stolen from Klement's body when he was abducted and assassinated.

These murders were inextricably linked to the campaign of political genocide in the Soviet Union, directed against all of the revolutionary workers, socialist intellectuals and Bolshevik leaders who had played a decisive role in the October 1917 Revolution.

Within one year of the founding of the Fourth International, humanity would be plunged into another world war, and within two, its principal leader, Leon Trotsky, would die at the hands of a GPU assassin. The war itself saw the cadres of the Fourth International subjected to the combined and deadly repression of the Stalinists and fascists, as well as that of the so-called democratic imperialists, with the leaders of the American section jailed on sedition charges.

While the Fourth International survived the Second World War, as the report states:

... what the police of the fascists, Stalinists and "democratic" imperialists had failed to achieve—the destruction of the Fourth International—was very nearly accomplished by an opportunist tendency which emerged as a response to the restabilization of world capitalism, on the basis of the political settlement between American imperialism and the Kremlin. From the developments in Yugoslavia under Tito and the nationalization of property relations in Eastern Europe, Michel Pablo and his then close associate Ernest Mandel drew the conclusion that Stalinism retained a revolutionary potential that Trotsky had failed to appreciate. [13]

Rather than being, as Trotsky had insisted, the principal agency of imperialism in the workers movement, the Stalinist bureaucracies and their associated parties were destined to provide the necessary impulse for the victory of socialism.

Explaining the unfavorable conditions confronting orthodox Trotskyism during the period of Pabloism's ascendancy, comrade North emphasized:

In the final analysis, the influence of the Pabloites was based on the residual power of the Stalinist organizations and the petty-bourgeois forces which, due to the peculiar characteristics of the postwar order, were able to maintain, especially in the backward countries, influence over the masses on the basis of pseudo anti-imperialist radical posturing. The Pabloites collaborated with and promoted these forces to block the development of an independent revolutionary leadership in the working class. [14]

At the same time, the report makes the case that there were also very powerful objective forces underlying the 1985 split and orthodox Trotskyism moving from what it describes as a "semi-legal tendency" to

reasserting control over the Fourth International.

Referring to the period from 1982, when the Workers League first raised differences with the WRP, and 1985, as "an astonishingly brief period of time," the report declares:

Just as the previous domination of opportunism had deep objective roots, the change of relations within the International Committee was a reflection of changes within the world situation. The 1982-85 struggle within the International Committee roughly coincided with the crisis inside the Soviet bureaucracy in the aftermath of the events in Poland and the period leading up to the ascension of Gorbachev to power in March 1985. [15]

As we have discussed, the changed relations in the ICFI were not merely a passive reflection of great objective changes. They had been prepared and fought for. The increasing divergence between the Workers League and the Sri Lankan RCL on the one hand, and the WRP on the other, expressed opposed political, theoretical and, indeed, class orientations that had developed over the course of over a decade. The fundamental dividing line was between revolutionary internationalism and national opportunism.

In concluding the report to the Berlin Conference, David North explained:

We are entering into a period which will be characterized by ever-greater struggles of the working class. Our task is to bring to this growing movement of the working class Marxist consciousness, and to organize the vanguard of the working class into sections of the Fourth International as the world party of socialist revolution...

We must transform the spontaneous militancy of the working class into Marxist consciousness. And we have the political strength to do this, precisely because we have decisively settled accounts with those who betrayed the program of Trotskyism within our own movement. We have demonstrated our right to lead the working class by virtue of this struggle. [16]

This conference laid the foundations for the decision taken, within the International Committee four years later, for the transformation of leagues into parties, which will be the subject of another lecture. The report identified the essential historical implications of the irrevocable discrediting of Stalinism and its apologists for our international party:

This Berlin conference marks a new stage in the development of the Fourth International. The International Committee today constitutes the only bona fide world Trotskyist organization in the entire world. The International Committee is not merely a specific tendency within the Fourth International, but it is the Fourth International as such. Starting with this conference, the International Committee will assume leadership responsibilities for the work of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution. [17]

Together with the liquidation of the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf war, the other major world development of decisive importance to the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was unfolding

in the midst of the Berlin Conference, was the breakup of Yugoslavia.

The conference manifesto stated the following:

News accounts of contemporary events in the Balkans read as if they were written in 1930 or even 1910. The international press is full of reports of conflicts between Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and Bosnian Muslims; of battles over the definition of the national identity of the Macedonians. [18]

The manifesto warned that these conflicts were being manipulated and exploited by the imperialist powers, while capitalism sought to divert popular indignation over social inequality into the blind alley of national and ethnic conflict.

The ability of reactionary petty-bourgeois demagogues to agitate for communal violence it said, “is to be attributed not to the intellectual and moral power of nationalism, but to the political vacuum left by the prostration of the traditional organizations of the working class, which offer no way out of the crisis of the capitalist system.”

Between the calling of the conference on May 1, 1991 and its convening on November 16, events moved very rapidly, with Croatia and Slovenia both declaring their independence on June 25 of that year. Macedonia followed suit soon after, and the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina began its fragmentation into warring ethnic cantons. Armed clashes had broken out, particularly around the coastal city of Dubrovnik.

The promotion of virulent ethno-chauvinism and national separatism was led by former bureaucrats of Yugoslavia’s ruling League of Communists. They sought, on the one hand, to divide and suppress the Yugoslav working class, which had carried out a wave of mass strikes against the austerity measures imposed by the IMF as part of capitalist restoration. On the other, they were driven to carve out ethnic states in order to forge their own independent relations with imperialism as a new ruling class of comprador capitalists.

In his report to the conference, comrade North pointed to the attitude adopted by the Pabloite leader Ernest Mandel, who advocated unconditional support for the self-determination of Croatia, regardless of the character of the regime. Mandel moreover issued a call for direct imperialist intervention, denouncing Serbian chauvinism, while turning a blind eye to Croatian chauvinism.

This position dovetailed neatly with that of German imperialism, which was backing Croatian and Slovenian independence as part of a post-reunification reassertion of its power in Europe. German imperialism was returning to the scenes of its crimes in 1914 and 1941, unilaterally defying the United States, the United Nations and the European Commission.

The Berlin conference adopted a resolution titled “On the Defense of the Working Class in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union” which stated the following:

Everywhere rival capitalist cliques are stirring up nationalism and chauvinism, in order to incite the workers against each other and to preempt an uprising against the old and new oppressors. The bloodbath in Yugoslavia is a result of these policies. This war has nothing to do with the right of nations to self-determination. Serbian and Croatian nationalists are merely fighting to secure for themselves a larger portion of the exploitation of the working class. [19]

The history of Yugoslavia, its rise and fall, could be the subject for an entire school, as could the national question and the slogan of “self-

determination.” Clearly that cannot be accomplished in this lecture.

Of course, the ICFI’s development of its perspective on the national question had derived from the struggle undertaken between 1982 and 1985 against the WRP’s promotion of various bourgeois nationalist leaders as “anti-imperialists,” to whom political support had to be given. Against this return to the outlook of Pabloism and unprincipled alliances with bourgeois nationalist regimes, the Workers League had defended Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, and the necessity for the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class on an international basis as the only means of realizing the democratic tasks of the revolution in the oppressed countries.

This analysis was deepened in the ICFI perspectives resolution of 1988, which pointed to the organic inability of any of the representatives of the national bourgeoisie to wage a consistent struggle against imperialism. It was further concretized in the critical discussions on perspectives in Sri Lanka and the party’s attitude toward the Tamil nationalist LTTE, which will be the subject of another lecture.

Not only the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the breakup of Yugoslavia, but more fundamentally, the development of capitalist globalization, gave rise to a new type of nationalist movement, seeking the dismemberment of existing states—including those that emerged out of the previous national struggles against colonialism—to further the interests of rival bourgeois factions in establishing the most advantageous relations to imperialism and transnational capital.

This was patently the case in Yugoslavia, where the first impulse to break up the existing federation came from Slovenia and Croatia, the wealthiest regions of the country, where local ruling elites calculated that they could fare better by breaking with the poorer republics and establishing their own independent ties to European governments, banks and corporations.

Similar considerations have motivated a whole series of national separatist movements, including in Europe, in the cases of the right-wing Northern League in Italy and Catalan nationalism in Spain.

This new nationalism stood in sharp contradiction to the earlier national movements, such as in India and China, which posed the progressive task of creating new states by unifying disparate peoples in a common struggle against imperialism—a task that clearly proved unrealizable under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. The nationalist movements that emerged at the close of the 20th century sought, instead, to break up existing states along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines with the aid of imperialism.

The Pabloite forces defended and promoted these new nationalist movements, invoking the slogan of the “right to self-determination” and regurgitating quotes from Lenin and Trotsky, ripped out of both their historical and political context and using them for purposes totally antithetical to their entire revolutionary internationalist perspective.

Writing in response to a manifesto issued by the Armenian social democrats, Lenin declared:

The demand for recognition of every nationality’s right to self-determination simply implies that we, the party of the proletariat, must always and unconditionally oppose any attempt to influence from without by violence or injustice. While at all times performing this negative duty of ours (to fight and protest against violence), we on our part concern ourselves with the self-determination of the proletariat in each nationality rather than with self-determination of peoples or nations ... As for support of the demand for national autonomy, it is by no means a permanent and binding part of the program of the proletariat. This support may become necessary for it only in isolated and exceptional cases... [20]



What does Lenin mean by “this negative duty of ours?” He was saying that socialists—even nearly a century ago—do not positively advocate national separation. Rather, they are intransigent opponents of any attempt to suppress national minorities or hold them within existing capitalist nation state structures by force. The Bolsheviks defended the right to self-determination—rather than advocating national separatism—as a means of combating nationalist influences within the working class and breaking down ethnic and linguistic barriers characteristic of regimes with a belated capitalist development. In Russia, known as “the prison house of nations,” this took the form of combating Great Russian chauvinism, in order to create the best conditions for the development of a unified class struggle across the entire tsarist empire.

