

The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International: An analysis of the ICFI Perspectives resolution of 1988

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20 September 2019

This lecture was delivered to the Socialist Equality Party (US) Summer School on July 23, 2019 by Andre Damon, regular writer for the World Socialist Web Site and leading member of the Socialist Equality Party in the US.

In his opening report to the Thirteenth National Congress of the Workers League in 1988, David North noted:

... for Marxists, the program arises out of a profound assimilation of the world historical experiences in which the revolutionary workers movement is rooted. The party's program can only take shape through a critique of the past, which reveals the process out of which this "present" emerged. Detached from its historical roots, the "present" is a mere facade, an appearance without texture, without depth and without truth. [1]

As with all the theoretical work of the Trotskyist movement—no matter how seemingly abstracted from day-to-day work—the study we are engaged in is intended for the most practical of ends. In our review of the history of the ICFI we are forging the analytical instruments with which we process and cognize contemporary reality, orient ourselves to the working class, and fight to assume its leadership in the socialist transformation of society.

Appropriating the lessons of the past is, itself, a contribution to the work of the present. The Thirteenth National Congress cited Hegel's exposition, in his history of philosophy, of the development of human thought:

This is the function of our own and of every age: to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and in so doing to develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level. In thus appropriating it to ourselves we make it into something different from what it was before. On the presupposition of an already existing intellectual world which is transformed in our appropriation of it, depends the fact that Philosophy can only arise in connection with previous Philosophy, from which of necessity it has arisen. The course of history does not show us the Becoming of things foreign to us, but the Becoming of ourselves and of our own knowledge. [2]

In other words, the critical evaluation of the past, far from a passive act of reflection, itself constitutes revolutionary practice.

This is the meaning of the lines that, in many ways, were the clarion call for the defeat of national opportunism within the IC, and were subsequently published in *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*:

A leadership that does not strive collectively to assimilate the whole of this history cannot adequately fulfill its revolutionary responsibilities to the working class... Thus the development of Trotskyism proceeds from the fresh experiences of the class struggle, which are posited on the entire historically-derived knowledge of our movement. [3]

In the opening report to its Thirteenth National Congress, in August 1988, the Workers League looked back over the nearly three years since the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party and referred to what David North called "our own October Revolution of 1985." We wrote:

Since our own October Revolution of 1985, a vast transformation has taken place inside the International Committee. [4]

On the face of it, such a comparison might seem almost presumptuous. The October Revolution is the greatest event in the history of the 20th century. How can we compare an event directly involving a few hundred, or, at most, a few thousand people, to a historical event that shaped the life of every one of the ten billion people that have lived ever since?

But the comparison is not an exaggeration. The split created the conditions for a theoretical renaissance of Marxism, whose energy, scope and dynamism were comparable to the development of Marxist theory in the 1890s and 1917, but telescoped into just a few years.

On April 1–2, 1988, the Workers League Central Committee Plenum noted that "the essential significance of the split" was that, "We began a systematic struggle to purge the IC of opportunism, and to restore the historically-grounded program of Trotskyism to its rightful place within the world party and all its sections." [5]

"In a fundamental sense," noted the Workers League Political Committee on January 3, 1988, "we had won the battle against the renegades:"

Through our struggle we had ejected a thoroughly right-wing clique of opportunists, reformed and reestablished our Trotskyist

foundations and made a big development in the theoretical level of the party. Reflected in the five issues of the *Fourth International* has been the greatest development of Marxism since the days of Trotsky. [6]

The Workers League Thirteenth National Congress declared:

If we put aside all the secondary features of the split and the immediate circumstances which attended it, what we are left with is a division between petty-bourgeois nationalists and proletarian internationalists.

...The present-day crisis of the workers movement on a world scale signifies, above all else, the utter bankruptcy of all national-reformist perspectives. [7]

In other words, the split with the representatives of national opportunism set the stage for the elucidation of an international program, the very conception of which had been rejected and abandoned by the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

David North's report to the April 1, 1988 Central Committee Plenum explained that the WRP had waged a "persistent attack on the conception that the program is fundamental in directing and guiding the struggles of the party in the working class...In opposition to that conception, they threw out the significance of program and placed above it, in a totally abstract and ahistorical way, the issue of method." [8]

The opening report to the 1988 Workers League summer camp stated:

Systematic work on perspectives came to an end in the period following the decisions announced by Nixon on August 15, 1971.... An analysis of the further development of the crisis was replaced with ritualistic references to the breakup of the Bretton Woods system on August 15. Nothing was really required except to await the collapse. This increasingly abstract perspective degenerated into a schema, in which the economic crisis arising from the end of dollar-gold convertibility would provoke revolutionary situations, first of all in Britain. This became the justification for an increasingly nationalist orientation by the WRP. [9]

Beginning in the early 1970s, the WRP began to embrace a series of interrelated doctrines—the "struggle against propagandism," the "undefeated working class," and the "practice of cognition," that denigrated the struggle for the correct political line through the systematic formulation of an international perspective.

"For Healy," David North wrote to Wije Dias on June 14, 1988, the "undefeated working class" was the abstraction he employed to characterize the entire post-war period." He added, "In essence, this abstraction prevented any concrete analysis of the strategical experiences of the working class." [10]

The "struggle against propagandism" was introduced in a statement issued in the name of the International Committee in 1972, and written by Cliff Slaughter, defending the split from the OCI (Organisation Communiste Internationaliste). It declared that the "struggle against idealist ways of thinking was necessary that went *much deeper than questions of agreement on program and policy.*" It complained that, "The Trotskyist movement had gone through a long period of isolation in which propagandism inevitably took a strong hold."

Commenting on this document, a report to the Workers League Plenum

on April 1, 1988 noted:

This statement introduced a theme that was to be repeated again and again during the next decade: that the struggle against propagandism and what they called "idealist ways of thinking"—not the struggle for a correct political line—constituted the essential task of the IC; the fight against these so-called idealist ways of thinking, the content of which was never defined, was supposedly far more important than "agreement on program and policy." [11]

Slaughter's IC statement continued:

Formal propaganda agreement, even to the extent of acknowledging verbally the basic theoretical premises of Marxism, actually served as a *barrier* to the real understanding of the unity of theory and practice. The same theory, which had rationalized a propaganda existence before, and which had never been called upon to guide a really revolutionary practice, now provided a screen of formal agreement to obstruct change, to obstruct understanding of the living movement of the class struggle. [12]

To this, the report to the Workers League Plenum replied:

In other words, we were led to believe that the whole purpose of the theory itself was to rationalize the propaganda existence. So you had the image of a handful of intellectuals in different parts of the world who really were too lazy and too disinterested to get their hands dirty and participate in real revolutionary struggles, presumably by joining the Communist Party or whatever mass movements existed.

The report continued:

According to this interpretation—of which Slaughter was the author—the crisis within the FI was not the product of opportunist revisions of program but rather of propagandism, which opposed "really revolutionary practice" and prevented an understanding of "the living movement."

In reality, the WRP was using almost the same language as Michel Pablo, who declared that "dogmas" were preventing the Fourth International from taking the leadership of "real mass struggles."

The June 1979 *Manifesto* of the Eighth World Congress of the ICFI intensified this frontal assault on the conception of the international program. The *Manifesto*, largely written by Banda, declared:

Cadres must be trained who will not place propaganda labels on the developments of the class struggle, thereby obscuring and preventing any real abstraction of its essence, but who will instead develop a fighting sensuous awareness of what the developing revolutionary reality demands.

Commenting on this document, the Workers League Central Committee Plenum report stated:

It was wrong for the Trotskyist movement to make a theoretical analysis of the class nature of the political tendencies dominating the working-class movement.... The WRP leaders opposed the concept that you actually made such an analysis of political tendencies on the basis of the historically-developed knowledge of the Marxist movement and the experiences of the world movement, verified scientifically. [13]

Banda went so far as to declare that the FBI takeover of the SWP was the result of the organization's past fidelity to Marxist principles. He said the SWP "eventually transformed Marxism from a theory of knowledge into a ritualistic and dogmatic incantation of *historical facts and programmatic demands*."

The meaning of this passage is that "revolutionary practice" must be based on a rejection of "historical facts" and "programmatic demands." But what is one left with? Only crass opportunism and the ability, as David North put it, to "sniff out opportunities."

To top it all off, the *Manifesto* concluded, "What is required in every section is not the repetition of 'correct' formulae but a revolutionary practice which can unleash the explosive force of the masses."

But that means, what is necessary is not a correct program, a correct analysis and a correct policy, but the adaptation to whatever is subjectively deemed to "unleash the explosive force of the masses." What the degeneration of the WRP makes clear is that, in abandoning the fight for a "correct" political line, a party is likely to unleash not the masses, but a mob of middle-class hysterics.

Even, however, as the WRP was deepening its opportunist political orientation, a different tendency had been developing inside the IC. The Workers League and the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) in Sri Lanka, leveraging their experience in the struggle against Pabloism, began to come into conflict with this orientation. These differences emerged as early as 1971, with the RCL's criticisms of the Socialist Labour League's response to the Indo-Pak War of 1971.

