

Fifty years since the founding of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter as the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International

Ulrich Rippert
19 September 2021

Ulrich Rippert is National Secretary of the German Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and was a founding member of its predecessor, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (League of Socialist Workers) in 1971. This is a slightly edited version of a speech he gave on September 19 at the final election meeting of the SGP, which is contesting the Bundestag and Berlin House of Representatives elections on the basis of a socialist programme.

Fifty years ago, on September 18 and 19, 1971, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA) was founded as the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). This was an event of the greatest historical significance.

Twenty-six years after the fall of the Nazi dictatorship, young workers and students were reconnecting with the powerful Marxist traditions that had originated here in Germany. It was here that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was built as the first mass Marxist party and the German Communist Party (KPD) as the largest Communist party outside the Soviet Union. But social democracy, Stalinism and Pabloite revisionism betrayed this tradition.

In 1938, Leon Trotsky founded the Fourth International to defend the perspective of world socialist revolution against Stalinism. The Fourth International also had a strong section in Germany. Even after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, the Berlin group alone, led by Oskar Hippe, had more than 50 members.

But then the followers of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel destroyed the German section. They dissolved it in 1951 into the short-lived Independent Workers' Party of Germany, which supported Yugoslav leader Josip Tito, and then liquidated it into the milieu of the SPD and the trade unions. Oskar Hippe was imprisoned for eight years by the Stalinist regime in East Germany.

The Fourth International was defended during this period by the American, British and French sections, which founded the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953. In the 1960s, the task of defending the principles of Trotskyism was increasingly focused on the British section, the Socialist Labour League, whose leader Gerry Healy personally attended the founding conference of the BSA.

Of the two-dozen founding members who gathered in Hanover at that time—I was one of them—hardly anyone was older than 25. What attracted us to the International Committee of the Fourth International were three great issues.

The first was Trotsky's analysis of National Socialism (Nazism).

The question of how, in a modern country with a powerful culture and a strong socialist working class tradition, such a relapse into barbarism was possible concerned an entire generation at the time.

After the war, the crimes of the Nazis had been covered up. But in the

1960s, this was no longer possible. The Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, in which, for the first time, a German court convicted mass murderers of the extermination camps, and documentaries such as "Night Will Fall" brought the monstrous scale of Nazi terror to the attention of an audience of millions.

Many at the time explained the cause of fascism in terms of the psychology of the masses and the seducible nature of the Germans. But we were not satisfied with this answer. Trotsky's writings showed us that the fundamental cause was the failure of the proletarian leadership.

The SPD and KPD had millions of voters and hundreds of thousands of active members. They had received far more votes than the Nazis in the last Reichstag election before Hitler came to power (November 1932). Their members were eager to stop the Nazis, but the party leaders refused to take up the fight.

The SPD relied on the state, the police and Reich President von Hindenburg—who appointed Hitler as chancellor less than three months after the election! The KPD, completely under the influence of Stalin, hid its cowardice behind radical phrases. It abused the Social Democrats as social fascists and refused to fight for a united front against the Nazis, as Trotsky and his followers incessantly demanded.

Thus, Hitler was able to establish his dictatorship without an uprising of the working class, the only social force that could have stopped him.

Based on Trotsky's writings, we also understood the inseparable connection between fascism and capitalism. Germany's ruling class had promoted Hitler, financed him, appointed him Reich Chancellor and—with the Enabling Act—made him dictator. It did this because it needed Hitler and his brown-shirted hordes to crush the workers' movement and fulfil its imperialist dream of "Lebensraum in the East."

We concluded that the fascist danger was not averted so long as capitalism continued to exist. Ernest Mandel took the opposite stand at the time. He wrote in the preface to a German edition of Trotsky's writings that one should not be "fascinated by a [fascist] danger that does not yet exist, and one should shout less about neo-fascism."

We, on the other hand, were convinced that only the building of a new Marxist leadership in the working class could prevent a relapse into war and dictatorship—an assessment that has been dramatically confirmed in recent years by the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Trump's attempted coup in the US, and similar developments in other capitalist countries.

The second was the International Committee's adherence to Trotsky's assessment of Stalinism as a counter-revolutionary agency of world imperialism.

The founding program of the Fourth International had predicted, "Either

the bureaucracy, which is increasingly becoming the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers state, overturns the new forms of property and throws the country back into capitalism, or the working class smashes the bureaucracy and opens the road to socialism.”

This question was at the heart of the split in the Fourth International in 1953. From a superficial assessment of the nationalizations in Eastern Europe, Pablo, Mandel and their followers had concluded that Stalinism was again playing a progressive role; the transition to socialism would develop over “centuries of degenerated workers states,” such as had emerged in Eastern Europe. In practical terms, this amounted to the liquidation of the Trotskyist movement into the Stalinist parties.

The International Committee firmly rejected this. It called Stalinism the “main obstacle” to socialist revolution. Stalinism used the prestige of the October Revolution of 1917 to attract workers and then drive them into illusions about capitalism and apathy. The price for these betrayals would be paid by the working class in the form of strengthening fascist forces and new wars.

The suppression of the workers’ uprising of June 17, 1953 in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968 confirmed the reactionary character of Stalinism.

The third and most important issue was the International Committee’s adherence to the revolutionary role of the working class and internationalism.

The 1960s and 70s were marked by a deep contradiction. There was an international wave of militant class struggles and colonial uprisings, which—like the 1968 general strike in France—took on revolutionary proportions. But the masses were politically dominated by reformist, Stalinist and national movements that defended capitalism.

In Germany, the SPD, which had formally broken with Marxism in 1959 in the Godesberg Programme, reached the peak of its influence in 1972, with over one million members and a federal election result of 46 percent.

Among student youth, who also became radicalized during this period, political conceptions prevailed that drew the most pessimistic conclusions from Nazi rule and World War II and held the working class responsible for them.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the two leading lights of the Frankfurt School, referred to workers as “amphibians” who were completely numbed by assembly-line work. “The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers, but the logical consequence of industrial society,” they wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The rebellious students did not understand “revolution” to mean a socialist movement of the working class, but liberation from sexual and other conventions of bourgeois society. Many enthused about the “cultural revolution” of Mao Zedong, a convinced Stalinist, or about national movements such as the Viet Cong and the PLO. Others took the “long road through the institutions” and eventually became ministers.

We rejected all that, insisting that the crucial question was building revolutionary leadership in the working class. And while all other political tendencies were adapting to the national milieu, we insisted that the building of the International had priority and was a precondition for the building of the national section.

Gerry Healy spoke very powerfully on these questions at the BSA founding conference in 1971. Only one month earlier, US President Richard Nixon had surprisingly ended the Bretton Woods agreement, which had been the basis of the world monetary system since the end of the war. Healy demonstrated that none of the contradictions that had led to the two world wars and fascism had been resolved. All efforts had to be concentrated on preparing the working class for a new epoch of revolutionary struggle through the building of the Fourth International.

In the mid-1970s, the bourgeoisie managed to block the wave of militant labour struggles with the help of the social-democratic and Stalinist

apparatuses. It launched a counteroffensive that continues to this day.

This counteroffensive took not only social and economic forms, but also ideological ones. Extreme forms of subjective idealism and irrationalism gained the upper hand at the universities, rejecting not only historical materialism but also the ideas of the Enlightenment.

This intensified the political pressure on the International Committee. Its French section, the OCI, had already broken with the International Committee in 1971. It turned to François Mitterrand’s Socialist Party, in which its cadres made successful careers. One of them, Lionel Jospin, later even became French prime minister.

The Internationale Arbeiterkorrespondenz group that the OCI had built in Germany in the 1960s broke apart. The majority went into the SPD and adapted to its anti-communism. The minority founded the BSA.

Then, in the course of the 1970s, the British section, which was now called the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), also capitulated to the Pabloism it had fought in the decades before. It put its national, opportunistic interests above the International and forged unprincipled links with bourgeois national movements, the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party bureaucracy.

This made the early years of the BSA enormously difficult. The WRP placed great pressure on us, but we were not ready to give up the goals for which we had founded the BSA. In the 1985-86 split between the WRP and the ICFI, the BSA supported the criticism of the Workers League, led by David North, and stood united on the side of the International Committee.

Since then, the International Committee’s perspectives have been vindicated to an extraordinary degree, and it has made enormous political progress.

The question of the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism was definitively decided 30 years ago. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the capitalist transformation of China, the bureaucracy, as predicted by Trotsky, had pushed the workers state back into capitalism.

The social-democratic parties and trade unions no longer advocate even the appearance of social reform. They organize social cuts and suppress any resistance to them.

Pabloism and its variants have fully integrated themselves into the bourgeois ruling apparatus. They sat or sit in bourgeois governments in several countries—such as Italy, Greece, Brazil and Spain. In Germany, they are leading members of the Left Party or among its Bundestag (federal parliament) deputies.

Apart from our international party, the International Committee, there is no political tendency in the world today that represents Marxist principles and an international socialist program. It is this program that is now developing a great appeal and becoming the basis for building mass socialist parties. With the *World Socialist Web Site*, we have created a daily organ that is already recognized worldwide as the authentic voice of socialism.

Fifty years is a long time in a person’s life, but not in history. Seventy-six years after the end of the Second World War, it is clearer than ever that not one of the problems that led to the greatest catastrophe in the history of mankind has been resolved.

With its inhuman coronavirus policies, which place profit and economic interests above the protection of health and life, the ruling capitalist class demonstrates that it is literally walking over corpses again. Democratic structures are collapsing everywhere, and fascist forces are being promoted by the ruling class.

After thirty years of devastating wars in the Middle East and Africa, the US and its allies are preparing a war against China that would be fought with nuclear weapons and destroy humanity. Germany, too, is again engaged in an aggressive program of military rearmament.

But the most important change in the current situation is the return of the class struggle. Strikes are developing and resistance is growing all

over the world. In all these struggles, the question of political leadership arises with great urgency. Building the ICFI and the Socialist Equality Party are the most important tasks. The future depends on the working class overthrowing capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact