

The coronavirus pandemic, the crisis of capitalism and the tasks of the SEP

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The following is the main resolution that was discussed and adopted unanimously at the Fifth National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held on August 14-16, 2020.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is a trigger event that has both revealed and accelerated the crisis of global capitalism. Just as the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand unleashed pent-up geopolitical and social tensions on June 28, 1914, plunging Europe into war, so the coronavirus outbreak has exacerbated the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system in Australia and around the world. It has given new impetus to the resurgence of the class struggle already underway—the product of a decades-long assault on the working class—and the necessity of fundamental social change.

2. At the beginning of the year, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) concluded, based on a Marxist assessment of the international situation, that world politics had reached a critical tipping point. The 2010s was a decade of intensifying capitalist crisis that led to a resurgence of the working class. The 2020s would be a decade of revolutionary upheaval. A perspective on the *World Socialist Web Site* on January 3, entitled “The decade of socialist revolution begins” made the following prognosis: “The arrival of the New Year marks the beginning of a decade of intensifying class struggle and world socialist revolution.” [1] It elaborated the underlying signs of an impending revolutionary storm, examining in turn, the growing drive to war between major nuclear-armed powers, the breakdown of democracy and turn to authoritarian forms of rule, the degradation of the environment, the untrammelled parasitism of the financial aristocracy and staggering levels of social inequality. It is these developments that are providing the impulse to class struggle.

3. Mass political consciousness is rapidly changing, undermining all the existing political parties and political structures as broad layers of workers and youth draw conclusions about the unviability of the profit system, and are attracted to socialism. As the January 3 perspective commented: “In many of the comments in the bourgeois press, the protests and struggles over the past year are referred to as ‘leaderless.’ But this is only a preliminary stage in the development of the consciousness of the masses. The masses, accumulating experiences in the course of struggle, are undergoing a profound change in their social and political orientation.” As the perspective made clear, however, the essential ingredient in the development of revolutionary consciousness is the political struggle of the party and its cadre in the working class. “The growth of the working class and the emergence of class struggle on an international scale are the objective basis for revolution. However, the spontaneous struggles of workers and their instinctive striving for socialism are, by themselves, inadequate. The transformation of the class struggle into a conscious movement for socialism is a question of political leadership.”

4. The prognosis of the January 3 perspective has been confirmed within months. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a monumental breakdown of the capitalist system and laid bare the chasm between the ruling classes and the mass of the population internationally. Governments

around the world stand exposed for their criminal indifference and negligence. Their lack of preparation, despite repeated warnings of the danger of such a public health disaster, and their failure to immediately implement the necessary counter-measures, are responsible for the rapid spread of COVID-19 and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

5. The pandemic has been treated as an economic, not a health crisis, with trillions being poured into the financial markets and corporate coffers to benefit the super-wealthy, while health systems have been starved of desperately needed funds. At the same time, the ruling classes are exploiting the opportunity to completely restructure class relations. The precipitous drive to force workers back to work, knowing that it will lead to rising infection rates, was preceded during the lockdown with the axing of penalty rates, a massive destruction of jobs, wholesale changes to working hours and conditions, and wage cuts. Countless lives are to be sacrificed to ensure the stepped-up extraction of surplus value from the working class needed to stave off the collapse of the mountains of fictitious value on the global share markets. In the press, the proponents of the homicidal theory of “herd immunity” argue, in the manner of fascist ideologues, that the pandemic should be allowed to run its course and resources not be devoted to saving the old, infirm and weak. [2] The universal character of this response demonstrates that it is not just the criminal reaction of individual political leaders but of the historically-outmoded social order of capitalism, which they represent and defend.

6. The rapid spread and global nature of the pandemic and its devastating economic and social impact demonstrate the impossibility of walling off any country or continent, including Australia, from the resulting crisis. National borders cannot protect the world’s population because of the vast interconnectedness of contemporary economic and social life. A global answer is necessary. The threat posed to millions more lives and livelihoods can only be countered through the mobilisation of the international working class—the only social force that can overturn the capitalist profit system, which is a barrier to the international coordination of economic, scientific, industrial and information resources needed to combat the virus. That task requires the building of the ICFI, the world party of socialist revolution, to provide the essential worldwide strategy and leadership. [3]

7. At the centre of the global maelstrom is the crisis of American imperialism. The decay of American capitalism is personified by the thuggish, fascistic figure of President Donald Trump. He represents the interests of the tiny financial oligarchy that has enriched itself through the orgy of speculation and outright criminal plunder over the past two decades which has produced soaring share values on Wall Street. Trump’s response to the pandemic has been to dismiss the dangers, oppose recommendations based on science, recklessly promote dangerous and life-threatening remedies and block demands for a lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus. Faced with the resistance of workers, the White House only belatedly imposed restrictions, which it is now seeking to rapidly lift, to drive workers back into unsafe factories and workplaces.

