

Greetings to the Anniversary Meeting of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists

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The following are remarks given by World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board Chairman David North to an online meeting celebrating the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists (YGBL), a Trotskyist organization in Russia and the former Soviet Union that has declared its political support for the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Dear Comrades,

Permit me to extend to you the revolutionary greetings of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections throughout the world on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists.

This milestone is worthy of celebration. The history of the YGBL records the progress of the organization toward Trotskyism, which during the last year has culminated in the establishment of comradely relations and close political collaboration with the International Committee. As is to be expected, the path of the YGBL toward genuine revolutionary Marxism has been complex and contradictory. Hegel, in the Preface with which he began his monumental *Phenomenology of Spirit*, belittled the pragmatic conception that there existed a problem-free “royal road” to scientific truth. His criticism of vulgar thought, which contents itself with the superficial and commonplace, may be applied to the sphere of politics. A Marxist party—whose aim is the education of the working class and its organization as a political force capable of overthrowing the capitalist system and replacing it with socialism on a world scale—develops through the systematic working out and clarification of the historical problems of an entire epoch.

The International Committee of the Fourth International recognizes the enormous significance of the emergence of the Trotskyist movement in Russia. Given the origins of the Trotskyist movement, what was known as the “Russian Question”—that is, the foundational issues of history and program raised by the struggle against the Stalinist perversion of Marxism and betrayal of the October Revolution—necessarily played a central role in the history of the Fourth International.

In one or another form, conflicts within the Fourth International invariably raised issues relating to the class nature of the Soviet state, the historical role of Stalinism, and the fate of the Soviet Union and its relationship to the World Socialist Revolution. The first major struggle within the Fourth International in 1939–40 was provoked by the emergence of a faction, led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham, which rejected the defense of the Soviet Union, even in a war with Hitler’s Germany. It argued that the designation of the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state was no longer valid, and that the Soviet Union represented a new form of exploitative “state capitalist” society unforeseen by the Marxists.

The theoretical and political essence of this theory, as its elaboration in the years that followed made clear, was that the entire historical perspective of socialism, based on the revolutionary role of the working

class, was false. Virtually all those who advanced this demoralized perspective—first and foremost, Shachtman and Burnham—soon deserted to the camp of imperialist counterrevolution.

The next major form of anti-Marxist and anti-Trotskyist revision was advanced by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. Between 1951 and 1953, they argued with ever greater insistence that Stalinism, contrary to the analysis advanced by Trotsky in *Revolution Betrayed* and the program of the Fourth International, would still play a revolutionary role. Pablo and Mandel went so far as to argue that revolutions led by the Stalinist parties would result in the creation of “deformed workers’ states” that would last for centuries!

Though the theory of Pablo and Mandel seemed to be the polar opposite of that of Shachtman and Burnham, both conceptions attributed to the Stalinist bureaucracy and its network of political parties a decisive historical role. The Shachtmanites transformed the Stalinist bureaucracy into a new form of class society. The Pabloites glorified the bureaucracy as the decisive revolutionary force that would overthrow capitalism. Both revisionist tendencies rejected the revolutionary potential of the working class and its unique historical role.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, whose founding was initiated by the Open Letter written by Socialist Workers Party leader James P. Cannon in November 1953, exposed the Pabloite revisions of Marxism and upheld the Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism, the revolutionary role of the working class, and the decisive significance of the Fourth International in the struggle for the development of socialist consciousness in the working class and resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership.

In this historic document, written almost exactly 70 years ago, Cannon insisted that the “main obstacle” to the victory of the World Socialist Revolution was Stalinism,

which attracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them either into the arms of Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism. The penalty for these betrayals is paid by the working people in the form of consolidation of fascist or monarchist forces, and new outbreaks of war fostered and prepared by capitalism. From its inception, the Fourth International set as one of its major tasks the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism inside and outside the USSR.

In the decades that followed, this analysis of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism was upheld by the International Committee against the Kremlin bureaucracy and the innumerable apologists for “real existing socialism,” which included the Pabloites, who did all in their power to prop up the prestige of the bureaucracy and divert the struggle against it.

Even within the International Committee, there was from the mid-1970s and into the early 1980s an increasing adaptation on the part of the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party to Stalinism. This political retreat evoked opposition and played a major role in provoking and intensifying the conflict that led to the split in 1985-86. It is hardly an accident that the political conflict between the Workers League (the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States) and the WRP emerged into the open between 1982 and 1985, the very years during which the Soviet bureaucracy entered into its final crisis as it shifted decisively, with the accession of Gorbachev, toward a policy that would precipitate the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism.

In the immediate aftermath of the split, the three principal leaders of the Workers Revolutionary Party repudiated Trotskyism. The WRP's general secretary, Michael Banda, denounced Trotsky and declared himself a fervent admirer of Stalin. Gerry Healy, who had broken with the British Communist Party in 1937 in response to the Moscow Trials and had been one of the original signers of the Open Letter in 1953, embraced the policies of Gorbachev as the beginning of the Political Revolution in the USSR. As for Cliff Slaughter, his faction rapidly evolved into anti-communist enemies of the October Revolution and supporters of imperialism.

The International Committee, having decisively defeated these renegade factions, upheld and developed the program and principles of the Fourth International. It is a matter of historical record that the ICFI, between the years 1986 and 1991, exposed and denounced the fool's gold of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, and repeatedly warned that it would lead to the dissolution of the USSR and restoration of capitalism.