In his work *The Right of Nations to Self-determination*, Lenin demanded “a concrete historical analysis of the question” of self-determination. He insisted that it was not some abstract and universal slogan, and that it had to be examined from the standpoint of the historical stage of development of given countries.

Writing in 1914, Lenin divided the world into three categories. In the first, the advanced capitalist countries of Europe, he said that the role of progressive bourgeois nationalist movements had come to an end by 1871. In the second, Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Russia itself, bourgeois national movements had arisen with the dawn of the 20th century. And in the third, the colonial and semi-colonial countries, including China, India and Turkey, which accounted for the majority of humanity, bourgeois national movements had “hardly begun.”

Moreover, Lenin drew out the objective impulse of the national movements in the development of capitalism, which was bound up with the formation of national states, the political unification of territories and the capture of the home market.

In its re-examination of the slogan of national self-determination, the ICFI adopted the same historical-materialist approach as Lenin, not repeating old formulae by rote, but making a concrete historical analysis.

Clearly, the countries in the two categories where Lenin said that national self-determination was applicable—Eastern Europe, Russia and the Balkans and the colonial world—had gone through immense revolutionary convulsions since 1914, including the October 1917 revolution in Russia and the decolonization of Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

The new ethno-nationalist separatist movements are not the “bourgeois-democratic national movements” to which Lenin referred. In Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Russia, they emerged as part of the process of capitalist restoration and bureaucrats turning themselves into capitalists, seeking to carve out their territories through violence and ethnic cleansing. In the former colonial countries, they represent the byproduct of the failure of more than half a century of rule by bourgeois nationalist governments to achieve independence from imperialism.

Under these conditions, the “right to self-determination” had come to mean something very different than the conceptions advanced by Lenin. The “negative” sense given to this right by Lenin and the Bolsheviks has been completely jettisoned by the Pabloites and pseudo-lefts who, following the lead of the imperialist powers, promote every manifestation of national separatism, based on ethnic and religious particularism, as a progressive development.

These new nationalist movements are manifestly not engaged in the process described by Lenin: the formation of national states to unify a national territory and capture the home market. Rather they are dedicated to the carve-up of existing states. Rather than the creation of a home market, their aim is to establish closer relations with imperialism for the benefit of local bourgeois cliques.

The ICFI rejected the conception that the liberation of humanity could be advanced in this era of global economic integration by establishing new national states. The program of carving up existing populations according

to ethnicity, language and religion is the road to barbarism. In opposition to these developments, it advanced the unification of the working class in struggle across national boundaries, based upon the program of world socialist revolution.

In conclusion: the so-called “Unipolar Moment” of 1990 and 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the launching of the Gulf War, marked the collapse of the post-World War II equilibrium, established on the basis of the hegemony of American capitalism and the collaboration of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy. It signaled the beginning of a new period of uninterrupted war, the growth of inter-imperialist rivalries, and inevitably, a global rise in the class struggle and socialist revolution.

The response to great events, and the struggle to politically clarify the working class, undertaken in the wake of the 1985 split, had established irrefutably that this movement and this movement alone represented the Fourth International and Trotskyism. And it established that it is only this movement that is prepared to undertake the building of a genuine revolutionary party equal to the immense tasks confronting the working class.

The documents developed during this period of immense changes provide critical theoretical and political foundations for the work that now stands in front of us, as we confront a resurgence of the class struggle on an international scale, creating the conditions for the building of the Fourth International in every country, as the mass party of world socialist revolution envisioned by Leon Trotsky.

Footnotes:

[1] *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International, Perspectives Resolution of the International Committee of the Fourth International*, (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1988), p. 66.

[2] Fareed Zakaria, “The Self-Destruction of American Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 4, (July/August 2019)

[3] Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1, (1990/1991), pp. 23–33

[4] *The Bulletin*, March 1, 1991, “Bush is Guilty of Mass Murder”

[5] Cited in *Desert Slaughter, The Imperialist War Against Iraq*, (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1991), p. 232.

[6] Karl Marx Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 153.

[7] *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International, The Transitional Program*, (New York: Labor Publications, 1981), p. 20.

[8] *Workers League Internal Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 15, p. 31.

[9] *Workers League Internal Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 2.

[10] *Oppose Imperialist War & Colonialism, Manifesto of the International Committee of the Fourth International*, (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1991), p. 12.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[12] *The Fourth International*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall-Winter 1992, p. 11.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[18] *Oppose Imperialist War & Colonialism*, p. 16.

[19] *The Fourth International*, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 38.

[20] *On the Manifesto of the Armenian Social Democrats*, *Iskra*, No. 33, Feb. 1, 1903, Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, pp. 326–329.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**