8. The acute social tensions in the United States erupted to the surface of political life in the widespread protests against the police killing of 46-year-old African American George Floyd on May 25. These continued, despite the mobilisation of the National Guard and military, and spread internationally. This brutal police killing became the focus for wider anger over huge and mounting levels of unemployment, extreme social polarisation and the callous disregard of government for the lives and health of the population. Reflecting the intense fears in ruling circles of the mounting social movement of the working class, Trump openly moved to establish dictatorial forms of rule. In an attempted coup d'état, hatched in the White House on June 1, the president moved to deploy the military against protesters in open violation of the US constitution. He was only compelled to pull back due to the opposition of military chiefs who feared they would not be able at the time to control the inevitable popular backlash. [4] Trump continues to seek a pretext for instituting outright dictatorial rule. The resort to police-state methods internationally is expressed in the promotion of far-right and fascistic forces in Europe and elsewhere in response to the resurgence of the class struggle, including the Yellow Vest movement in France, major strikes by teachers in Europe and mass anti-government protests in the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America.

9. The turn to autocratic forms of rule is a measure of the desperation and weakness of the capitalist class. In the US, where democratic traditions born of the American Revolution and Civil War run deep, the mechanism of bourgeois democracy, which masks the powerful vested interests that dominate government, has been the preferred method of rule. As workers and youth come into open confrontation with the capitalist state, everything for the ruling class depends on diverting a potentially revolutionary movement into safe political channels. In the mass protest movement against the police killing of George Floyd, the proponents of black identity politics in the US expressed their class hostility to the multinational and multi-ethnic character of the demonstrations by advancing a racialist perspective, that race, not class, is the fundamental divide in society. The more diverse and global the protests against police violence became, the more they blamed “white people,” not the capitalist system, for racial discrimination and oppression. They regard a united movement of the working class as a mortal threat to the social order in which their privileged position is rooted. [5]

10. Australia is no exception to upheavals erupting internationally. The doctrine of Australian exceptionalism, initially formulated by the Labor Party in the White Australia policy at the time of federation, has been the most virulent form of Australian nationalism. It has always been cultivated to seek to block the development of a socialist and internationalist perspective in the working class. History has refuted this doctrine of exceptionalism and the “lucky country.” Australia has been impacted by every major crisis of global capitalism over the past century—two world wars and the Great Depression, the protracted breakup of the post-World War II boom and the 2008–09 global financial crisis, and now the crisis triggered by the pandemic. The virus respects no national borders and carries no passport. Such is the interconnection of global society that if it is present anywhere it has the potential to spread everywhere—a danger that is being greatly increased by the rush to lift restrictions.

11. Throughout the pandemic the Australian ruling class—no less than its counterparts in the US, Britain, Brazil, and other centres of coronavirus infections—has prioritised the demands of big business and finance capital over the health and safety of the working class. The country had fewer initial infections than many other countries, in part due to substantially lower than usual tourist numbers because of the 2019–2020 summer bushfire catastrophe. Rather than use this fortuitous breathing space to make the necessary public investments and emergency preparations, virtually nothing was done. Only as infections surged, triggering growing

indications of working class opposition, was the “national cabinet” of federal and state governments formed on March 13 to oversee putting restrictions in place and sanction the handout of billions of dollars primarily to big business. Even then the restrictions on movement and large gatherings were extremely limited. With the exception of the hospitality and entertainment industries, no impediments were placed in the way of the continued extraction of corporate profit, and manufacturing, construction, retail, and other industries continued normal operations. On March 23, five days before daily infection rates reached their first wave peak, Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared, in a mantra that was subsequently repeated multiple times, that anyone who had a job was an “essential worker.” Anger and concern among doctors, teachers, parents, child care workers and retail workers—voiced in open letters and petitions signed by thousands—then forced governments to announce further partial shutdown measures and “transition” schools to mostly online teaching.

