Forty years after the Malvinas/Falklands War: How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism

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The WSWS is today republishing an excerpt from the 1986 statement *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism* to mark the 40th anniversary of the Malvinas/Falklands War. The statement was the product of a determined struggle carried out by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against the opportunism of the WRP, leading to its split with the ICFI in 1986.

By the time of the ten-week war between Britain and Argentina in 1982, the WRP was already in an advanced stage of political decay. Its leadership's inability to conduct a struggle against British imperialism while providing a revolutionary perspective for the British and Argentine working class during the war over the Malvinas/Falkland islands was an especially sharp example. In contrast, the ICFI's critique reprinted below powerfully articulates the principles of socialist internationalism and permanent revolution.

Appraising the political line of the WRP from 1973-1985, *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism* is an essential Marxist analysis of the degeneration of what had been the leading section of the international Trotskyist movement. In exposing the increasingly debased political opportunism of the WRP and its leaders Gerry Healy, Cliff Slaughter and Mike Banda, the statement provides a case study in Marxist analysis and the fight against revisionism. It should be read in full by all those wishing to educate themselves in the history of Trotskyism and the struggle for world socialist revolution.

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The Malvinas War: How Healy Worked as an Imperialist Stooge

The outbreak of war between Britain and Argentina over the Malvinas islands in April 1982 exposed the political putrefaction of the central leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party. Above all, it revealed that Healy, utterly corrupted by his prostitution of principles over the previous decade, now stood on the extreme right wing of the WRP, and well to the right of most Pabloite groups and even of sections of the Labour and Communist parties. After years of masquerading as a defender of national liberation movements, while functioning in reality as a petty agent and paid propagandist within the British labor movement of the colonial bourgeoisie, Healy proved incapable of conducting a principled struggle in defense of an oppressed nation confronting the onslaught of British imperialism.

The initial reaction of the WRP was politically confused, as Healy advanced the line that the war between Britain and Argentina was an inter-imperialist conflict. An editorial which appeared in the April 3, 1982 issue [of the *News Line*, the WRP's daily newspaper] presented Healy's potted theory of the origins of the war:

> "Argentina is one of the Reagan administration's client states in Latin America, and it is significant that Washington's protests have been purely formal.
>
> "US imperialism wants to grab control of the Falklands for two basic reasons. Firstly, beneath the Atlantic waters around the islands are rich oil reserves—possibly ten times the amount of oil in the North Sea. Secondly, the Pentagon is anxious to establish a communications base in the region to monitor the movement of shipping around Cape Horn."

This editorial concentrated on the crimes of the junta, and the reference to Britain came only in the second half of the statement. There was no reference to the historical right of Argentina to the Malvinas, which, parenthetically, the *News Line* continued for some time to refer to as "Falklands." Significantly, the same issue carried a lead story on page two which was provocatively headlined, ***"Argentina Invades Falklands."***

The party line set down by Healy was summarized in the headline of the issue of April 5, 1982, which read, ***"This is Not Our War."*** It claimed that *"The working class in Britain and Argentina have absolutely no interest in this war, which serves the interests only of the big oil monopolies, the arms manufacturers and the armed services chiefs."*

The next day, beneath a headline which read ***"The Main Enemy is at Home for British and Argentinian Workers,"*** there was an indication of differences within the Party leadership. While the *News Line* lead hinted at the need for a General Election, the front page also carried an advertisment for an April 8th public meeting on the war, in which the following words appeared:

"Falkland Islands—This is not our war!—Benn and the opportunism of the Labour leaders."

Throughout the Party and even on the editorial board, there was an instinctive demand for a campaign against Thatcher. But Healy's office was opposed to this and ordered a public meeting to disassociate the WRP from any campaign against the government, with the public announcement centering its fire on the only parliamentary figure who had explicitly called for a General Election.

The *News Line* carried no report on the speeches given at the April 8th meeting, but did quote a resolution that had been carried overwhelmingly. It concluded with a call for a General Election.

This call for a campaign against Thatcher infuriated Healy and forced his hand. He drafted a political letter, dated April 10, 1982, *"to each member and cadre of the WRP,"* which was clearly a right-wing attack specifically aimed at silencing those in the Party who were, at the very

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least, critically supporting Benn's call for the bringing down of the Tory government. It can be safely said that never in the entire history of the Fourth International had the principal leader of any national section resorted to such vulgar sophistries to justify capitulation to an imperialist government and to oppose the right of a semi-colonial country to defend itself against imperialist attack.

The letter began by fabricating a politically-fictitious scenario to misrepresent the essential class issues at stake in the war:

> "1.The inter-imperialist crisis over the future of the oil deposits in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands (!!) is a further powerful testimony of the break-up of the economic and political relations within the camp of world imperialism.
>
> "Secretly (!), US imperialism supports Argentina, while professing friendship toward Britain. In reality, the driving force behind the hypocrisy of this two-faced relationship is the world-wide decline of US imperialism itself."

This bizarre theory of the origins of the conflict, contradicted by the indispensable role played by the United States in supplying and protecting the British fleet as it sailed into the South Atlantic, served as the basis for defining the war as an "inter-imperialist crisis." This false characterization became the basis for denying political support to the Argentine masses in their struggle against British imperialism. The letter continued:

*"For Britain, driven to desperation about the future of its enormous investment in the North Sea, in the face of the world slump in oil prices, the consequences are catastrophic. If its phased-out Navy strives to resurrect the spirit of Pirate Drake, it has nothing to do with the future of the 1,800 semi-feudal old-style Englanders who inhabit the islands. Oil is the basic issue, especially if it can be produced more cheaply than in the North Sea, thus assisting the partial recovery of at least some of the burdens of excessive capital expenditure. So the Naval and nuclear juggernauts fly the flag' in a military adventure which***they cannot win***" (Emphasis in the original).

Healy knew even less about geography than he did about the Leninist principle of self-determination. He offered no economic analysis to substantiate his claim that *"Oil is the basic issue"* nor did he explain how deposits at the bottom of the South Atlantic, 8,000 miles from Britain, could be extracted more cheaply than oil in the North Sea. Moreover, Healy did not attempt to reconcile the contradiction between his claim that oil *"in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands"* will solve the problems of *"excessive capital expenditure"* in the North Sea and the reality of the billions of pounds sterling being spent by the British government to sail the fleet into the South Atlantic. This would all be comical were it not so politically disgusting.

The abysmal level of Healy's political reasoning was also exposed in his categorical assertion that Britain *"cannot win."* The prediction was not only wrong; it exposed the unseriousness with which he approached the political tasks of the WRP. If he really anticipated an imminent military catastrophe for British imperialism, two fundamental conclusions would have been immediately drawn by any Marxist. The first, was that the destruction of the British fleet in Argentina and a corresponding loss of thousands of lives would produce the immediate collapse of the Tory government and create, almost overnight, an intensely revolutionary situation. The second, flowing from the first, was that the WRP must work might and main for such a military defeat and prepare the party for the probable consequences. Healy neither drew the first conclusion nor worked on the basis of the second.

The letter was loaded down with banal non-sequiturs that could be mistaken for senile ramblings. The crisis of bourgeois rule was depicted as a problem of *"indecisive capitalist statesmen and great scandals. From the patriarch Macmillan (you've never had it so good' Supermac) to Profumo. From Sir Harold and 'slagheap speculation', to I'm a Tory now' Marcia. From the 'New Horizon' Kennedys to the disaster of the Bay of Pigs. From Nixon to Watergate. From Reagan to who knows what? etc., etc."*

He finally arrived at the class nature of the war, and proceeded to quote a section from Volume 21 of Lenin's *Collected Works*, dealing with the attitude of socialists toward war; and then immediately proved that he did not understand what he had quoted:

> "These Leninist principles are as basic to the Falkland Islands today as they were when he wrote them in 1915. We are dealing with our attitude towards imperialist war, as it is a conflict in reality between British imperial interests and those of the Argentine Junta acting as a front for the United States, in which 'War is the continuation of politics by other (i.e. by violent) means."

The Lenin quotation had stressed that Marxists *"deem it necessary to study each war historically (from the standpoint of Marx's dialectical materialism) and separately."* As this was completely contrary to the subjectivism of Healy—who denied the existence of any historical content within dialectical categories and who believed that the memorization of the names and sequences of the logical concepts, jotted down in the course of a confused reading of Hegel, could be used to justify his arbitrary impressions and supply the desired answer to any political problem—he refused to apply this correct logical-historical method to the study of the Malvinas War. The first casualties of his ignorant disdain for Marxism were the fundamental political categories of **oppressed and oppressor** nations—without whose proper use it is impossible to define any war in the imperialist epoch.

Incapable of distinguishing between imperialist Britain and Argentina, Healy essentially reproduced the petty-bourgeois position of Shachtman, who in the 1940's characterized all wars, even the struggle of China against the Japanese occupation, as inter-imperialist conflicts. Like Shachtman, Healy concluded that it was impossible to base the party's position on "an *abstract* characterization of the class character of the state involved in the war," but rather proceeded from a supposedly concrete examination of the "realities of living events"—in this case, a dispute over oil with Argentina fronting for US imperialism.

Thus, Healy declared in words which should be branded on his backside: *"It is* ***not*** (emphasis in the original) *at all a question that historically the islands belong to Argentina as that cowardly organ of revisionism* Socialist Worker *implies..."* He also objected to the following statement which appeared in the newspaper of the British Pabloites, who declared that the British imperialists *"have no right to the territory against the rights of the Argentinians."*

Healy then visited his wrath against the centrist MP Tony Benn who had the temerity to respond to the Malvinas War with a call for the bringing down of the Tory government—which was, under the circumstances, to the left of Healy's cowardly position. The WRP's "theoretician" gave a dazzling display of his "practice of cognition" by producing a series of sophistries aimed at justifying his dastardly opposition to Benn's correct demand.

> "Benn can call for bringing Thatcher down, knowing full well that the chauvinism not only within the right-wing Labourites but

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the so-called left' as well will ensure that the Tories will have a parliamentary majority and are immediately in no fear of their government being brought down."

While Benn at least was prepared to fight the chauvinism within the Labour Party and oppose the imperialist war openly, Healy, a political coward who was thoroughly intimidated by the dispatching of the British fleet, wrote off the possibility of any struggle against Thatcher.

Within this context, Healy's denunciation of Benn for "parliamentary opportunism" was sheer duplicity. In practice, he was defending the Tory government.

Healy then summarized his political conclusions:

> "a) The source of the crisis is the continued break-up of the economic and political base of world imperialism.
>
> "b) For the workers in Britain and Argentina who **have no country, the main enemy is at home**. **The war is not our war**. It has arisen out of the totally **REACTIONARY NATURE OF IMPERIALISM**.
>
> "c) The workers of Britain and Argentina must work for the defeat of their own ruling class. The ruling class who today intensify their campaigns to justify **their war**, will just as easily turn their guns on the working class in Britain as they have done in Argentina over many years past."
>
> "d) The working class in Britain and Argentina, as Lenin explained, must actively prepare the defeat of their own ruling class by developing the struggle to turn imperialist war into civil war and thus take advantage of the growing weaknesses of the imperialist ruling class."

Having already defined the war incorrectly as an inter-imperialist conflict and having refused to give even critical support to Benn's call for the bringing down of the Tory government, Healy's reference to civil war was utterly hollow and hypocritical. Behind Healy's vague and eclectic formulations lay a calculated opposition to any policy, slogan or practical activities that would bring the WRP into conflict *with the* capitalist state and disrupt the imperialist war. Thus, the letter did not put forward a *single* concrete proposal for action *within the British labor* movement. In *this* internal letter to the party cadre, in the *midst* of a war crisis, there was not to be found a *single* political slogan or a proposed tactical initiative.

Rather, Healy concluded his letter by instructing the members to fulfill petty organizational quotas set by the Party apparatchiks to meet the financial requirements of their London bureaucracy:

> "a) We need an increase of 1,800 News Line sales each and every day from Monday April 19th, 1982.
>
> "We need that vital £20.000 towards the Youth Training Fund by the same date Monday April 19th.
>
> "These are two essential and vital practices directly connected to the revolutionary struggle against imperialist war over the Falkland Islands. Without such practices we can use all the 'left words' we like and do nothing more than disappear into the swamp of revisionism and reformist Labourism:
>
> "Here we have the test of tests... We await with some anxiety your most revolutionary and practical answers by April 19th."

These paragraphs represented the most consummate and, in this case, politically sinister, opportunism: he attacked the call for a General Election and the bringing down of the Tories with disparaging sarcasm—*"we can use all the left words we like"*—and made the continued inflow of money into the center *"the test of all tests."* These are the words of a man who had become utterly insensitive to the needs of the class struggle and the historical responsibilities of the Party he represented. Healy awaited *"with some anxiety"* not the reports from the field on the sentiments of the working class *and* the labor movement's response to the party line but *"an increase of 1,800 News Line sales"* and *"that vital £20,000."* His response to the war was not that of a Bolshevik nor even that of a left-centrist, but of a cowardly petty-bourgeois reformist careerist whose only concern was to defend the party coffers.

This time Healy had gone too far for even Michael Banda, who found it impossible to close his eyes to Healy's shameless defense of British imperialism. With Healy's letter already printed and on its way to Party branches, Banda issued a protest and demanded an immediate change in policy, along the line of the resolution that had been passed at the April 8th meeting. Seeking to head off a political scandal, Banda convinced Healy to recall his political letter and those which had gone out were collected and returned to the center. Banda then supervised a cut-and-paste redrafting of the Political Letter, dropping all attacks on the revisionists and Tony Benn and adding one crucial paragraph following the reference to Lenin:

> "There is one vital historical difference. The Argentine resistance to British imperialist interests invokes a powerful element of the National Liberation struggle, since the islands belong historically speaking to Argentina and the country has every right to have them returned. Hence the spontaneous mobilization of the masses demanding they should be returned."

This political shift was gradually worked into the policy of the News Line. On April 13, 1982 the *News Line* finally denounced "The Thatcher government's imperialist war against Argentina" and by the next day the WRP included in its front page May Day advertisement two new slogans: "Down with Thatcher's imperialist war over the Falklands!" and "Mobilize the working class to bring down the Tory government!"

Three and a half years later, in the midst of the explosion that followed the exposure of Healy's depraved abuse of female cadre, Banda glorified his own role in opposing Healy's line on the Malvinas war. But as the facts show, his "struggle" against Healy was conducted in an utterly unprincipled manner, behind the backs of the Party membership and the International Committee.

At issue was not merely an episodic error in political analysis. Healy's Political Letter was consciously directed against a section of the labor movement and those within the WRP who called for action against the Tories. In other words, Healy's real starting point was not an incorrect evaluation of Argentina's claim to the Malvinas but an adaptation to the British imperialist establishment. His definition of the war as an inter-imperialist conflict was derived from his opposition to any mobilization of the working class in defense of Argentina.

Under these conditions, the failure of Banda—and, we might add, Cliff Slaughter—to challenge Healy openly in front of the entire Party and the International Committee—was of a far greater political significance than the hasty and face-saving correction. No political explanation was offered to the membership about the circumstances surrounding the change in line. The first commandment of Bolshevism, to expose the right wing within the party, was violated. Later in 1982, when a member of the WRP Central Committee wrote to Banda and complained about the political cover-up, he was summarily expelled. All this amounted to a conscious

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cover-up of Healy's role within the leadership as a political lackey of British imperialism. Banda, in effect, left the time-bomb ticking inside the WRP and the International Committee of the Fourth International. He knew, as did Slaughter and all those privy to the events of early April 1982, that Healy was politically unfit to continue inside the leadership of the Trotskyist movement.

In articles which appeared in the *News Line* during the war, scathing denunciations were made of various right-wing tendencies within the labor movement whose positions were similar or identical to Healy's. In the issue of May 28, 1982, in response to a reader who confessed disgust with the pro-imperialist policies of the Labour Party leadership and who asked for an explanation of their role, the *News Line* replied:

> "The first and most important point to grasp is that Foot and his henchmen are not 'bad' individuals who have committed a 'mistake' and that our task is to try to correct them."

In another question about the war policy of the "Militant" group, which in no way differed from that of Healy, the *News Line* replied in its June 12, 1982 issue:

> "The 'Militant' tendency is a group of renegade fake 'Trotskyists' who provide a cover for the right-wing in the Labour Party. Masquerading as Marxists, the role of 'Militant' is to try and block those moving towards serious revolutionary politics...In reality, they are abject reformists, adherents of the parliamentary road to socialism, and close collaborators with the bureaucracy against left-wing members of the Labour Party.
>
> "Thus the call for a 'class stand' against the war is merely a smokescreen behind which 'Militant', in fact, line up with the Labour right wing (**as Healy did against Benn**) and British and American imperialism in the reactionary imperialist war against Argentina."

In the August 1982 edition of *Labour Review*, Slaughter wrote a merciless analysis of the political line of "Militant" leader, Ted Grant. He used such phrases as "farrago of nonsense," "sentimental drivel," and "hopeless confusion" to characterize Grant's "Healyite" equation of Argentina and Britain, warning that "he strives to 'bend' Marxism to fit his opportunism and betrayal." He mocked Grant for denying what "every man and woman all over the world fighting against imperialism has understood..." and he concluded that "This treachery, masquerading as Marxism, must be exposed in every way possible," (pp. 11-15) But this rule did not apply to the central leader of the WRP.

There is still another side to this lugubrious tale. In the course of correcting Healy's grotesque right-wing line, Banda introduced a few opportunist novelties of his own. In a reply to a reader who asked what position the WRP would adopt toward the Argentine junta if it worked in that country, the response which appeared in the daily "Questions & Answers" column, for which Banda was politically-responsible, explained:

> "A section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Argentina would unconditionally support the Argentine bourgeoisie against British imperialism...
>
> "A Marxist party in Argentina must therefore form a united front with the bourgeois military junta in the fight against the predatory war of British and US imperialism.
>
> This must not involve any concession of the political independence of the working class and its revolutionary vanguard." (June 1, 1982)

This was a miserable caricature of Trotsky's position: to speak of unconditional support to the Argentine bourgeoisie precludes genuine political independence of the working class; to offer the junta a "united front" was to abandon the political vocabulary of Marxism and to betray the working class.

In its leadership of the democratic struggle for national self-determination, the Argentine working class defends neither the bourgeoisie nor its functionaries in the military. As Trotsky wrote in the *Transitional Program, "In supporting the colonial country or the USSR in a war, the proletariat does not in the slightest degree solidarize either with the bourgeois government of the colonial country or with the Thermidorian bureaucracy of the USSR. On the contrary, it maintains full political independence from the one as from the other. Giving aid in a just and progressive war, the revolutionary proletariat wins the sympathy of the workers in the colonies and in the USSR, strengthens there the authority and influence of the Fourth International, and increases its ability to help overthrow the bourgeois government in the colonial country, the reactionary bureaucracy in the USSR."* (New Park, p. 36)

In the concrete conditions under which the Malvinas war arose, it was doubly treacherous to follow the policies suggested by Banda, which would have placed the would-be Trotskyists of Argentina in a "united front" not only with the junta but also with every rabid petty-bourgeois chauvinist in the country, including those who moon-lighted for Galtieri in his death squads.

The war was launched by the junta as a desperate diversion to forestall its imminent collapse. It then proceeded to conduct the war in a manner which guaranteed the maximum suffering for Argentine working class and peasant soldiers and the ultimate victory of British imperialism. In this situation, Trotskyists would have utilized the war to hasten the revolutionary overthrow of Galtieri and directed its agitation in pursuit of that goal. While not rejecting whenever necessary coordinated action with the government, insofar as our Party is not yet able to overthrow it, under no conditions would we explain such actions in terms that lent the slightest credibility to the regime or placed upon our Party responsibility for the junta's actions. At all times we would expose the treacherous nature of the bourgeoisie, the incompetence and depravity of its officers, and demand the arming of the workers and the formation of their own militias. At the same time, we would put before the masses our program for a workers' and farmers' government and the liquidation of Argentine capitalism through the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The WRP's whirlwind romance with the Argentine junta was the most quixotic product of Banda's elevation of armed struggle to the level of a strategy. This established a false criteria which enabled the WRP to hold open the prospect that a military conflict could transform a gang of jackbooted hirelings into intransigent opponents of imperialism and potential liberators of the working class. In its issue of June 17, 1982, the *News Line* defended its previous claim that Britain could never retake the Malvinas Islands by accepting the claims of the Argentine junta at face value and projecting a protracted war. This article, written under the supervision of Banda, respectfully quoted the fatuous claims of "President" Leopoldo Galtieri, "Foreign Minister" Costa Mendez, and "Defense Minister" Amadeo Frugoli and claimed that *"These are sentiments which are widely shared throughout Latin America"*—as if there existed any real identity between these discredited tyrants, who were soon to be arrested and dispatched to prison camps, and the genuine anti-

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imperialist views of the masses.

The article then interpreted the Malvinas War as the starting point of *"a profound awakening of the national question"* and made no reference whatsoever to the Latin American proletariat and the class struggle. Full confidence was placed on the junta, and the *News Line*, accepting the empty boasts of the discredited generals, predicted that the war would go on. While Galtieri was hiding in the Presidential palace and mass demonstrations of workers were demanding his head, the *News Line* offered a shameless apology for the junta:

"Whatever temporary settlement is reached today, the supply lines and the British positions on the islands themselves remain prime targets in the future for the Argentine armed forces." Had any Argentine "Trotskyist" attempted to assuage the anger of the masses with this sophistry, he would have rightly been strung up on a lamp-post in the Plaza del Mayo.

An even more incredible statement followed: *"A protracted war under these conditions will be a running sore that will turn the Malvinas into Thatcher's Vietnam, a war which she can no more win than the United States win (sic) in South-east Asia."*

This prediction proves that the WRP had not an ounce of confidence in the British working class and its revolutionary role. The junta now became the gravedigger of British imperialism, just as the Iranian military was soon to be proclaimed the executor of revolutionary tasks in the Middle East. It confirmed, moreover, that the so-called "correction" in April had been merely a political cosmetics job which did nothing to restore a proletarian class line in the WRP.

In a number of articles, Banda and the *News Line* attempted to give an orthodox cover for their attitude to the Argentine junta by references to Chiang Kai-shek's struggle against Japan in the 1930's. This was an utterly mechanical and invalid comparison. To equate the life-and-death struggle of the Chinese people—striving to secure for the first time their right to national existence, against the imperialist invaders who occupied their country—with the diversionary war launched by the discredited junta in 1982 is a mockery of dialectical concreteness. The very fact that the Argentine Pabloites uncritically adapted themselves to the worst chauvinist elements played into the hands of the more astute bourgeois radicals, such as Alfonsin, who maintained their distance from the junta.

To sum up, the tasks of Trotskyists in Britain was to unconditionally defend the right of Argentina to self-determination and work at all times for the defeat of the British government and its military forces. In Argentina, Trotskyists had to defend national self-determination with their own, proletarian, methods, upholding at all times the political independence of the working class and the banner of revolutionary internationalism.

The inability of the WRP to conduct from the start of the war a principled policy in Britain or elaborate a revolutionary strategy for Argentine workers was bound up with the fact that Healy and Banda repudiated the Marxist conception of the capitalist state, endowed it with a liberating role, and attempted to make use of it, in one form or another, as an instrument of Party policy and the class struggle.

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