

The ICFI and the Crisis of Stalinism

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The political and theoretical gains from the split with the WRP

The victory of the Trotskyist majority of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) over the national opportunist Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) leadership reaffirmed and strengthened the proletarian internationalist foundations of the world party. It upheld the Fourth International's historical position of uncompromising opposition to Stalinism, understood to be the chief counterrevolutionary agency of imperialism within the workers movement, and defended the program of world socialist revolution and strategy of permanent revolution against the Stalinist doctrine of "socialism in one country."

The struggle between 1982 and 1986 unfolded against the backdrop of a deepening crisis of Stalinism internationally. It was preceded by General Jaruzelski's declaration of martial law in Poland and suppression of Solidarity in December of 1981.

Leonid Brezhnev, who had headed the Soviet Communist Party and state apparatus from 1964, died on November 10, 1982, three days after the date of the final section of the document presented by the Workers League, in October–November 1982, outlining its differences with the WRP on Marxist philosophy and the WRP's political line. Brezhnev was succeeded by KGP head, Yuri Andropov.

Andropov died in February 1984, the same month that the Workers League presented a further document to the IC, summing up its opposition to the WRP's Pabloite line. He was succeeded by Konstantin Chernenko.

Chernenko died in March 1985, seven days after the end of the year-long UK miners' strike, which intensified the crisis within the WRP, and less than four months prior to the letter on Healy's abuses of cadre from Aileen Jennings. Chernenko was immediately replaced by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Within months of the WRP's removal from the IC, Michael Banda denounced Trotsky and hailed Stalin as a "proletarian Bonaparte," while Gerry Healy formed the Marxist Party, which proclaimed Gorbachev the leader of the political revolution in the USSR.

The split was followed, within less than four years, by the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the events of Tiananmen Square in China and, two years later, the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In adopting the Pabloite positions against which it had fought between 1953 and the mid-1970s, the British section was responding to the intensified pressure of world imperialism and its counterrevolutionary agencies to prop up the rotting Stalinist regimes and block the development of a conscious Trotskyist opposition in the working class.

But there was also an opposite response. It did not arise spontaneously, although it was an expression, at the most conscious level, of the

revolutionary potential in the mounting crisis of world capitalism. It had to be fought for, based on the political and theoretical gains from the preceding years, in which the Workers League responded to the desertion of Tim Wohlforth by seeking to assimilate and deepen its understanding of the struggle of the IC against Pabloism and, through that, all of the lessons of the origins and struggle of the Fourth International.

For a number of years, at least since 1976, two divergent tendencies had been maturing within the IC: the revolutionary internationalist and Trotskyist tendency, which was most consciously articulated by the Workers League, and the increasingly nationalist-opportunist tendency centered in the WRP.

The defense of the continuity of the Fourth International and the deepening of its internationalist foundations, coming out of the split with the WRP, placed the IC in a powerful position to analyze the unfolding crisis of Stalinism, oppose capitalist restoration and present a revolutionary program—the program of political revolution as part of the world socialist revolution—to the working class in the Stalinist-ruled countries.

The programmatic foundations laid down by Trotsky in the struggle against Stalinism

In analyzing the Gorbachev regime and its policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the IC based itself on the scientific Marxist analysis of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist bureaucracy, developed by Leon Trotsky in the course of his struggle against the bureaucracy. This body of knowledge embodied, at the most conscious level, the revolutionary striving of the Soviet working class to free itself from the grip of the parasitic and despotic regime and return to the road of world socialist revolution and socialist construction within the USSR.

The IC's response was in complete contrast to the impressionist responses of all varieties of revisionism, including the former British section of the IC, which adapted themselves to Gorbachev's capitalist restorationist program. Nothing could more clearly expose the anti-Marxist and opportunist content of Healy's so-called "practice of cognition," than his own rush to proclaim Gorbachev the leader of the "political revolution" in the USSR.

The conception of the training of cadre, based on an assimilation of the historical experiences of the Fourth International, was crystallized in the struggle against the degeneration of the WRP. It is summed up in David North's *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, written in the fall and winter of 1982:

The real heart of cadre training is the conscious subordination of all who join the Party to the revolutionary principles through which the historical continuity of the Marxist movement is expressed. By 'historical continuity' we have in mind the

unbroken chain of political and ideological struggle by our *international* movement against Stalinism, Social Democracy, revisionism and all other enemies of the working class...

A leadership which does not strive collectively to assimilate the *whole* of this history cannot adequately fulfill its revolutionary responsibilities to the working class. Without a real knowledge of the historical development of the Trotskyist movement, references to dialectical materialism are not merely hollow; such empty references pave the way for a real distortion of the dialectical method. The source of theory lies not in thought but in the objective world. 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. (Emphasis in the original) [1]

It is not possible within the limits of this lecture to review the entire history of the Trotskyist movement. But certain central issues must be established.

The Soviet Union was the product of the October 1917 socialist revolution, in which the Russian working class, led by the Bolshevik Party and with the backing of the broad mass of the peasantry, overthrew the bourgeois Provisional Government, took power into its own hands through the workers' and soldiers' soviets, and established a workers state. The victory of the working class in Russia was the first shot in the world socialist revolution, and the strategy and tactics that guided the revolution, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, were based on the program of world socialist revolution.

That is why the Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Lenin, linked the fight to overthrow the tsar with an uncompromising struggle against the Second International, which had gone over to nationalism and support for the imperialist world war, and the fight to establish a new, Third International, which was founded in 1919.

Lenin reoriented the Bolshevik Party along the lines of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, following the February 1917 overthrow of the tsar and installation, at the hands of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries—who controlled the soviets—of a bourgeois government. This was prepared by his analysis of the outbreak of the imperialist war and betrayal of the Second International, and his conclusion that the war was the antechamber of the world socialist revolution.

Lenin's *April Theses*, in all essentials, adopted the perspective of permanent revolution: that the democratic revolution in Russia could take the form only of a socialist revolution that would place the working class in power. The workers state could defend itself from capitalist reaction and establish socialism only by fighting for the extension of the revolution into the advanced capitalist countries of the West.

Trotsky began the struggle against the emerging state and party bureaucracy, whose chief representative became Stalin, in 1923, as a struggle against bureaucratism. He explained that the rapid growth of bureaucratic tendencies was the result, above all, of the defeats of the European revolution—in Germany, Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria and elsewhere—following 1917, and the consequent isolation of the first workers state under imperialist encirclement. This, combined with the backwardness inherited from tsarism—Russia was an overwhelmingly peasant country—and the terrible toll, both human and economic, on the country from seven years of war and civil war, created conditions unfavorable to the workers and favorable to the growth of petty-bourgeois and bourgeois social forces.

Trotsky formed the Left Opposition to oppose these tendencies by strengthening the proletarian internationalist foundations of the workers state, opposing the strangling of workers democracy in the soviets and in the party, and fighting for a program of planned industrialization, to

strengthen the proletarian forces and weaken the influence of the rich peasantry and quasi-capitalist elements, which grew under the forced retreat of the New Economic Policy. The latter was adopted by Lenin and Trotsky in 1921, to prevent a breach between the working class and the peasantry, by allowing limited capitalist relations, with the conception that this necessary retreat would enable the Soviet Union to hold out until the victory of the working class in the West.

A fundamental turning point occurred in late 1924, when Stalin, with the support of Bukharin, proclaimed the "theory" of "socialism in one country." This total departure from the program of Bolshevism articulated a nationalist reaction within the party and state apparatus, reflecting the pressure of imperialism externally, and of petty-bourgeois forces in the countryside and cities within the USSR. It signified that the bureaucracy was becoming more conscious of its interests as a distinct and privileged social layer, opposed to the mass of workers.

On the reactionary content of "socialism in one country," Trotsky wrote in 1930:

Marxism takes its point of departure from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labor and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets. The productive forces of capitalist society have long ago outgrown the national boundaries. The imperialist war (of 1914–1918) was one of the expressions of this fact. In respect of the technique of production, socialist society must represent a stage higher than capitalism. To aim at building a *nationally isolated* socialist society means, in spite of all passing successes, to pull the productive forces backward even as compared with capitalism. (Emphasis in the original) [2]

The doctrine of "socialism in one country" was joined with a vicious attack on Trotsky and permanent revolution, led by Stalin and his allies in the bureaucracy, including at the time Kamenev and Zinoviev. What became known as "Trotskyism" originated as a Marxist and internationalist defense of the program of world socialist revolution, in opposition to a nationalist repudiation of the basic perspective of scientific socialism.

"Socialism in one country," in essence a denial of the viability of socialist revolution internationally, was an adaptation to world imperialism, which inevitably involved the subordination of the working class, both in the USSR and internationally, to petty-bourgeois and bourgeois forces. Its logic was the transformation of the Third International and its sections, from instruments for the overthrow of capitalism worldwide, into appendages of the foreign policy of the bureaucracy that was entrenching itself within the USSR. This meant the subordination of the parties of the Comintern to the social democratic and trade union bureaucracies in the advanced capitalist countries, and the national bourgeois leaderships in the colonial countries.

The disastrous results of this program rapidly emerged, with the subordination of the British Communist Party to the trade union bureaucracy in the 1926 general strike, which contributed to the betrayal of the strike, and the defeat of the Chinese working class in the revolution of 1925–1927. That massive revolution was drowned in blood because, under orders from the Kremlin, the Chinese Communist Party adopted the Menshevik program of the "bloc of four classes," and subordinated itself to the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-Shek. Trotsky and the Left Opposition resolutely opposed this line and warned of its inevitable, catastrophic outcome.

These international defeats further isolated the Soviet Union and

intensified the internal contradictions of the regime. The rich peasants, the kulaks, who had been cultivated by Stalin and Bukharin, in opposition to the Left Opposition's policy of more rapid industrialization on the basis of state planning, carried out a grain strike that threatened to starve the cities. Stalin, beginning in 1928, swung wildly to the ultra-left adventurist policies of the "Third Period." Domestically this centered on the violent and forced collectivization of agriculture, a bureaucratically implemented operation that inflicted damage on Soviet agriculture from which the USSR never really recovered.

The defeats in Britain and China vindicated the Left Opposition's critiques of Stalin's nationalist and opportunist orientation. Nevertheless, these events objectively weakened the position of the Left Opposition within the USSR and strengthened that of the bureaucracy, because they added to the discouragement and passivity of the Soviet working class, and skepticism toward the fight to extend the socialist revolution beyond the borders of Russia. Thus, they further weakened the class position of the working class, to the benefit of right-wing nationalist forces within society and the state and party apparatus.

Stalin seized on the impact of these defeats to expel Trotsky and the Left Opposition from the Soviet Communist Party in 1927. Trotsky was exiled to remote Alma Ata in 1928, and deported from the Soviet Union in 1929.

In foreign policy, the Stalinist regime replaced right-centrist adaptation to counterrevolutionary bureaucracies and parties with an ultra-left sectarian attitude toward social democracy, branding the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), which retained the allegiance of millions of German workers, as "social fascist" and the "twin" of Hitler's Nazis. Behind the ultra-radical façade, this policy represented a demoralized and fatalistic response to the rise of fascism, and a refusal to conduct a genuine struggle to expose the social democrats before the eyes of the workers and break the SPD's supporters from the conservative bureaucracy.

The Stalinist leadership of the Comintern and the German Communist Party rejected Trotsky's call for a united front with the SPD, to mobilize the full strength of the working class against the Nazi threat, while maintaining the CP's program of socialist revolution and exposing, in practice, the cowardice and treachery of the SPD leadership. This monumental betrayal paralyzed the working class and produced the catastrophe of Hitler's coming to power without a shot being fired.

The victory of fascism in the land of Marx and Engels and the home of the first mass socialist party in the world, demonstrated the bankruptcy of the German Communist Party. The Comintern's endorsement of the policies that had produced the disaster, and the failure of a single section of the Third International to demand a discussion of the German defeat, demonstrated to Trotsky that the Third International was dead as a revolutionary party and could not be reformed. It had become an instrument of the world bourgeoisie within the international workers movement.

Up until 1933, the Left Opposition, although officially expelled from the CP and banned politically, had considered itself a faction within the party and the Third International. It fought for a policy of mobilizing the party ranks and workers against the bureaucracy, removing it from the leadership, and reforming the party and the International, returning them to the program of world socialist revolution and restoring workers democracy within the workers state.

Now Trotsky began the necessary fight to build a new, Fourth International.

Within two years of the disaster in Germany, Stalin dropped the ultra-left policies of the "Third Period" and adopted the class collaborationist and openly counterrevolutionary policy of the "popular front." In an attempt to conciliate the Western imperialist powers and build a common front against the Nazi threat to the USSR, the Comintern, in 1935, announced the policy of a "popular front against war and fascism." This

program of subordinating the working class in every country to the so-called "democratic" bourgeoisie, and renouncing the struggle for socialist revolution, sabotaged the resistance of the working class in country after country, particularly in Spain and France, ensuring the spread of fascism and the outbreak of a second imperialist world war.

Within the Soviet Union, Stalin launched the Moscow purge trials, beginning in 1936, which became the centerpiece of a reign of terror. Virtually the entire leadership of the October Revolution and all genuinely socialist elements within the country were exterminated, along with the socialist intelligentsia and artistic community, and many prominent academics and scientists. Hundreds of thousands of communists were murdered by the Stalinist bureaucracy, in large part to convince the imperialist powers that they had nothing to fear from the Soviet Union.

As Trotsky said, a "river of blood" separated the Fourth International from Stalinism.

In March 1987, in *What is Happening in the USSR? Gorbachev and the Crisis of Stalinism*, the ICFI wrote:

"Socialism in one country" now became a conscious counterrevolutionary policy of subordinating the international working class to the diplomacy of the bureaucracy. It found its consummate expression in the Stalinist policy of popular front, in which the proletarian revolution was explicitly rejected in favor of alliances with "democratic" sections of the world bourgeoisie. Popular frontism went hand in hand with the greatest massacre of communists in history. [3]

The Revolution Betrayed

Trotsky laid down the scientific, Marxist basis for the founding of the Fourth International in his monumental work *The Revolution Betrayed*. David North, in his introduction to the 1991 edition of Trotsky's work, wrote: "The aim of *The Revolution Betrayed* was to uncover the internal contradictions underlying the evolution of a state that was the product of the first socialist revolution in world history."

It stands as a masterpiece of Marxist analysis: the application of dialectical and historical materialism to the analysis of an historically unprecedented phenomenon: a workers state, one, moreover, in an economically backward country in imperialist encirclement. It is the opposite of the impressionistic and contentious commentary that dominated bourgeois Sovietology. Its analysis and prognosis were completely vindicated, in the negative, by the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy in December of 1991.

The guiding thread of Trotsky's analysis is the concept of the Soviet Union as part of the historical process of world socialist revolution, and the fact that the nature of Soviet society and politics could not be considered in isolation from world economy and the international class struggle.

Trotsky begins his analysis by summing up "what has been achieved" on the basis of nationalized industry and economic planning. The figures are staggering and demonstrate the enormous transformation of economic life carried out in the Soviet Union, in a brief period and despite highly unfavorable international conditions. Trotsky notes that in the six years after the Wall Street crash, while industrial production in the US declined by 25 percent, it increased in the USSR by 250 percent. Heavy industry increased production between 1925 and 1935 more than 10 times.

He wrote:

Gigantic achievements in industry, enormously promising beginnings in agriculture, an extraordinary growth of the old industrial cities and a building of new ones, a rapid increase of the number of workers, a rise in cultural level and cultural demands—such are the indubitable results of the October Revolution, in which the prophets of the old world tried to see the grave of human civilization. With the bourgeois economists we have no longer anything to quarrel over. Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of *Das Kapital*, but in an economic arena embracing one-sixth of the earth's surface—not in the language of dialectics, but in the language of iron, cement and electricity. Even if the Soviet Union, as a result of internal difficulties, external blows and the mistakes of its leadership, were to collapse—which we firmly hope will not happen—there would remain as a pledge of the future this ineradicable fact, that thanks solely to the proletarian revolution, a backward country has achieved in less than twenty years successes unexampled in history. [4]

However, as Trotsky then explains, these achievements could not be considered in isolation from the world capitalist economy. Despite the gains from nationalized property and economic planning, these were made from a very low starting point, and the Soviet Union still lagged far behind the advanced capitalist countries in quality of goods, technique and, above all, the productivity of labor.

Moreover, the more developed and complex the Soviet economy became, the sharper its internal contradictions, in so far as it remained cut off from the world market and the international division of labor. Or, to put it another way, the more pressing became the need to extend the socialist revolution into the advanced capitalist countries. This, however, the bureaucracy opposed with all of its might, understanding that successful socialist revolutions outside the USSR would encourage a revolutionary movement of the working class against its rule within the USSR.

Far from the achievements of the Soviet economy confirming the Stalinist program of national economic autarky, they pointed ever more imperiously to the bankruptcy of that nationalist perspective.

It is important to review the fundamental conceptions developed by Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed* about the nature of the Soviet regime, the social character and political role of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and their relation to the world socialist revolution, and, flowing from this analysis, the policies for the Soviet and international working class advanced by Trotsky and adopted by the Fourth International.

Trotsky characterized the Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers state,” transitional between capitalism and socialism, with the outcome to be determined by the class struggle internationally and within the Soviet Union. He rejected the idea that the betrayals and despotic predations of the bureaucracy signified the overthrow of the basic gains of the October Revolution and the emergence of either a new form of capitalism, or some other new social formation, vaguely defined by terms such as “bureaucratic collectivism.”

The ruling bureaucracy was a caste, not a class, he insisted. It was a parasitic excrescence on the workers state, whose origins lay in the defeats of the working class internationally, compounded by the backward economic conditions inherited from the tsarist regime. It based its privileges and its rule on the nationalized property relations established by the October Revolution, not on capitalist, or some historically new form of production relations. It was counterrevolutionary through and through and could not be reformed, but it still sought to defend, in its own interests and by counterrevolutionary means, the nationalized property relations established by October.

This was ultimately impossible. Unless overthrown by the Soviet working class in a political revolution, the pressure of the capitalist world market and imperialist intervention, whether military, economic or a combination of the two, would lead to the dismantling of the workers state and restoration of capitalism. In this final act of counterrevolution, the bureaucracy itself would play a major role, allying itself directly with world imperialism to more firmly secure its parasitic interests by anchoring them in capitalist property, i.e., by becoming owners of capital, rather than just leeches on state property. The anti-Stalinist revolution Trotsky advocated was “political” and not “social,” because it would not change the system of property relations. It would defend the existing property relations by removing the parasitic bureaucracy. It would revive and restore workers democracy to the workers state, rather than overthrowing the state and establishing a new class regime.

The Soviet working class, under the leadership of a party of the Fourth International, would have to physically oust the bureaucracy, purge it from the soviets, reestablish soviet democracy, end all of the bureaucratic deformations and abuses of the planned economy, and return the USSR to the proletarian internationalist program of world socialist revolution.

Trotsky made no bones about the insurrectionary and non-peaceful character of the political revolution. In contradistinction to the original Pabloites, and their latter-day converts in the leadership of the WRP, he rejected the possibility of the “self-reform” of the ruling caste. “There is no peaceful outcome for this crisis,” he wrote in *The Revolution Betrayed*. “No devil ever yet voluntarily cut off its own claws. The Soviet bureaucracy will not give up its positions without a fight. The development leads obviously to the road of revolution.”

The Fourth International, in fighting for this political revolution, unconditionally defended the Soviet Union against imperialism. This was essential in defending the basic gains of the October Revolution, as part of the struggle for world socialism. Far from any concession to the bureaucracy, the FI's defense of the Soviet Union was a critical aspect of its implacable struggle against Stalinism. The Fourth International would do everything in its power to prevent the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy from completing its services to imperialism by overseeing the destruction of the workers state. Defense of the Soviet Union was inseparably linked to the program of political revolution to overthrow the bureaucracy.

Summing up the relationship between the political revolution in the USSR and the world socialist revolution, Trotsky wrote in September of 1939:

The defense of the USSR coincides for us with the preparation of world revolution. Only those methods are permissible which do not conflict with the interests of the revolution. The defense of the USSR is related to the world socialist revolution as a tactical task is related to a strategic one. A tactic is subordinated to a strategic goal and in no case can be in contradiction to the latter...

We must not lose sight for a single moment of the fact that the question of overthrowing the Soviet bureaucracy is for us subordinate to the question of preserving state property in the means of production in the USSR; that the question of preserving state property in the means of production in the USSR is subordinate for us to the question of the world proletarian revolution. [5]

Trotsky based his analysis of the Soviet Union and the program of action derived from that analysis on a dialectical and historical materialist examination of the fundamental contradictions of the regime, rooted in its historical origins and its socio-economic foundations. In a chapter in *The*

Revolution Betrayed titled “The Dual Character of the Workers State,” he explained that while the property forms established by the October Revolution, and defended by the workers state, consisted of social ownership of the means of production, the material backwardness of the economy made it impossible for the Soviet Union, on the basis of its own resources, to overcome scarcity and therefore inequality. As a result, the norms of distribution remained bourgeois, based on a capitalist measure of value (wages).

He wrote:

Insofar as the state, which assumes the task of the socialist transformation of society, is compelled to defend inequality, that is, the material privileges of a minority, by methods of compulsion, insofar does it also remain a ‘bourgeois’ state, even though without a bourgeoisie. These words contain neither praise nor blame; they merely name things with their real names...

The state assumes directly and from the very beginning a dual character: socialistic, insofar as it defends social property in the means of production; bourgeois, insofar as the distribution of life’s goods is carried out with a capitalist measure of value and all the consequences ensuing therefrom. Such a contradictory characterization may horrify the dogmatists and scholastics; we can only offer them our condolences. [6]

Further on, he called the bureaucracy the “policeman of inequality,” writing:

The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there are enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there are few goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy. It ‘knows’ who is to get something and who has to wait...

The social meaning of the Soviet Thermidor now begins to take form before us. The poverty and cultural backwardness of the masses has again become incarnate in the malignant figure of the ruler with a great club in his hand. [7]

The fundamental cause of the degeneration of the workers state, in the form of a totalitarian bureaucracy, was the delay in the world socialist revolution and consequent isolation of the USSR. This dilemma was reinforced and compounded by the counterrevolutionary policies of the Stalinist regime, based on the nationalist program of “socialism in one country.”

There were only two ways to end this isolation and resolve the crisis of the workers state: either through the dismantling of the socialized property relations established by October and integration of the Soviet Union into the structure of world capitalism—that is, by counterrevolutionary means—or through the overthrow of the bureaucracy by the working class, restoration of Soviet democracy and return to the program of world socialist revolution—the revolutionary road fought for by the Fourth International.

Trotsky summed up the analysis concisely and brilliantly in the *Transitional Program*:

The Soviet Union emerged from the October Revolution as a workers state. State ownership of the means of production, a necessary prerequisite to socialist development, opened up the possibility of a rapid growth of the productive forces. But the apparatus of the workers state underwent a complete degeneration at the same time: it was transformed from a weapon of the working class into a weapon for the sabotage of the country’s economy. The bureaucratization of a backward and isolated workers state, and the transformation of the bureaucracy into an all-powerful privileged caste, constitute the most convincing refutation—not only theoretically but this time practically—of the theory of socialism in one country.

The USSR thus embodies terrific contradictions. But it still remains a degenerated workers state. Such is the social diagnosis. The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism. [8]

The revisionist assault on the Fourth International’s analysis of Stalinism: State capitalism and Pabloism

The question of the nature of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist bureaucracy has been at the center of controversies and struggles within the Fourth International almost since its founding, in September of 1938. The signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact on August 23, 1939, and outbreak of the Second World War one week later, became the occasion for the first major revisionist attack on the program of the FI. A petty-bourgeois faction within the Socialist Workers Party, led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham, declared that these events demonstrated the “imperialist” character of the Soviet Union and required that the Fourth International drop its call for the defense of the USSR against imperialism.

This opposition reflected the rightward shift within the radical middle class, in line with the needs of US imperialism as it prepared to enter the war. Stalin’s pact with Hitler expressed the bureaucracy’s crisis and its utter contempt for the international working class, but it did not signify a change in the social foundations of the USSR. Burnham and Shachtman, along with the bulk of the radical middle class, defended the USSR when the GPU was murdering revolutionaries in Spain and brutally repressing the working class, in order to defend the bourgeois “popular front” government, leading to the victory of Franco. Likewise, when Stalin was exterminating the leadership of the 1917 Revolution and hundreds of thousands of socialists during the Moscow purge trials. But they refused to defend the USSR when the bureaucracy cynically switched its orientation from the “democratic” imperialists to the fascist imperialists.

Trotsky explained, in the course of the 1939–40 faction fight within the SWP, that the claim that the bureaucracy had transformed itself into a new “bureaucratic collectivist” ruling class amounted to a renunciation of any prospect for socialist revolution for an entire historical epoch. If the bureaucracy embodied a new ruling class, he explained, that meant it had to be the carrier of a historically necessary development of the productive forces. Thus, the working class was not the historical and revolutionary bearer of a new and higher, socialist, mode of production. Socialist revolution was off the historical agenda. The conception of imperialism as the epoch of wars and revolutions and the transition to world socialism was false and had to be discarded.

This was a statement of complete skepticism and political demoralization, and, notwithstanding its anti-Stalinist form, a capitulation

to the Stalinist bureaucracy as well as to imperialism.

Pabloite liquidationism, which arose in the late 1940s under the leadership of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, was a virulent petty-bourgeois tendency that took the form of state capitalism turned inside out. It rejected the characterization of Stalinism as counterrevolutionary and, instead, attributed to it a revolutionary role, denying the historical necessity of the Fourth International as the unique and sole revolutionary leadership of the working class. It repudiated the FI's call for a political revolution to overthrow the Stalinist regime, claiming instead that, under pressure from the working class on the one side, and imperialism on the other, a "progressive" faction within the bureaucracy could "de-Stalinize" the regime and return it to the revolutionary road.

What state capitalism and Pabloism had in common was a rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class. The Pabloites demanded that the Fourth International liquidate itself into the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties, and the bourgeois nationalist movements in the colonial countries.

As the ICFI wrote in the editorial of the July–December, 1989 *Fourth International*:

In the final analysis, Pabloite opportunism represented the capitulation to the temporary domination of the international workers movement by the Stalinists. This capitulation found its most precise theoretical expression in the notorious proclamation of Pablo and Mandel in 1951 that "objective social reality consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world." In this way, the Pabloite opportunists endowed Stalinism with a vast historical mission, and thereby dismissed the independent revolutionary role of the proletariat and its genuine Marxist vanguard, the Fourth International. [9]

The ICFI, founded with the "Open Letter" to the world Trotskyist movement by the SWP in November of 1953, was born in a struggle against Pabloite liquidationism. However, the struggle within the Trotskyist movement against revisionism continued, first against the SWP's reunification with the Pabloites in 1963, then against the centrism of the OCI (Organisation Communiste Internationaliste), and finally against the capitulation of the WRP to Pabloism via national opportunism, culminating in the split of 1985–86. That political struggle marked the victory of the orthodox Trotskyists over petty-bourgeois forces within the IC.

It was through these struggles, conducted under generally unfavorable conditions—first of economic boom and then of reigning political reaction, and the domination of the workers movement by counterrevolutionary bureaucracies—that the continuity of Trotskyism and Marxism was maintained.

The WRP adapts to Stalinism

The WRP's descent to Pabloism necessarily involved an increasingly pronounced adaptation to Stalinism. The WRP paid little attention to the mass upsurge against Stalinism, in the form of the Solidarity movement in Poland of 1980–1981, and used its immense influence in the ICFI to prevent any independent Trotskyist intervention. It thereby left the field open to the Pabloites to promote left-reformist factions of Solidarity, which worked to head off a revolutionary movement of the workers for the overthrow of the bureaucracy and divert it into a policy of seeking to

pressure the regime for reforms.

While the *News Line* made no attempt to send a reporter to Poland to cover the tumultuous events there, in 1980 it dispatched its sports editor to Moscow, to cover the summer Olympics, where he was accorded a warm reception by the government.

The WRP entered into publishing deals with the Soviet authorities behind the backs of the IC sections. In 1982, the *News Line* refused to publish a lengthy analysis of the crisis in the Soviet economy that had been published by the Workers League in the *Bulletin*. It had previously reprinted, without critical comment, a *Novosti* press release, praising the conditions in the Soviet steel industry.

In 1983, the WRP intervened in a faction fight within the British Communist Party over control of the Stalinist newspaper *Morning Star*, supporting the Euro-Stalinist party executive against an opposition faction that had gained control of the newspaper's publishing arm. The *News Line* ran banner headlines and editorials defending the party apparatus and advising it on how to retrieve control of its counterrevolutionary newspaper.

The *News Line* of June 24, 1983 carried an "open letter" from the WRP Political Committee to the membership of the British Communist Party, bemoaning the fact that the *Morning Star* was "no longer under the political control of the Communist Party of Great Britain and its congress."

The WRP's "open letter" made the astonishing statement that the "party leadership's loss of control of the newspaper... represents not only a repudiation of the Communist Party, but the historical foundations on which the party was formed, namely to defend the great gains of the Russian Revolution of 1917 led by Lenin and Trotsky and the establishment of the first workers state in history." [10]

In the 1984–85 British miners' strike, the WRP capitulated to the Labour Party leadership and National Union of Mineworkers' leader Arthur Scargill, a former Young Communist League National Executive Committee member. Less than two weeks before Scargill called off the strike, on the basis of a complete surrender to the Tory Thatcher government, the WRP published a Central Committee statement that declared: "The Central Committee of the Workers Revolutionary Party calls on all striking miners to stand firm behind Arthur Scargill and the NUM Executive."

Some six weeks after the betrayal, Healy wrote a letter to Scargill (uncovered later in 1985 by the ICFI International Control Commission) that began "Dear Arthur" and stated, in part:

All the resources and technical facilities which constitute the practice of our Party are at the disposal of the NUM and yourself as its President. If it is necessary we will print and publish anything which the union wants, for nothing, to the limit of our resources. [11]

Thus Slaughter's infamous handshake with Stalinist hack and Moscow Trials apologist Monty Johnstone, at the November 26, 1985 Friends Hall Meeting, did not occur out of the blue. It was a public demonstration of an opportunist capitulation to Stalinism that had been developing over a number of years.

The IC's analysis of Gorbachev and perestroika

Just some 13 months after the completion of the split with the WRP, in

February of 1986, the International Committee of the Fourth International published a statement, dated March 23, 1987, that set forth its Marxist analysis and principled revolutionary Trotskyist line on Gorbachev's much vaunted *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) program within the Soviet Union. This was still at a fairly early stage of Gorbachev's drive toward capitalist restoration, but the analysis already demonstrated the anti-working class, petty-bourgeois and pro-capitalist orientation of the bureaucracy. This was rapidly vindicated by the ensuing chain of events, leading to the juridical termination of the Soviet Union in December of 1991.

The statement, *What is Happening in the USSR? Gorbachev and the Crisis of Stalinism*, began by setting forth the IC's principled position:

The Fourth International unconditionally defends the Soviet Union and the gains of the October Revolution against imperialism. It unequivocally states that this defense is only possible through the world socialist revolution, which includes as one of its component parts the political revolution to overthrow the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy presently headed by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Gorbachev's current *glasnost* program, hailed by bourgeois public opinion and celebrated by every revisionist renegade from Trotskyism, does not alter this historic perspective one iota.

Gorbachev represents not the Soviet workers and the conquests they made in overthrowing czarism and establishing the first workers state, but rather the bureaucratic caste which usurped political power from the working class. He is the heir not of Lenin and Trotsky, who led the revolution of 1917, but rather of its gravedigger—Stalin. He is the product of this bureaucracy which he has served his entire life. He rose up through its ranks, insulated from the masses and thoroughly imbued with its petty-bourgeois hostility to the working class...

Acting as the conduit for this bourgeois media blitz and beginning with their impressions of Gorbachev's national policies, various revisionist trends, rejecting the scientific analysis of Stalinism developed by Trotsky, speculate on the potential of the bureaucracy for self-reform.

The Fourth International completely rejects these claims of bourgeois public opinion and develops its own analysis in direct opposition to the anti-Marxist method of the revisionists. It begins neither from Gorbachev's "charm" nor from one or another national measure aimed at saving his crisis-ridden bureaucratic regime. Our starting point is that of the international proletariat and the world socialist revolution. Gorbachev and the Soviet Union can only be understood from this international perspective and from the standpoint of the origins and development of the Soviet state and its subsequent bureaucratic degeneration. [12]

After reviewing the origins of the Stalinist bureaucracy, its essential nationalist foundation and its evolution as the major agency of imperialism within the international workers movement, the statement examined the crisis of the Soviet Union underlying Gorbachev's "reform" program.

Politically, it explained, Gorbachev's "reforms" embodied the bureaucracy's reaction to the threat of political revolution it so clearly perceived in the events in Poland. Faced with the growing opposition of the working class to the ossified bureaucratic caste, Gorbachev, in the form of the limited loosening of state repression denoted by *glasnost*, moved against the bureaucracy's worst excesses from the standpoint of defending the bureaucracy as a whole against the Soviet proletariat.

However, the statement explained:

For both the working class in the Soviet Union and the workers and oppressed masses internationally, the so-called reform policy of Gorbachev represents a sinister threat. It jeopardizes the historic conquests of the October Revolution and is bound up with a deepening of the bureaucracy's counterrevolutionary collaboration with imperialism on a world scale. [13]

Economically, the reactionary framework of national economic autarky had led the Soviet economy into an intractable crisis. Within the USSR, the immense growth of the productive forces in the 70 years since the October Revolution—made possible by the nationalization of the means of production and economic planning—had not lessened inequality, privilege or bureaucratism.

The productivity of labor still lagged badly behind the levels of the most advanced capitalist countries. Only by surpassing these levels could socialism be guaranteed, but that could be achieved only, as Trotsky pointed out, "on the soil of the worldwide division of labor which has been created by the entire preceding development of capitalism." In other words, through the conquest of power by the working class in the advanced capitalist countries.

In a speech to the Central Committee in January of 1987, Gorbachev had outlined the mounting economic crisis. Growth rates had fallen sharply since the mid-1970s, most five-year-plan targets had not been met, and the Soviet Union had fallen far behind the West in the development of advanced technology, associated with the computer and telecommunications revolutions.

The more the productive forces within the Soviet Union grew, the more dependent on the world economy the Soviet economy became. Soviet exports and imports had grown six- and seven-fold between 1970 and 1984. A slump in world oil prices took a devastating toll on the USSR, whose continued economic backwardness was expressed by the fact that it was forced to rely on the export of energy, in order to acquire the foreign exchange required for the purchase of high-tech imports.

The Stalinist regime under Gorbachev was no less hostile to the extension of socialism outside the USSR than under his predecessors, seeing in that development a mortal threat to its own rule. As the IC statement explained:

The development of socialism in the Soviet Union and the solution of the economic problems arising in its evolution are indissolubly bound up with the extension of the proletarian revolution to the world arena. The shortage of technology and continuing contradictions between industry and agriculture can only be resolved through access to the world market. *There are only two roads to the integration of the Soviet Union into that market—that of Gorbachev leading towards capitalist restoration and that of the world socialist revolution.* (Emphasis added) [14]

Any objective observer would have had little difficulty detecting in Gorbachev's own words the anti-working class axis of his policies. In his speech to the Central Committee, for example, he claimed that "the most important principle of socialism" was "distribution according to work."

This is a complete falsification of Marxism, which states that the principle of socialism is "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Gorbachev made the bourgeois norm of distribution, which socialism terminates and supersedes, the basis of

socialism!

In another part of his speech he denounced “parasitism.” But he identified parasitism not with the corruption and plunder of the bureaucracy, but with the working class. “Parasitic sentiments grew stronger and the mentality of wage leveling began to take hold. All that hit those workers who could and wanted to work better, while making life easier for the lazy ones.”

After reviewing Gorbachev’s initial economic measures, carried out under the banner of *perestroika*, the IC statement declared:

The essence of Gorbachev’s ‘reforms’ now emerges. Fearing the movement of the Soviet working class, the bureaucracy attempts to overcome the obstacles in the development of the economy created by the bureaucracy itself.

Expanding the bourgeois norms of distribution, weakening the state monopoly of foreign trade, opening the way for the conversion of money into capital by individual enterprises, the bureaucracy functions as the agent of the world bourgeoisie in the workers state and opens the way for capitalist restoration.

Gorbachev’s “democratic” measures—the release of some political prisoners, a very limited relaxation of censorship, and criticism of bureaucratic excesses—do not, by any means, constitute a move towards restoring Soviet democracy. They are an attempt to win a social base for the bureaucracy among the broad layers of Soviet intelligentsia and managerial functionaries. [15]

Initially, the limited loosening of censorship and repression triggered a generally left-wing response in the population. There was an upsurge of interest in the history of the Soviet Union and the Russian Revolution, and, in particular, the role of Trotsky, who had been slandered as a counterrevolutionary and fascist agent, and then expunged for decades from historical and political discourse. As we shall discuss further on, the ICFI actively sought to encourage this development and intervened to present the history and program of Trotskyism and the Fourth International to youth and workers who were being politically activated.

While the Gorbachev regime rehabilitated dozens of party leaders, who were framed and executed by Stalin, including Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Radek and Pyatakov, it refused to rehabilitate Trotsky. In 1987, Gorbachev declared that Trotsky’s ideas were “essentially an attack on Lenin all down the line.”

Gorbachev’s efforts to defend the social interests of the bureaucracy, by introducing capitalist market relations, did trigger an oppositional movement in the working class. In the space of a few days, in July of 1989, a strike by hundreds of thousands of Soviet coal miners swept from Siberia through the Urals and into Ukraine.

All the more determined was the intervention of the revisionists, including the renegades of the WRP, to promote Gorbachev and vouch for the supposedly progressive and democratic content of his reforms. In his book *Beyond Perestroika*, published in 1989 by Verso, Ernest Mandel wrote, “From the viewpoint of the Soviet working people and the world proletariat, Gorbachev would today be the best solution for the USSR.”

Tariq Ali dedicated his 1988 book *Revolution From Above* to Boris Yeltsin, writing: “*Revolution From Above* argues that Gorbachev represents a progressive, reformist current within the Soviet elite, whose programme, if successful, would represent an enormous gain for socialists and democrats on a world scale. The scale of Gorbachev’s operations is, in fact, reminiscent of the efforts of the American President of the 19th century: Abraham Lincoln.”

Michael Banda rapidly demonstrated the logic of his infamous 27 *Reasons Why the ICFI Should Be Buried Forthwith* by abandoning the

WRP, denouncing the struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement since 1928, and hailing Stalin as the “proletarian Bonaparte.” He attacked Trotsky’s warnings of capitalist restoration as a “lurid fantasy” and joined the chorus of Gorbachev courtiers, praising Gorbachev’s program as a “gradual liberalization of bureaucratic rule” and “decentralization of economic administration in line with the vast and unprecedented changes in Soviet industry and technology—and the working class.”