In the United States, the Workers League's steeping in the traditions of Trotskyist internationalism expressed itself, as David North put it in his contribution, in a "determined orientation to the working class." North insisted, "Despite all the difficulties it confronted, the Workers League was imbued with confidence in the revolutionary role of the American working class. It was here that the best traditions of 'Cannonism' found expression." [14]

Following the split, David North related the striving of the Workers League for programmatic and political clarity to its turn deeper toward the working class.

"In the period of 1981–84, I was very involved in trade union work, PATCO, Greyhound and Phelps Dodge," he said, at an April 10, 1988 Political Committee meeting. "The more we made gains in this trade union work, the more I felt the necessity of an international perspective. I called for a renewal of the struggle against Pabloism. During this period, we developed our political differences with the WRP. I felt our work was being crippled and that we required a political clarification." [15]

This struggle for a political program, arising organically from the Workers League's orientation toward the working class, expressed itself in the party's 1978 program, *The World Economic-Political Crisis of Capitalism and the Death Agony of US Imperialism*. That document sought to root a strategy for the American working class in a serious analysis of the global capitalist crisis. It presented the coming onslaught against the working class—which it predicted with extraordinary

lucidity—as the outcome of the crisis of American imperialism within the framework of the global crisis of capitalism. This orientation, in other words, placed the Workers League in direct conflict with the orientation to which the WRP had become increasingly committed.

In 1981, Cliff Slaughter produced a draft of a statement by the International Committee defining our attitude to the danger of imperialist war. Delegates from the Workers League criticized the document's presentation of the danger of war as a conflict between "two superpowers." David North subsequently noted, in his report to the 1987 Summer Camp:

We never accepted that kind of parallel characterization of a workers state and an imperialist state. "Superpowers" is a typical journalistic phrase, which conceals the essential class contradictions between the two countries. [16]

The letter critiquing the draft was a significant step forward toward the development of a world perspective for the IC. But, when viewed in retrospect, the letter was remarkably far-sighted, raising themes that would be elucidated with the publication of the material that would make up the volume, *A Quarter Century of War*, published in 2016:

The insoluble economic crisis of world capitalism is driving... an attempt by world imperialism, spearheaded by the United States, to restore the world position lost through the October Revolution of 1917 and the titanic struggles of national liberation throughout Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and to maintain, at all costs, the enslavement of Latin America. This would be a global war in the truest sense: A struggle by the oppressor nations against the Soviet Union and the oppressed nations. [17]

The letter continued:

The territorial re-division of the world has, for imperialism, been desperately complicated by two factors:

1. The existence of the USSR and the extension, after 1945, of the nationalized property relations through the overthrow and expropriation of the bourgeoisie in Eastern Europe, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Albania and vast portions of Asia (China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia)....

2. The anti-colonial struggles represented historic defeats for world imperialism. It cannot survive without destroying the USSR, restoring colonial slavery, and on this basis re-dividing the world in the interest of imperialist exploitation....

Imperialism sees no way out of the crisis except through the violent re-division of the world. But this re-division assumes a different form from that of the previous world wars. It is not a matter of imperialist states attempting to seize each other's colonies, "but of regaining lost positions" through the destruction of national revolutionary movements, the reestablishment, in one form or another, of colonial slavery, and the destruction of the workers states—above all, the USSR. This is the basis of all the imperialist alliances.

Definite plans for splitting the "booty" from an imperialist war are being formulated by the major imperialist powers: the US is to "get" the Persian Gulf; France, working closely with the United

States, is to “get” the areas of its old colonial empire from North Africa through the regions of the Congo....

The letter argued that world imperialism was striving for a global re-division of the world, including both the Soviet Union and the former colonies. With the benefit of hindsight, we now see that the essential process the letter was describing took the form, not of a military conquest of the Soviet Union, but of the Stalinist bureaucracy opening the door to capitalist restoration. The neo-colonial re-division of the world through a massive outbreak of war is, in fact, what happened in the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, beginning with the first Gulf War of 1991.

The struggle to formulate a global program continued over subsequent years through the struggle waged by the IC for Trotskyism. In January 1984, David North wrote to Michael Banda, expressing concern:

We do feel that the International Committee has for some time been working without a clear and politically-unified perspective to guide its practice. Rather than a perspective for the building of sections of the International Committee in every country, the central focus of the IC’s work for several years has been the development of alliances with various bourgeois nationalist regimes and liberation movements. [18]

The letter further warned that:

No matter how promising certain developments within the national sections may appear—such as our own experiences in various trade union struggles—these will not produce real gains unless such work is guided by a scientifically worked-out international perspective. The more the Workers League turns toward the working class, the more we feel the need for the closest collaboration with our international comrades to drive the work forward.