12. In April, as daily infections declined as a result of these restrictions, the federal government declared victory, and, with the support of every state premier, Labor and Liberal, insisted that it was possible to manage a “safe” level of COVID-19 infection. This was backed by the corporate media, sections of which argued that “the cure [the lockdown] must not be worse than the disease.” On April 27, the government received a report that had been commissioned by the federal chief medical officer from 100 academics, mostly epidemiologists and medical scientists. It explained that it was entirely feasible to eliminate coronavirus infections, through “reasonable additional investment” for more testing and contact tracing, as well as an extension of the lockdown beyond mid-May, possibly for another 30 days. “The elimination strategy should lead to fewer total infections, hospitalisations and deaths, and better protection of vulnerable populations than any of the alternatives,” the health experts stated. But, in what amounted to a social crime against the working class, all these proposals were rejected by the federal government and every state administration. Morrison contemptuously declared on May 1: “We need to get businesses open, we need to enable Australians to go back to work. ...We can’t keep Australia under the doona.” [6] That month the limited restrictions previously imposed were lifted, with restaurants, pubs and other high-risk venues reopened and face-to-face teaching resumed despite widespread opposition among teachers and parents.

13. On June 3, the Socialist Equality Party issued a statement, “Oppose the premature lifting of COVID-19 safety restrictions!” The party warned: “Via decrees agreed by the so-called national cabinet, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike are gambling with the lives of the population.” [7] This was quickly vindicated—infection rates climbed steadily in Victoria in June, before erupting in July with hundreds of new cases confirmed every day. On August 2, the Victorian Labor government declared a “state of disaster” involving a night-time curfew, the suspension of the retail industry and restrictions on other sectors of the economy, as well as far-reaching police measures to enforce the lockdown. In response, the SEP published a statement on August 5, “Victoria’s COVID-19 catastrophe: An indictment of Australian governments and capitalism” which pointed to the next phase of the pandemic—the development of determined working-class opposition. “Already, the past weeks have seen the start of an upsurge in the class struggle. Educators have demanded the closure of the schools, while meat workers, cleaners and warehouse staff have engaged in stoppages and protests to demand safe conditions,” it stated. [8]

14. As the pandemic has worsened, the working class has borne the brunt, with low wage and casualised workers in the meat industry, aged care sector, and warehouses among the worst affected. COVID-19 has exposed the protracted underfunding and neglect of the public healthcare system by successive Labor and Liberal governments. More than 1,000 health workers in Victoria, including hospital doctors and nurses, have

contracted the disease because of inadequate provision of proper personal protective equipment (PPE). In an extraordinary demonstration of government negligence and incompetence, in August—five months after the World Health Organisation declared coronavirus a global pandemic—20 percent of health workers across Australia still lacked access to adequate PPE.

15. The formation of the wartime-like national cabinet—a de-facto government of national unity in which the federal Coalition government has been joined by state governments, the majority of which are Labor—is the sharpest political expression of the profound underlying crisis of Australian capitalism exposed and accelerated by the pandemic. This cabinet, which has since become permanent, has no constitutional standing, meets behind closed doors and is bound by “cabinet confidentiality.” Governments of national unity only emerge in times of acute crisis. The new national cabinet reflects the advanced rot of the establishment parties and extreme volatility of politics since the 2008–09 global financial crisis. One prime minister after another—seven in all—has fallen victim either to inner-party intrigues or been voted out of office. The incapacity of each government to fully impose the pro-market program demanded by the ruling class, along with conflicting interests generated by the rising US offensive against China, have contributed to this political instability. However, the very fact that prime ministers and governments, both Coalition and Labor, have been ousted or voted out with such regularity is a product of the widespread popular distrust of, and alienation from, the entire political establishment, the mainstream media and the state apparatus more generally.