During these critical years, the ICFI did everything in its power to alert the Soviet workers and sections of the intelligentsia who continued to profess support for socialism and the heritage of the October Revolution. I visited the Soviet Union in 1989 and 1991 and had the opportunity to speak with substantial numbers of workers, students and intellectuals. In these discussions it became clear that the resistance to the reactionary Stalinist policy of capitalist restoration had been undermined by the almost complete absence of knowledge of the history of the October Revolution and its aftermath. More than 60 years of the systematic falsification of Soviet history by the Stalinist regime had created an environment of political disorientation, which was exploited by the supporters of Gorbachev and Yeltsin to advance their claims that the October Revolution was a catastrophic error and that socialism was to be viewed as either a criminal enterprise or a utopian illusion.

The essential falsification upon which these denunciations of the October Revolution and socialism was based was the denial that there had existed any alternative to the policies pursued by the regime in the aftermath of the Revolution. The path from 1917 to 1991 was an inevitable and non-stop drive to catastrophe. Stalinism was not an aberration, a perversion and betrayal of October 1917, but its inevitable and necessary outcome.

The International Committee of the Fourth International recognized that the refutation of this false narrative was a critical task for the revival of Marxism not only in the former USSR, but throughout the world.

Exactly 30 years ago this month, in February 1993, I met the historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin for the first time in Kiev. He had been reading the *Bulletin of the Fourth International*, published by the International Committee, for several years. Finally, Rogovin was able to establish contact with the ICFI, and we arranged to meet in Kiev, where I was to give lectures on the history of the International Committee. During several days of discussion, we agreed on all essential questions of history. Above all, we agreed that the greatest task of the International Committee, upon which the realization of its program depended, was the clarification of the history of the October Revolution and its aftermath. This required,

above all, the refutation of all the lies directed by the bureaucracy since 1923 against Lev Davidovich Trotsky and the Left Opposition. It had to be demonstrated that Trotsky and the Left Opposition had advanced and fought for a program that represented a revolutionary socialist and internationalist alternative to Stalinism.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, historians in Russia and the West had sought to preempt a revival of interest in Trotsky and Trotskyism by not only repeating the old lies of the Stalinist regime, but also by inventing new ones. It would be necessary to refute all the lies, both old and new. And so, in Kiev, Comrade Rogovin agreed that he would devote all his intellectual energies to fighting alongside the International Committee of the Fourth International in a worldwide campaign against the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification.

In the five years that followed, Comrade Vadim, despite the fatal illness that was first diagnosed in 1994 and which claimed his life in September 1998, lectured throughout the world at meetings organized by the International Committee and wrote his epochal seven-volume work on the struggle of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International against Stalinism. He decisively answered the question, "Was there an alternative to Stalinism?"

As you mark the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, it is important that its cadre not only pay tribute to the memory of this great Trotskyist and revolutionary historian, but also recognize that the fight for historical truth remains the most critical task in the building of the Fourth International in Russia and throughout the former USSR.

The contemporary fight against the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification now develops under conditions of a war that is exposing the disastrous consequences of the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism. It must be noted that political contact between the YGBL and the International Committee began in January 2022, on the very eve of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The extensive correspondence between the ICFI and Comrades Ritsky and Roerich began under the shadow of the approaching war and has continued throughout the year of this escalating conflict.

Great events test political tendencies, and the response of the comrades of the YGBL in both Russia and Ukraine—opposing NATO imperialism and Russian national chauvinism—testifies to your commitment to the foundational principles of Trotskyist internationalism. Your intransigent stand against the reckless and desperate policies of the Putin regime has been vindicated by events. Putin's speech of February 21 on the war is a pathetic self-exposure of not only his political miscalculations but also the bankruptcy of the historical perspective of his regime.

Employing the language of a disappointed and rejected lover, Putin now complains that his efforts to woo the imperialists have failed. He has been cruelly betrayed by his "Western partners." They did not share his desire for peace. Putin complained:

The promises of the Western rulers, their assurances of a desire for peace in Donbass turned out, as we now see, into a forgery, a cruel lie. They simply dragged out the clock, engaged in a lot of pussyfooting, turned a blind eye to the political murders, the Kiev regime's repression of the unwanted, the bullying of believers, and increasingly encouraged Ukrainian neo-Nazis to commit terrorist acts in Donbass. The officers of nationalist battalions were trained in Western academies and colleges, and weapons were supplied.

With a patience that rivals even that of Tolstoy's Alexei Karenin, the deceived husband of Anna, Putin gave his beloved Western partners every benefit of the doubt. But he was betrayed.

It turns out that all the time when Donbass was burning, when blood was shed, when Russia sincerely—I want to stress this—sincerely sought a peaceful solution, they were playing on people’s lives, playing, in fact, as they say in well-known circles, with split cards.

This disgusting method of deception has been tried many times before. They behaved in the same unscrupulous, duplicitous way when they destroyed Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria. They will never be able to wash themselves of this shame. The concepts of honor, trust, decency are not for them.

And, in a final lament, Putin announces his shocking discovery:

During the long centuries of colonialism, dictatorship, hegemony, they got used to being allowed everything, got used to not giving a damn about the whole world. It turns out that they treat the people of their own countries with the same disdain and dignity—they have also cynically deceived them with fables about seeking peace, about adherence to UN Security Council resolutions on Donbass. Indeed, Western elites have become a symbol of total unprincipled lies.

The imperialists acted as imperialists. What a shocking surprise! Putin might have spared himself the trauma of this revelation had he studied the writings of Lenin and Trotsky on the subject of imperialism. But, as he made clear in his speech, he draws his inspiration not from the brilliant Marxist leaders of the October Revolution, but from the architect of the Tsarist counterrevolution, Pyotr Stolypin. But the perspective of the ill-fated Tsarist prime minister will prove no more effective in combating the forces of revolution in the 21st century than it was in resisting the approach of revolution more than 100 years earlier.

The work of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists is of the greatest historical significance. In carrying forward the task of building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, you are resolving in theory and practice the historic “Russian question.”

Your comrade,
David North



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