

Part One

Cliff Slaughter: A Political Biography (1928–1963)

David North
4 August 2021

Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4

This political biography of Cliff Slaughter covers the period between 1928 and 1963. A second section of the biography, from 1963 through his death, will be published later in the year.

Introduction

Cliff Slaughter died on May 3, 2021, in Leeds, England, at the age of 92.

From 1957 until 1986, Slaughter worked in close collaboration with Gerry Healy and Michael Banda in the leadership of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Slaughter was the main author of a series of historically significant documents that upheld the programmatic and theoretical foundations of orthodox Trotskyism in opposition to the unprincipled 1963 reunification of the American Socialist Workers Party with the Pabloite International Secretariat. He served for many years as secretary of the ICFI.

Slaughter's enduring contribution in the 1960s to the defense of Trotskyism stands in tragic contrast with his subsequent political opportunism and repudiation of revolutionary Marxism. In 1985–86, amid a devastating crisis within the Workers Revolutionary Party—for which he shared with Healy and Banda central responsibility—Slaughter did everything in his power to disorient the members of the British section, block any serious assessment of the causes of the WRP's breakdown, and discredit the International Committee.

On February 8, 1986, surrounded by a phalanx of London police and with their assistance, Slaughter barred WRP supporters of the ICFI from participating in the party's congress and split from the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Longevity was not kind to Cliff Slaughter. Still only 57 years old at the time of his break with the International Committee, Slaughter would devote the remaining 35 years of his life to repudiating and denouncing all the principles that he had defended during his 30 years in the Trotskyist movement. Dishonestly seeking to evade all responsibility for the crisis that destroyed the WRP, Slaughter placed the blame on Healy (whom, Slaughter claimed, "brooked no opposition") and, above all, on Lenin and Trotsky. The WRP's breakdown, he would insist in the decades that followed the split, was rooted in the erroneous belief that socialism requires the building of a revolutionary Marxist party in the working class. In 1996, Slaughter summed up his renunciation of Marxism with the declaration, "It is necessary to break entirely with the whole idea of

providing a party and program 'for' the working class. ..." [1]

With this phrase Slaughter made clear that he had broken entirely with the central principle for which he had fought 30 years earlier in the struggle against Pabloite revisionism: that the victory of socialism depends on the fight for socialist consciousness in the working class, which can be achieved only through the building of Marxist-Trotskyist parties.

For those in the International Committee who had worked with and learned from Cliff Slaughter during the years of his life when he defended Trotskyism, his repudiation of Marxist theory and politics, which he carried out with unabashed deceit and cynicism, could not but evoke contempt. But his role in 1985–86 and in the years that followed did not come entirely by surprise. During the previous decade the deterioration in the quality of Slaughter's work reflected the WRP's increasingly overt retreat from Trotskyism. The same degenerative process was evident in the evolution of his closest comrades.

Gerry Healy, who since the 1930s had upheld the Trotskyist program of political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy, ended his political life as an apologist for Mikhail Gorbachev. Michael Banda, who had joined the Trotskyist movement in the 1940s and fought against the counterrevolutionary policies of the Kremlin his entire adult life, suddenly denounced the Fourth International and proclaimed his admiration for Stalin. Despite the complete collapse of their personal relations amid the most bitter mutual recriminations, Healy, Banda, and Slaughter arrived, more or less simultaneously, at political positions diametrically opposed to those that they, in the years of their close collaboration, had defended. Their collective political trajectory was determined by social and political processes, rooted in the development of the class struggle in Britain and internationally in the critical decades of the 1970s and 1980s.

Given the fundamental character of his break with Trotskyism, and the manner in which he carried it out, Slaughter's death is not an occasion for sentimental recollections. Nevertheless, it is not only the evil men do that lives after them. In assessing his life, I will not imitate Slaughter by disregarding the immensely positive role he had played in the fight for Trotskyism within Britain and internationally during the most politically and intellectually productive period of his life.

