

## Part Four

# Cliff Slaughter: A Political Biography (1928–1963)

David North  
8 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.*

## Slaughter's *Lenin on Dialectics*

The same issue of *Labour Review* included the first of a three-part essay written by Slaughter, titled “In the Workshop of Revolution: Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*.” Later published as a pamphlet, with the title *Lenin on Dialectics*, it proved to be the best known and most influential of Slaughter’s theoretical works. The essay was a major contribution to the clarification of the relation of dialectical materialism to the analysis of social phenomena and political processes. The significance of this essay in the context of the struggle against the SWP’s drive for reunification with Pabloism was analogous to that of Trotsky’s exposition of the materialist dialectic in the 1939–40 faction fight inside the Socialist Workers Party. Together with *Opportunism and Empiricism*, written by Slaughter in March 1963 and issued as a statement of the SLL National Committee, *Lenin on Dialectics* played a major role in the education of the cadre of the International Committee in the years that followed the split with the Socialist Workers Party.

Moreover, the high esteem in which Slaughter was held throughout the International Committee was based, to a great extent, on comrades’ appreciative study of this work.

The publication by Soviet editors of a new English-language edition of Lenin’s *Collected Works* in 1961 was a major political and intellectual event. This edition included a new volume, number 38, consisting of a substantial collection of notes made by Lenin in the course of his study of key works of philosophy. The most important of these notes were his “Conspectus of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*” and his “Conspectus of Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.” Volume 38 also included a remarkable essay, “On the Question of Dialectics.” These works had been written in 1914–15, after Lenin’s arrival in Switzerland following the outbreak of World War I.

Lenin’s notes on Hegel were not entirely unknown outside the Soviet Union prior to the publication of the new edition of Lenin’s *Collected Works*. A French-language edition of Lenin’s *Cahiers philosophiques* had been published in 1955 and was widely commented on.

However, the publications of the *Notebooks* in English vastly expanded their readership and had an immense impact on the political and scholarly appreciation of Lenin. These notes clearly established that Lenin was a

thinker of immense depth. Efforts to portray him as merely a skillful *realpolitiker*, responding intuitively to opportunities as they arose, were shattered. Lenin was, as he had once described himself in a letter to Gorky, a “seeker” in philosophy, capable of grasping the most complex and abstract concepts.

Important questions were raised by Volume 38: What was the relation of Lenin’s study of Hegel in 1914–15 to the conquest of power by the Bolsheviks in 1917? Why did Lenin, under conditions of a raging World War, spend hours in a Swiss library in Bern poring over Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, among the most difficult and abstract of philosophical texts? Yet another question raised by the *Notebooks* was their relation to an earlier work on philosophy written by Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. The latter book had been so often criticized as a rehash of “vulgar” materialism. Did Lenin’s notes on Hegel signify a fundamental reorientation in his theoretical outlook, away from a dull “mechanical materialism” toward a “dialectical” mixture of materialism and idealism? Had Lenin, under the influence of Hegel, finally seen the light and substantially modified his earlier unrelenting hostility to idealism?

The Socialist Labour League leadership was aware of the *Notebooks* prior to the publication of Volume 38. A 1958 article in *Labour Review*, “Lenin as Philosopher,” by Peter Fryer, cited passages from the French *Cahiers philosophiques*. This important article cited passages from the *Notebooks* (translated from the French-language edition by Fryer himself) in order to refute E.P. Thompson’s contemptuous dismissal of Lenin as an adherent of mechanical materialism who had little understanding of the subtleties of dialectical thinking. [73]

There can be no doubt that the contents and significance of the *Philosophical Notebooks* were the subject of intense discussions within the leadership of the SLL and, especially, between Healy, Slaughter, Tom Kemp, and Cyril Smith. Healy, in particular, was anxious to draw attention to the methodological issues raised in the ongoing struggle with the SWP. Recalling Trotsky’s intervention against the pragmatism of James Burnham in the 1939–40 faction fight, the SLL had already begun to focus on the low-level and banal pragmatic calculations that determined the policies of the SWP. It is likely that Healy urged Slaughter to write an essay on the new volume. The concerns motivating the writing of the essay were clearly stated in its opening:

These writings will prove absolutely invaluable in the process, now beginning, of developing Marxist theory to answer the revolutionary tasks of the working class in this and every country. Just as Lenin made his enormous original contribution to theory as part of the construction of a revolutionary leadership at the beginning of the century, so theoretical development today will be

made only as part of the living struggle to overcome the betrayals and the theoretical degeneration of the Social-Democratic and Stalinist movements. Overcoming the consequences of those betrayals is not a question of words, but of building an alternative leadership which can arm the working class with the developing theory required to achieve consciousness of its historic role and the necessary strategy of class struggle.

In reading Lenin, therefore, our aim is not to find recipes for our present problems, but to gain an insight into the *method* used by this outstanding thinker and political leader. With the use of this method Lenin made important discoveries about the nature of world capitalism and about the social relations and ideologies of his own time, particularly in Russia. These discoveries have received more study than the method itself, and yet Lenin's use of the dialectical method was the key to his ability to analyse new stages in economic and political development, and to his mastery of political strategy and tactics [emphasis in the original]. [74]

Slaughter rejected efforts to present Lenin's notes on Hegel's *Logic* as a break with *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*:

It is customary in some circles to claim that only when Lenin read Hegel in 1914-15 did he grasp the dialectic; indeed it is fashionable to take this as proved. In his early writings Lenin is said to have been crude and mechanical; this crudeness is supposed to have been most explicit in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908), but the implication is that his attitudes on Party organisation and political questions were rigid and dogmatic. It is important to see that this case is sustained on a very narrow base: instead of an examination of the actual work of Lenin, including *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, we are usually presented with truncated excerpts from the latter work, which distort its meaning, or with a series of short quotations from the Notebooks which are supposed to show that Lenin renounced his philosophical past. ...