16. The federal election in May 2019 marked a turning point in the decay of the Australian political establishment. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his Liberal-National Coalition only scraped back into office with the assistance of vote preferences from right-wing populist formations. The win did not represent support for the Coalition, but was, above all, a rejection of Labor. While the primary vote for the Coalition declined, that of the Labor Party fell even further, to just 33 percent—the lowest in more than a century. The immediate beneficiaries, however, were right-wing, nationalist formations such as One Nation and Clive Palmer’s United Australia Party. There are political lessons that must be learned from the election. While certainly justified in its rejection of the Labor Party, the working class, without an independent, class-conscious perspective, remains confined to the trap of parliamentary democracy which only results in one capitalist party being voted out of office and another voted in to carry through the dictates of the ruling elites. [9]

17. Labor’s response to the election defeat was to move sharply to the right. Its newly-installed leader Anthony Albanese rapidly ditched the party’s empty populist election promises and, adopting the pro-market language of Morrison, vowed that Labor would be “first and foremost” in “the business of creating wealth.” [10] The dependence of the weak, internally-divided Morrison government on the support of Labor soon became evident in the crisis provoked by the 2019–20 bushfires, which were unprecedented in scale and duration in Australian history, and provoked shock around the world. Warnings by fire fighters and scientists of a catastrophic fire season were ignored by Labor and Liberal governments alike. [11] The wilful unpreparedness and criminal indifference of the Morrison Liberal-National Coalition government to the bushfire crisis, provoked anger and hostility from workers in fire-affected communities and the population as a whole. Under conditions of mounting national protests and with a precipitous decline in confidence in the federal government—down to 27 percent—the Labor Party, fearing an eruption against the entire parliamentary set-up, came to Morrison’s rescue. Albanese called for “national unity” stating now wasn’t the time to make “party-political points.”

18. Ever since Federation in 1901, the ruling class has relied on the Labor Party to prop up bourgeois rule in every crisis, including two world

wars and the Great Depression. The bourgeoisie depended on the Whitlam Labor government (1972–75) to contain the eruption of huge working-class struggles, then the Hawke-Keating Labor governments (1983–96) to impose pro-market restructuring pioneered by Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in Britain. It now enters a period of the greatest economic and political turmoil since the 1930s, completely dependent on Labor and the trade unions to contain popular opposition to its pandemic measures. However, their ability to once again step into the breach and defend capitalism is deeply compromised by their decades-long record imposing the dictates of big business on the working class. The 2019 election defeat revealed Labor no longer enjoys any significant positive support among workers, and is not even regarded as a “lesser evil” as compared to the Coalition among broad layers of working people.

19. Underpinning these political upheavals is the economic and social crisis of global and Australian capitalism, which has deepened immensely, far beyond the 2008–09 global financial crisis. Cheap money pumped into the markets by the world’s central banks over the past decade only led to a renewed orgy of speculation on stock exchanges that further enriched a tiny financial aristocracy at the expense of the world’s population. According to the charity Oxfam, the planet’s 26 richest billionaires now own as much as the 3.8 billion people, who comprise the poorest half of the world’s population. The response of governments worldwide to the economic impact of COVID-19 has been to flood money into financial markets on a scale unprecedented in world history. The governments of the major capitalist countries, grouped in the OECD, are expected to take on at least \$17 trillion in additional public debt, with state debt set to rise from 109 percent of GDP to 137 percent. Australian government spending measures exceeding \$200 billion, were largely aimed at bailing out major corporations, and resulted in the total government debt rising to \$1 trillion, that is, to a proportion of the total economy not seen except in times of war. The mantra that “we are all in this together” clearly does not apply to the super-rich. While unemployment and underemployment have risen to Great Depression levels of 20 percent, the wealthiest 20 billionaires in Australia have increased their combined worth by 32 percent to \$189 billion over the past year.

20. The huge sums of money funnelled to the corporate and financial elite, in the name of keeping the economy afloat, will have to be recouped from the working class. That is what is behind the precipitous drive to lift all restrictions and to restructure class relations. Only by driving up the rate of exploitation, through the elimination of penalty rates, lowering wages, slashing jobs and removing any barriers to speed-up and multi-tasking, is it possible to extract the surplus value needed from the working class. The trade unions are playing the central role in this war on the working class. This was epitomised by Sally McManus, head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, who proclaimed on April 5, amid massive job losses, that by working with the unions, businesses could get “whatever they want.” So close is her daily collaboration with the federal government that Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter described her as his BFF [best friend forever]. [12] Together, they were the main architects of a \$130 billion corporate bailout, by far the largest in history, featuring JobSeeker wage subsidies to prop up businesses and quell working-class discontent. Announced on March 31, it was tied to provisions to allow employers to cut pay, working hours and other working conditions, while denying any financial support for more than two million casual workers, temporary visa holders and university workers. Within weeks, the unions had negotiated deals with employers to slash overtime pay and abolish shift restrictions for some three million hospitality and clerical workers. Union officials sit alongside big business representatives in five working groups on industrial relations established by the Morrison government to carry out a massive assault on the social position of the working class.

21. The shift to the right in official politics is exemplified by the

evolution of the various revisionist groups into what the ICFI has characterised as the pseudo-left. These organisations have integrated ever more closely with the political establishment and speak for layers of the upper-middle class, for whom identity politics is the ticket to lucrative positions within corporations, universities, the trade unions and the state apparatus. They have played a pernicious role over decades in promoting the poison of identity politics. This is aimed at denying that the fundamental divide in capitalist society is class, thereby undermining the unity of the working class. The class orientation of pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, is underscored by their abandonment of their previous anti-imperialist rhetoric and their support for the predatory US military interventions in the Middle East—Syria, in particular. They have championed various left-populist movements such as Syriza, which imposed drastic austerity measures on the Greek working class, and figures such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, whose roles have been to prop up capitalist rule by containing rising mass opposition within the framework of the British Labour Party and the Democratic Party in the US respectively. Within Australia, whatever their formal criticisms of Labor and the Greens, the pseudo-lefts invariably call for a vote, either directly or indirectly, for one or other of these capitalist parties. Their unwavering support for the trade union bureaucracies is a clear warning that, in the coming class struggles, these outfits will act as the last line of defence for the union apparatuses, as workers rebel against their stifling straitjacket.

22. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only exacerbated class tensions. It is fuelling geo-political enmities as the major powers seek to impose the burdens of the worsening capitalist crisis onto their rivals and to accelerate the drive to a calamitous world war. The chief destabilising factor in global politics is the reckless drive by US imperialism to arrest its historic decline through all means, including military ones. Its wars of aggression for domination of the Middle East and Central Asia have morphed over the past decade to focus on its global rivals, above all, China. US imperialism is demanding that China function as a kind of semi-colony of the US within its so-called “rules-based” order and will tolerate nothing less. Trump’s brazen lies aimed at scapegoating Beijing for the pandemic feed into the escalating US economic war and military build-up against China that began under the Obama administration. His administration is dramatically escalating the anti-China campaign on all fronts—a blanket rejection of Chinese claims in the South China Sea as illegal combined with stepped-up naval provocations, sanctions against Chinese officials over Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, economic warfare against Chinese tech companies like Huawei, and unsubstantiated allegations of spying. In a keynote speech on July 23, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo overturned decades of US diplomacy with China, and in denouncing Chinese Communist Party “tyranny” effectively called for regime-change in Beijing. [13] Trump’s resort to economic nationalism has an objective logic. While irrational from an economic standpoint, the drive to concentrate the economic forces of the country, the sinews of war, within the confines of the national state is the preparation for war.

23. Once again, the Australian government has lined up completely with Washington. By calling for an aggressive supposed ‘independent’ inquiry, with intrusive inspectors, into the origins of COVID-19, Morrison was functioning as point-man for Trump in the effort to concoct material for US propaganda against China. Successive Coalition and Labor governments have placed the Australian population on the frontline of any US war with China by opening up Australian bases to the US military, integrating the Australian military into the US war machine and joining Washington in strengthening anti-China alliances. While fears exist in Australian ruling circles about the economic impact of a confrontation with China, the dominant sections are fully committed to the US war drive. Canberra is not simply a “yes man” for Washington, but recognises that its own imperialist interests can only be pursued with the backing of

the dominant power. These interests include securing control over the South Pacific, which has long been a lucrative source of raw materials and cheap labour for Australian imperialism, as well as an important geostrategic base of operations. Canberra fears the encroachment into “its patch” by rival powers, above all China. The only social force that can halt the drive to war is the international working class. In line with the ICFI’s 2016 statement “Socialism and the Fight against War,” [14] the SEP, in collaboration with its sister parties internationally, will step up its efforts to build an international movement of the working class based on the fight to abolish capitalism and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.

24. The rapid spread of protests against the police killing of George Floyd internationally testifies to profound global processes driving workers and youth into struggle. Tens of thousands joined the demonstrations in Australia in regional centres as well as the main capital cities, not only to express their opposition to police violence and racism, but to voice their discontent and frustration over the injustice of a social order that puts corporate profit above all else. As in the United States, the ruling class in Australia depended on a layer of Aboriginal black nationalists to sow divisions along racial lines in what were multi-ethnic and multi-racial protests. Racism certainly exists and is particularly promoted among reactionary layers in the police forces, but the root cause of the horrific oppression of Aboriginal people is not “whites” or “white society” but capitalism. Black nationalism represents the interests of a thin upper-middle class layer of Aboriginal entrepreneurs, academics, journalists and politicians for whom it is a lever to advance their careers and power. They are intensely hostile to the SEP’s insistence that the historic oppression of the Aboriginal people is a class oppression and can only be ended as part of the struggle to unify the working class to overthrow the profit system.

25. The process of political radicalisation was also revealed in the protests and school strikes in Australia, as part of global rallies against climate change. The demonstrations involved tens of thousands and were, per capita, among the largest in the world. These re-erupted as the bushfire crisis brought into stark relief the failure of governments to take any meaningful action to halt global warming and its catastrophic impacts. [15] While such heterogeneous movements lack a coherent political program and reflect significant political confusion, they also express the striving for a progressive solution to the crises confronting humanity. A survey conducted in mid-2018 of young people—“millennials” born between 1980 and 1996—found that 58 percent of respondents had a favourable view of socialism while 59 percent agreed that “capitalism had failed.” The malign neglect of governments over the COVID-19 pandemic will have only further fuelled this growth of anti-capitalist sentiment.

26. The attempts by state and federal governments to block or ban the protests against police killings testify to the extreme nervousness in ruling circles over the potential for any such demonstrations becoming the focus for a far broader movement of the working class outside of safe parliamentary channels. Over the past two decades, successive governments, Labor and Coalition, have greatly strengthened the state apparatus, including the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), and enacted police-state measures that will be used in the class battles ahead. These laws include provisions to allow the deployment of the military to combat domestic unrest, without being called in by a state government, in potential violation of the constitution. Deep inroads have been made into basic democratic rights and legal norms, including the indefinite incarceration of refugees without charge or trial. Amid a xenophobic campaign against China, draconian “foreign interference” laws have greatly expanded the scope and penalties for crimes such as spying and treason, as well as establishing new, vaguely defined, “foreign interference” offenses. [16] While the first raids under this legislation have been carried out against a

Labor MP, these laws are designed to suppress any form of international collaboration and crack down on anti-war opposition. The government's collaboration in the persecution of Australian citizen Julian Assange, who remains imprisoned, despite the threat to his life posed by the spread of COVID-19 in British jails, is the starkest warning of the anti-democratic measures that will be used against the working class as it comes into struggle. The defence of democratic rights is intimately connected to the struggle for socialism. As they careen towards economic disaster and war, the ruling classes are increasingly promoting extreme-right and fascist forces, and using police-state measures. It is no longer a question of reform or revolution, but of socialist revolution or counterrevolution. If the working class does not seize power and begin to reconstruct society on a socialist basis, the bourgeoisie will impose its reactionary agenda through autocratic and dictatorial forms of rule.

27. The COVID-19 pandemic has graphically exposed the class character of the state apparatus, which is not a neutral body acting in the interests of society as a whole, but is made up, in essence, of bodies of armed men tasked with defending capitalist property and interests. The pandemic poses the necessity of an organised response based on the best scientific advice to protect the lives and well-being of the population. Instead, governments around the world have mobilised the state to pump trillions into propping up the markets and private enterprise on a scale that far exceeds the 2008–09 global financial crisis, while failing to provide adequate health resources and engaging in a homicidal campaign to force workers back to work in unsafe conditions. While defending capitalism and denigrating socialism at every point, the ruling class, confronted with a monumental crisis, has, for the time being, set aside all the nostrums concerning the magic of the market. The necessity for state intervention to combat the pandemic and to prevent economic collapse is no longer dismissed as a socialist fantasy but is grasped as a lifeline by the bourgeoisie itself. The burning issue of the day is: in whose interests will this state power be exercised? If power remains in the hands of the present financial oligarchy, the health, well-being and lives of working people will be sacrificed to the further aggrandisement of wealth of the very few. What is required is the revolutionary political struggle of the working class to dismantle the capitalist state and create a workers' state and a workers' government, based on democratically-elected organs of the working class, to reorganise society to meet the pressing social needs of the vast majority of the population.