I first met and heard Cliff Slaughter lecture in July 1971, exactly a half century ago. His writings and lectures, as well as our many discussions in the course of political work, contributed significantly to my education as a Marxist. But Slaughter came to share substantial responsibility for the increasing theoretical and political disorientation of the Workers Revolutionary Party, both for what he did and for what he chose not to do. If there was any one person in the WRP who could have decisively intervened to expose Healy's falsification of the Marxist method in the 1980s, which was employed to justify political opportunism, it was Cliff

Slaughter. But he consciously chose not to, and the role he played during and in the aftermath of the 1985–86 crisis ended completely all political and personal contact between us. I was obligated to subject his political activities and writing to the harshest criticism; and there is nothing that I would change, let alone withdraw. But the irony is that what I wrote against Slaughter was, to no small extent, greatly influenced by what I had learned, in earlier years, from him. This contradiction persists in the writing of the ensuing political biography of Cliff Slaughter.

David North
July 30, 2021

Cliff Slaughter's background and early years

Cliff Slaughter's father, Frederick Arthur Slaughter, was born in 1907 in Oxfordshire, in the south of England. When he was still in his teens, Fred moved to the northeast of England, where he found work as a coal miner in Durham. He passed through the experience of the 1926 General Strike, which was betrayed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) with devastating consequences for the miners, and the working class as a whole. In Durham, he met Annie Elizabeth Stokeld, born in 1903, whom he married in April 1928. The young couple soon moved to Doncaster, in Yorkshire, where their first child, Clifford, was born in October. Two siblings, Keith and Nancy, followed. In 1938, Frederick Slaughter and his family moved to Leeds, where Cliff Slaughter was to live his entire adult life.

An obituary published in the *Workers Press* after his death on November 14, 1974, at the age of 67, stated that the elder Slaughter's "experiences in the 1920s and 1930s gave him a bitter hatred of capitalism and a profound conviction of the necessity of social revolution by the working class." According to the *Workers Press*, Fred "recalled time and again the 1926 General Strike and contrasted the fighting strength of the miners, of whom he was one at the time, and the cowardly betrayal of the TUC leaders." [2]

Fred Slaughter worked as a door-to-door insurance salesman in the 1930s, but he eventually found employment as a worker at the John Fowler tractor factory in Leeds, where he became a convenor (shop steward). At some point during World War II, Fred Slaughter joined the Stalinist Communist Party (CP). Annie Elizabeth also joined the CP, but she was far less active than her husband. Following the war, Fred Slaughter returned to work as a "canvasser," selling encyclopedias door-to-door to working class families.

Cliff Slaughter suffered great privations in his childhood. His future wife, Barbara Slaughter (née Bennett), recalls: "At the age of about 8 years he came home from school one day to find his mother in the living room, sitting on an orange box weeping. The bailiffs had removed almost all the furniture in the house in lieu of rent arrears. That was an experience he never forgot." [3]

Cliff attended Leeds Modern High School for Boys, where he excelled academically, and became the first of its students to win a scholarship to Cambridge University. Under the influence of his father, with whom he enjoyed a very close relationship, Cliff Slaughter began reading the works of Lenin and the Marxist classics while still in high school. By 1947 Slaughter had become active in the Young Communist League (YCL).

Upon the completion of high school, before proceeding to university, Slaughter decided to work as a miner, as an alternative to conscription in the armed forces. He worked at the Water Haigh Colliery in Woodlesford, a small village outside of Leeds. Slaughter would wake up an hour earlier than necessary to make the morning shift, so that he had time to study Lenin's writings. The experience left its mark on Slaughter, imparting to

his growing immersion in Marxist theory a detailed knowledge of and sensitivity toward the realities of working-class life and struggles. As Barbara Slaughter observed: "I think his understanding of the life of the working class was very profound. You couldn't work for two years underground, on your knees, shoveling coal in three-foot seams, and taking part in constant strike struggles over wages and conditions without learning a great deal about working class life. That, combined with his study of the Russian Revolution and the writings of Lenin, convinced him of the need for the working class to take power through socialist revolution." [4]

Following his work at the colliery, Slaughter found employment for several months in the engineering industry in Leeds. In October 1949 he began his studies at Cambridge, where he first majored in history before shifting his area of concentration to social anthropology. Slaughter achieved a first-class degree in 1952. He pursued socialist political activities alongside his studies and had to deal with the provocations of right-wing students at the university. Once, upon returning to his room, he discovered that his clothes, as well as those of a Jewish friend and fellow student, had been thrown into the quadrangle outside the dormitory building.