Now while there is no doubt that his reading of Hegel at the beginning of the First World War enriched Lenin's theory, enabled him to penetrate more deeply to the essence of the contradictions of imperialism and of the working-class movement, it is quite wrong to make the rigid demarcation which is now so often made between the "pre-Hegelian" and "post-Hegelian" phases of his political life. Rather there is a really dialectical development in Lenin's own work. [75]

The second part of Slaughter's essay related Lenin's work on Hegel to problems of political analysis and practice raised in the struggle with the SWP. SWP leader Joseph Hansen—later exposed as an FBI informer by the International Committee—argued for a political practice based on an impressionist response to the "facts" of any given political situation. This was combined, Slaughter stressed, with a form of passive "objectivism"—also mistaken frequently for materialism—that assesses political events as if they unfold entirely outside of and independent of human action in general and "critical-revolutionary" practice in particular.

Objectivists—as Lenin had explained as far back as 1894, 20 years before his writing of the *Notebooks*—speak about the "inevitability" of one or another political outcome; but unlike the Marxist (dialectical) materialist, they fail to reveal "exactly what social-economic formation gives the process its content, *exactly what class* determines this necessity." [76]

Thus, as Slaughter stressed, this combination of impressionistic "worshipping of the accomplished fact" and objectivist passivity reduces the Marxist party, to the extent that it can be described as Marxist, to the role of an impotent bystander to events, avoiding its responsibility to intervene in events and provide leadership to the working class, striving to turn events—to the extent that such potential objectively exists—in a revolutionary direction.

Slaughter argued that Lenin's work on Hegel strengthens the revolutionary movement in resisting such an essentially non-Marxist and revisionist approach to politics:

Lenin's Notebooks on Hegel might appear obscure and a not very pressing pre-occupation, when big things are happening all over the world. However, it is exactly on the theoretical front that the sharpest and most uncompromising struggle must be waged. A mistaken conception here can mean a whole mistaken method, the relations between the facts becomes totally misunderstood, and disastrously wrong conclusions will be drawn. For example, some "Marxists" assume that Marxist method has the same starting-point as empiricism: that is to say, it starts with "*the facts*". It is difficult to understand why Lenin and others should have spent so much time on Hegel and the dialectical method if this were true. Of course every science is based on facts. However, the *definition* and *establishment* of "the facts" is crucial to any science. Part of the creation of a science is precisely its delimitation and definition as a field of study with its own laws: the "facts" are shown in experience to be objectively and lawfully interconnected in such a way that a science of these fact[s] is a meaningful and useful basis for practice. Our "empiricist" Marxists in the field of society and politics are far from this state of affairs. Their procedure is to say: we had a programme, based on the facts as they were in 1848, or 1921, or 1938; now the facts are obviously different, so we need a different programme. ...

It is a false and non-Marxist view of "the facts" which leads to these revisionist ideas. What our "objectivists" are saying, with their message "history is on our side", is this: look at the big struggles taking place, add them together without analysing them, go on your *impressions* of their significance, and add all these together—and you have "the facts". Colonial revolutions are successful here, and successful there, and in another place; then the success of the colonial revolution is a fact. Nationalist leaders like Nkrumah and Mboya and Nasser make "anti-imperialist" speeches and even carry out nationalizations; this suggests that history is tending irreversibly and inexorably to force non-proletarian politicians in a socialist direction. But "objectivism" of this kind is a collection of impressions and not a rich dialectical analysis of the whole picture, with the parts related to one another. A truly objective analysis begins from the economic relations between classes on a world scale and within nations. It proceeds through an analysis of the relations between the needs of these classes and their consciousness and organization. On these it bases its programme for the working-class internationally and in each national sector. A list of the "progressive forces" is not an objective analysis! It is the opposite, i.e., simply a collection of surface impressions, an acceptance of the *existing unscientific consciousness* of the contemporary class struggle as held by the participants, primarily by petty-bourgeois politicians who lead the national movements and bureaucratized labour movements. To overlay this theoretical blunder by suggesting that Castro and others are "natural" Marxists [as claimed by Hansen and the SWP] serves only to confirm that the "theorists" concerned are little

aware of how far they have gone. They seem to suggest that the periods of maximum revolutionary tension are those when the participants in mass struggle arrive easily and spontaneously at revolutionary concepts. On the contrary, it is precisely at such times that there is a premium on scientific consciousness, on the theory and strategy developed in struggle over a long period.

