

From the archives

Anti-Semitism and the Socialist Workers Party

David North
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This article was originally published in the Bulletin on September 18, 1984. It was written by David North, then the national secretary of the Workers League, the predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party (US). North is currently the national chairman of the SEP and the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS.

The article was written as a polemic against the defense of anti-Semitism by the Socialist Workers Party, which had long since broken with Trotskyism. The Workers League was founded in 1966 on the basis of the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International against the SWP's capitulation to the politics of petty-bourgeois nationalism and Pabloism.

The WSWS is republishing the article now as it addresses critical historical and political issues in the fight against anti-Semitism, which is again on the rise in the United States and is being actively promoted by Trump and the Republican Party.

There are no limits to the political degradation of the virulently anti-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party. The transformation of this police-infested organization^[1] into an agency of imperialism within the workers' movement has found a particularly grotesque expression in a recent innovation in its political line: the explicit defense of anti-Semitism.

In a series of articles which have appeared in its newspaper, *The Militant*, the SWP has vigorously defended the anti-Jewish demagogery of the ex-calypso singer Louis Farrakhan. These articles—which are explicitly based on the recently adopted political perspectives of the Socialist Workers Party—present a justification for the Farrakhan statements that proceeds from premises and conceptions that are saturated with the outlook of anti-Semitism.

The SWP's ostentatious defense of Farrakhan is made all the more revolting by the fact that this charlatan achieved an insidious notoriety 20 years ago when he acted as Elijah Muhammed's principal hatchet man against Malcolm X and issued inflammatory denunciations which helped to create a favorable political environment for those who carried out the assassination of the black leader in February 1965.

In its issue of August 3, 1984, *The Militant* criticized the apologetic speech given by Jesse Jackson at the Democratic Convention, singling out for particular criticism the civil rights leader's call for a progressive alliance between blacks and Jews.

"It is a myth that Blacks and Jews have 'shared blood and shared sacrifices,' as Jackson claimed," wrote Malik Miah, the national cochairman of the SWP. "Blacks are an overwhelmingly working-class oppressed nationality; Jews today are mostly middle-class and professionals. Under the rightward drift of capitalist politics, most Jews have become more conservative as reflected in their opposition to issues of great importance to Blacks and all working people such as affirmative

action programs that use quotas."

One week later, in *The Militant* of August 10, Miah's arguments were reiterated by Mohammed Oliver, who cited statistics to substantiate Miah's claim that the Jewish population plays a predominantly reactionary role in the United States.

"Until World War II, Jews in the United States were mostly workers. They were, for example, a significant proportion of workers in New York's garment industry.

"This is no longer true. Since the war, US Jews have become increasingly middle class. Those Jews who still are workers tend to be older, skilled workers—such as cutters in the garment industry.

"Most Jews today are part of the middle class. Tens of millions of people in their middle class and professional layers directly benefit from government social policies, tax breaks and support for the employers' antilabor offensive. This class composition of US Jews helps explain why many of them oppose affirmative action quotas and other demands for Black equality. Such demands threaten the privileged status of the middle class and professionals."

Both articles are squarely based on the political resolution of the SWP's Political Committee, issued in July 1984. This resolution denounces

... the myth that Blacks as a group and Jews as a group in the United States share a common oppression and thus have common interests. This is false. It ignores the evolution of the class composition of Blacks and Jews in the United States since World War II. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, a substantial majority of the Jewish population in this country were workers. This is no longer the case. Today the Jewish population in the United States is made up overwhelmingly of middle class and professional layers ...

The change in the class makeup of the Jewish population in the United States since World War II is the basis for the rightward political direction of the major Jewish organizations, and major sections of the Jewish population. Within this class framework, Zionism and the defense of the national dispossession of the Palestinians by Israel provides an added impulse to the adoption by many Jews of right-wing positions against national liberation struggles, backing racial discrimination against peoples of color, and support for US imperialism. (SWP Information Bulletin, No. 4, July 1984)

Combining inaccurate history with bad sociology, the Socialist Workers Party arrives at a justification for anti-Semitic politics. What is palmed off

as a “class analysis” for the supposed “rightward political direction” of the Jews has nothing whatsoever in common with Marxism, whose dialectical and historical materialist method is utterly hostile to the vulgar and mechanical logic employed by the SWP “theoreticians.” The Jews, we are told, were once predominantly working class and oppressed. Now, however, they are predominantly middle class professionals, allied with the capitalist oppressors, and therefore it is a “myth” that blacks and Jews share “common interests.”

This attempt to portray the Jews as enemies of the working class on the basis of their supposed economic interests is hardly original with the SWP. This has always been the stock-in-trade of the fascists and anti-Semites of all descriptions. However, we must make note here of the incredible ignorance of history which underlies the arguments of the SWP. Its reference to the “evolution of the class composition” of Jews suggests that the large percentage of professionals among their population is a new phenomenon and thus accounts for their alleged hostility to the blacks.

In point of fact, however, the sociological phenomenon noted, albeit in a grossly distorted form, by the SWP is not new at all and cannot provide any substantiation for the claim that the Jews are not an oppressed people.

For profound historical reasons, related to the economic and social complexities of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the Jews have been mainly an urban people with a large petty bourgeois and artisan strata. Moreover, the specific structure of the Jewish working class assumed a distinctive character, developing a high percentage of professional workers (which the SWP crudely labels “middle class”).

What has been called the “Jewish anomaly” is the fact that a comparatively small percentage of Jewish workers were employed in heavy industry. Rather, Jewish wage earners tended to be found with far greater frequency in light industries associated with the production of consumer goods and in white collar jobs.

Utilizing statistics available in the 1930s, the late Abram Leon—whose tragic death in Auschwitz deprived the Trotskyist movement of one of its more promising cadre—wrote the following in his brilliant study on *The Jewish Question*:

The number of Jewish workers, relatively low in the backward countries like Poland where it reaches about 25% of all persons economically active, reaches 46% in America. The professional structure of the Jewish working class still differs greatly from that of the proletariats of other peoples. Thus white collar workers form 30 to 36% of all Jewish wage earners, which is a proportion three to four times as great as among other nations. ... Sixty to 70% of the Jewish workers employed in industry are in reality worker artisans (in Eastern Europe 80% of the proletarians work in shops and not in factories) whereas among the workers of other nationalities, 75 to 80% are factory workers (*The Jewish Question*, Pathfinder, p. 219).

So, what the SWP declares to be a new development in the economic evolution of the Jews is, in fact, an historical phenomenon observed long ago. What is significant, however, is the SWP’s blanket use of the term “middle class” to characterize the hundreds of thousands of professional workers to be found among the Jewish people.

In fact, they form a significant component of the labor force in precisely those areas where trade unionism has expanded most dramatically during the last 25 years—i.e., teachers, social service employees, legal aides, health care workers, etc. Despite the claims of the SWP, masses of American Jews are directly connected with the trade union movement and identify themselves socially and politically with the aspirations of the working class.

Furthermore, this identification is not to be explained merely by establishing the exact number of workers and petty bourgeois within the sum total of the Jewish population. The whole historical development of the Jews has produced social circumstances which led significant numbers of them to participate actively in the labor and socialist movements—though the extent of this involvement has often been either exaggerated or explained in idealist terms.

It is, at any rate, entirely false and un-Marxist to base an analysis of the social and political status of the Jewish people merely on simplistic, and, we might add, careless descriptions of their income levels. Such vulgar “materialism” simply plays into the hands of the fascists and disguises the social essence of anti-Semitism.

As long as there is capitalism, the position of the Jews remains precarious. Whatever its myriad forms in different countries, anti-Semitism retains its social base in the hopeless position of the petty bourgeois in capitalist society. It is the malignant and inchoate expression of the ruined petty bourgeois outrage against the capitalism which he hates, but against which he is powerless.

The false identification of the Jew with capital, which lies at the base of anti-Semitism, lingers on as a form of distorted historical recollection of the feudal past. That the Jewish money lender of the Middle Ages long ago gave way to the modern Christian bourgeois is an historical nuance not easily grasped by the hysterical petty bourgeois who readily blames his economic misfortunes on the Jews. As Leon correctly explained:

Historically, the success of racism means that capitalism has managed to channellize the anti-capitalist consciousness of the masses into a form that antedates capitalism and which no longer exists except in a vestigial state; this vestige is nevertheless still sufficiently great to give a certain appearance of reality to the myth (p.237).

In counterposing the “middle-class” Jews, as allies of imperialism, to the exploited workers, the SWP legitimizes the outlook of precisely those elements of the petty bourgeoisie that embrace anti-Semitism. It is simply a disguised form of the old anti-Semitic canard that the Jews are the principal agents of international capital.

In practice, this argument has been used to justify pogroms against such “powerful” representatives of capital as ... the Jewish tailor or grocer. This is the basis for the SWP’s infatuation with Farrakhan, whose outlook as a Black Muslim is that of an embittered petty bourgeois who resents “Jewish competition,” which he identifies with capitalism. It is not without sufficient reason that Engels referred to anti-Semitism as “the socialism of fools.”

Regardless of the income level of any particular strata of the Jewish population, they remain an oppressed people whose interests are most definitely bound up with the struggle of all sections of the working class against capitalism. It should hardly be necessary to refer to the many Jewish people from both working and middle class backgrounds—such as Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner—who played an exceptionally active role in the struggle for the civil rights of black workers. Let us simply note that despite our profound and irreconcilable political differences with the reformist views of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, his acknowledgment of the “shared blood and shared sacrifices” of blacks and Jews expresses a far deeper knowledge of the history of the civil rights movement than that of the anti-Semites in the SWP leadership.

But what about the SWP’s claim that “Zionism and the defense of national dispossession of the Palestinians by Israel provides an added impulse to the adoption by many Jews of right-wing positions against national liberation struggles, backing racial discrimination against peoples

of color, and support for US imperialism.”

Unlike the SWP, which identifies the growth of Zionist influence with the improvement in the social and political position of the Jews, Marxists insist that the temporary strengthening of Zionism is the historical outcome of the catastrophic defeats of the European labor movement that led to the annihilation of six million Jews by the fascists. Without the combined betrayals of Stalinism and Social Democracy which prepared these defeats, the Zionists could never have attained the influence they acquired during the post-World War II period.

For Zionism to win a mass base, it was first necessary for the Jews to lose confidence in the perspective of World Socialist Revolution. As an ideology, Zionism is the outcome of the oppression of the Jews by imperialism—an attempt to resolve on the basis of petty-bourgeois nationalism the problems of the Jews within capitalist society. Its politically horrific implications were predicted long ago by Marxists, who have always been the most indefatigable opponents of the reactionary petty bourgeois doctrines of Herzl and his truest political progeny, Begin, Sharon and the Rabbi Kahane. However, Zionism is incapable of resolving the problems of the Jewish people and its disintegration—clearly foreshadowed in the present social and economic eruptions within Israel—is absolutely inevitable.

The position of the SWP is just the opposite. Writing that “Zionism and defense of the national dispossession of the Palestinians by Israel provides an added impulse to the adoption by many Jews of right-wing positions against national liberation struggles ... and support for US imperialism,” the SWP anti-Semites imply that Zionism has solved the historical problems of the Jewish people. The claim that Jews “benefit” from the Zionist oppression of Palestinians is an argument that will be advanced only by those who identify Judaism with Zionism, who claim that Zionism is the expression of the historical aspirations and interests of the Jewish people, and that the struggle against Zionism means a struggle against Jews. This reactionary position has been repudiated by the PLO and its chairman Yassir Arafat. Significantly, it surfaced during the Syrian-backed rebellion against Arafat led by the right-wing stooge Abu Musa—whose anti-Jewish statements were welcomed by the Shamir regime at a time when pressure was growing within Israel for negotiations with the PLO.

The significance of the SWP’s flirtation with anti-Semitism goes beyond the personal views of the dubious individuals within its leadership. Never has Zionism been in greater crisis than it is today. Within Israel itself, mass opposition has developed against the genocidal policies pursued by the regime in Lebanon and on the West Bank. For thousands of Israelis, the surfacing of anti-Arab terrorist organizations and the activities of Rabbi Kahane have shaken their commitment to Zionist ideology. Joint demonstrations of Jews and Arabs have already taken place. At the same time, the catastrophic economic crisis has intensified the fundamental class contradictions within the “Jewish State.”