In October 1950, while studying at Cambridge, Slaughter married Barbara Bennett, whom he had met several years earlier. Barbara, whose parents were committed socialists, had joined the Communist Party in 1944 while studying sociology at Leeds University. During the first two years of their marriage, the couple lived in Cambridge, where they were active in the Communist Party. They attended lectures given by prominent CP intellectuals, including J.D. Bernal.

After graduating from Cambridge, Cliff Slaughter and Barbara moved to Leeds. Slaughter secured a post at Leeds University conducting research, with his colleagues Norman Dennis and Fernando Henriques, into a single Yorkshire mining community. As part of their research, Slaughter and Dennis worked in a local coal mine for several months.

Based on their research, Slaughter, Dennis and Henriques wrote a book, *Coal Is Our Life*, which remains a standard sociology text used in British universities.

Barbara Slaughter recalls that the youthful Slaughter was intensely focused on political and cultural issues. Aside from his academic research and political studies, Slaughter had a wide knowledge of English and French literature. He introduced Barbara to the novels of Stendhal, Flaubert, and Zola. Committed to the fight for socialism, Slaughter, at that stage of his life, evinced no interest in conventional forms of personal success.

Though active in the Communist Party, Slaughter found the reformist orientation elaborated in the 1951 program, "The British Road to Socialism," difficult to reconcile with the Marxist theory of the state. He was also astonished that Communist Party members accepted, without any questions, the pronouncements of Stalin as irrefutable. Everything the Soviet dictator said or wrote, even on matters about which he obviously lacked knowledge and competence, was accepted as gospel.

Barbara Slaughter has described the conditions that led to her joining the Communist Party and her experiences in the Stalinist movement:

I entered politics 63 years ago when I joined the Communist Party in 1945, at the age of 18, just as the Second World War was coming to an end. Having witnessed as a child the sufferings of the working class, including of my own family, during the 1930s and the terrible events of the Spanish Civil War and then the Second World War, I, like millions of others, was determined that there would be no return to the pre-war days. The Communist Party had gained tremendous prestige because of the heroism of the Russian working class in its defence of the gains of the Russian Revolution

in the war, and I, like thousands of others, joined the CP under the mistaken impression that it was a revolutionary party.

During the next 11 years I was thoroughly miseducated. I had absolutely no knowledge of the struggles of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International. In fact the Trotskyists were described as some kind of incarnation of evil, who were “worse than the fascists.” I can’t say that I really questioned this, but it did not take me very long to realise that the CP was far from being a revolutionary party. But I could see no alternative. [5]

Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech”

Whatever doubts Cliff and Barbara Slaughter had about the political course of the British Communist Party, their break with Stalinism and turn to Trotskyism were a response to the crisis that erupted within the world Stalinist movement in 1956. On February 25, 1956, almost exactly three years after Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev, the new Soviet party leader and long-time henchman of the deceased dictator, delivered a four-hour-long “Secret Speech” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev read to the delegates the long-suppressed *Testament*, in which Lenin had urged the removal of Stalin from the post of general secretary.

Khrushchev told the stunned delegates that Stalin, who had long been venerated in the Soviet Union as a demi-god, was, in fact, a political criminal, responsible for the murder of thousands of Bolshevik leaders and loyal communists. He stated:

Stalin acted not through persuasion, explanation, and patient cooperation with people, but by imposing his concepts and demanding absolute submission to his opinion. Whoever opposed these concepts or tried to prove his [own] viewpoint and the correctness of his [own] position was doomed to removal from the leadership collective and to subsequent moral and physical annihilation. This was especially true during the period following the 17th Party Congress [in 1934], when many prominent Party leaders and rank-and-file Party workers, honest and dedicated to the cause of Communism, fell victim to Stalin’s despotism. ...

Stalin originated the concept “enemy of the people.” ... It made possible the use of the cruelest repression, violating all norms of revolutionary legality, against anyone who in any way disagreed with Stalin.... On the whole, the only proof of guilt actually used, against all norms of current legal science, was the “confession” of the accused himself. As subsequent probing has proven, “confessions” were acquired through physical pressures against the accused. This led to glaring violations of revolutionary legality and to the fact that many entirely innocent individuals—[persons] who in the past had defended the Party line—became victims. ...

Arbitrary behavior by one person encouraged and permitted arbitrariness in others. Mass arrests and deportations of many thousands of people, execution without trial and without normal investigation created conditions of insecurity, fear and even desperation.

This, of course, did not contribute toward unity of the Party ranks and of all strata of working people, but, on the contrary, brought about annihilation and the expulsion from the Party of workers who were loyal but inconvenient to Stalin. [6]

Khrushchev and his allies in the Soviet Politburo sought to evade responsibility for the crimes by attributing all responsibility to Stalin, who, they claimed, had created a “cult of personality” to which the entire party had mysteriously succumbed. Of course, this political ghost story explained nothing at all. It avoided any examination of the political struggles within the Soviet Communist Party during the 1920s that resulted in Stalin’s rise to power. To the extent that any reference was made to the inner-party struggle, Khrushchev insisted that the campaign against Trotsky had been correct:

We must affirm that the Party fought a serious fight against the Trotskyites, rightists and bourgeois nationalists, and that it disarmed ideologically all the enemies of Leninism. This ideological fight was carried on successfully, as a result of which the Party became strengthened and tempered. Here Stalin played a positive role. [7]

Stalinist parties in crisis

As the text of the “Secret Speech” found its way into the international press and was translated into countless languages, Khrushchev’s revelations set off shock waves in Communist parties all over the world. The leaders of all the major Communist parties—many of whom owed their positions to Stalin, had enthusiastically endorsed the Moscow Trials, and justified countless other crimes—were suddenly confronted with a tidal wave of questions from members. Throughout the world, Communist Party bosses—who had postured as little Stalins in their own countries—were being asked to provide an account of their personal responsibility for what the Kremlin was now referring to as “violations of revolutionary legality.” For how long had they consciously misled the members of their own national parties with false information?

But the questions that frightened the Stalinist leaders the most were the ones that arose inexorably out of the irrefutable exposure of Stalin’s crimes: Had Trotsky been right? Was it not necessary to review the entire course of the struggle that had unfolded inside the Soviet Communist Party and the Third International during Lenin’s final illness in 1923 and following his death in 1924? Had the time not come to publish Trotsky’s speeches and writings? Should Trotsky and his thousands of followers who were victims of Stalin’s terror be “rehabilitated” and honored as great revolutionaries?

Not one of these questions could be answered in the affirmative by Khrushchev or any other Communist Party leader. The political struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the 1920s and the 1930s had never been simply against Stalin as an individual. Trotsky’s critique was directed at an entire bureaucratic regime, of which Stalin was the personification. The Stalinist regime, Trotsky had explained, was the product of the bureaucracy’s usurpation of the power of the working class, which it carried out on the basis of the anti-Marxist theory of “socialism in one country.” The crimes of the Stalinist regime, including its conscious and systematic betrayals of the international working class, were rooted in its defense of the privileges of a bureaucracy that functioned as the “gendarme of inequality” within the Soviet Union. Trotsky’s call for the founding of the Fourth International in 1933, following Hitler’s rise to power in Germany (for which the policies of the Kremlin were responsible), coincided with his recognition that the Stalinist regime could not be reformed and that its overthrow by the working class in a political revolution was necessary.

Neither the Kremlin nor the national Stalinist parties would allow a

discussion of Trotsky's critique, let alone acknowledge its correctness. In fact, Maurice Thorez and Harry Pollitt, the general secretaries of the French and British Communist parties, had pleaded with Khrushchev not to rehabilitate the victims of the Moscow Trials. The British CP, under Pollitt, had endorsed the frame-up trials and executions. To quell the growing turmoil inside Stalinist organizations throughout the world, the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party passed a resolution on June 30, 1956, barely four months after Khrushchev's secret speech, that attempted to shut down further discussion of Stalin's crimes and, above all, their deeper political causes.

But the crisis inside the Stalinist organizations triggered by Khrushchev's speech was massively intensified by the outbreak of protests in Poland and Hungary in the autumn of 1956. The self-serving claims of the Kremlin regime that the process of de-Stalinization and self-reform had been completed were shattered by its decision to send tanks into Budapest and brutally suppress the uprising of the Hungarian working class.

While the Kremlin presented its intervention as the suppression of a fascist counterrevolution, these lies were refuted by the reports of journalist Peter Fryer, a long-time member of the British Communist Party, who had traveled to Hungary as a correspondent for the party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. As his reports contradicted the Kremlin's propaganda, they were censored by the British CP. When Fryer announced his resignation from the *Daily Worker*, the British Stalinists responded with a vicious smear campaign. Hoping to isolate him, the Communist Party first suspended and then expelled Fryer, but this bureaucratic action further discredited the organization. Within several months, 7,000 people—approximately 20 percent of its membership—had resigned from the British CP.

Despite his expulsion, Fryer's *Hungarian Tragedy*, published in December 1956, reverberated through the ranks of the British Communist Party. He wrote of two tragedies. The first was that "of a people's revolution—a mass uprising against tyranny and poverty that had become insupportable—being crushed by the army of the world's first socialist state." [8]

Fryer rejected the Kremlin's lying allegations:

I saw for myself that the uprising was neither organised nor controlled by fascists or reactionaries, though reactionaries were undeniably trying to gain control of it. I saw for myself that the Soviet troops who were thrown into battle against "counter-revolution" fought in fact not fascists or reactionaries but the common people of Hungary: workers, peasants, students and soldiers. The army that liberated Hungary in 1944-5 from German fascist rule, that chased away the collaborating big landowners and big capitalists and made possible the land reform and the beginning of Socialist construction—this army now had to fight the best sons of the Hungarian people. [9]

The invasion cost the lives of 20,000 Hungarians and 3,500 Russians. Large portions of Budapest were destroyed, and tens of thousands were wounded in the fighting.

The second tragedy was the long-term political consequences of the intervention. The sympathy for the Soviet Union—a legacy of Hungary's liberation from Nazi occupation by the Red Army—was obliterated. It was replaced by hatred of Russia and extreme disorientation. Fryer wrote:

Most Hungarians, while they do not want capitalism back or the landowners back, today detest, and rightly so, the regime of

poverty, drabness and fear that has been presented to them as Communism. The responsibility for this lies squarely on the shoulders of the Communist leaders, and principally on those of Rákosi, Farkas and Gerö, who promised the people an earthly paradise and gave them a police state as repressive and as reprehensible as the pre-war fascist dictatorship of Admiral Horthy. The workers were exploited and bullied and lied to. The peasants were exploited and bullied and lied to. The writers and artists were squeezed into the most rigid of ideological strait-jackets—and bullied and lied to. To speak one's mind, to ask an awkward question, even to speak about political questions in language not signposted with the safe, familiar monolithic jargon, was to run the risk of falling foul of the ubiquitous secret police. The purpose of this highly-paid organisation was ostensibly to protect the people from attempts at the restoration of capitalism, but in practice it protected the power of the oligarchy. To this end it used the most abominable methods, including censorship, thought control, imprisonment, torture and murder. The tragedy was that such a regime was presented as a Socialist society, as a "people's democracy", as a first step on the road to Communism. [10]

Fryer then called attention to yet another tragedy, that of British Communists who had visited Hungary but

did not admit, even to ourselves, the truth about what was taking place there, that we defended tyranny with all our heart and soul. Till the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party half-lifted the bandage from our eyes we admitted what we called certain "negative aspects" of the building of Socialism. We were confident that healthy criticism and self-criticism would enable these "negative aspects" to be overcome. After the Twentieth Congress we allowed ourselves to speak of "errors", "abuses", "violations of Socialist legality" and sometimes, greatly daring, "crimes". But we were still the victims of our own eagerness to see arising the bright new society that we so desperately wanted to see in our lifetime, and that our propaganda told us was being built. [11]

British Trotskyists respond to the crisis of Stalinism

It was during these convulsive months in late 1956 that Peter Fryer met Gerry Healy, the leader of the Trotskyist movement in Britain, who had been expelled from the British Communist Party in 1937 for raising questions about the Moscow Trials. The Trotskyist movement was known as "The Club" and worked as a faction inside the Labour Party. As one account of the crisis inside the British CP recalled, Fryer was attracted to Healy "not only because he had been right about Stalin, but because he boasted of a historical theory which accounted for Stalinism." [12] Healy organized the publication of Fryer's *Hungarian Tragedy* as a pamphlet for circulation among members of the Communist Party.

The intervention of the small British Trotskyist movement into the crisis of the Stalinist party was a political achievement of historic significance. Gerry Healy provided, without question, the essential political and, it must be added, intellectual impulse for this intervention. His critical role was not merely determined by his personal dynamism, unyielding determination, and remarkable oratorical ability—qualities that even his

bitterest enemies were compelled to acknowledge. The most remarkable of Healy's qualities as a leader, in this critical period of his life, was his understanding that the clarification of the great historical issues raised by Trotsky in the struggle against Stalinism is the foundation upon which the new mass revolutionary socialist party of the working class, the Fourth International, must be built. This clarification was not merely an "aspect" of party building, to which attention should be given when time permitted. It was, Healy frequently insisted, the very essence of the construction of the revolutionary party, for it was the indispensable basis for the education of the revolutionary cadre and the working class.

Moreover, The Club, despite its small size and extremely limited financial resources, had been politically prepared for the crisis inside the world Stalinist movement by the political struggle it had been waging inside the Fourth International during the previous three years.

The Fourth International and the struggle against Pabloism

In November 1953, irreconcilable political and programmatic differences culminated in a split of the Fourth International into two conflicting factions. One faction—led by Michel Pablo, the secretary of the International Secretariat of the Fourth International, and Ernest Mandel—had concluded that Trotsky's analysis, developed between 1933 and 1938, of the counterrevolutionary role of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and its associated parties had been both superseded and refuted by the course of World War II and its aftermath. The victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany and the establishment of "People's Democracies" in the "buffer states" of Eastern Europe had demonstrated that Stalinism contained a revolutionary role that Trotsky had not foreseen. These "deformed workers' states" represented, Pablo and Mandel claimed, an alternative course to socialism, achieved under the aegis of the Stalinist parties.

This revisionist perspective was elaborated in a document written by Pablo and Mandel (who then used the party name "Germain") that was adopted at the Ninth Plenum of the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International in 1951. It stated:

For our movement objective social reality consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world. Furthermore, whether we like it or not, these two elements by and large constitute objective social reality, for the overwhelming majority of the forces opposing capitalism are right now to be found under the leadership or influence of the Soviet bureaucracy. [13]

Furthermore, the escalating conflict between US imperialism and the Soviet Union would lead to a new world war, which would assume the form of a Stalinist-led global revolution, resulting in the creation of "deformed workers' states" that would last for centuries. With cataclysmic war between the "capitalist regime" and the "Stalinist world" looming, Pablo insisted that there was no justification for the independent existence of the Fourth International:

We will not cease to repeat again and again that the entire tactic set forth by the Third World Congress of the International in the different categories of countries is now conditioned by our fundamental estimation that the international situation is evolving irreversibly within a relatively brief period toward a world war of a

given character and within a given relationship of forces....

The difference between us and all others, including our deserters, is that we do not passively make this observation, we do not dream in the depths of our souls for another possible, more agreeable, easier evolution. But not wanting to lull ourselves with illusions, we attempt to act as of now in *consequence of this position and in practice*. [14]

Trotskyists, to the extent that they had any role at all to play in the unfolding global "War-Revolution," would serve as advisers to the Stalinist organizations, encouraging them to proceed along a revolutionary course as required by objective events. Therefore, the Trotskyists could best fulfill this modest political role by liquidating their own organizations and entering the Stalinist parties.

The political conflict provoked by this perspective was brought to a head by the developments in the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death on March 5, 1953. The measures taken by the new Kremlin leaders to diminish Stalin's god-like status, call a halt to the grotesque anti-Semitic campaign launched during the final months of the dictator's life, and reduce the level of state repression were proclaimed by Pablo and Mandel as signs of a progressive process of self-reform by the Soviet bureaucracy. This fantasy was quickly shattered by the brutal crushing of the working-class uprising in East Berlin by the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy, led by Walter Ulbricht, in June 1953.

With their encouragement, liquidationist factions developed in national sections throughout the Fourth International. In the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Pabloite faction led by Cochran and Clarke adopted the slogan "Junk the Old Trotskyism." In the British section of the Fourth International, the Pabloite faction, led by John Lawrence, demanded the dissolution of The Club into the Communist Party.

The revision of Trotsky's analysis of the role of Stalinism was a critical element of the Pabloite attack on the program of the Fourth International. But its repudiation of Trotskyism encompassed the foundational principles of the Marxist movement: the decisive role of leadership and its fight for socialist consciousness in the working class. This was explained by James P. Cannon in his summation speech on November 3, 1953, at the National Committee of the SWP, following the expulsion of the Cochran-Clarke faction:

Leadership is the one unsolved problem of the working class of the entire world. The only barrier between the working class of the world and socialism is the unsolved problem of leadership. That is what is meant by "the question of the party." That is what the *Transitional Program* means when it states that the crisis of the labor movement is the crisis of leadership. That means that until the working class solves the problem of creating the revolutionary party, the conscious expression of the historic process, which can lead the masses in struggle, the issue remains undecided. It is the most important of all questions—the question of the party.

And if our break with Pabloism—as we see it now clearly—if it boils down to one point and is concentrated in one point, that is it: the question of the party. That seems clear to us now, as we have seen the development of Pabloism in action. The essence of Pabloist revisionism is the overthrow of that part of Trotskyism which is today its most vital part—the conception of the crisis of mankind as the crisis of the leadership of the labor movement summed up in the question of the party.

Pabloism aims not only to overthrow Trotskyism; it aims to overthrow that part of Trotskyism which Trotsky learned from Lenin. Lenin's greatest contribution to his whole epoch was his

idea and his determined struggle to build a vanguard party capable of leading the workers in revolution. And he did not confine his theory to the time of his own activity. He went all the way back to 1871, and said that the decisive factor in the defeat of the first proletarian revolution, the Paris Commune, was the absence of a party of the revolutionary Marxist vanguard, capable of giving the mass movement a conscious program and resolute leadership. It was Trotsky's acceptance of this part of Lenin in 1917 that made Trotsky a Leninist.

That is written into the *Transitional Program*, that Leninist concept of the decisive role of the revolutionary party. And that is what the Pabloites are throwing overboard in favor of the conception that the ideas will somehow filter into the treacherous bureaucracy, the Stalinists or reformists, and in some way or another, "In the Day of the Comet," the socialist revolution will be realized and carried through to conclusion without a revolutionary Marxist, that is, a Leninist-Trotskyist party. That is the essence of Pabloism. Pabloism is the substitution of a cult and a revelation for a party and a program. [15]

On November 16, 1953, Cannon issued his Open Letter to Trotskyists all over the world calling for a decisive political and organizational break with Pablo and Pabloism. In this letter, Cannon unequivocally rejected Pablo's revision of the Trotskyist appraisal of Stalinism, which, he wrote:

[A]ttracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them either into the arms of the Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism. The penalty for these betrayals is paid by the working people in the form of consolidation of fascist or monarchist forces, and new outbreaks of wars fostered and prepared by capitalism. From its inception, the Fourth International set as one of its major tasks the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism inside and outside the USSR. [16]

One week later, on November 23, 1953, a resolution was adopted announcing the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the leadership body of orthodox Trotskyists throughout the world, in opposition to Pablo's International Secretariat. Gerry Healy was one of the four signatories of this historic resolution.

The British Trotskyist movement emerged from the 1953 split politically strengthened. Its defense of the Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism enabled it to avoid impressionist assessments of the factional struggles within the Kremlin, in contrast to Pablo and Mandel, who were endlessly speculating on the prospects for one or another supposedly progressive tendency within the bureaucracy (that of Malenkov or perhaps Mikoyan). The British Trotskyists placed emphasis on the crisis of the entire Stalinist movement, based on the reactionary and unviable program of "socialism in one country" and its updated variant, "peaceful coexistence" with imperialism.

Healy mobilizes the British Trotskyists

The British Trotskyists were, therefore, prepared for the crisis of 1956. Healy would later recall the cold and drizzly Saturday afternoon in late

winter when he heard for the first time of reports that Khrushchev had denounced Stalin in a speech to the 20th Party Congress. When the full text was finally published in the British press, Healy recognized at once that the "Secret Speech" marked a critical turning point in the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism. At long last, the heroic struggle that had been waged by the "Old Man" between 1923 and 1940 against the Soviet bureaucracy and the "Stalin School of Falsification" was being confirmed straight from the horse's mouth, or, rather, that of Nikita Khrushchev.

Healy knew what had to be done. He insisted that members of his small organization compile a list of every member of the Stalinist party with whom they could possibly establish contact. No matter what they had said about Trotskyism in the past, Healy instructed party members to visit them and discuss Khrushchev's speech. Healy himself traveled all over England, Wales, and Scotland, by train and car, looking up all those he had known when he was a member of the Communist Party, including erstwhile "comrades" who had voted for his expulsion in 1937. He contacted "old mates" from his days in the Young Communist League, some of whom had risen to high and mighty positions in the powerful Trades Union Congress (TUC).

It was time-consuming, difficult, and often frustrating work. There was much headshaking, some sobbing, and even the occasional apology for past wrongs. Healy visited a Communist Party member with whom he had worked closely in the early 1930s. The man had refused to speak with Healy after his expulsion, and would even publicly bait him as a "Mosleyite" fascist when their paths crossed at public demonstrations. He now occupied one of the leading positions in the Transport and General Workers Union. Healy went over Khrushchev's speech paragraph by paragraph. When Healy had completed his review of the speech, the now powerful union official replied, "Well, Gerry, I guess you were right all these years." But he was not prepared to demand Trotsky's rehabilitation, let alone break publicly with the Stalinists. His position in the union depended upon the support of the Communist Party leadership.

Despite the many difficulties, Healy and The Club succeeded in establishing a significant presence among the growing number of serious dissidents inside the Communist Party, even before the invasion of Hungary. Among the CP intellectuals won by Healy to Trotskyism were Tom Kemp and Brian Pearce. Healy and The Club also raised the crucial historical issues inside the Labour Party, gaining support among those who were seeking a revolutionary alternative to Social Democratic reformism.

To be continued

Notes:

[1] Cliff Slaughter, *A New Party for Socialism—Why? How? By Whom? On What Programme? Answers to Some Burning Questions—And Some New Questions* (London: Workers Revolutionary Party, 1996), p. 68.

[2] *Workers Press*, November 18, 1974, p. 12.

[3] Barbara Slaughter, email to David North, July 27, 2021.

[4] Barbara Slaughter, email to David North, July 26, 2021.

[5] Barbara Slaughter, Remarks upon opening the founding congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US), July 2008.

[6] Available here.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Available here.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] This citation comes from a review of *The Death of Uncle Joe* by Alison Macleod, published by the journal *Revolutionary History*, Volume 7, No. 2. It is available online here. Macleod, who wrote for the *Daily Worker* from 1944 until her resignation in 1957, remained bitterly hostile to Trotskyism and to Gerry Healy. This makes her acknowledgment of

Healy's influence on Fryer, a fact that Macleod deploras, all the more significant. The reviewer was also hostile to Healy, who he refers to as Fryer's Mephistopheles.

[13] Cited in David North, *The Heritage We Defend*, in the chapter titled "The Nature of Pabloite Opportunism".

[14] "For a Decisive Turn in France," *International Information Bulletin*, November 1952, p. 5.

[15] James P. Cannon, *Speeches to the Party* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), pp. 181–82.

[16] Cliff Slaughter, ed., *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism: A Documentary History* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), Vol. 1, *The Fight Against Pabloism in the Fourth International*, pp. 298–301.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact