

Socialist Equality Party Summer School: The lessons of history in the fight for socialism today

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7 August 2023

The Socialist Equality Party (United States) held its biennial International Summer School from Sunday, July 30, to Friday, August 4. The school was devoted to a detailed review of the history of the Trotskyist movement, specifically the 33-year period between the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1953 and the split with the national opportunists in the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in 1985-86.

The school was held online, allowing for the participation of members from all the sections and sympathizing groups in the ICFI. All the lectures and discussions were simultaneously translated and captioned into eight different languages using AI-based technologies. Moreover, the SEP leadership considers it ill-advised, to the point of irresponsibility, to hold a large, weeklong in-person meeting in the midst of a pandemic, when there exists a safe and effective online alternative.

A total of 12 lectures were delivered over six days by leading members of the ICFI and supporting groups from 10 countries. These lectures will be published on the *World Socialist Web Site* over the coming weeks, beginning with the introductory lecture published today, “Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Epoch of Imperialist War and Socialist Revolution,” by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman and SEP National Chairman David North.

The opening report recalled the overview of the history of the Trotskyist movement presented at the 2019 summer school. Five distinct phases in the history of the Trotskyist movement had been identified in the 2019 opening report. The first four were: 1) Between the founding of the Left Opposition in 1923 and the founding of the Fourth International in 1938; 2) Between the founding of the Fourth International and the formation of the International Committee in November 1953; 3) Between the formation of the ICFI and the final break with the national opportunists in the WRP in 1986; and 4) The period following the break with the WRP.

The 2019 opening report stated that the fifth stage, now underway, would be characterized by an enormous intensification of the capitalist crisis, escalation of the class struggle and the growth of the political influence of the ICFI.

The lectures at the 2023 school were focused on the third phase in the history of the Trotskyist movement. This was a period of intense conflict within the ICFI, in which the Trotskyists waged a protracted struggle against different forms of Pabloite liquidationism, which denied the revolutionary role of the working class and sought to subordinate the Fourth International to the Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist movements.

The opening report by David North set the tone for the entire week. It began by dedicating the school to the life and memory of Wije Dias, who held the post of general secretary of the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI for 35 years until his death on July 27, 2022. In paying tribute to Comrade Wije, North called attention to the central role he played in the leadership of the Sri Lankan Trotskyist movement for over six decades. “The outstanding characteristics of Wije were limitless and unaffected personal courage and unyielding commitment to political principles,” North said. “This was recognized even by his political opponents, who, when in his presence, could not help but feel somewhat ashamed of their own opportunism.”

North then posed the question: To what extent has the evaluation in 2019 of a new stage in the Trotskyist movement been verified? “Looking back over the past four years,” he stated, “it is an unarguable fact that the 2019 school took place on the very eve of a massive escalation of the economic, political and social crisis of imperialism.” The main elements of this crisis include the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in the initial months of 2020; the attempted fascist coup in the United States on January 6, 2021; the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which was instigated and has been relentlessly escalated by the US-NATO imperialist powers; and a huge upsurge in the struggles of the working class throughout the world.

Calling attention to the extreme recklessness of the Biden administration in the conduct of the war with Russia, North stressed that it must be understood as part of the protracted effort of the American ruling class to offset its deteriorating global economic position with military force. “The preservation of the central role of the United States in global geopolitics,” he

explained, “let alone its striving for hegemony, is entirely bound up with maintaining the US dollar as the indisputable world reserve currency.”

North emphasized not only the scale of the capitalist crisis but the essential role of the ICFI and its publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, in providing a perspective and orientation for the working class. The expansion of the political authority of the ICFI over the past four years can be seen in its central role in exposing the *New York Times*’ 1619 project; the mobilization of opposition to the ruling class’s pandemic policy, including the founding of the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic; the campaign among workers and youth against the US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine and the resurgence of fascism internationally; and the growing support for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), initiated by the ICFI in 2021.

He then summed up the basic political conception motivating the school. “Our work proceeds from the fundamental and historically verified premise that the working class is the basic revolutionary force in society, capable—by virtue of its objective role in the process of production—of overthrowing the capitalist system. Whether or not the working class can achieve the level of political self-consciousness and understanding of its historic tasks is not a matter for idle speculation. What can or cannot be achieved will be determined in practice. It is no doubt true that revolutions have suffered defeats. But it has been shown—above all, in the experience of the 1917 October Revolution—that the working class, given the necessary leadership, can overthrow the ruling class.”

Such a leadership must be based, above all, on an understanding of the immense experiences of the working class in the 20th century, which have been consciously reviewed and fought out in the history of the Trotskyist movement.

Meeting the challenges of a revolutionary period, North said, “requires greater attention to the education of the party membership. The most important element of this education is raising the cadres’ knowledge and understanding of the history of the Trotskyist movement.” He continued,

For the Marxist movement, historical knowledge has always been the foundation of revolutionary practice. The assimilation of historical experience is the basis for a theoretically guided practice, which must transcend a pragmatic approach to politics which generally takes individual experience and personal impressions as the starting point of political activity.

The entire school was animated by this perspective. A continuous theme was the relationship between revolutionary practice and history. In this sense the school was entirely

unique. There is not a single other political tendency that can provide an objective and honest account of its role and political positions over the past decade, let alone the past century. Organizations like Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Left Party in Germany and the Democratic Socialists of America in the United States base their politics on one pragmatic maneuver after the next, with each betrayal invariably followed by a further lurch to the right.

The lectures reviewed a series of critical experiences, including the political basis for Trotsky’s founding of the Fourth International in 1938; the establishment of the ICFI in the fight against Pabloite liquidationism in 1953; the Cuban Revolution and the ICFI’s opposition to Castroism and petty-bourgeois nationalism; the “Great Betrayal” in Sri Lanka when the LSSP joined a bourgeois government in 1964; the complex political issues involved in the split with the OCI in France in 1971; the Marxist critique of Ernest Mandel’s “neo-capitalist” economic theories; the break with Tim Wohlforth in 1974 and the renewal of the struggle against Pabloism in the Workers League, predecessor of the SEP; the origins and development of the Security and the Fourth International investigation into the assassination of Trotsky, initiated in 1975; and the philosophical and political issues involved in the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1985-86.

The collective review of this history was undertaken not from the standpoint of passive contemplation but revolutionary action. All the lectures and discussions during the school were imbued with the understanding that the experiences of the past are the basis for orientating the working class in the present. The history in that sense is an active force in the fight to build a political movement in the working class to take power, abolish inequality, end imperialist war, and reorganize social and economic life on the basis of socialism.

We urge all our readers to carefully study the reports from the SEP International Summer School and make them the basis for your own political education.



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