

SEP Summer School 2021 Lecture

# From PATCO to Volvo: The resurgence of the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

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The intervention of the Socialist Equality Party in the Volvo strike and the increasingly decisive role our world movement is playing in the development and direction of the global class struggle are the product of the decades-long struggle of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to free the working class from the grip of the social democratic, Stalinist and anti-communist labor bureaucracies and build the revolutionary leadership in the working class needed to achieve its historic socialist aims.

We are accused by our pseudo-left detractors of being “sectarian” and failing to “do work in the unions.” In fact, no political tendency has been more active in the struggles of the working class, including those workers trapped in the trade unions, than our international movement. We have rejected, however, the insistence of the various Pabloite and state capitalist forces that it is impermissible for socialists to organize and mobilize the working class independently of and in opposition to the corporatist trade union bureaucracy. By “working in the unions,” the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left means bolstering the authority of the bureaucracy and gaining lucrative positions within it.

Even when the unions commanded the allegiance of tens of millions of workers, we never chased the latest left-talking opportunist who emerged from the trade union bureaucracy. Instead, we fought to develop the independent initiative of the working class, its confidence in its own fighting capacity and its political independence from the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois defenders of capitalism. In so doing, the sections of the ICFI fought to bring socialist consciousness into the mass struggles of workers and recruit and train the most advanced workers as Marxists.

Comrade David North’s essay on Cliff Slaughter established very powerfully the connection of the British Trotskyists’ fight against Pabloite revisionism in the late 1950s and early 1960s and its struggle to free the working class in the UK from the grip of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Labour Party bureaucracies. Even at a time when British workers looked to the unions and the Labour Party, the *Labor Review* wrote in 1958 that “given the right circumstances, large groups of trade union members will seek to break out of what has for them become a union ‘prison house’ in which all workers’ initiative, all attempts to express their own ideas on the defense of their interests, remain caged, canalized or simply suppressed.”

The leadership of the Workers League in the US (the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) was trained in the political and theoretical lessons of the fight led by the Socialist Labour League (SLL) against the

Socialist Workers Party’s opportunist reunification with the Pabloites in 1963, and the arguments by SWP leader Joseph Hansen that objective events were leading the Stalinists to self-reform and bourgeois nationalists like Castro to establish workers’ states and socialism. The lessons of this struggle, which saved the ICFI from liquidation, were the foundation for the building of a section of the ICFI in the US. These lessons would be carefully re-worked and assimilated after the renegacy of Workers League National Secretary Tim Wohlforth in 1974 and his return to the SWP.

The party’s interventions in the working class, the Workers League wrote in its 1978 perspectives document, are guided by “the conscious struggle to preserve the lines of historical continuity between the present-day struggles of the working class and the whole content of the objective historical experiences of the class and the development of Bolshevism.”

It is beyond the scope of my report to go into detail about the class struggle in the 1970s and 1980s and the intervention and the Workers League. However, I’d like to review some of this history and the essential political issues, which have immense bearing on the development of our work today.

## The Workers League and the class struggle in the US

In the 1970s, the Workers League conducted a tenacious struggle to mobilize the working class against the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, raising the political demand for a labor party in opposition to the unions’ political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and American imperialism. In the 1970s, the Workers League formed the Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party (TUALP), led a successful campaign to demand that AFL-CIO President George Meany get off of Nixon’s Pay Board in 1972, and intervened in hundreds of militant strikes. During this period, the party won and trained as Marxist leaders important working class cadre, including Dayton GM workers Jim Lawrence and John Austin, New York City transit worker Ed Winn and others.

These struggles erupted in opposition to the ruling class’ efforts to make the working class pay for the eroding global position of American capitalism. As Comrade Tom Mackaman pointed out in his excellent series “Forty years since the PATCO Strike,” the enormous financial cost of the Vietnam War accelerated the decline of American capitalism, and the measures taken by the Nixon administration, including the ending of the Bretton Woods system and dollar-gold convertibility in August 1971, failed to halt the weakening of US capitalism relative to its chief European

and Asian rivals. Rather, they helped set in motion the high inflation and low economic growth that characterized the 1970s.