28. The SEP will actively encourage and politically assist workers in the establishment of their own independent organisations. The outbreak of serious strikes will necessarily take the form of a rebellion against the trade union apparatus and the legal straitjacket of anti-strike laws that the unions have helped put in place and police. The unions no longer in any sense represent the basic interests of the working class and are deeply hostile to any movement of workers which would threaten their cosy and lucrative relations with corporations and governments. The SEP calls for the formation of democratically elected, rank-and-file committees in workplaces to prepare for the strike struggles ahead. At the same time, the working class is confronted with a host of pressing social issues outside the workplace. That is why the SEP also advocates the establishment of action committees in local communities, to fight for the class interests of workers and their families, including high quality health care, schools and housing. Such committees are the basis for reaching out to other sections of workers in Australia and around the world who are being driven into struggle by their common and pressing social problems, thus establishing a common front against the depredations of capitalism. Vital lessons have been learnt through the political work of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) over many years. It has developed an analysis on many aspects of education and presented an independent socialist perspective, distributing it among educators via information bulletins and online newsletters, through social media and the *World Socialist Web Site* and

campaigning at schools, universities and workplaces. Central to its work has been providing teachers with a voice and exposing the criminal and complicit role of the teacher unions. At the same time, the CFPE has sought to engage and mobilise educators on broader political issues, taking forward the defence of Julian Assange through the formation of "Teachers for Assange" and connecting their struggles with the fight of workers internationally.

29. The emerging struggles of the working class underscore the necessity for the SEP to advance, in a timely fashion, those transitional demands that act as a bridge between the present consciousness of workers and the historic tasks they confront in overturning the profit system. As Leon Trotsky explained in the founding document of the Fourth International—the *Transitional Program*—the strategic task of the party is the conquest of power by the proletariat for the purpose of expropriating the bourgeoisie, but that is unthinkable without careful attention to all, even small and partial, questions of tactics. "The present epoch is distinguished not for the fact that it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried on indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution...Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But it carries on this day-to-day work within the framework of the correct actual, that is, revolutionary perspective." [17] The significance of transitional demands has taken on concrete form in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, when measures essential to the health of workers, such as proper protective equipment, adequate testing, safe working procedures and care for infected workers, conflict with the corporate profit drive. These demands, which require the establishment of workplace safety committees, become the means for mobilising and educating workers in the necessity for the socialist reorganisation of society.

30. The strategic lessons of the 20th century—the victory of the Russian Revolution in October 1917, as well as the bitter defeats of the working class in revolutionary struggles—all demonstrate that without a revolutionary party to provide political education and leadership a mass movement of the working class, no matter how militant, is incapable of seizing power from the bourgeoisie. The basic task of the SEP is to build its political influence in key sections of the working class, by intervening aggressively in struggles as they emerge, to recruit workers and youth to the party and train them as revolutionary fighters.

31. In his work *Lessons of October*, Leon Trotsky explained that any major turn in the objective situation brings new pressures on the party as it is required to alter its tactics and methods of organisation to meet the new demands of the class struggle. [18] The resurgence of the class struggle, after its protracted suppression, opens up new opportunities for the party and poses new responsibilities. It also carries political dangers that the party must guard against. In its 2018 Congress Resolution, the SEP in the US made the following salient warning: "A study of social revolutions in the twentieth century reveals that political defeats were frequently the consequence of incorrect policies by the socialist party in the course of revolutionary struggles. The policies of the POUM during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) rank among the most tragic examples of a defeat resulting from incorrect policies. But another cause of defeats is the failure of the Marxist party to recognize and respond, in a timely and sufficiently determined manner, to the approach of a revolutionary crisis. The defeat of the German Revolution in 1923 is the most significant example of such a failure of political initiative. In the present situation of deepening crisis, it is the latter mistake that the revolutionary movement must be determined to avoid." [19]