Under these conditions, only the interests of the State Department and the Zionist regime are served by new attempts to fan the flames of anti-Semitism. Such efforts are all the more pernicious when they are carried out by an organization such as the SWP which people mistakenly assume to be socialist.

Furthermore, within the United States, any attempt to sow differences between black workers and the masses of Jewish working people, to deny that “Blacks as a group and Jews as a group in the United States share a common oppression and thus have common interests,” is to consciously sabotage the efforts to unify all sections of the working class and oppressed minorities in the struggle against capitalism. When the SWP claims that it is “false” to assert the identity of the blacks and Jews as victims of racist oppression, when it denounces as a “Myth” the reference of Jesse Jackson to the “shared blood and shared sacrifices” of blacks and Jews, it is working in the interests of the anti-Semites and the enemies of

the socialist revolution.

The Workers League, in political solidarity with the International Committee, has not only demonstrated that the SWP has broken all connections with Trotskyism and with the entire political heritage of Marxism. We have, as a result of our decade-long investigation into police infiltration of the SWP, identified the presence of agents in the highest levels of its leadership. In its justification of anti-Semitism, we find yet another example of how the SWP agents create political provocations aimed at undermining Trotskyism and advancing the interests of the State Department. However, they will not succeed. The historical traditions of the Fourth International, the analytical weapons of Marxism and the worldwide movement of the working class are far more powerful than the provocations of political police.

The implacable opposition of the Trotskyist movement—embodied in the Workers League and all the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International—to Zionism, is inextricably linked to our struggle against world imperialism in all its political, economic and ideological forms. The formation of the state of Israel was an historical tragedy for the Jewish as well as the Palestinian people. For the former, the belated nature of its impact will not make its consequences, unless averted through revolutionary struggle, any less catastrophic. The only way out for the Jewish masses in Israel lies in the common struggle with the Palestinian masses against Zionism and imperialism, for the establishment of a secular and socialist Palestine.

On the subject of the struggle against anti-Semitism, the Trotskyist movement can speak with authority. No other political movement—least of all Zionism—can compare its record with ours. In the darkest days of World War II, when the American Zionists were advising Jews to maintain a cowardly silence on the fate of the Jews, so as not to “embarrass” their imperialist patron Roosevelt, the Fourth International demanded action in defense of the victims of fascist genocide. It is not uncommon today for American Zionists to claim that the extent of the slaughter of European Jews was not known until after the war. But this lie is best refuted by citing a statement by the Executive Committee of the Fourth International, dated February 28, 1943:

Hitler’s mass murders of the Jewish people of Europe arouse in every class conscious worker a feeling of fury against this arch-dastard evil spawn of decaying capitalism.

The full brunt of Hitler’s insane violence falls against the Jewish toilers: workers, artisans and small tradesmen who make up the huge majority of the Jews in Europe and the world. The wealthy Jews have been able, in large measure, to escape or to buy privileges the trapped poor Jews cannot secure.

Anger against Hitler and sympathy for the Jewish people are not enough. Every worker must do what he can to aid and protect the Jews from those who hunt them down. The Allied ruling classes, while making capital of Hitler’s treatment of the Jews for their war propaganda, discuss and deliberate on the question endlessly. The workers in the Allied countries must raise the demand: Give immediate refuge to the Jews and all those being hounded for racial or religious reasons or for advocating social progress, who are pounding desperately at the gates. Quotas, immigration laws, visas—these must be cast aside. Open the doors of refuge to those who otherwise face extermination! The right to asylum is an elementary democratic right, which the workers and all honest democrats must support.

The Fourth International, leader of the workers in the struggle for world socialism, welcomes the Jewish toilers into its ranks. Only by world socialism can the Jews, above all the Jewish workers, and all the oppressed nations and races be saved from the

terrible fate world capitalism has inflicted on them and the even worse fate it has in store for ever-increasing numbers of them. Only in world socialism will human brotherhood become a reality and anti-Semitism a hideous memory.

The words in the concluding paragraph are as true today as they were 40 years ago and they remain inscribed on the banners of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

At the time this article was written, released FBI documents showed the massive infiltration of the SWP by the FBI, a process that was further proved by the ICFI's Security and the Fourth International investigation.

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