In February 1984, representatives from the Workers League went to an IC meeting, hoping to discuss these points. But the WRP leadership threatened the Workers League with an immediate split, unless the criticisms were withdrawn. As David North subsequently commented:

The political alliances which had been formed by the WRP leadership with the bourgeois nationalists, the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracies, and its behind-the-scenes overtures to the Soviet bureaucracy, could not have survived a perspectives discussion inside the International Committee. [19]

The opening report to the Seventh Plenum of the IC, at which the perspectives resolution was adopted, began by stating:

In 1984, we asked Healy, Slaughter and Banda for discussions on perspectives. It took an enormous split within our movement in order to make that discussion possible. Before we could begin to elaborate our international perspective of proletarian revolution, we first had to break ruthlessly with the petty-bourgeois forces

inside the International Committee. That is what actually happened.

Prior to the split, the Workers League had emphasized that the crisis developing in the IC required a renewal of the fight against Pabloism and the development of our international perspectives. It was impossible to have this discussion with the WRP because their orientation was nationalist—the work of the IC was subordinated to their work in Britain. They had a petty-bourgeois nationalist line. It was only in the fight against this that the IC was able to develop our perspectives, after years of the stifling of that work. [20]

“There is a very close connection,” the opening report to the Workers League Central Committee Plenum noted, “between the struggle against opportunism and the elaboration of our international perspective:”

It was first of all necessary to wage a conscious struggle against every form of residual nationalism inside the ICFI and, at the same time, to establish the organic connection between the objective development of the world capitalist crisis and the conscious program of the ICFI. *We must recognize that this fight for an international perspective and program is the highest point of the struggle against opportunism because ultimately all opportunism is rooted in very definite forms of national adaptation.* [21]

The report continued:

[T]he building of the party, the creation of a genuine proletarian party proceeds through a process of relentless struggle to hammer out, in a scientific way, a program based on the defense of the objective historical interests of the working class. ... It is not simply the accumulation of ever-larger numbers of members. It is the forging of an instrument which, at a certain point in the development of the objective situation, proves itself worthy of the historical needs of the working class. [22]

Looking over the entire experience of the split, North concluded:

The historical development of opportunism inside the Marxist movement has again and again taken the form of separating socialism from its internationalist essence. That is true not only in the Second and Third, but also in the Fourth International...

“Internationalism,” North emphasised, “is the essence of the heart of the struggle to finally overcome the devastating impact of opportunism upon the Fourth International.”

This principle forms the heart of the 1988 perspectives resolution, which declares in point 169:

Revolutionary internationalism is the political antipode of opportunism. In one form or another, opportunism expresses a definite adaptation to the so-called realities of political life as it takes shape within a given national environment... Thus, the central historic contribution which the sections of the International Committee make to the workers’ movement in the countries in

which they operate is the collective and unified struggle for the perspective of world socialist revolution. [23]

The remnants of the WRP responded to the IC's efforts to develop the struggle for this program with a mixture of perplexity and hostility. To cite one example, writing in the *News Line* of Sheila Torrance, Ray Athow scratched his head over the emphasis of the Workers League's election platform on the struggle for proletarian internationalism. He quotes the following passage:

In order to defeat the capitalists, who operate on a global scale, the American workers must adopt an international revolutionary strategy and unite their struggles with those of their class brothers in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. Regardless of their country, language, religion or skin color, workers share the same concerns and confront the same capitalist enemy.

To this, Athow replies:

We don't want to belittle North's contribution to 'Marxism,' but Marx himself did put this question more briefly 140 years ago when he declared: 'Workers of the world, unite!'

The "almost religious nature of this Election program," Athow wrote, "is revealed by statements such as 'the Workers League brings to the labor movement in the United States the strategy of world socialist revolution.'"

In contradiction to this statement, Athow declared, "The world revolution only develops through its national parts."

Replying to Athow's statements, North wrote:

[I]t is not enough to repeat the words 'Workers of the world, unite.' First of all, the content of internationalism must be derived and developed from a study of the concrete evolution of world economy and its impact upon the class struggle. Like all scientific Marxist concepts, that of internationalism has evolved in accordance with the objective development of the world capitalist system.

In the epoch of the Second International, there existed a real historically-determined gulf between the slogan advanced by Marx at the very dawn of the international workers movement and the given stage of capitalist development within which the new mass working-class parties were taking shape. Within the framework of the national state in the last decade of the nineteenth century, there were still progressive tasks which preoccupied the immediate attention of the young social democratic parties and largely determined the character of their practical work....

... the world socialist revolution is not simply the sum of national revolutions. Were it merely that, then the concept of world socialist revolution would hardly be of any special significance, inasmuch as it would only be used to describe a completed process. But the world socialist revolution is itself a definite historical epoch, not a series of isolated events. It is a world epoch. The 'national parts' develop in accordance with the laws which govern this world historical process.