As for Gerry Healy, in August 1986 he asserted, at a PC meeting of the rump WRP he had formed with Torrance and the Redgraves, that the Soviet bureaucracy was no longer Thermidorean and that “a left turn was taking place in the USSR.” This was quoted in the June–July 1987 edition of *The Marxist*, which Healy set up when he and the Redgraves split from Torrance’s group in late 1986. During the final three years of his life, having hailed Gorbachev as the leader of the political revolution, he traveled several times to the Soviet Union as a guest of the Soviet government.

In October 1986, a member of Healy’s group, Mick Blakey, issued a document that proclaimed:

Running in tandem with these violent outbursts in the Political Revolution has been in the Soviet Union itself amongst a section of the Intelligentsia the development of dialectical materialism, principally by Omelyanovsky, Oizerman and Ilyenkov... this development did not take place in a vacuum, but has entered into the thinking of a left moving section of the bureaucracy, which today occupies the leading positions, and which is De-Stalinizing the bureaucracy...

I contend that the Political Revolution is under way and is evident in the highest echelons of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. [16]

As for Slaughter’s WRP, Cyril Smith denounced the IC, in the May 13, 1989 issue of *Workers Press*, for seeing “in Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika nothing but a deliberate and conscious move to bring back capitalism.”

The IC’s analysis of *perestroika* was updated and deepened in David North’s *Perestroika Versus Socialism: Stalinism and the Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR*, a collection of articles published in the Workers League’s *Bulletin* newspaper between March and May of 1989. This comprehensive and politically devastating analysis examined the program and actions of the Gorbachev regime from the standpoint of its innovations in the fields of the political and juridical superstructure, ideology and doctrine, economic policy and foreign policy.

It showed that changes in the electoral system were designed to dilute the representation of the industrial working class in the Congress of People’s Deputies, and that, more generally, the “liberal” reforms of *glasnost* were intended to facilitate the restoration of private property, the dismantling of the state monopoly of foreign trade and the growth of a powerful layer of bourgeois business owners. All of this was to be carried out at the cost of millions of jobs and a brutal reduction in the living standards of the Soviet working class.

North summed up this connection as follows:

When Gorbachev “fights” the bureaucracy, or, more precisely, a section of it, he directs his blows against those strata within the state and party apparatus whose positions and privileges are bound up with the administration of the nationalized industry and agricultural collectives. This type of anti-bureaucratic ‘struggle’ provides a political cover for an open attack on the property

relations created by the October Revolution. In pursuit of “radical *perestroika*”—that is, the implementation of free market policies, the liquidation of the monopoly of foreign trade, and the legalization of private ownership of the means of production—the Gorbachev faction has been seeking to forge an alliance of the most privileged and politically articulate strata of Soviet society: from the managerial elite within the most prosperous sections of state industry and the farm collectives, to the technocrats, the intelligentsia, and the avaricious petty bourgeoisie, whose numerical growth and enrichment is among the principal goals of the Stalinist regime. [17]

Discussing Gorbachev’s promotion of bourgeois concepts in place of the class categories of Marxism and the concept of a workers state, North cited Gorbachev’s speech to the 19th Conference, in which he declared that the Soviet state must be not a workers state, but a “people’s state.”

In an article published in February of 1989, the head of the Soviet Communist Party and state, in the name of “elaborating the concept of a new face of socialism,” called for overcoming “man’s alienation from the means of production” by ending state ownership of the land and converting the collective farms into privately-owned “cooperatives.”

On economic policy, North noted: “Measures already enacted into law have virtually destroyed the monopoly of foreign trade and established a legal basis for direct economic relations between imperialist concerns and privately-owned cooperatives in the USSR.”

The editorial of the January–June 1990 *Fourth International*, “Fifty Years Since the Assassination of Leon Trotsky,” reported the following:

The extent of consciousness and deliberation in the bureaucracy’s drive to restore capitalism is made clear enough by a new law which took effect in the Soviet Union on July 1, 1990. It gives private property legal protections as sweeping as those found in any capitalist country. The passages declare:

“The right of ownership is recognized and protected by law in the USSR.”

“An owner has the right to do anything with his property that does not violate the law. He may use his property to carry out any sort of economic or any other activity that is not prohibited by law...”

“Property may consist of land, mineral resources, water, plant and animal life, buildings, structures, equipment, objects of material and spiritual culture, money, securities and other assets.”

“The results of economic utilization of property (output and income) belong to the owner of this property unless otherwise stipulated by law...” [18]

On the relationship between capitalist restoration and Gorbachev’s foreign policy, North wrote, in *Perestroika Versus Socialism*:

During the past three years, decisive steps have been taken by Gorbachev to promote private ownership of the productive forces. The bureaucracy is ever more openly identifying its interests with the development of Soviet cooperatives along entirely capitalist lines. Thus, to the extent that the bureaucracy’s own privileges are no longer bound up with, but hostile to, the forms of state property, its relations with world imperialism must undergo a corresponding and significant change. The principal goal of Soviet foreign policy becomes less and less the defense of the USSR against imperialist

attack, but rather the mobilization of imperialist support—political and economic—for the realization of the domestic goals of *perestroika*, that is, the development of capitalist property relations within the Soviet Union. Thus, the counterrevolutionary logic of the Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country” finds its ultimate expression in the development of a foreign policy aimed at undermining Soviet state property and reintroducing capitalism within the USSR itself. [19]

Summing up the essence of the bureaucracy’s foreign policy innovations, North wrote:

The distinctive features of the new Soviet foreign policy are the unconditional repudiation of international socialism as a long-term goal of Soviet policy, the renunciation of any political solidarity between the Soviet Union and anti-imperialist struggles throughout the world, and the explicit rejection of the class struggle as a relevant factor in the formulation of foreign policy. The changes in Soviet foreign policy are inseparably bound up with the on-going integration of the economy into the structure of world capitalism. The economic goals of the Kremlin require that the Soviet Union emphatically and unconditionally renounce any lingering association between its foreign policy and the class struggle and anti-imperialism in any form. It was for this reason that Gorbachev chose the United Nations as the forum for his declaration last December that the October Revolution of 1917, like the French Revolution of 1789, belongs to another historical era and is irrelevant to the modern world. [20]

Examples of the new foreign policy in action included Gorbachev’s cutting off of oil exports to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, his embrace of Suharto in Indonesia, his moves to establish diplomatic relations with Israel and South Africa and, of course, his green light to the US to invade Iraq in 1990–91.

North provided further examples of the bureaucracy’s pathological hatred of the working class and outright anti-communism:

Economist Tatyana Zaslavskaya, one of Gorbachev’s principal advisers, in an interview with *Izvestia* said: “The situation in which it [perestroika] began was essentially a pre-Revolutionary situation, in which the ‘lower classes’ were unwilling or refused to do good-quality work, while the upper crust was no longer able to make them.”

In a 1989 exchange between L. I. Albalkin, Gorbachev’s chief economic adviser, and Alexander Afanasyev, reporter for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Albalkin commiserated with Afanasyev over the difficulties in destroying the “machine” of working-class affinity for the ideals of the Russian Revolution by saying, “Only a machine can counter a machine.”

North wrote of this exchange:

Two leading spokesmen of *perestroika*, like two intoxicated émigré aristocrats whining over empty bottles, bewail the fate of Old Mother Russia and its lost master craftsmen and people with a sense of proprietorship. The problem, they conclude, is the Russian masses themselves. The ideals of the October Revolution have penetrated their psychology. They will not permit the ‘social humus’ of capitalism to rise again.

This morbid dialogue is a chilling articulation of the vitriolic anti-communism that animates the ‘Black Hundred’ ideologues of *perestroika*. Reflected in this dialogue is the recognition within

the bureaucracy that it is only a matter of time before the counterrevolutionary goals of *perestroika* will require the organization of violence on a massive scale against the working class. As the two interlocutors agreed: ‘Only a machine can counter a machine.’ [21]

Summing up the analysis of the ICFI and the political conclusions flowing from it, North wrote:

In considering the position of the USSR in the world economy, the essential question is how the Soviet Union will break out of the economic isolation imposed upon it by the capitalist world market. Only two methods are possible: the forging of a revolutionary alliance with the international proletariat in the struggle against world imperialism, or the integration of the USSR into the existing economic structures of world capitalism. The first route is that of the world socialist revolution; the second is that of capitalist restoration in the USSR. It is the second course that is being followed by Gorbachev...

The real confrontation between the Soviet masses and the Stalinist bureaucracy is still on the agenda. When that confrontation comes, the victory of the Soviet proletariat depends upon the development of a conscious revolutionary leadership which—having fully assimilated the lessons of the long struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International against the Stalinist bureaucracy—stands completely independent of all the bureaucratic cliques.

It is on this basis that the genuine Trotskyists of the International Committee are striving to build the Soviet section of the Fourth International. [22]

The IC’s intervention in the USSR

The analysis of Gorbachev and the crisis of Stalinism, and the practical measures taken to intervene in the USSR, were guided by the profound international analysis the IC was making—coming out of the split—of the new stage of the world crisis of capitalism. At the center of this analysis was the understanding of the far-reaching implications of globalization and the intensified conflict between world economy and the nation-state system.

This framework, first elaborated in its 1988 international perspectives document, enabled the IC to grasp that the collapse of the Stalinist regimes was ultimately an expression of the deepening crisis of the nation-state system as a whole, which found its initial expression in the economies most vulnerable because of their shut-in, national autarkic character.

This understanding enabled the IC, and the IC alone, to recognize that the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, while, in themselves, serious setbacks for the working class, nevertheless signified the breakdown of the entire imperialist post-war order at its weakest links. Far from heralding the “end of history,” “death of socialism” or “triumph of liberal capitalism,” this massive development was the precursor to a rapid and violent intensification of inter-imperialist tensions and a new drive toward world war. It also heralded a new period of revolutionary social convulsions.

Moreover, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes was, itself, part of a broader collapse of all labor bureaucracies based on national programs. The working class would be compelled, in defending its most basic

interests, to coordinate its struggles on an international scale; and the sole organization that embodied that perspective was the ICFI. Hence the immense revolutionary potential and challenge facing the Trotskyist movement.

The struggle taken up against the national-opportunist WRP leadership and the victory of the genuine Trotskyists—expressed in the ejection of the WRP from the IC—made possible, and provided a powerful impulse for, the intervention of the Fourth International into the mounting crisis of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR. The WRP had used its influence to block any serious struggle to intervene, win the most advanced workers, youth and intellectuals to the Trotskyist program and build sections of the ICFI in these countries. The political clarification of the basic issues of program and principle carried out by the IC majority, concerning internationalism, the world party and the struggle against Stalinism and revisionism, provided the basis for the IC’s intervention.

The record of the IC’s intervention in the USSR and Eastern Europe is voluminous. It marked a historical milestone in the history of the Trotskyist movement. For the first time in many decades, the program and principles of Trotskyism, and the genuine legacy of the October Revolution, were being brought into the Soviet working class. The central thread of the intervention was the struggle to reestablish the historical and political links of the Soviet working class, and the workers in the Stalinist-ruled countries of Eastern Europe, to the proletarian internationalist foundations of October. It was, above all on this basis, that the IC sought to educate the advanced workers, youth and intellectuals, and create the conditions for the building of sections of the ICFI.

The IC carried out three trips to the USSR between 1989 and 1992. Comrade North spent two weeks in the Soviet Union in November 1989, visiting Moscow and Leningrad, and returned there in October 1991, holding meetings and discussions in Moscow and Kiev. Comrade Nick Beams visited Moscow, Lvov and Kiev in October 1990.

At this stage in the crisis there was great political and intellectual ferment, and tremendous interest in the figure of Trotsky. Comrade North spoke at the Moscow Historical Archival Institute, at the invitation of the faculty, on November 13, 1989, and participated in a seminar on “scientific communism” at the invitation of students in Moscow, on November 14, 1989. He spoke in Kiev when he returned to the USSR in 1991. Nick Beams gave a lecture in Kiev in 1990.

The IC published the *Bulletin of the Fourth International* in Russian for four years, beginning in 1988. The volumes of the *Fourth International* from 1990 to 1992 contain extensive correspondence with Soviet contacts, as well as statements, articles, polemics, and transcripts of discussions, meticulously subjecting the rapid developments to Marxist analysis, and elaborating the Trotskyist program of political revolution and world socialist revolution.

This work laid a powerful foundation for the establishment of a section of the IC in the former Soviet Union. Its most immediate results were the recruitment of Comrade Vladimir and the initiation of the collaboration with Vadim Rogovin, out of which came Rogovin’s monumental seven-volume study *Was There an Alternative?* which examined the struggle of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International against the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR.

Comrade North’s November 13, 1989 lecture at the Moscow Historical Archival Institute was a milestone in the history of the Fourth International. It was titled “The Future of Socialism: The Trotskyist Perspective,” and was attended by teachers, students, trade union activists and members of the general public.

Afterwards, students asked North to attend a seminar on “scientific communism” to further explain Trotsky’s views on Marxism and socialism. That discussion was held on November 14, 1989.

In his lecture, North welcomed the discrediting of the crude Stalinist lie that Trotsky was an enemy of the Soviet Union and agent of Hitler, but

pointed to the new lie that was being promoted: that there were no principled differences between Trotsky and Stalin, and the former's victory would not have changed the evolution of the USSR in any significant way. Stalinism, according to this narrative, was the inevitable outcome of the October Revolution.

Before turning to the significance of Gorbachev's policies, North explained the historical and political foundations of Trotsky's struggle against Stalin, and the Fourth International's program of political revolution against the bureaucracy in the deformed and degenerated workers states. The current crisis in the USSR and Gorbachev's "reforms" amounted to an acknowledgment of the bankruptcy of the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country."

He said:

Sixty-five years after the issue was first raised, it is still the decisive question. 'Socialism in one country' now means capitalist restoration and a horrifying decline in the cultural and social level of the Soviet Union. The only alternative is international revolution. [23]

In his lively and at times contentious discussion with Moscow students the following day, North drew attention to a central problem in the development of a revolutionary leadership in the Soviet working class. He declared:

You have started asking questions and never let anyone stop you. But if I can make a criticism I still believe that you tend to see things very much in a simply national framework. This is understandable to the extent that the government has for so many decades imposed isolation upon you. But it is important to see the developments within an international framework and it is important to understand the events within the Soviet Union as part of a world crisis and not simply a Soviet crisis. [24]

Earlier that same month, the counterrevolutionary role of Pabloism in supporting the Stalinist regimes and their program of capitalist restoration, was summed up in a major event that occurred on November 4. On that day, the German section of the ICFI, then called the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA), intervened in a mass demonstration of more than one million people in East Berlin. The BSA distributed thousands of copies of a Central Committee statement titled "Overthrow the SED Bureaucracy! Build Workers Councils!"

The SED (the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany) then invited Ernest Mandel and interviewed him in the newspaper of its youth organization *Junge Welt*. The newspaper presented Mandel as the "leading theoretician of the Trotskyist Fourth International" and explicitly asked him about the statement distributed by the BSA on November 4. Mandel denounced the statement as "tactless" and "interference from outside."

Meanwhile, his supporters within the GDR in the "Democratic Socialists" were calling for a common government with the SED.

In the same *Junge Welt* interview, Mandel said of Gorbachev:

Not to see that we have to defend the nucleus of the achievements of "glasnost" against all its enemies as a huge step forward for the Soviet working class, the Soviet people, the international working class and all democratic forces in the world—that seems to me a dangerous political blindness, delusion

or mania. [25]

There were many expressions of mass opposition, in the working class in the USSR and the Eastern European countries, to the policies of capitalist restoration and the rule of the bureaucracy. It was by no means clear or foreordained what the outcome of the crisis would be.

Soviet miners struck across much of the USSR in July 1989 and raised political demands in opposition to the bureaucracy, including the abolition of the cooperatives and an end to the bureaucracy's privileges. They formed strike committees to run the walkout and mobilize support in the regions affected.

The strike broke out soon after Gorbachev returned from a visit to Beijing, where he witnessed first-hand the wave of strikes and protests that culminated in the Maoist regime's bloody mass repression that began at Tiananmen Square on June 4.

There were strikes in Poland and other Stalinist-ruled countries against massive price increases, privatization and anti-strike legislation.

The Workers League Political Committee published a statement in the *Bulletin* dated July 21, 1989 that explained the fundamental historical and political issues raised by the revival of working class struggle in the USSR, and advanced the program of political revolution and world socialist revolution. It stated:

The Soviet strike wave has vast historical significance. It means the revival of the great revolutionary traditions of the Russian and Soviet working class, which has already made three revolutions in this century—the 1905 Revolution, which first challenged the tsarist autocracy, the February 1917 Revolution, which overthrew tsarism, and the October 1917 Revolution, which overthrew capitalist rule and established the first workers state.

This means a revival within the Soviet working class of the revolutionary internationalist program on which the Bolshevik Revolution was based. [26]

One can get a sense of the intensity of the IC's intervention, and the wealth of political material it produced, by considering the list of items on the history of the struggle against Stalinism and the then-unfolding developments in the USSR and Eastern Europe, in the January–June 1990 edition of *Fourth International*:

Fifty Years Since the Assassination of Leon Trotsky
The Crisis in the GDR and the Tasks of the Fourth International
Following the East German Elections: The Working Class Faces Sharp Attacks
Lecture at the Historical Archival Institute
A Discussion of Marxism with Soviet Students
A Reply to Eight Questions from a Soviet Journalist
An Interview with Two Soviet Youth
An Interview with a Soviet Historian
Letter to a Soviet Youth
Imperialism Breaks at Its Weakest Link
The Crisis of Stalinism and the Perspective of World Socialist Revolution
Workers Need a Revolutionary Internationalist Program
Ernest Mandel Defends Stalinism
What Next in Czechoslovakia?
Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989) Liberal Critic of Stalinism
Stalinist Bloodbath in Baku

The Summer–Fall 1991 *Fourth International* provided a sample of the extensive correspondence that was developing between students, workers, historians and intellectuals in the USSR and the ICFI. Letters were published from a Soviet youth, a Soviet academician, a worker in Volzhsky, a worker in Vorkuta, a worker in Kiev and a correspondent in Kirov—all with replies by David North—as well as a contribution from a Soviet historian, with an extensive reply by North. The volume also included a lecture given by Beams at the Pedagogical Foreign Language Institute in Kiev.

There is a wealth of fascinating and illuminating material in these exchanges, but for the purposes of this lecture, I will cite only one excerpt from a reply by Comrade North to a letter from a Soviet youth on August 14, 1990:

In no country in the world has Marxism been so ruthlessly falsified and repressed as in the Soviet Union. For this very reason, the greatest task confronting socialists in the USSR is to re-forge the historical and political links between the working class and its great revolutionary, genuine Bolshevik, traditions. The most terrible lie of all, which we must fight against with all our strength, is that which claims that Stalinism was the product of Marxism and that the crimes of the bureaucracy arose organically and inevitably out of the Bolshevik Revolution...

The history of Marxism over the last 67 years is the history of the struggle against Stalinism! [27]

The same letter contains a trenchant exposure of the politics of the opportunist anti-Trotskyist, Boris Kagarlitsky, who had developed a following among disaffected youth.

On October 3, 1991, less than three months before the Kremlin bureaucracy officially dissolved the Soviet Union, David North delivered a lecture to a workers' club in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev that presented a precise and prescient forewarning of the catastrophic consequences of capitalist restoration for the working class. Amid endless talk in the Soviet media of the wonders of capitalism in the West, especially the United States, from longtime Stalinist hacks and apologists for the Moscow regime's crimes, North said:

To the extent that they are even willing to acknowledge the grave implications of a return to capitalism in Russia and the Ukraine, smug economists among the ex-Stalinists, right-wing 'democrats' and nationalists declare that Russia and the Ukraine are not like other 'third world' countries. That is quite true: they both possess a massive industrial infrastructure and a level of social culture unknown to the masses of any other "developing" country. But herein lies the unique dilemma of the USSR and its republics. For the countries of the third world, capitalist development is theoretically "justified"—to the extent that it can be justified at all—as a means of creating the modern industrial economies that will provide, at some unknown date in the distant future, an escape from grinding poverty. Aside from the fact that this apology is based more on illusions and myths than on facts, it has no relevance for the Soviet Union. In this country, capitalist restoration can only take place on the basis of the wide-scale destruction of the already existing productive forces and the social-

cultural institutions that depend upon them. *In other words, the integration of the USSR into the structure of the world imperialist economy on a capitalist basis means not the slow development of a backward national economy, but the rapid destruction of one that has sustained living conditions which are, at least for the working class, far closer to those which exist in the advanced countries than in the third world.*" (Emphasis in the original) [28]

Taking on the arguments of the nationalists, including longtime operatives within the bureaucracy in the various republics, including Ukraine, now clamoring for independence from the USSR on a capitalist basis, North explained:

In the republics, the nationalists proclaim that the solution to all problems lies in the creation of new "independent" states. Allow us to ask, independent of whom? Declaring "independence" from Moscow, the nationalists can do nothing more than place all the vital decisions relating to the future of their new states in the hands of Germany, Britain, France, Japan and the United States. Kravchuk goes to Washington and squirms in his seat like a schoolboy while he is lectured by President Bush...

What path then, should the working people of the USSR follow? What is the alternative? The only solution is that which is based on the program of revolutionary internationalism. The return to capitalism, for which the chauvinist agitation of the nationalists is only one guise, can only lead to a new form of oppression. Rather than each of the Soviet nationalities approaching the imperialists separately with their heads bowed and their knees bent, begging for alms and favors, the Soviet workers of all nationalities should forge a new relationship, based on the principles of real social equality and democracy, and on this basis undertake the revolutionary defense of all that is worth preserving of the heritage of 1917. [29]

Conclusion

This lecture could only outline the historic content of the struggle waged by the ICFI in defense of the gains of the October Revolution against capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union. The articles, statements, lectures, correspondence, etc. comprise many hundreds of pages, and call for careful study. This is a critical aspect of the development of the perspective and revolutionary practice of the ICFI, in the aftermath of the split with the WRP.

It is my hope that this introduction will facilitate that study and contribute to the education of the cadre and the preparation of the IC for a rapid growth in our ranks and for the explosive class battles that lie ahead.

Footnotes:

- [1] *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, Labor Publications, 1985, Detroit, p.5 and p. 18
- [2] *The Permanent Revolution*, Pathfinder Press, 1969, New York, p. 146
- [3] *What is Happening in the USSR: Gorbachev and the Crisis of Stalinism*, p. 8
- [4] *The Revolution Betrayed*, Labor Publications, 1991, Detroit, pp.7–8
- [5] *In Defense of Marxism*, Pathfinder Press, 1995, New York, pp. 67-68 and 73
- [6] *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 46
- [7] *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97

- [8] *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, Pathfinder Press, 1977, New York, pp. 184-85
- [9] *Fourth International*, July–December 1989, p. iv
- [10] *News Line*, June 24, 1983
- [11] Letter from Gerry Healy to Arthur Scargill, April 29, 1985, *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism*, p. 108
- [12] *What is Happening in the USSR? Gorbachev and the Crisis of Stalinism*, p. 1–2
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 12
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 13
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 18
- [16] *Fourth International*, September 1987, p.10
- [17] *Perestroika Versus Socialism*, Labor Publications, 1989, Detroit, p. 10
- [18] *Fourth International*, January–June 1990, p. vi
- [19] *Perestroika Versus Socialism*, p. 49
- [20] *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 25
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 63, p. 71)
- [23] *The USSR and Socialism*, p.11
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 25
- [25] *Fourth International*, January–June 1990, p. 92
- [26] *Fourth International*, July–December 1989, p. 18
- [27] *Fourth International*, Summer–Fall 1991, p. 117
- [28] *Fourth International*, Fall–Winter 1992, p. 109
- [29] *Ibid.*, p. 110



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