

Greetings from the ICFI to the SEP (US) 2022 Congress

The social and political crisis in the UK and the tasks of the working class

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These remarks were delivered by Chris Marsden to the Seventh National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US), held from July 31 to August 5, 2022.

Marsden is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Read the full report on the Congress and the resolutions adopted at it.

Comrade North's opening remarks to this Congress addressed the political responsibilities placed on our cadre during the fifth stage in the history of the Fourth International.

The intersection of a new revolutionary upsurge of the international working class with the political struggle for world socialist revolution by the International Committee, he stressed, demands not only the instigation of the initiatives necessary to provide a means for the working class to fight independently of and against the old bureaucracies. It underscores the vital role of the ICFI as the repository of the history of the struggle to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership.

North drew on the analysis made by Trotsky of the betrayal of the parties of the Second International which, prior to the First World War, were never presented with the task of making an insurrection, of taking power—other than the Russian Social Democrats in 1905.

Citing Kautsky's declaration in 1893 that "The socialist party is a revolutionary party, but not a revolution-making party," he explained that years of reformist practice in the end counted for more than the Social Democracy's programmatic commitment to revolution in determining its response to World War One.

This is not the experience of the ICFI at all. But due to the restrictions placed on our movement by an unfavourable political situation and balance of political forces, we have been involved in a long historical defence and elaboration of a revolutionary perspective—with only limited opportunities to put this to practical effect.

Major opportunities are emerging that we must seize. But our ability to correctly identify such opportunities and to determine a correct response is made possible only to the extent that our cadre is rooted in our own history. And approaches events from a profoundly informed historical standpoint and not in an impressionistic and pragmatic fashion.

North explains in his tribute to comrade Wije, "During virtually the entirety of his political work, Comrade Wije had to fight under conditions in which the reactionary forces were on the offensive and the working class—betrayed by the LSSP, the trade unions, and other opportunist organizations—was in retreat."

The long history of struggle Wije embodied now becomes the vital political capital on which the SEP and the ICFI has been able to elaborate a revolutionary perspective through which the working class can go on the offensive against capitalism. It is, he wrote, the "vast experience" necessary "to provide political leadership to the powerful spontaneous movement."

In the UK we too are now presented with major opportunities to secure the party's leadership of the working class. We must respond by bringing to bear the rich political history embodied in our party.

The social and political situation is explosive. There is an eruption of strikes after decades of the suppression of the class struggle, driven by a social and economic crisis without precedent since the Great Depression.

Average wages are no higher today than they were before the 2008 financial crisis, representing a loss of £9,200 per year.

More than two million households are already going without "heating or eating," according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and seven million families are living through a "frightening year of financial fear."

UK energy bills are expected to almost double to nearly £4,000 this winter.

Low-income households have borrowed £12.5 billion of new debt in 2022, including £3.5 billion from doorstep lenders and loan sharks. Over 1.3 million households have no savings and half of families have savings equivalent to less than a month's income.

RPI inflation is predicted to hit 17.7 percent by the end of the year and soar to "astronomical levels."

Savage pay restraint in this desperate situation has provoked a wave of strikes involving rail, post and telecoms workers, and bus workers. Nurses, doctors, teachers, lecturers and council workers are determined to join them.

In our response to this strike wave, we have drawn on the historic experiences of the 1926 general strike, the 1972-74 miners' strikes that brought down Heath's Conservative government, and the 1984-85 miners' strike.

We warned in “Lessons of the British rail strikes,” on 29 June:

First, there is no way forward outside of direct confrontation with Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, the most reactionary and corrupt in British history...

Second, workers must take measures to ensure that their fight is not sabotaged by the union bureaucrats in the rail unions and the Trades Union Congress, who will do everything they can to smother and shut down an insurrectionary struggle of British workers.

Crucially, we have determined a course of action that addresses the working class directly to the political issues it faces.

The trade union bureaucracy is doing what it always does—isolating strikes, imposing sell-outs, and confining the working class to limited protest actions.

But it does so amid a crisis of rule that has led to the downfall of Boris Johnson and a contest over who will replace him that has been confined to the ranks of his rightward careening party.

It is at this level that the fate of the working class is being planned out, where the grave dangers confronting workers are most clear, and where the trade union bureaucracy is working with the Labour Party at the highest level of the state to exclude the working class from exerting its independent political and social interests.

Only by addressing themselves to the political struggle, leading as the Sri Lankan statement makes clear to the taking of power, can the working class transcend a militant response that leave the bourgeoisie and its bureaucratic agencies in charge of events.

That is why we have raised the demand for an immediate general election, so that workers can disrupt and ultimately defeat the conspiracy of the Tories, Labour and the trade unions to maintain the political rule of the financial oligarchy.

The dangers workers face are acute.

Since the latest COVID wave began in June, more than 4,700 people have been killed and two million people are suffering from Long COVID. This is likely a serious underestimate.

The UK has been recording 500-1,000 excess deaths a week for the last 11 weeks, across all age groups with half accounted for by COVID. Scientists have forecast new, even larger COVID waves this autumn and early 2023, with 8 percent of the UK population infected by November.

Britain is also being dragged ever more firmly into a shooting war with Russia, with the head of the British Army General Sir Patrick Sanders declaring, “The British Army must be prepared to engage in warfare at its most violent.”

And it is the economic disaster created by the pandemic and war against Russia and China that demands class war at home—a ruthless programme of cuts and speed ups that is incompatible with democratic rights.

The SEP has elaborated the reason for our call for a general election: To bring into the open the issues that underlie the present crisis: 1) The relentless escalation of the war against Russia, even

to the point of risking a nuclear war; 2) The criminal refusal to stop the endless transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and allow mass infection and death; and 3) The ruthless assault on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class.

The SEP has initiated the call for a general election as a means for the working class to break through the conspiracy of both major parties, oppose their policies, and assert its independent social interests.

Our call is directed towards developing the industrial and political struggle of the working class. We will make the case for strikes, mass protests and the organisation of a general strike to stop the war, force the adoption of a zero-COVID policy, and build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism. We will intervene in this emerging movement to popularise the building of rank-and-file committees in workplaces and working class communities.

The necessity for such a political and industrial offensive is clear. Tory leadership favourite Liz Truss has pledged an unprecedented clampdown on strikes, including a de facto ban in essential industries and services, hiking fines on unions, delaying all strikes with a “right to respond” time for the employer, demanding re-balloting after every separate action taken, a compulsory two month cooling off periods, and more.

This prompted RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch to state that he would campaign for a general strike, warning, “If these proposals become law, there will be the biggest resistance mounted by the entire trade union movement, rivalling the general strike of 1926, the suffragettes and Chartism.”

Lynch and his fellow bureaucrats will, naturally, do all in their power to prevent such a struggle emerging. But the issue of a general strike and the working class taking over control of society is posed objectively.

We will take up the most determined struggle for this perspective, in opposition to the prostration encouraged by the pseudo left and the Corbyn Labourites, with the aim of building the party’s influence among the most advanced workers and youth looking for a fight and ready to be educated as Marxists.



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