The essence of the history of the proletarian revolutionary movement is the conscious effort to develop scientific theory and a strategy conforming to that science. All talk about “natural” developments toward Marxism are an attack on the necessity to carry on this process. The empiricist believes that he can study the various parts of the social process as they present themselves from day to day. Adding these together will then give a “realistic” or “objective” total picture and international perspective. [77]

Slaughter was not advocating a cavalier disregard for “facts.” But this charge is often made by pragmatists who are blithely unaware of the methodology, social interests, and even crass political and intellectual prejudices that lead them to decide that a “fact” is important or unimportant. Little attention, if any, is given to the concepts that are employed in the process of thought. It is this common intellectual deficiency to which Hegel specifically addressed himself in *The Science of Logic*, and which was the focus of Lenin’s study, as a materialist, of Hegel’s monumental work. The fundamental significance of theoretically conscious (i.e., dialectical materialist) thought, upon which a scientifically accurate reflection of objective reality depends, was explained by Lenin:

Logic is the science of cognition. It is the theory of knowledge. Knowledge is the reflection of nature by man. But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection, but the process of a series of abstractions, the formation and development of concepts, laws, etc., and these concepts, laws, etc. (thought, science = “the logical Idea”) embrace conditionally, approximately, the universal law-governed character of eternally moving and developing nature. Here there are *actually*, objectively, **three** members: 1) nature; 2) human cognition = the human **brain** (as the highest product of this same nature), and 3) the form of reflection of nature in human cognition, and this form consists precisely of concepts, laws, categories, etc. Man cannot comprehend = reflect = mirror nature *as a whole*, in its completeness, its “immediate totality,” he can only *eternally* come closer to this, creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific picture of the world, etc., etc. [78]

Slaughter, while explaining the immense significance of Hegel’s elaboration of dialectical logic, took great care to stress the idealist foundations of his work and, therefore, its limitations. Moreover, he warned: “To assume that ‘the dialectical method’ is a short cut which makes all this hard work [of economic, social and political analysis] unnecessary is the mistake of those who talk glibly about ‘applying’ dialectics.” [79]

The effective and scientifically legitimate appropriation of Hegel’s advances in the elaboration of dialectical logic was only possible through the turn to materialism, which required of Marx not only a philosophical critique. As Slaughter explained:

Lenin could base himself not only upon the philosophical rejection of Hegel by the young Marx but more soundly upon the

scientific economic and social study carried out by Marx in fulfillment of this turn to materialism. The “objective world created by man” amounted to a definite series of historically specific social-economic formations based on definite production-relations. These “economic structures”, the necessary relations into which men organized for the exploitation of the productive forces, skills and techniques built up by the whole of human experience, were the objective foundations of all of men’s activity and therefore of any scientific theory of that activity. With the end of speculative philosophy, the task of social science or historical materialism was to record the necessary connections and contradictions in social life, beginning from “the mode of production in material life”. To make the working-class conscious of these contradictions the better to organize its struggle against capitalism—this was the life work of Marx, devoted largely to the scientific analysis of capitalist society and its contradictions. Marxists today have the responsibility and the opportunity of producing a further enriched account of the relations between the decline of capitalist society, the struggle of the proletariat and the consciousness or theory of the proletariat, at its highest point in the revolutionary party. The major contributions in this direction have been made by Lenin between 1896 and his death, and by Trotsky in his struggle to prevent the Stalinist degeneration of the international Communist movement and then build a Fourth International in the period of the violent disintegration of imperialism between 1922 and 1940. [80]

The extent of the impact of Slaughter’s essay on the cadre of the International Committee, particularly of those forces that were won to the ICFI in the aftermath of the split with the SWP, cannot be overestimated. Here I am obligated to reference the significance of this essay in my own theoretical education and political development. As the drift of the Workers Revolutionary Party toward Pabloite opportunism in the late 1970s and early 1980s became increasingly evident, the issue of the relationship between this retrograde development and Healy’s reversion to a pseudo-Hegelian misinterpretation of Lenin’s *Notebooks* acquired great importance. My growing doubts about the validity of Healy’s approach—in fact, the conviction that his lectures and articles on Volume 38 were wrong and had to be subjected to comprehensive critique—were greatly influenced by my rereading of *Lenin on Dialectics* in the autumn of 1982. I copied lengthy extracts from Slaughter’s work, to which I added, for the purpose of self-clarification, my own comments.

In an appraisal of Slaughter’s approach to the study of Lenin’s *Notebooks*, I wrote:

Slaughter, while correctly emphasizing the great importance of Lenin’s study of Hegel’s *Logic*, makes no concession to the idealism of Hegel, i.e., he makes no attempt to water down the fundamental distinction between Lenin the materialist and Hegel the idealist. Lenin, the partisan of materialism, appropriated all that was rational in Hegel’s *Logic* in order to enrich materialist dialectics. Thus, Slaughter appropriately notes Lenin’s critical remarks, i.e., those directed against the idealism of Hegel:

“The mystic-idealist-spiritualist Hegel (like all official, clerical-idealist philosophy of our own day) extols and expiates on mysticism, idealism in the history of philosophy, while ignoring and slighting materialism.”

Characteristic of Slaughter’s approach, in distinction from that of GH [Gerry Healy], is his demonstration that Lenin’s entire body of work was imbued with the dialectical method.

Consequently, Lenin's study of the matter of logic was directed toward deepening his understanding of how the logic of the matter was reflected dialectically in thought. Dialectics == how movement in the external world, in all phenomena, is expressed through concepts. ...

Slaughter recognizes that scientific study is the *sine qua non* of the dialectical materialist method. This is entirely in the spirit of Marx and Engels. Philosophical categories cannot displace this study, for they cannot provide a content out of their own self-movement. The conscious development of the dialectical method is the work of science, which concerns itself with discovering the laws of motion of all phenomena and their universal interconnection. Slaughter also relates this to the development of the science of revolutionary politics, establishing the continuity of Lenin's work specifically in Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR. This crucial element barely receives any mention in the articles of GH [Gerry Healy]; and in so far as it is mentioned, it is merely for the purpose of introducing his potted version of Hegelian dialectics, rather than analyzing Trotsky's real development of materialist dialectics. As for the first issue, i.e., the necessity of real scientific study, GH suggests that the abstract reproduction of categories renders that superfluous, as the self-movement of thought is duplicating the categories through which "correct" thought (as Ilyenkov maintains) moves. Hence the possibility of "speedy" practices which flow inevitably from the dialectic of abstract concepts. The outcome of this method is inevitably an uncritical acceptance of the impressions that are mistakenly interpreted as the dialectical flow of concepts. One is thus ceaselessly congratulating oneself for having the "right" thought in the proper sequence. The premise of this entire procedure is the simple identity of matter and thought. Rather than the dialectic of thought reflecting (through a complex process and approximation) the dialectic of things, the mental dialectic is considered the same as the material dialectic (or more precisely: dialectical matter and its reflection in thought are conceived as a single and undifferentiated process). [81]

In an overall appraisal of the significance of *Lenin on Dialectics*, I concluded:

Slaughter's work, published originally in 1962, was a major contribution to the struggle for dialectical materialism within the Trotskyist movement, and it remains, to this day, perhaps the best exposition of the general features of the dialectical method. There is not any attempt to obscure the role of dialectics through recourse to pretentious and mystical language. The central points are clear: Man thinks with the aid of concepts, but these concepts are not fixed, but reflect constantly changing reality. The development of our revolutionary concepts is a reflection of the changes in the material world, the essence of which is penetrated by the Party in the course of its struggle to prepare and lead the socialist revolution. At each stage of its revolutionary activity within a capitalist world that is constantly changing, the Marxist party seeks to discover the inner laws of the world crisis. The dialectical movement has to be extracted from the world itself and expressed in concepts that are arrived at only as a result of protracted scientific work.

The book still deserves careful study by comrades. [82]

Even after the passage of 39 years, I stand by that recommendation.

### The SLL denounces the SWP's betrayal of Trotskyism

Slaughter's study of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* strengthened the SLL's struggle against revisionism. On July 21, 1962, its National Committee issued a statement, "Trotskyism Betrayed: The SWP accepts the political method of Pabloite revisionism," whose principal author was Slaughter. It left no doubt that the SLL would not accept reunification without a clarification of the causes of the 1953 split and its aftermath. It rejected the claim that the alleged successes of the Castro regime, which came to power without an independent movement of the working class, were grounds for a reunification with the Pabloites. The starting point for elaborating the strategy of the Fourth International could not be Cuba. The SWP's emphasis on Cuba, the document insisted, was wrong. "We must begin," Slaughter wrote, "from the need to establish Leninist parties in every country, and in the first place to defeat revisionism." [83]

The Pabloite doctrine of political capitulation was incompatible with the building of sections of the Fourth International:

Capitulation to centrists or "leftward-moving currents" at this stage amounts to a betrayal on a bigger scale than that of 1953. Apologies for the non-Marxist leaderships, assertions that petty-bourgeois leadership can become Marxist "naturally" through the strength of the "objective forces"—these threaten to disarm the working class by disorienting the Marxist leadership. If capitulation to the centrists takes place now, preventing the working class from breaking with the Social Democratic, Stalinist and trade union bureaucracy, then the revisionists will have the responsibility for enormous working-class defeats. [84]

The British Trotskyists issued a warning: "The Socialist Labour League is not prepared to go to any part of the way with this revisionism, and will fight it to the end." [85] This warning was reinforced by an editorial in *Labour Review*:

At this point, others, whose proud boast it was that they were orthodox Trotskyists, are seeking ways and means to unify with Pablo. The parrot-cry goes up: "Forget the past! Let us not discuss the political reasons for the split of 1953 with Pabloism." ...

This new group of revisionists would have us write history along these lines. In 1953 we had a deep-going split with Pablo, now all this is forgotten, it was, in fact, a nightmare; it never happened. Forget the past, look only to the "new reality." This shameful abandonment of Trotskyist theory constitutes the new spearhead of revisionism against the Marxist movement. ...

One thing is certain from this discussion; it will show that there can be no unity between the Marxists and the revisionists. The Socialist Labour League will under no circumstances participate in such a political fraud. We stand ready to discuss and collaborate with all those who claim to be Trotskyists and who are willing to talk and collaborate with us. But we will never agree to unity on an organizational basis without adequate political clarification. [86]

## ***Opportunism and Empiricism and the split in the International Committee***

Joseph Hansen, the SWP's principal political leader and architect of its drive for reunification with the Pabloite International Secretariat, responded in November 1962 to *Lenin on Dialectics* with a vicious attack on the Socialist Labour League and Cliff Slaughter. Hansen's document, titled "Cuba—the Acid Test: A reply to the Ultraleft sectarians," had the foul odor of a Stalinist diatribe. And, in fact, that is what it was: information uncovered in the 1970s by the International Committee in the course of its investigation into the assassination of Trotsky established that Hansen had initially entered the SWP as an agent of the Soviet secret police, the GPU. Hansen, whose rhetorical style consisted of combining a malign form of sarcasm with distortions and outright falsification, exploited the indifference to theory and political ignorance of the SWP's increasingly affluent middle-class student membership. He treated the SLL's attention to theory as a matter to be joked about, or as the manifestation of a mental disorder. The SLL's refusal to accept that a workers' state had been established in Cuba was the product of a bizarre prejudice against "facts." In a mocking tone, Hansen wrote:

The SLL leaders have refused to listen to the American and Canadian Trotskyists who have followed events in Cuba with close attention from the very beginning [as if the SLL had not!]. They have refused to listen to the Latin-American Trotskyists who have first-hand acquaintance with the development and results of the Revolution in both its home base and the rest of the continent. They scorn the conclusions reached by other Trotskyists throughout the world. Why this obstinate refusal to admit palpable events? Strangest of all, the leaders of the SLL have come to recognize that they are refusing to acknowledge the facts; they have converted this into a virtue and even elevated it into a philosophy. The reasoning is very simple: To recognize facts is characteristic of empiricism; Marxism is opposed to empiricism; therefore, as Marxists, we refuse to recognize facts. [87]

Whether or not other "Trotskyists" regarded Cuba as a "workers state" in no way settled, without a careful examination of their arguments, the question of the class nature of the Cuban state. In Trotsky's time, millions of people regarded Stalin as Lenin's political heir, considered the Soviet Union a workers' paradise, and the Moscow Trial defendants guilty. This did not stop Trotsky from denouncing Stalin as a counterrevolutionary, defining the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state, and calling for a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucratic regime. Moreover, to present the absurd syllogism constructed by Hansen ("To recognize facts is characteristic of empiricism; Marxism is opposed to empiricism; therefore, as Marxists, we refuse to recognize facts") as an accurate presentation of the SLL's argument was a political provocation.

Hansen proceeded to deride the passage from *Lenin on Dialectics* that we have already cited at length (which begins: "Lenin's Notebooks on Hegel might appear obscure and a not very pressing pre-occupation, when big things are happening all over the world"). Joking about "the original academic language which has proved so entrancing to the readers of this article," Hansen continued:

Study of this shining passage is worth the effort, for it reveals the theoretical method used by the SLL leaders in approaching the Cuban Revolution and much else in today's world. We note the

qualifying sentence, "Of course, every science is based on facts." The author is to be congratulated on admitting this; it is a favorable indication of at least certain awareness that a material world does exist. We can even pin a medal on him for the sage observation that the various sciences cover different fields, that in these fields facts have various orders of importance and that it is the job of science to reveal their significance and the significance of the relations between them so that we can put them to use. ...

Slaughter's error is to establish an absolute gulf between empiricism, and Marxism, leaving out what they have in common. In brief, he is guilty of rigid, mechanical thinking on this point. However, we plead that the culprit be let off with a light sentence in view of the novel circumstances. How often are we privileged to see a British metaphysician demonstrate that the heavy machinery of academic learning can be so finely controlled as to prove a mere trifle like facts don't count? And with Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks fed as information to the machine! It's better than cracking a walnut with a pile driver.

This reply could only have been written by an individual who had no intellectual connection to the philosophical foundations of Marxism. The claim that Marxism and Empiricism share a common foundation in their mutual acceptance of the "facts"—and that Empiricism "systematically carried out" [88] is the method of Marxism—simply glossed over the fundamental division between idealism and materialism. Idealists, of course, recognize "facts." But what they do not recognize is that "facts" are abstractions from a reality that exists independent of human consciousness. It is on this very issue that Lenin concentrated his attack on Machism in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

Hansen proceeded to claim that a refusal to define Cuba as a workers' state was tantamount to opposing its defense against American imperialism. For years to come, this outrageous lie became a basic weapon in the arsenal of Pabloite denunciations of the Socialist Labour League and the International Committee.

The SLL's answer to Hansen was delivered in a statement issued by its National Committee on March 23, 1963. Though there was certainly input from Mike Banda, its principal author was Cliff Slaughter. He began by rejecting Hansen's reference to "consistent materialism" as "sheer nonsense." Slaughter wrote:

Empiricism, and its transatlantic younger brother, pragmatism, refuse to admit the possibility of answering the question: "What is the nature of the objectively existing world?" They thus leave the way open to subjective idealism which explains the world in terms of mind alone. Empiricism, ignoring the history of philosophy, rejects the dialectical theory of knowledge as "metaphysics". Only the dialectical materialist view can explain the world, because it includes a materialist explanation of the development of our concepts as well as the material world which they reflect. Empiricism must be *rejected*, not made "consistent". There are many sides to this methodological error of Hansen's [emphasis in the original]. [89]

Hansen's crude handling of critical issues of Marxist philosophy and method recalled concerns raised by Trotsky during the 1939–40 faction fight about the low theoretical level of the Socialist Workers Party. Slaughter recalled that Trotsky "warned the SWP in his last writings that they must encourage a determined struggle on the theoretical front against the 'American' philosophy of pragmatism, a more recent development of

empiricism; unless this was done, then there would be no real Marxist development in the U.S. Today Hansen and Cannon are ‘confirming’ Trotsky’s warning in a negative fashion.” [90]

As an example of this confirmation, Slaughter reviewed Cannon’s response to the recent “Cuban Missile Crisis,” which in October 1962 had brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war. Upon discovering, as a result of surveillance flights with high-altitude U-2 spy planes, that the Soviet Union had installed ballistic missiles in Cuba, the Kennedy administration demanded their immediate dismantling and removal from the country. President John F. Kennedy ordered a blockade of Cuba and declared that all Soviet freighters approaching the island would be stopped, boarded, and inspected by American naval forces. Any Soviet vessel that refused inspection and defied the blockade would be fired upon.

For almost two weeks, the world stood on the brink of a military conflict, involving the use of thermonuclear weapons, between the United States and the Soviet Union. At the eleventh hour, Nikita Khrushchev—who, six years after his Secret Speech, was still in power—announced that the Soviet missiles would be withdrawn. The Kennedy administration pledged that it would not invade Cuba. The imminent threat of nuclear war receded.

On October 31, 1962, just a few days after the Soviet announcement of the missile withdrawal, James P. Cannon—72 years old and living in semi-retirement in Los Angeles—sent a letter to his successor as national secretary, Farrell Dobbs. His assessment of the crisis and its outcome consisted of banal semi-pacifist commonplaces that amounted to an apology for the Soviet Union’s actions, which had combined reckless adventurism with abject cowardice. After reviewing the actions of the Kennedy administration, Cannon wrote:

In the face of these direct and immediate threats to world peace and the Cuban revolution, Khrushchev drew back, agreed to pull out the missiles, and dismantle the bases under UN supervision. He received in return a suspension of the blockade and public assurances that Cuba would not be invaded.

What else could have been done under the given circumstances? It would have been foolhardy to risk setting off a thermonuclear war and daring the U.S. to come and wipe out the Cuban bases in view of Washington’s evident determination to go to the limit if necessary.

In our opinion Khrushchev sensibly backed away from such a showdown, thus saving the world from war and the Cuban revolution from attack by overwhelming forces for a time. But time is of decisive importance!

The retreat was unavoidable and the concessions, as we know about them, did not give up anything essential. Those who judge otherwise should tell us what alternative course Khrushchev should have followed on the military and diplomatic fronts at that excruciating point of decision. Should Khrushchev have defied the embargo or refused outright to withdraw the missile bases? ...

The grim fact was that both the Soviet Union and Cuba not only had guns, but even more fearsome weapons, poised over their heads and ready to be used. For this reason we do not believe that Khrushchev’s course was incorrect on the level of military affairs and state relations. ...

Despite gleeful claims by the American press that Kennedy’s strong stand has given a stern lesson and severe setback to “Soviet aggression”, people unaffected by imperialist propaganda have, I believe, breathed relief over the settlement and thank Khrushchev for his sanity. Bertrand Russell and Nehru expressed themselves along that line. [91]

Slaughter subjected Cannon’s letter to a scathing analysis, writing that it could serve “as a model of the pragmatist method. After a lifetime of struggle for revolutionary Marxism, particularly against Stalinism, he denies that whole career in two pages with the kind of politics which Hansen’s pathetic essay in ‘theory’ is meant to justify: ‘What else could he [Khrushchev] have done under the given circumstances?’ asks Cannon.” [92]

After reviewing the “circumstances” given by Cannon, as quoted above, Slaughter replied:

Cannon replaces class analysis of social forces and political tendencies with pragmatic prescriptions. The so-called “given circumstances” (equivalent of Hansen’s “the facts”) are the *product* of a policy of class-collaboration by Khrushchev and the Stalinist bureaucracy in relation to U.S. imperialism. We must evaluate Khrushchev and the Stalinist bureaucracy in relation to U.S. imperialism. We must evaluate Khrushchev’s conduct as *part of the process which produced those circumstances*. Only in that way can Marxists work out their political programme in relation to other class tendencies [emphasis in the original]. [93]

Slaughter provided a succinct explanation of the relationship of the pragmatic method of Hansen and the SWP to its accelerating drift toward opportunism:

Indeed, Cannon’s letter on Cuba illustrates the *class* role of empiricism and pragmatism, those tendencies in philosophy which accept “the given fact”, etc. Inevitably this acceptance becomes what Trotsky once called a “worshipping of the accomplished fact.” In effect this means accepting the forms of consciousness proper to those who are adapted to the existing structure, such as the bureaucracy in the USSR and the labour movement. They develop their ideas as ways of rationalising and justifying their own position between capitalism and the working class. Cannon’s justification of Khrushchev, like the recent contributions of Murry Weiss in justification of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and the constant avoidance of the questions of political revolution and construction of revolutionary parties in the workers’ states by SWP spokesmen and the Pabloites, are an abandonment of principled revolutionary politics, flowing from the abandonment of dialectical materialism in favour of empiricism. Dialectical analysis insists on seeing facts in the context of a whole series of interrelated processes, not as finished, independent entities about which “practical” decisions have to be made. In the sphere of politics, that means to see each situation in terms of the development of the international class struggle, to evaluate the policies of the various political forces towards this situation in terms of their relation to these class forces and to their whole previous course. This is why it is nonsense to pose the Cuban problem as Cannon poses it—“What else could he have done under the given circumstances?” Taken to its logical conclusion, this type of argument can be used to justify anything. It is not even surprising, once the extent of this theoretical departure from Marxism is grasped, that Cannon utters an absurdity like “... people unaffected by imperialist propaganda have, I believe, breathed relief over the settlement and thanked Khrushchev for his sanity. Bertrand Russell and Nehru expressed themselves along this line.” Who would have thought that at the same time, Nehru was head of a government engaged in armed conflict, with imperialist support, against the [People’s] Republic

of China? In the course of that conflict mass arrests of Indian Communists were carried out. At the same time, Soviet fighter planes were being supplied to the Indian government by Khrushchev! No doubt Nehru praised Khrushchev (as well as Kennedy and [UK Prime Minister Harold] Macmillan) for this piece of practical “wisdom”. Perhaps Cannon will say “What else could he have done under the given circumstances?” Cannon’s method leads to this end not by a trick of logical development, but because the forces for whom he becomes the apologist are tied *in reality* to imperialism and its present needs. Trotskyism is no more an exception to the laws of history than any other phase in the development of Marxism and the labour movement. Once theoretical development stops, then the movement is subject to the dominant ideologies of the time, however gradual and subtle the process of adaptation—and however venerable the “cadre” [emphasis in the original]. [94]

This was an annihilating criticism that effectively exposed the relationship between pragmatic method and opportunist politics. However, there is a phrase in this extended quotation that raises retrospective concern in the light of the Workers Revolutionary Party’s distortion of dialectics a decade later. Slaughter speaks of “the abandonment of principled revolutionary politics *flowing from* the abandonment of dialectical materialism in favour of empiricism” [emphasis added]. Later in the document, Slaughter again writes of “support for the servants of imperialism, which *flows from* the abandonment of the dialectical method” [emphasis added]. [95]

The turn of the SWP to regroupment in 1957 and, almost simultaneously, to reunification with the Pabloites, did not simply “flow from” a false method. The more essential answer to the SWP’s abandonment of Trotskyism must be found in objective social and political conditions and the class pressures to which the party was adapting itself, of which the resort to pragmatism was a manifestation. However, the WRP’s revision of Marxism lay years in the future. In 1963, the emphasis on a false method and its consequences in the politics of the SWP was entirely legitimate. The SLL’s concentration on method was not employed at that point, as it would be in a later period, to avoid a careful examination of political issues.

Moreover, Slaughter explicitly related the false methodology and the growth of opportunist tendencies to very real class pressures:

In our opinion the revisions of Trotskyism by Pablo, leading to the split in 1953, and now manifested in opportunist policies for the advanced countries, the workers’ states, and the colonial countries, were a political capitulation to the forces which stand between the working class and the overthrow of imperialism. The power of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the slowness of the European and U.S. labour movements to resolve the crisis of leadership in the 1930s and 1940s, had an impact on the ideas of Pablo and his group which was not interpreted scientifically, in a class way, but impressionistically. This abandonment of the dialectical method, of the class criterion in the analysis of society and politics, resulted in the conclusion that forces other than the proletariat organized behind revolutionary Marxist parties would lead the next historical stage of struggle against capitalism. [96]

The SWP was incapable of replying in any principled manner to the arguments of the SLL. Its reunification with the Pabloite International Secretariat, renamed the United Secretariat, was consummated in June

1963.

In July 1963, the British and French sections of the International Committee met to assess the political causes and future implications of the split. This appraisal, published in *Labour Review* in the summer of 1963 as a Manifesto, was titled “25 Years After,” thereby establishing the historical link that connected the struggle against Pabloism to the founding of the Fourth International in 1938. The Manifesto began with an overview of the world situation:

A quarter of a century has passed. It has been a period of unprecedented change. Old empires have crumbled. New states have emerged.

Imperialism, weakened by war, has had to make a strategic retreat, handing over old territories to new retainers like Nehru, Nkrumah and Ben Bella. The national liberation movement has expanded into Africa and Latin America.

Fainthearts, sceptics and impressionists who have tried to revise the Transitional Programme insist that there have been fundamental changes in imperialism and Stalinism since 1938.

Some turned from the building of the Fourth International at the end of the war, declaring that the war devastation, collapse of production, famine and chaotic conditions in Europe meant that the working class had been declassed, that the struggle had been put back for centuries and the socialist revolution postponed.

Then, revisionism took on a new guise when, through the treachery of Stalinism and social democracy, imperialism was able to rebuild its foundations in Europe.

A trend, led by Pablo, developed in the Fourth International which placed a question mark over the movement and its Transitional Programme. It concluded that revolutionary conditions would make leaderships revolutionary, irrespective of their origins and previous developments.

It claimed that the Stalinist bureaucracy could no longer betray in the same way as before the war.

Against the revisionists, the International Committee was established in 1953 to build a Fourth International in the best traditions of the First and the Third Internationals and standing on the Transitional Programme.

We declare unequivocally that only a world party of Marxists—the Fourth International, as founded by Trotsky—can lead the oppressed to the overturn of decaying imperialism. Its programme is based on the international and historical experiences of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.

No other leadership can offer a way out for humanity. [97]

The Manifesto stressed the centrality of the fight against revisions of the revolutionary program:

Since its inception, the Marxist movement has had to wage a life and death struggle against revisionist trends. In an earlier epoch, revisionism represented the pressure of the petty-bourgeoisie of town and country directly on the labour movement.

Today, however, this pressure is concentrated in the labour bureaucracy which is integrated in varying degrees with the capitalist state machine and the superstructure of world imperialism.

The revisionists today are all those who succumb to the pressure of capitalism by adapting the theory and practice of the Marxist movement to the existing bureaucratic leaderships.

What characterizes all brands of revisionism today is their denial or underestimation of the role of the international working class as the *only* independent and revolutionary social force capable of liberating humanity. For these people the working class has ceased to be the subject of history and has become its despised and passive object.

Thus the Marxist movement today cannot ignore for a single moment revisionist ideas and trends. Not only the liberation of the working class but its very existence as an independent force is assured only to the extent that an implacable war is waged against revisionism.

That is why the International Committee refused to participate in the recent “unity” conference convened by the Pabloite revisionists in Italy.

For ten years now an uninterrupted struggle has gone on against Pabloite revisionism. Some people in Europe and America who supported us earlier have changed their ideas on Pablo and Pabloism in the course of the last decade.

We have not. Pabloism represents to us an advanced form of centrist degeneration in a section of the Trotskyist movement. [98]

With remarkable foresight, the Manifesto indicted the Lanka Sama Samaja Party as the treacherous epitome of the type of opportunism promoted by Pabloism:

The most instructive example of opportunist degeneration, assisted, if not inspired, by Pablo, is the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in Ceylon. In 1954, at the time of the split in the Fourth International, the leaders of this party took an equivocal position.

(Yet only a few months prior to this a minority advocating a Pabloite policy split from the LSSP. The leaders, however, refused to draw any political conclusions from this split.)

In return, Pablo actively encouraged the opportunism of the LSSP leaders who today have replaced their revolutionary pretensions with the most servile crawling before bourgeois parties and regimes. In 1960, the LSSP, be it noted, was prepared to form a coalition government with Mrs. Bandaranaike and the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

These leaders are petty-bourgeois charlatans masquerading as Marxists. If anyone doubts it let him read the Transitional Programme on the tasks of the International and contrast it with the policies of the LSSP. [99]

Exactly one year later, the LSSP vindicated the warnings of the ICFI by entering the bourgeois coalition government of Bandaranaike, a betrayal of historic dimensions that was to have devastating consequences for all sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

Finally, the Manifesto reviewed the challenges and tasks confronting the International Committee:

The International Committee has always championed unity of the Fourth International and fought against every attempt to split the movement and destroy its cadre. The recent conference in Italy must be seen not as “unity”, but as the political continuation of a split begun in 1953.

Real unity of the Fourth International can come about only through adherence to a correct method, firm principles and a tried and tested programme. Unity which is built on confusion—which

does not base itself on the conviction to build a world Marxist leadership in competition with all other trends—such unity is a rope of sand.

“This is a Trotskyist epoch” say the revisionists. But there is neither confidence nor optimism in this sort of cheerful idiocy. It expresses the attitude of those who have successfully adapted their policies to the needs of petty-bourgeois nationalists and left reformists.

Pablo’s international has no future because it is based on the petty-bourgeois—a social group without any historic future. We are optimistic about the International because we base ourselves on the working class and the class struggle which goes on all over the world.

We say this is a Trotskyist epoch not because some irreversible process makes it so but because out of firm, principled, independent intervention in the struggles of the working class we will build a world party.

The struggle to build the Fourth International is inseparable from the struggle against revisionism. “The Fourth International sweeps away the quacks, charlatans and unsolicited teachers of morals.”

We call on all those who want to build a true communist leadership of the working class: we call on all those who fight for the Transitional Programme: on all those who accept the fundamental proposition of the Founding Conference, that the crisis of leadership can only be resolved through the conscious activity of the Fourth International. [100]

The unprincipled reunification of the SWP with the International Secretariat marked an escalation in the civil war within the Fourth International that had erupted ten years earlier. The struggle waged by the SLL leadership was of world historic significance, for it prevented the destruction of the World Party of Socialist Revolution that had been founded by Trotsky 25 years earlier. Moreover, the political lessons of that struggle, recorded in the extraordinary documents written between 1961 and 1963, were to play a critical role in the subsequent development of the new sections of the International Committee that were built on the basis of the principles defended by the SLL leadership. The immense contribution made by Gerry Healy, Michael Banda, and Cliff Slaughter is an enduring element of their legacy that no honest appraisal of their historical role can disregard.

The role of Cliff Slaughter in the decade that followed the 1963 split in the International Committee will be the subject of the second part of this political biography, which will appear later in the coming autumn.

Notes:

[73] *Labour Review*, September-October 1957, Vol. 2, No. 5, pp. 136–147.

[74] *Labour Review*, Volume 7, Number 1, Spring 1962, p. 33.

[75] *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

[76] “The Economic Content of Narodism and the Criticism of It in Mr. Struve’s Book,” Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), pp. 399–400.

[77] “‘The Theoretical Front’, Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks, Second Article” *Labour Review*, Summer 1962, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 77–78.

[78] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 38 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 182.

[79] “‘The Theoretical Front’, Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks, Second Article” *Labour Review*, Summer 1962, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 78.

[80] *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

[81] David North, *Notes on Lenin on Dialectics*, October 1, 1982 [unpublished typed manuscript].

[82] *Ibid.*



[83] “Trotskyism Betrayed: The SWP accepts the political method of Pabloite revisionism,” *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Three (London: New Park, 1974), p. 238.

[84] Ibid., pp. 238–39.

[85] Ibid., p. 239.

[86] “Against Revisionism,” *Labour Review*, Volume 7, No. 2, Summer 1962, p. 41.

[87] “Cuba, the Acid Test,” *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Four (London: New Park, 1974), p. 23.

[88] Ibid., p. 25.

[89] Ibid., p. 76.

[90] Ibid.

[91] “Letter from James P. Cannon to Farrell Dobbs, October 31, 1962,” *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Four, pp. 72–73.

[92] “Opportunism and Empiricism,” *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Four, p. 77.

[93] Ibid., pp. 77–78.

[94] Ibid., pp. 78–79.

[95] Ibid., p. 87.

[96] Ibid., p. 97.

[97] “Manifesto of the International Committee of the Fourth International,” *Labour Review*, Summer 1963, Volume 7, Number 5, pp. 165–66.

[98] Ibid., p. 168.

[99] Ibid., p. 169.

[100] Ibid., pp. 170–71.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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