Between 1969 and 1979, one million or more workers were on strike every year, including 2.5 million in 1971 and 1.8 million in 1974. The number of strikes involving more than 1,000 workers in 1974 was 424, tying a post-war record, with an annual average of 300 major strikes between 1969 and 1979.

One of the key struggles of the decade was the 111-day coal miners' strike in 1977-78, when the miners defied President Jimmy Carter's strike-breaking Taft-Hartley order after decisively rejecting a White House-dictated contract brought back by United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President Arnold Miller. In the 1978 Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party pamphlet "The lessons of the miners strike," we wrote that the strike "marks the end for all time of the period of class compromise, based on the boom, and the start of a period of the most explosive class confrontation. The American working class is now joining the struggles of its class brothers all over the world."

By invoking Taft-Hartley, the Workers League wrote, the Democratic Carter administration was "telling miners and every worker in the country if they didn't accept the terms dictated by big business, then the government would impose massive fines against the unions, declare the rank and file criminals and use violence against them...."

The pamphlet noted that in the face of state violence, which included the dispatch of National Guard troops to the coalfields, hundreds of arrests and the deaths of three miners in the first two months of the strike, "the union bureaucracy not only refused to call a general strike to defend the miners but deliberately isolated their strike from the millions of workers across the country who supported it." It cited the comments of AFL-CIO President George Meany, who said he too would have invoked the strikebreaking provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act if he had been president, since Taft Hartley was the "law of the land."

The AFL-CIO was aided by the Stalinists, who slandered the miners who revolted against Miller, calling them "company stooges," and the SWP, which claimed that support for the miners excluded any criticism of the Miller bureaucracy.

"Only the Workers League and its industrial arm, the Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party" we wrote, had stood "with the miners through their fight and support[ed] their militancy. But we fought every step of the way for an understanding among miners and all workers that this was not enough, that the crucial political issues in this struggle had to be raised—the need to rally the labor movement in General Strike action to force out Carter and build a Labor Party to bring in a workers' government." The most fundamental lesson of the strike, we said, "is the need for the construction of revolutionary leadership inside the working class."

While we called for the unions to build a labor party—as a means of mobilizing the ranks against the labor bureaucracy and its subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party—the Workers League made it clear the fight for a political break with the capitalist parties would have to be waged by the revolutionary party and the workers it trained, rejecting any suggestion that it would emerge from the actions of a section of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Moreover, we advocated the establishment of a labor party based on a socialist program, explaining that the interests of the workers required the conscious struggle of the working class against the capitalist system, its political parties and its state. A workers' government would end private ownership of the means of production and place the corporations and banks under the democratic control of the working class.

The Workers League wrote in its 1978 perspectives document:

The whole experience of the AFL-CIO has shown that the

bureaucracy will stop at nothing to destroy any genuine independent political movement of the working class. Any political movement of any sort led by any section of the union bureaucracy, whether for a "third" party or even something called a "labor party," would in no sense represent a real political break from the apron strings of the bourgeoisie.

Such a political break, the Workers League said, was possible only through "the intervention of the revolutionary party within the spontaneous movement of the working class," and the "conscious struggle of the Workers League against all forms of opportunism within the workers' movement, and, finally, against all manifestations of the domination of bourgeois ideology over the working class."

The vast majority of those who would come to make up the pseudo-left wrote off the American working class as hopelessly backward, racist and reactionary, as they embraced the middle-class politics of race and gender. Those state capitalists and Pabloites who did work in the unions claimed pressure from the ruling class and the capitalist state from above and the working class from below would force the trade union bureaucracy to renounce its material interests and somehow open the road for workers to fight for socialism.

In this regard, it is important to contrast our response to the 1977-78 miners' strike to what was written in 1978 by Kim Moody, the state capitalist and co-founder of *Labor Notes*, whose so-called "Rank-and-File Strategy" is promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America today.

Praising Meany, United Auto Workers President Douglas Fraser, United Steelworkers President Lloyd McBride and other "top-level labor leaders" for donating money to the striking miners, Moody wrote, "As welcome a sign as it is, this support did not signify a break with the American labor leadership's belief in the mutual interest and cooperation between labor and capital. The credibility of these old ideas will, of course, be stretched more and more. The pressure and aggression from the employers, and the retreats and vacillations of the [Carter] administration and Congress, will make life more difficult at all levels of the labor movement. No doubt, as in the past, this will produce political changes and breaks even at the top."

Over the next four decades, however, no section of the union bureaucracy would oppose the ruling class offensive against the working class, even when it involved the outright smashing of unions. This included the myriad of dissidents whom the state capitalists and Pabloites chased after and hailed, from Miners for Democracy alumni Richard Trumka and Cecil Roberts and Teamsters for a Democratic Union-backed Ron Carey, to the so-called insurgent AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

As the American ruling class shifted from a policy of relative class compromise to violent class war, the Democratic Party did not "vacillate" and the AFL-CIO did not move to the left. On the contrary, the AFL-CIO moved completely in tandem with the ruling class drive to substantially reduce the income of American workers. In August 1979, Carter appointed Chase Manhattan banker Paul Volcker as head of the Federal Reserve. Volcker raised interest rates to 20 percent in what was called the "Volcker shock." This was a calculated move to trigger mass layoffs and the worst economic downturn up to that time since the Great Depression. The shutdown of industries and mass unemployment were used to "wring inflation out of the economy," i.e., beat back the resistance of the working class to a wave of wage cuts.

AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland became co-chair of Carter's Economic Revitalization Board, which was tasked with deciding which industries should be allowed to vanish because they could not compete in world markets. UAW President Douglas Fraser was brought onto the board of directors of Chrysler Corp. In the federal bailout of Chrysler engineered by Carter, Fraser collaborated in the elimination of 57,000 jobs and closure of nearly 30 factories, including more than a dozen in Detroit,

where, according to a congressional report, the “most troublesome workforce in America” resided.

Over massive rank-and-file opposition, the UAW finally forced through the cuts, which included the loss of \$4,000 in wages and benefits for each worker—the equivalent of an annual cut of \$15,000 in current dollars. When Canadian autoworkers voted down the concessions, the UAW offered to cut another \$25 million from American workers.

### **The PATCO strike**

This was the background to Reagan’s smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike, which began 40 years ago on August 3, 1981. After forgoing any intervention against the 72-day strike by 160,000 coal miners earlier in the year, Reagan decided to break a small union of professional workers, which had endorsed him in the 1980 presidential election.

While Reagan has for years been lauded by the bourgeois press and the Democratic Party as a great political leader, he was deeply hated in the working class. I remember attending a mass meeting of striking coal miners in Hazard, Kentucky on March 30, 1981. When word came that Reagan had been shot, a cheer went up from the miners.

In his perspective, “Volvo Truck workers in Virginia return to the picket lines: A turning point in the US and global class struggle,” published on June 7, Comrade David North wrote of the PATCO strike:

This historically unprecedented assault on a union and rank-and-file workers by the federal government succeeded only because the national AFL-CIO flatly refused to come to the defense of PATCO. It was widely and correctly assumed by PATCO militants that the Reagan administration had received assurances from the AFL-CIO that it would not act to prevent the destruction of PATCO.

There was enormous support in the working class for a struggle against Reagan’s unionbusting. On September 19, 1981, as many as half a million workers marched in Washington, DC on “Solidarity Day,” with striking PATCO workers taking the honored position at the front of the march. The Workers League won enormous support for its call for a general strike to defend the PATCO strike and sold hundreds of copies of the *The human cost of Reagan’s cuts* and other pamphlets.

David North summed up the four major points the Workers League stressed in its August 13, 1981 statement, “The PATCO strike: A Warning to the Working Class”:

First, it stressed that the violent action of the Reagan administration was aimed at implementing a fundamental restructuring of class relations in the United States, i.e., creating the best conditions for a massive increase in the exploitation of the working class and the transfer of wealth to the ruling elite. The destruction of PATCO was a signal for a general offensive by the corporations against all sections of the working class.

Second, it explained that the Reagan administration’s attack on workers was aimed at reversing the global economic decline of the United States and weakening the resistance of the international working class to the geostrategic interests of American imperialism.

The attack on the PATCO membership is inseparable from Reagan’s policy of global counterrevolution. American capitalism can no longer keep two sets of books, politically speaking, maintaining class compromise at home while pursuing ferocious counterrevolution and establishing and supporting military and fascist dictatorships overseas.

Third, the Workers League warned that the subservience of the AFL-CIO, the UAW, the Teamsters and other labor organizations to capitalism and its two political parties drastically weakened the working class and would lead to one defeat after another.

Fourth, the defense of the working class required the building of a new revolutionary leadership, based on a socialist perspective. The Workers League warned:

The labor bureaucracy will betray, and is betraying. The struggle against these betrayals cannot be based solely on militancy, but requires a political strategy for the struggle against the government.

The analysis made by the Workers League, regarding both the national and international consequences of the betrayal and defeat of the PATCO strike, was confirmed by subsequent events. Within the United States, the destruction of PATCO was followed by a wave of strikebreaking—at Continental Airlines, Phelps Dodge copper mines, Hormel meat processing plants and AT Massey coal mines, to name only the most notorious—that resulted in a devastating decline in the living standards of the American working class.

The Workers League would actively intervene in each of these struggles and many, many others to mobilize the working class against the treachery of the AFL-CIO. The interview earlier this year with striking copper miners’ leader Jorge O’Leary explained the role of the Workers League and, in particular, Comrade David North in assisting and informing the copper miners during the three-year Phelps Dodge strike.

During the 1980s, we were the only political tendency that fought to mobilize the working class against the revival of levels of corporate and state violence not seen since the 1920s. This included the frame-up and imprisonment of militant workers such as the AT Massey and Milburn miners and Greyhound striker Roger Cawthra. It also included the picket-line murders of Greyhound strikers Ray Phillips and Robert Waterhouse, New York telephone worker Gerry Horgan and West Virginia coal miner John McCoy.

### **The corporatist transformation of the unions**

At the same time, the Workers League analyzed the degeneration and transformation of the trade unions. This included the adoption by the United Auto Workers at its 1983 convention of the doctrine of corporatism, which we described as the “conception of unrestrained class collaboration that preaches complete harmony of the interests between the capitalists and the working class.”

We pointed to the similarities with the program of Italian fascism, in which the employers and the unions were integrated into the state and all were subordinated to the “national interest” of the ruling class. At the same time, we began a serious examination of the income and the material interests of the labor bureaucracy, including the establishment of joint labor-management training centers, which would become the conduit for the transfer of billions of dollars from the companies to the UAW. This study showed that the income of the bureaucracy was rising in parallel with the decline in the income of the workers, establishing the

antagonistic interests of the working class and the labor bureaucracy. It should be noted that this work was denounced as “mechanical materialism” by Cliff Slaughter, who by this time was far along in the abandonment of Marxism.

The fight against the corporatist program of the UAW was inseparable from the fight against the national chauvinism peddled by the unions. We relentlessly opposed the anti-Japanese racism of the UAW, which led to the death of Chinese-American engineer Vincent Chin in 1982. We fought for the international unity of the working class.

As I noted before, the pseudo-left apologists for the trade unions often argued and continue to claim that pressure from militant workers from below would force the trade unions to fight. How did the union bureaucracy really react to the efforts by the working class to change the course of the trade unions? The 1985-86 Hormel strike is a critical case study.

On August 17, 1985, 1,500 workers at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota went on strike when the meatpacking giant demanded a 23 percent wage cut. The strike by United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9 was opposed by the UFCW national union, which had agreed to wage cuts across the industry.

When Hormel sought to reopen the plant with strikebreakers in January 1986, Local P-9 organized mass picketing to halt production. A week later, Minnesota’s Democratic governor, Rudy Perpich, deployed hundreds of National Guard troops to protect the scabs. In defiance of the UFCW, P-9 sent roving pickets to other Hormel plants, including in Ottumwa, Iowa, where 750 workers joined the strike. Through February and into March, large rallies were held in several large American cities, including Detroit, New York and San Francisco, and car convoys were organized in Minnesota and Wisconsin to transport food and money to the strikers.

The UFCW responded by withdrawing its sanction for the strike, cutting off strike benefits and launching a red-baiting campaign against P-9 President Jim Guyette and other leaders. Local P-9 workers defiantly voted to continue the walkout and fought pitched battles against strikebreakers and police in Austin, while thousands of supporters continued to pour into the Minnesota city.

In April 1986, the UFCW began kangaroo court proceedings to put P-9 under trusteeship. The local sued the national union in federal court, charging it with a “malicious, willful, and bad-faith” effort to end the strike, which included freezing the local’s bank account, seizing money donated to the strikers and employing spies to disrupt support activities.

With the backing of a federal judge in Minnesota who had previously issued one strikebreaking injunction after another against the Hormel workers, the UFCW sent a goon squad of 30 officials to seize the union hall and change the locks. The UFCW issued letters to strikers saying they would be arrested if they interfered with the trusteeship. It sent spies throughout town photographing cars with anti-Hormel bumper stickers and telling workers they would lose all hope of reinstatement if they continued to speak out.

The elected local officials were removed and the UFCW International enrolled the strikebreakers into a new local union. In August, the national union announced that it had reached a deal, which did not provide for the recall of any of the strikers and accepted all of the company’s demands. The deal was ratified in a UFCW-organized vote by the reconstituted local made up of scabs.

Reflecting the unseriousness of left-liberal elements in and around the unions, Ray Rogers, who was hired to carry out the so-called corporate campaign of boycotting Hormel products and staging civil disobedience stunts, admitted that he was completely blindsided by the strikebreaking role of the UFCW. “I never counted on the International fighting so hard against us,” he said. “I would never have believed that they would attack us, ignore us when the National Guard came, that Kirkland and

Winpisinger would get involved against us, and that they’d spend the millions that they did to defeat us. I never figured they’d do anything one way or the other.”

### **Internationalism and the fight for revolutionary leadership in the working class**

It would be wrong to see the development of the Workers League’s interventions in the working class from a nationalist standpoint. As Comrade David North, wrote to Workers Revolutionary Party General Secretary Michael Banda on January 23, 1984:

No matter how promising certain developments within the national work of the sections may appear—such as our own experiences in various trade union struggles—these will not produce real gains for the sections involved unless such work is guided by a scientifically worked out international perspective. The more the Workers League turns towards the working class, the more we feel the need for the closest collaboration with our international comrades to drive the work forward. The degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party, culminating in the open split with Mandel, is the greatest historic vindication of the struggle you waged against Pabloism. We are proud to have been your students in that struggle. But the new stage in the crisis of imperialism and Stalinism and the break-up of revisionism now poses the necessity of a great development in our theoretical work and practical activity. We believe that this development requires a renewal of our struggle against Pabloite revisionism—above all, against the manifestation of its outlook within our own sections.

Tragically, Healy, Banda and Slaughter rejected this path of international collaboration and struggle, having adopted the positions and outlook of Pabloite revisionism, which they had once fearlessly opposed. This took the form of the most grotesque adaptation to bourgeois nationalism in the Middle East and Africa, Gorbachev’s *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, and in England the Labour and Trades Union Congress bureaucracy, including the Stalinist leader of the National Union of Miners Arthur Scargill during the 1984-85 strike.

The split with the WRP in 1985-86 was the culmination of a more than thirty-year civil war inside the Fourth International and marked the victory of the orthodox Trotskyists. This created the conditions for an immense theoretical, political and organizational development of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The defeat and ejection of the national opportunists anticipated immense historical events, including the Stalinist liquidation of the USSR and the transformation of social democratic parties, trade unions and all the national-based organizations, under the weight of globalization, into direct agencies of capital. These are precisely the institutions upon which Pabloite opportunism had been based.

In the beginning of the 1990s, there was a protracted struggle in the Workers League over the implications of the transformation of the unions and national reformist parties for the practice of the American section. This took the form of a fight against any conception that the basic task of the party was to issue demands to the AFL-CIO, including for the building of a labor party, and the conception that the party could not “substitute” itself for the “mass organizations of the working class” and the “labor movement.”

I would like to cite several comments by Comrade Dave North during an April 1991 discussion on the Political Committee of the Workers League.

We have spent some time examining the actual changes that have taken place in the trade unions, the change in the relationship of the bureaucracy to the working class, the changing social role of that bureaucracy. We've made the point that in the struggles of the working class the bureaucracy has been redefining itself as a social force, that it enters into agreements systematically that can in no way be described as even a distorted defense of the working class and the minimal requirements of the working class.

[T]o the extent that we actually intervene in the struggles of the working class and we find ourselves in the leadership of movements, we will find ourselves in a position where we will confront almost immediately the direct opposition, politically and organizationally, of the trade unions. At a very early stage we will be confronted with the question: do we call the struggle off or do we proceed in defiance of the labor movement, of the existing structures of the labor movement?

... These are not just questions which will confront us. It will confront masses of workers themselves. Do we and should we encourage strikes taken in defiance of the leaders? Should we tell workers that they must be prepared to go out, regardless of what their leadership says? We can say, 'Yes, you can demand that the union take action, but we know full well that it will not take action, that to the extent that it takes any action it will only be to gain control, to take the initiative away from the insurgent forces and strangle any movement. If the party is serious in fighting for its program it should not invest the placing of demands with the same significance as it had before, but we should stress more strongly the necessity of an insurgent movement of the working class against the existing bureaucracies and be prepared to break boldly and ruthlessly with the union organizations of the official labor movement to the extent that that movement has become an obstacle...

North continued:

We understand very well that the labor bureaucracy will not carry out such struggles. Then what do we tell workers to do? We go and the unions refuse. What do we do then? Will we tell the workers to take action in spite of that—of course we will. Do we advise workers to go on wildcat strikes? Yes, we do. And if this places us in opposition to the "labor movement," well, so be it. We *are* in opposition.

Summing up these points, North said:

There may well be the eruption of trade union struggles and they will largely be in immediate opposition to the whole trade union leadership, which will try to suppress and destroy them. We have taken that into account by making it very clear that the continuation of such struggles, trade union struggles, as far as we are concerned, does not depend upon them being sanctioned by the trade union bureaucracy and, in many cases, if they are to continue, they will have to continue in opposition to the labor bureaucracy. The International Falls strike is an indication of that.

The Hormel strike is an indication of that. The Phelps Dodge strike was an indication of that. The miners' wildcat, which we praised and which we took some credit for, was a demonstration of that.

These conclusions were drawn from the bitter experiences of the working class with organizations that had turned against them, and the logic of the strivings of workers to find a new means to express their class interests. In this regard, it is fitting to cite the warnings made in 1989 by then-United Mine Workers of America President Richard Trumka, whose death yesterday was met with a tearful statement on the floor of the US Senate by top Senate Democrat Charles Schumer and gushing tweets by Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) leader Bhaskar Sunkara.

Pointing to the wave of wildcat strikes that erupted in opposition to the UMWA's isolation of the 1989-90 Pittston strike, Trumka told the *Charleston Gazette* the revolt was "not authorized" and "not solicited" by the union, which had worked hard to establish "our worldwide reputation for stability."

If a "maverick employer" like Pittston crushed the union, Trumka warned, "I submit to you that from crumbled blocks will arise a movement just like it did in 1890 when we had no money, just like it did in 1910 when we had no money, just like it did in 1920 when we had no money, and just like it did in the 1940s, it came back and it will again. When it comes back, I think the form of union probably will be different. Its tolerance for injustice will be far less and its willingness to alibi for a system that we know doesn't work will be nonexistent."

Trumka clearly defined the trade union he then headed, and the AFL-CIO he later led, as organizations that knowingly defended a failed capitalist system. Seeing the growing support among miners for the policies fought for by the Workers League, he warned the American ruling class that workers would seek a far more radical alternative if the unions lost their grip over the working class.

What conclusions did the SEP draw about the collapse of the AFL-CIO and the demise of the official labor movement, which was based on the thoroughly rotten foundations of nationalism, anti-communism and political subordination to the Democratic Party?

In a January 4, 1992 report titled *The End of the USSR*, Comrade North drew the most far-ranging conclusions from the Stalinist liquidation of the Soviet Union. "All over the world," he said, "the working class is confronted with the fact that the trade unions, parties and even states which they created in an earlier period have been transformed into direct instruments of imperialism."

North cited Trotsky's explanation in the 1937 article "Not a Workers Not a Bourgeois State," where he wrote:

The character of a workers' organization such as a trade union is determined by its relation to the distribution of national income. The fact that [AFL President] Green and Company defend private property in the means of production characterizes them as bourgeois. Should these gentlemen in addition defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed; then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union.

North continued:

If we take Trotsky's definition of a trade union as an organization whose class character is determined by its relation to

the distribution of the national income, it is clear that a trade union can carry out policies which are opposed to the long-term interests of the working class without ceasing to be a workers' organization.

But when these leaders and organizations actively collaborate with the bourgeoisie in lowering the living standards of the working class, smashing up strikes, framing up workers, and throwing workers onto the unemployment rolls, then, of course, we're dealing with a profound change in the class character of such organizations.

In 1993, the Workers League would withdraw its demand for a Labor Party based on the unions, which in an earlier period had been so critical in mobilizing the working class against the pro-capitalist bureaucracy and fighting for its political independence. Given the transformation of the unions, this tactical demand was no longer viable.

The task confronting the revolutionary leadership was to grasp the significance of the collapse of the old nationally based organizations in the US and internationally and elaborate a way forward for the working class. David North spelled this out in his June 1995 report proposing the transformation of the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party:

Our task is not to speculate on the fate of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy or to align ourselves with a non-existent progressive tendency. We must draw the appropriate conclusions from the collapse of the AFL-CIO and correctly formulate the new tasks of the party. If there is to be leadership given to the working class, it must be provided by our party. If a new road is to be opened for the masses of working people, it must be opened up by our organization. The problem of leadership cannot be resolved on the basis of a clever tactic. We cannot resolve the crisis of working class leadership by "demanding" that others provide that leadership. If there is to be a new party, then we must build it.

## Conclusion

At our last party school two years ago, we discussed that after the ICFI's political defeat and removal of the neo-Pabloite tendencies centered in the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party, the major achievements of the Fourth Period of the Fourth International involved the strengthening of the internationalist foundations of the world party, the elaboration of the international strategy of the ICFI, the defense of the historical heritage of the Fourth International, the conversion of the International Committee's leagues into parties, and the establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The suppression of the class struggle and the collusion of the AFL-CIO in the historic reversal in the social position of the working class have had devastating economic, social and political consequences. But we now live in a situation, no matter how desperate the efforts of the petty-bourgeois elements to contain the decades-long buildup of social tensions, in which the AFL-CIO, the Stalinists and social democrats no longer dominate the working class.

Our analysis of the unions and the form the class struggle would take—as a direct upheaval against the old labor apparatuses and increasingly international in form—has been completely vindicated. The fifth phase in the history of the Fourth International, which we are now in, is seeing the increasing intersection of the international perspective and practice of our

world party with the emergence of the global class struggle.

This is understood in the ruling class. The Biden administration looks at the workers' revolt at Volvo and the intervention of the Socialist Equality Party, and the National Labor Relations Board decides to hold a revote at the Amazon warehouse in Alabama. It is saying that either we get the RWDSU union in there to police the workforce, or the "maniacs" of the SEP and their rank-and-file committees are going to lead a revolt.

Our task is to lead the coming struggles of the working class and provide workers with the means to fight for and secure their class interests.



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