If the world revolution exists only as the accumulation of

national revolutions, what then is the basis of the World Party of Socialist Revolution? What need is there for an international party if world socialism is simply realized on the basis of an unconnected "succession of national struggles," or national struggles which are only linked through moral solidarity or a vague form of political sympathy? The necessity of the world party flows precisely from the fact that the world socialist revolution must be fought for and can only be realized as the consciously integrated and unified struggle of the international proletariat.

In July 1987, the Fourth Plenum of the ICFI initiated a discussion on the changes in the essential structures of world capitalism and their impact upon the international class struggle. At that conference, David North asked:

How do we foresee the development of the world socialist revolution? What processes and contradictions will provide the basis for a fresh upsurge of the working class and a renewal of revolutionary class struggle?

The answer, we stressed, was to be found in the "development of world capitalism associated with the globalization of the production process." This had raised to a new level the significance and inescapable necessity of socialist internationalism.

The opening report to the Workers League 1987 Summer Camp expressed these themes as follows:

Revolutions can only take place if they are objectively necessary, and we are the conscious agents of that necessity. In other words, our own work, the struggle within the International Committee, is one of the objectively-created forms taken by the conflict at the economic base of society, between the productive forces and the social relations.

It should be noted that this orientation to the global unity of the working class brought us into direct conflict with the ideologists of petty-bourgeois radical politics, who sought to equate anti-capitalism with anti-globalization, at a time before Trump and Bannon made undeniable the connection between economic nationalism and the most fascistic forms of bourgeois reaction. At the same time as our perspectives resolution was being written, Mouffe and Laclau were claiming that the highest task of the "revolutionary democratic" movement was the "organic reconstitution of the nation." And of course, the Democratic Socialists of America today proclaims, in the words of Bashkar Sunkara, that it is trying to build a version of "21st-century Americanism."

Reporting to the Workers League Political Committee on the discussion in Sri Lanka about the perspectives document, David North concluded:

The present-day development of the world economy and the international division of labor, embodied in the immense development of multinational corporations and transnational production, gives to internationalism an unprecedented concreteness. This makes necessary the international coordination and unified struggle of the working class. There exists no other

basis for a fight against imperialism in this epoch.”

He continued this theme in his report to the Seventh Plenum:

The working class is an international class. This is a question of principle. Marx defined the proletariat as a world historical class before the international nature of the working class was visible. It hadn't appeared in many countries. Now that this world historical role is grounded in the enormous development of the productive forces, this is no longer a theoretical question. It has become a practical question. This is why we say at the beginning of the document that the struggles of the working class have become internationalist not only in essence but also in form.

Criticizing the direction of the IC under the domination of the WRP, David North's report to the Seventh Plenum warned:

There was a danger of a fracture of the IC along nationalist lines, a national program. Our international strategy was seen only in a formal sense, Second International-style. In the early 20th century, such an attitude was understandable—not forgivable, but understandable. The peculiarities of national economies were extremely marked. The world economy had emerged, but was embryonic compared to today.

Coming out of the split, it was necessary for the International Committee to reaffirm its adherence to the primacy of the world revolution; the articulation of a global perspective. But this, the opening report to the Central Committee Plenum said, “produced a new level of struggle within the IC. Arising out of this analysis came the necessity of conducting a very systematic struggle to clarify within every section of the IC the primacy of our world program.”

This development was so significant, the report noted, that the Workers League itself had emerged as a “different party:”

In the last two years, we have sought to stamp out and destroy all vestiges of nationalism, remove the Pabloite encrustations on the movement and struggle to revive and rebuild the international movement in the method of Lenin and Trotsky. The long protracted fight to build the International has now reached a crucial stage.

This change, David North emphasized, “is making *the party incompatible with... petty-bourgeois radicalism*. That can only be done on the basis of an international program. The more we build up this consciousness and solidify the movement internationally on this common program, this common conception, the more we will be able to build a mass party of the working class.”

This struggle led to a successful reorientation of the IC sections on the basis of a common, international perspective. It deepened and intensified our political analysis and, in the end, only strengthened the 1988 program itself.

Ultimately, we are all here because the Workers League and the IC as a whole chose the perspective of internationalism and voted, at the Seventh Plenum, to accept the perspectives resolution.