32. The ability of the party and its cadre to chart a revolutionary course for the working class depends on the thorough assimilation of the strategic experiences of the working class over the past century, above all the struggles of the Trotskyist movement, which alone represents the continuity of the fight for Marxism. These include the lessons of the

protracted struggle waged by the ICFI against Pabloite opportunism which sought to subordinate the Fourth International to the social democratic, Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist movements that dominated the workers' movement in the post-war period. This 30-year-long conflict culminated in the victory of the orthodox Trotskyists in the ICFI in the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1985–86 and led to a renaissance of Marxism. The theoretical analysis developed in the immediate aftermath of the split, which was reviewed in the lectures to the 2019 SEP (US) Summer School, provided the essential framework for the work of the ICFI over the past three decades and is critical for the period ahead. [20]

33. The objective foundations for the victory of the ICFI and its perspective of world socialist revolution over the WRP's national opportunism lay in the profound changes in the structure of world economy arising from the development of globalised production that had rendered the nationalist programs of the old mass parties and trade unions utterly bankrupt. Drawing the necessary conclusions, the sections of the ICFI made the transition from leagues to parties in 1995. This was based on the understanding that the radicalisation of the masses would not take place within the framework of the old organisations but in a struggle against them. Motivating the necessary transition, SEP (US) national chairman David North, wrote: "If there is to be leadership given to the working class, it must be provided by our party. If a new road is to be opened for the masses of working people, it must be opened by our organization. The problem of leadership cannot be resolved on the basis of a clever tactic. We cannot resolve the crisis of working-class leadership by 'demanding' that others provide that leadership. If there is to be a new party, then we must build it." The change was embodied in the *World Socialist Web Site* launched in February 1998, an initiative that has played the decisive role in establishing the ICFI as the authentic and authoritative representative of international socialism.

34. Without the intervention of the party, it is impossible to reveal and develop the revolutionary potential in the situation. In the past two years, amid near universal silence in the media and political establishment, the SEP, in collaboration with its sister parties of the ICFI, has mounted an aggressive campaign against the persecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, revealing a powerful wellspring of support among workers and young people who regard the two as heroes for exposing the crimes of imperialism. The SEP will continue to fight for the unconditional release of Assange and an end to the persecution of Manning. At the same time, the opposition of the SEP (US) to the *New York Times'* 1619 Project [21] provided a platform, which would not otherwise have been available, for distinguished historians to criticise the project's denigration of America's revolutionary democratic traditions. The SEP must be sensitive to the many theoretical, political and social issues that will emerge in the immediate next period and open the way for the party to intervene, educate and mobilise the working class.

35. The pronounced shift in class relations since the beginning of the year and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided new opportunities to deepen the intervention of the party in the working class. The Committee For Public Education (CFPE) has been able to expand its work in the schools, which have been a prime target of the back-to-work campaign, and in universities through its insistence on safe working conditions and opposition to inroads into jobs, pay and conditions. The SEP will develop its interventions in other sections of the working class, along the lines of work already begun among teachers, health workers and in Australia Post. Amid the lockdown and restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic, the SEP has, in addition to the work of the *World Socialist Web Site*, turned to online media and social media to hold public meetings and lectures and reach out to other sections of workers. The use of these platforms has also enabled the International Committee and its sections to lift its political collaboration to a new level. In the coming

period, the SEP, together with its sister parties, will use the lessons learnt to win new layers of workers and youth to the revolutionary party. Above all, the immense and complex tasks of the struggle for socialism can only be resolved on the international plane and require the building of the ICFI as the world party of socialist revolution. The SEP is committed to the development and expansion of the political work of the ICFI throughout the globe, including the building of new sections in the Asia-Pacific region. We are confident that the program and practice of the party, prepared over decades, is meeting up with a radicalisation of workers and youth that is creating the conditions for the abolition of capitalism and the realisation of a socialist future.

Endnotes:

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[20] "The Political Origins and Consequences of the 1982–86 Split in the International Committee of the Fourth International," by David North,

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[21] “The New York Times’s 1619 Project: A racist falsification of American and world history” by Niles Niemuth, Tom Mackaman and David North, *World Socialist Web Site*, September 6, 2019



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