David North's opening report to the Workers League Thirteenth National Congress summed up the essential content of the resolution:

In essence, this document deals with two fundamental and interrelated objective processes: the development of the world capitalist crisis, the crisis of the capitalist mode of production, and the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the proletariat—and, within that, the historic crisis of the Fourth International itself. [24]

We primarily remember the document for its contributions to our understanding of the globalization of production, but equally significant was the fact that it correctly analyzed the mass social struggles of the 1960s and 70s as fundamentally revolutionary, and which were systematically betrayed by the Pabloites.

The Thirteenth National Congress of the Workers League pointed to the document's assessment of the role of the Pabloite organizations in sabotaging the upsurge of the working class in the 1960s and 70s:

We establish, if only in outline form, that world capitalism passed through the greatest revolutionary crisis in its history between 1968 and 1975; and that its survival was possible only through the betrayals of the working class by its leadership; and that the subsequent offensive against the working class by the international bourgeoisie is the product of these betrayals. [25]

...The vast Latin American debt and the resulting destitution of millions of workers and peasants are not merely the outcome of abstract economic processes. All economic processes are mediated through the struggle of social classes. The conditions of the 1980s in Latin America are the direct product of the defeats of the Bolivian, Chilean and Argentine workers. [26]

Our attitude is the same as Trotsky's attitude to 1923 in Germany: capitalism could have been overthrown in sections of Europe had it not been for the weaknesses and betrayals of its leadership. The revolutionary experiences in the 60s and 70s were even greater than in 1923. The survival of capitalism was again based on the treachery of the Stalinists and Social Democrats.

Academic economists have, particularly in the 1990s, pointed to the “two periods of globalization,” comparing the era of globalization beginning in the 1980s with the one that came to a close in 1914. Our assessment prefigured such comparisons. The opening report to the 1987 Summer School noted:

The 42 years that have elapsed since the end of World War II have certain similarities with the final period of organic capitalist development: the 40-odd years between the founding of the German Empire and the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, which signified the consolidation of the bourgeois state system in Western Europe, and the eruption of World War I in 1914.” [27]

The main components of the document were summed up in six points:

First, the unprecedented integration of the world market and internationalization of production

Point 117 of the resolution noted:

... an unprecedented integration of the world market and internationalization of production. The absolute and active predominance of the world economy over all national economies, including that of the United States, is a basic fact of modern life. Advances in technology associated with the invention and perfection of the integrated circuit have produced revolutionary changes in communications which, in turn, have accelerated the process of global economic integration. But these economic and technological developments, far from opening up new historical vistas for capitalism, have raised the fundamental contradiction between world economy and the capitalist nation-state system, and between social production and private ownership, to an unprecedented level of intensity.

The loss by the United States of its global economic hegemony, in both relative and absolute terms, symbolized by its transformation from the world's principal creditor into its largest debtor. This transformation, which manifests itself directly in the devastating decline in workers' living standards, opens up a period of revolutionary class confrontation in the US ...

The rise of Japan as the most potent industrial power and largest exporter of capital, challenging American capital in every corner of the globe and thus spearheading an enormous intensification of anti-imperialist antagonisms.

During this period, Japan rose to become the world's second-largest exporter, with a per capita GDP even greater than that of the US:

The extraordinarily rapid development of the economies of the Asia Pacific Rim has brought into existence large working classes that are being thrust into revolutionary conflicts against the native bourgeoisie, whose economic position is entirely dependent upon unsustainable export markets.

Point 137 notes:

The expansion of capitalism in many parts of the globe since the end of World War II and the creation of gigantic production centers in Asia does not contradict Lenin's definition of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. As Lenin specifically warned in *Imperialism*, "It would be a mistake to believe that this tendency to decay precludes the rapid growth of capitalism. It does not." American imperialism has utilized the countries of the Asia Pacific as "assembly platforms."

The horrific impoverishment of the backward countries and the utter collapse of the myriad "development" strategies of the impotent national bourgeoisie, must produce revolutionary confrontations.

The turn by all the Stalinist bureaucracies to the policies of the market economy, especially in China and the USSR, opens up a period of revolutionary confrontation between the bureaucracies and the working class.

Point 14 of the resolution warned that the new forms of global production did not diminish, but rather intensified the danger of world

war:

The global character of capitalist production has tremendously sharpened the economic and political antagonisms between the principal imperialist powers, and has once again brought to the forefront the irreconcilable contradiction between the objective development of the world economy and the nation-state form in which the whole system of capitalist property is historically rooted.

It explained the systematic global offensive by the entire ruling elite, for which the way had been cleared by the betrayal of the mass social struggles of the 1960s and 70s by the Pabloites:

The policies embarked upon by the American bourgeoisie in 1979–80 signaled a shift in the methods of class rule on an international scale. Simultaneously, the election of Thatcher in May 1979 marked the beginning of a sustained offensive aimed at disciplining the working class and destroying the social welfare system created in the aftermath of World War II. In France, the "socialist" Mitterrand government, with its four Stalinist ministers, after a sham display of radicalism, soon reverted to economic policies barely distinguishable from those of Reagan. A similar development occurred in Germany, following the election of Helmut Kohl. The European corollary of Reaganite "deregulation" has been the frenzied "privatization" campaigns aimed at dismantling the nationalized industries. Between 1979 and 1988, every European government, from Portugal to Greece, repudiated the policies of social reformism and class compromise. Nor was this process confined to the United States and Europe. Under Hawke in Australia and Lange in New Zealand, social democratic governments are tearing down even the limited barriers erected by the working class against untrammelled capitalist exploitation.

Despite the capitulations of the Stalinists and petty-bourgeois nationalists to the demands of global finance capital, the resolution characterized the period as one, not of capitalist ascendancy, but of capitalist crisis:

The visible crisis of the international workers movement has been seized upon by propagandists of the bourgeoisie to proclaim a new golden age of capitalism. But despite the enormous growth of poverty, the bourgeoisie has been unable to extricate itself from the deepening world crisis of the entire capitalist order. The crisis which confronts the bourgeoisie on a world scale is of a historic and systemic, and not simply conjunctural, character.

The document's analysis of the systematic betrayals carried out by trade unions all over the world in the exigencies of globalization, set out the theoretical grounds for our subsequent call for a break with the trade unions:

The ferocious competition between various national and continental blocs of capitalists requires, as a matter of urgent necessity, the complete integration of the workers organizations

into the productive mechanisms of state-finance capital. There exists no room for independent, or even quasi-independent, reformist labor organizations. Trade unions are being directly transformed into instruments through which the intensified exploitation of the proletariat in the interest of the national state is realized. Herein lies the source of the prostration of all the existing labor bureaucracies. The search for national solutions to the international crisis leads inevitably to the subordination of each national labor movement to the trade-war policies of the bourgeoisie. There is no way out of this impasse except on the basis of revolutionary internationalism, and we mean by this not the invocation of holiday phrases. The supreme strategical task that confronts the Trotskyist movement is the unification of the working class of the entire world into what Trotsky once referred to as “a single international proletarian organization of revolutionary action having one world center and one world political orientation.” [28]

Commenting on this analysis, David North concluded, “The real content of the crisis of the labor movement is not the failure of Marxism, but the bankruptcy of social reformism.”

Point 13 develops these points:

It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character. Thus, the unprecedented international mobility of capital has rendered all nationalist programs for the labor movement of different countries obsolete and reactionary.

It was precisely these developments that constituted the objective foundation with which the growth of the ICFI was necessarily linked. This point was developed and emphasized in David North’s August 1988 report to the Thirteenth National Congress of the Workers League:

We anticipate that the next stage of proletarian struggle will develop inexorably, beneath the combined pressure of objective economic tendencies and the subjective influence of Marxists, along an international trajectory. The proletariat will tend more and more to define itself in practice as an international class; and the Marxian internationalists, whose policies are the expression of this organic tendency, will cultivate the process and give it conscious form.

So much of what was analyzed in the program has come to pass, both in the growth of the class struggle and in the organization of the party itself.

We predicted, “It will become commonplace in the coming period for workers to organize strikes and other forms of struggle based on an international strategy. It will be looked on as something hopelessly outdated to enter into great struggles against capitalism without having sought to coordinate every aspect of those struggles with other sections of the international working class, that is, with workers outside the national borders.” [29]

It must be said: the fundamental tendencies identified in the document, not only continued and developed in the subsequent period, but

intensified.

Thirty years after the publication of the 1988 perspectives document, the economist Branko Milanovic published a book entitled *Global Inequality* that noted the convergence of social conditions for workers all over the world, pointing to the fact that the world was becoming one in which “class” was “the dominant cleavage rather than location.” The analysis was, as the proclamations of bourgeois economists typically are with regard to the IC, a day late and a dollar short, but it reflected the increasingly undeniable actuality of the processes identified in the 1988 resolution.

In fact, all over the world, workers are beginning to coordinate their struggles across international lines. It is no surprise that the first question we were asked, in a WSWS *Autoworkers Newsletter* meeting of autoworkers in Detroit, in December 2018, was “Will the WSWS work to coordinate struggles by workers in different parts of the world?”

In fact, all the elements identified by the IC in its analysis have only intensified, whether the transformative effect of technology, world trade, or the global integration of the working class itself.

Finally, much has been said in the press about the so-called end of globalization and the fragmenting of the internet. But this, too, is a manifestation of the processes identified in the document above. It is not Moore’s law that is breaking down, but the capitalist nation-state system, which is rebelling against the means of production, in line with the analysis made by Trotsky a century ago, and reaffirmed in the aftermath of the split.

The global integration of the class struggle, which is now beginning to manifest itself in preliminary fashion, found most immediate expression in the International Committee itself. As was reported to the Detroit Aggregate in 1988:

During the past year the sections of the ICFI have been coordinating their practical work on a day to day basis. The Workers League and the SLL are utilizing computer and communications technology to transfer files at least twice a week—a step toward the global integration of newspaper production and political work. We were able to publish simultaneously in the United States, Australia and Germany the statement of the International Committee on the events in China, and we are also developing our computer links with the BSA and the ICP. Other areas of practical work are being developed on the basis of close international collaboration.

The significance of this international practical work should not be underestimated. The scope of this international collaboration, its direct impact on virtually every aspect of the practical work of each section, has profoundly and positively altered the character of the ICFI and its sections. The latter are ceasing to exist in any politically and practically meaningful way as independent entities. Upon the foundation of a common political program, a complex network of relationships has emerged within the ICFI which binds together every section. That is, the sections of the ICFI comprise interconnected and interdependent components of a single political organism. Any breaking of that relationship would have devastating effects within the section involved. Every section has now become dependent for its very existence upon this international cooperation and collaboration, both ideological and practical.

In a letter he sent to Linda Tenenbaum on July 10, 1989, David North observed that “it was precisely during the period of political reactions (1907–1917 and then 1923–1940)—when he was fighting for the

development of revolutionary perspective in the teeth of reaction—that Trotsky made his most profound contributions to the development of revolutionary theory.”

I think it is essentially the same process we are describing here. The period we are analyzing is a period of reaction. But within that period existed profound progressive currents and tendencies. It is those progressive tendencies that found expression in the theoretical renaissance of Marxism inside the ICFI after 1985.

Footnotes:

- [1] David North, “Workers League Thirteenth National Congress Report,” *Fourth International, July–December 1988*, p. 41.
- [2] *History of Philosophy*, pp. 2–3.
- [3] David North, *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, (Detroit, 1985), p. 5; 17–18.
- [4] op. cit., *Fourth International, July–December 1988*, p. 33.
- [5] David North, “April 1 Workers League Central Committee Plenum Political Report,” *Workers League Internal Bulletin, May 1988*, p. 47.
- [6] *ibid.*, *Workers League Internal Bulletin, May 1988*, p. 3.
- [7] op. cit., *Fourth International, July–December 1988*, p. 48.
- [8] David North, “April 1 Workers League Central Committee Plenum Political Report,” *Workers League Internal Bulletin, May 1988*, p. 44.
- [9] David North, “Political Report on the Perspectives of the International Committee of the Fourth International,” *Fourth International, January–March 1988*, p. 67.
- [10] David North, “June 14, 1988 Letter from David North to Wije Dias,” *Political Chronology of the International Committee of the Fourth International 1982–1991*, p. 44.
- [11] David North, “April 1 Workers League Central Committee Plenum Political Report,” *Workers League Internal Bulletin, May 1988*, p. 48.
- [12] “Statement by the International Committee (Majority), March 1, 1972,” *Trotskyism vs. Revisionism, Volume 6*, p. 83.
- [13] David North, “April 1 Workers League Central Committee Plenum Political Report,” *Workers League Internal Bulletin, May 1988*, p. 49.
- [14] David North, “August 4 Opening Report to SEP 2019 Summer School.”
- [15] David North, “April 10 Workers League Political Committee Meeting,” *Workers League Internal Bulletin, May 1988*, p. 87.
- [16] op. cit., *Fourth International, January–March 1988*, p. 67.
- [17] David North, “November 4, 1981 letter to Mike Banda.”
- [18] David North, “Letter from David North to Mike Banda–January 23, 1984,” *The ICFI Defends Trotskyism*, p. 35.
- [19] op. cit., *Fourth International, January–March 1988*, p. 67.
- [20] David North, “Seventh Plenum of the International Committee of the Fourth International.”
- [21] David North, “April 1 Workers League Central Committee Plenum Political Report,” *Workers League Internal Bulletin, May 1988*, p. 56.
- [22] *ibid.*, p. 52.
- [23] International Committee of the Fourth International, “*The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*,” p. 70.
- [24] op. cit., *Fourth International, July–December 1988*, p. 33.
- [25] *ibid.*, p. 33.
- [26] *ibid.*, p. 35.
- [27] op. cit., *Fourth International, January–March 1988*, p. 71.
- [28] op. cit., *Fourth International, July–December 1988*, p. 38.
- [29] op. cit., *Fourth International, January–March 1988*, p. 82.



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