

SEP 2023 Summer School Lecture

# The Historical and Political Foundations of the Fourth International

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*The following lecture was delivered by Clara Weiss, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and national secretary of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US, and Johannes Stern, editor of the German-language edition of the World Socialist Web Site, to the SEP (US) International Summer School, held between July 30 and August 4, 2023.*

*The opening report to the Summer School by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North, “Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Epoch of Imperialist War and Socialist Revolution,” was published last week. The WSWS will be publishing all the lectures at the school in the coming weeks.*

The task of this lecture is to outline the historical experiences out of which the Trotskyist movement emerged as the sole continuation of Marxism and to introduce the basic political conceptions of Trotskyism which were defended, from 1953 onward, in the struggle against Pabloism by the International Committee.

We often stress that we are a party of history. But it is important to understand what approach to history underlies our work. We do not approach history subjectively. That is, we do not approach history from the standpoint of passing moral judgements on the “good” or “bad” actions or motives of individuals. The task of Marxists is, in Engels’s famous words, to “uncover the motives behind the motives”: to establish the objective social driving forces behind the political thought and actions of tendencies and individuals.

But this objective approach to history does not mean a passive approach. We approach history from the standpoint of revolutionary struggle. We understand the socialist revolution as a law-driven but also as a dynamic process, which is critically shaped by the program, decisions and actions of the revolutionary class and its party.

This approach to history is intrinsically bound up with our conception of the imperialist epoch and the role of revolutionary leadership in the socialist revolution. In the wake of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, three different conceptions of the 20th century were developed. The first, Francis Fukuyama’s now infamous proclamation of the “end of history,” hardly requires detailed refutation. He recently appeared on a platform together with members of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion at Stanford University.

The second was developed by the British Stalinist and historian Eric Hobsbawm. He claimed that there had been a “short twentieth century” because, in his view, the end of the USSR marked the “death” of the Russian Revolution and, thereby, the “end” of the century.<sup>[1]</sup>

The third conception was that developed by the International Committee: “the unfinished twentieth century.” In essence, this conception maintains that all the fundamental historical contradictions of the world capitalist system that gave rise to two world wars and fascism,

but also the October Revolution, remain unresolved.

At stake in the conception of the “unfinished twentieth century” was, first, the Marxist understanding of our epoch as the epoch of imperialist wars and world socialist revolution, and, second, the role and continuity of the Marxist leadership in that revolution. In response to an essay by Hobsbawm that rejected any consideration of the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalinism as “speculative,” David North explained that in the socialist revolution the role of the subjective factor—of parties, programs and the very process of political struggle—cannot be subtracted from the “objective” historical process. In fact, Hobsbawm’s own essay demonstrated that ignoring or downplaying the “subjective” factor can only result in a distortion of the historical record: by dismissing the struggle of the Left Opposition as a “counterfactual” he offered, essentially, an apology for Stalinism.

In dealing with Hobsbawm’s conceptions on a more fundamental theoretical level, North stressed that the October Revolution was not, as Hobsbawm claimed, akin to a natural disaster like an earthquake or a flood which might be predicted by scientists but cannot be qualitatively influenced by the actions of human beings. The socialist revolution developed in a manner that was qualitatively different from that of the bourgeois revolutions. David North explained:

With the advent of Marxism the relation of man to his own history underwent a profound transformation. Man acquired the capacity to consciously interpret his thought and actions in socioeconomic terms, and, thereby, to precisely locate his own activity within a chain of historical causality. ... the analyses, perspectives, strategies and programs of political organizations assumed an altogether unprecedented role in the historical process. History ceased to simply happen. *It was anticipated, prepared for and, to an extent hitherto impossible, consciously directed.*<sup>[2]</sup>

The alignment of the social thought and practice of the revolutionary class with objective reality reached its so far unsurpassed culmination in the October seizure of power by the working class in 1917. The Trotskyist movement historically emerged amidst an ebb of the revolutionary wave that had forced the end of World War I and had given rise to the 1917 Revolution.

In a sense, this was one of the most tragic if not the most tragic period in history. The 30 years that passed between the October Revolution and the end of World War II saw the defeats of immense revolutionary struggles across Asia and Europe, the advent of Nazism in Germany, the Second World War with its 60 million dead, the Holocaust and the annihilation of

generations of Marxists and socialists by Stalinism.

But it was not *only* a period of tragic defeats, reaction and capitalist barbarism. It was also one of a determined and heroic struggle for the preservation and development of the continuity of Marxism and the forging of an international revolutionary cadre that could lead the working class in struggle. Trotsky summed up the most critical lesson of that period in the first sentence of the founding document of the Fourth International, “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Our lecture will be dedicated to a summation of the strategic experiences of the international working class that underlay this assessment and remain foundational to the struggle for socialism today.

Eric Hobsbawm’s claims that the October Revolution was “dead” by 1991 and Stalinism was inevitable rested on two interrelated arguments: first, that the revolution was a largely uncontrollable, automatic process, and second, that it was above all a *national* event and bound to remain isolated. Hobsbawm dismissed the notion out of hand that a revolution in Germany was “in the cards”: “A German October revolution,” he wrote, “was not seriously on and therefore didn’t have to be betrayed.”<sup>[4]</sup>

These claims are false. The October Revolution did not fall from the sky. It had objective and subjective preconditions, and both of these were, fundamentally, of an international character. In terms of its socio-economic basis, the October Revolution arose out of the same contradictions of the world imperialist system that had given rise to the First World War. However, while these objective contradictions explain the emergence of revolutionary struggles in Russia, they do not explain the successful seizure of power by the working class.

The level of political consciousness attained by the working class in Russia in 1917 was the product of a conscious, “protracted historical struggle for Marxism in the European and Russian working class that had spanned the previous 70 years.”<sup>[5]</sup> This struggle reached its theoretical and political high point in the work of Lenin and Trotsky, the two principal leaders of the revolution. It included two key elements: The first was the struggle waged by Lenin’s Bolsheviks for an independent revolutionary party of the working class in a fight against national opportunism.

The second was Trotsky’s development of the conception of permanent revolution. Based on a historical evaluation of the entire preceding development of the social revolution and world economy, Trotsky recognized that, in our epoch, even in an economically backward country like Russia, the working class was the only revolutionary class, capable of leading the revolution and completing the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution. During the 1905 revolution, he wrote

Binding all countries together with its mode of production and its commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism. ... This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character, and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions.<sup>[6]</sup>

However, the contradictions between the dictatorship of the working class in a peasant country could only be resolved through an extension of the revolution on a world scale. The fate of the revolution in Russia was going to be decided primarily on the world arena.

This strategic conception of the dynamics of the socialist revolution was the basis for the October seizure of power in 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet Union in December 1922. Contrary to the Bolsheviks’

expectations, however, the working class in Europe failed to seize power, above all as a result of the betrayals of Social Democracy. Several revolutionary movements—most notably in Germany in 1918-1919, in Hungary in 1919 and in Italy in 1919—were drowned in blood.

The economically devastated Soviet republic unexpectedly found itself isolated in capitalist encirclement. The Soviet government was forced to initiate a significant retreat with the so-called New Economic Policy (1921). This policy, though necessary under the given conditions, contributed to a strengthening of bourgeois forces within Soviet society. To make matters more difficult, Lenin, the most authoritative leader of the party, became seriously ill and bed-ridden in 1922. Although he managed to initiate a struggle against the growing bureaucratic and national tendencies within the party, he would prematurely die in January 1924.

A long nascent struggle in the party leadership between an increasingly emboldened national opportunist wing and the Marxist left wing, led by Trotsky and Lenin, burst into the open in the context of the aborted German revolution of October 1923. Trotsky and the internationalist revolutionary wing of the party now initiated an open struggle, aimed at reorienting the policies of the party. On October 15, 1923, 46 Old Bolsheviks issued a joint declaration, stating their political support for Trotsky’s insistence on the need for inner-party democracy and his calls for greater emphasis on planning and the strengthening of state industry.

The approach Trotsky took to the struggle of the Left Opposition can only be understood based on the conception that he and Lenin had developed of the role of the Marxist leadership in the socialist revolution. In his essay *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, David North explained that the experiences of the collapse of the Second International in 1914 and the seizure of power in 1917 invested

[t]he concept of *cadre training* and of the role of the International ... with a new historical content. ... the Communist International proceeded from the fundamental premise that the socialist revolution could not be left to the inexorable working out of abstractly conceived objective economic forces and social contradictions. The leaders of the revolutionary parties of the Comintern ... had to recognize that their subjective practice was a decisive *objective link* in the chain of historical events leading to the overthrow of capitalism.<sup>[7]</sup>

This basic conception was confirmed, in the negative, by the defeats suffered by the working class between 1917 and 1923. The principal reason for those defeats was the absence of a revolutionary leadership, comparable to that of the Bolsheviks in 1917. In 1924, Trotsky concluded:

It cannot be thought that history mechanically creates the conditions for revolution and presents them thereafter at the party’s request, at any moment, on a plate: here you are, sign the receipt please. That does not happen. A class must, in the course of a prolonged struggle, forge a vanguard which will be able to find its way in a situation, which will recognize revolution when it knocks at the door, which at the necessary moment will be able to grasp the problem of insurrection as a problem of art, to work out a plan, distribute roles and deal a merciless blow at the bourgeoisie.<sup>[8]</sup>

In *Lessons of October*, Trotsky developed this analysis further, based on a review of the political struggle within the Bolshevik Party during the 1917 Revolution. At the time, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and

Joseph Stalin led a faction that opposed the seizure of power, arguing that conditions in Russia were not “mature” enough for socialist revolution. Trotsky emphasized that under conditions of sharp shifts in the political situation, pressures to adapt to bourgeois public opinion and national tendencies were inevitable. A revolutionary party is subject to the pressure of hostile class forces. The challenge of a party leadership is to fight such pressures to ensure that the party keeps step with the historical tasks of its class. Otherwise, Trotsky warned, the party “runs the risk of becoming the indirect tool of other classes.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The party leadership, which was now dominated by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, responded to the publication of *Lessons of October* in October 1924 with an embittered campaign against Trotsky and permanent revolution. In the course of this campaign, the entire history of the Bolshevik Party and the 1917 Revolution was subject to systematic falsification. In December 1924, Stalin elaborated the conception that it was possible to build “socialism in one country” in Russia, without the seizure of power by the working class in Europe. This anti-Marxist and nationalist theory would form the political basis for the Stalinist reaction against the October Revolution.

When posed with the question of why he lost political power in 1923-1924, Trotsky always rejected subjective explanations that reduced matters to a struggle for “power” and the clash of different personalities. Underlying the shift in the political orientation of the Bolshevik leadership and the degeneration of the party were profound shifts in the international balance of class forces which had an immense impact on political and social relations in the Soviet Union.

The delay of the international revolution fostered moods of disillusionment in the numerically and economically weakened Soviet working class. At the same time, these defeats and the resulting international isolation consolidated the position of a rapidly growing bureaucracy whose social interests were increasingly articulated by nationally oriented forces in the party leadership. Trotsky later explained the political and socio-psychological processes underway as follows:

The sentiment of “Not all and always for the revolution, but something for oneself as well,” was translated as “Down with permanent revolution.” The revolt against the exacting theoretical demands of Marxism and the exacting political demands of the revolution gradually assumed, in the eyes of these people, the form of a struggle against “Trotskyism.” Under this banner, the liberation of the philistine in the Bolshevik was proceeding. It was because of this that I lost power, and it was this that determined the form which this loss took.<sup>[10]</sup>

The rise of the Soviet bureaucracy also underlay a profound shift in the orientation of the Comintern in which the Soviet party played the dominant role. In December 1925, the Bolshevik Party officially adopted the nationalist program of building “socialism in one country.” This orientation was explicitly supplemented by the conception that a “period of peaceful co-existence” between the Soviet Union and the capitalist countries had begun. From the standpoint of the bureaucracy, the main function of the Comintern increasingly became not the fight to lead the working class in the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. Rather, the task was, as Stalin put it, to “neutralize” the bourgeoisie and prevent possible military attacks on the USSR.

This national orientation led to catastrophic defeats of the working class. The first major betrayal of Stalinism was the defeat of the British General Strike in May 1926. The Stalinist leadership subordinated a powerful movement by the working class in one of the most important imperialist countries to union bureaucrats and Labor reformists. The second major

betrayal was that of the Chinese revolution of 1925-1927.

If the seizure of power of the working class in 1917 was the positive confirmation of permanent revolution and the struggle for an independent revolutionary party of the working class, the Chinese revolution was a tragic confirmation of them in the negative.

In 1925-1926, China saw the emergence of a gigantic revolutionary movement by workers and peasants. Yet instead of preparing the Chinese working class and its leadership for the seizure of state power with the support of the poor masses of peasants, the Stalinized Comintern adopted a line in which the Chinese Communist Party had to subordinate its entire activities to the interests of the Guomindang, the party of the national bourgeoisie. The CCP was not even allowed to criticize the Guomindang or run an independent press.

This class collaborationist policy was based on a revival of the old Menshevik conception of a revolution in “two stages.” Based on this conception, the working class in economically backward countries has to first help bring the bourgeoisie to power. Only after a prolonged period of capitalist development, could the working class then aspire to seize power itself. In regard to China, Stalin argued that imperialist oppression would form the basis for a “bloc of four classes”: an alliance between the working class, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie. But as Trotsky explained:

It is a gross mistake to think that imperialism mechanically welds together all the classes of China from without. ... The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict.<sup>[11]</sup>

The politics of the Comintern had catastrophic consequences. In April 1927, Guomindang leader Chiang Kai-Shek staged a coup in Shanghai and slaughtered tens of thousands of Chinese workers and communists.

The renewed setback for the international revolution had a profound impact on the Soviet working class, encouraging moods of conservatism and demoralization, while reinforcing the social and political position of the bureaucracy. At the 15th Congress of the Communist Party in December 1927, the Left Opposition was expelled from the party. In the weeks that followed, Trotsky and virtually all other leaders of the opposition were exiled. Throughout 1928, thousands of oppositionists were expelled, arrested and either exiled or imprisoned.

Trotsky’s principal response to these events was a systematic review of the strategic experiences that the working class had just gone through. The resultant document, his Critique of the Draft Program of the 6th Comintern Congress, remains foundational not only to our historical perspective but to the very approach that we take to the political analysis and development of the ICFI and the WSWP.

Central to Trotsky’s refutation of the nationalist revision of Marxism by Stalinism was his insistence on the strategic definition of our epoch as the epoch of imperialist war and socialist revolution. In this epoch, which was characterized by the dominance of the world economy and finance capital as well as by sharp shifts in the objective situation, the role of revolutionary leadership assumed exceptional significance. Therefore, the question of a correct strategic and programmatic orientation of that leadership was decisive. Trotsky summarized the basic internationalist principles that had to underlie the political orientation of the International as follows:

The international program must proceed directly from an

analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole. ... In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.<sup>[12]</sup>

By accident, James P. Cannon, who attended the Comintern Congress in Moscow in the summer of 1928 as a delegate of the American Communist Party, gained access to a copy of this document, studied it and smuggled it out of the USSR. This marked the emergence of the American Trotskyist movement and the beginning of systematic work of the International Left Opposition.

Despite the betrayals of Stalinism and the increasingly violent crackdown on the Left Opposition, Trotsky throughout this period insisted that the opposition had to orient toward a reform of the Soviet party and the Comintern. This course was only changed in response to one of the greatest political catastrophes of the 20th century: the coming to power of Hitler in Germany.

The fatal role played by the KPD [German Communist Party] and the entire Comintern in the “German catastrophe” made it necessary to start building a new, Fourth International. This reorientation was not a subjective reaction to the dramatic events but was based on an objective analysis of the historical development and the role of Stalinism.

It was the KPD’s refusal to fight for a united front policy that would unite the working class under the leadership of the KPD in the struggle for power that led to the German catastrophe.

Of course, Hobsbawm would denounce this as “speculation,” but there is no question that Hitler could have been stopped. With many million socialist and communist workers, Germany had the largest organized workers’ movement in the world, which had proved its willingness to fight more than once and had a rich Marxist history. Workers were prepared to oppose Hitler. In the last reasonably free elections in November 1932, the two major working class parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Communist Party, together won 37.3 percent, far more votes than Hitler’s NSDAP (33.1 percent). And the official elections were only a weak reflection of the real balance of power.

But instead of unifying the working class on the basis of a revolutionary perspective against fascism, the KPD adopted an ultra-leftist line, equating social democracy with fascism, thus dividing and confusing the working class and handing over large sections of the petty bourgeoisie to Hitler’s fascist demagoguery. In the process the KPD not only rejected any collaboration with the SPD against the fascist danger, in some cases, it even made common cause with the Nazis—perhaps most infamously, when it backed the “red referendum” initiated by the NSDAP in 1931 to oust the SPD-led government in the German state of Prussia.

Explaining the political goals and significance of the policy of the united front, Trotsky wrote in May 1933:

No policy of the Communist Party could, of course, have transformed the Social Democracy into a party of the revolution. But neither was that the aim. It was necessary to exploit to the limit the contradiction between reformism and fascism—in order to weaken fascism, at the same time weakening reformism by exposing to the workers the incapacity of the Social Democratic leadership. These two tasks fused naturally into one. The policy of the Comintern bureaucracy led to the opposite result: the capitulation of the reformists served the interests of fascism and not of Communism; the Social Democratic workers remained with

their leaders; the Communist workers lost faith in themselves and in the leadership.<sup>[13]</sup>

The Comintern not only implemented policies that paved Hitler’s way to power, but it also banned any critical discussion of the events. This meant that the Third International was historically finished as a revolutionary organization of the working class. Stalinism, Trotsky stressed, like Social Democracy in 1914, had finally passed into the camp of bourgeois counterrevolution.

The necessary political conclusions had to be drawn. From now on, the perspective of seeking a reform of the communist parties and the Communist International had no validity. As David North notes in *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, the “quantitative accumulation of political betrayals had produced a qualitative transformation of Stalinism itself. It had passed from bureaucratic centrism to conscious counterrevolution.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Trotsky wrote about the “change of orientation” in his important programmatic article “To build communist parties and an International anew”:

The most dangerous thing in politics is to fall captive to one’s own formula that yesterday was appropriate, but is bereft of all content today. ... An organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of the bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it. To say this openly and publicly is our direct duty toward the proletariat and its future. In all our subsequent work it is necessary to take as our point of departure the historical collapse of the official Communist International.<sup>[15]</sup>

At the center of Trotsky’s work was the clarification of the political and historical situation and the tasks arising from it. Only on this basis could the development of the Left Opposition as the new political leadership of the working class be advanced. The development of a cadre is “not merely an organizational problem, it is a political problem: cadres are formed on the basis of a definite perspective,” he explained in “The Collapse of the KPD”:

To again warm up the slogan of party reform means to knowingly set a utopian aim and thereby to push our own cadre toward new and ever sharper disappointments. With such a course the Left Opposition would only become the appendage of a decomposing party and would disappear from the scene together with it.<sup>[16]</sup>

While the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and the Stalinized Comintern were now ever more openly acting as opponents of the revolution, Trotsky’s policy was oriented toward the development of the international class struggle and world socialist revolution. Trotsky was concerned with working out a correct political line to raise the consciousness of the working class and bring it into line with the requirements of the historical situation.

The whole historical experience shows that fascism can be fought only through the independent mobilization of the working class against capitalism. Fascism is not simply a wrong or bad policy but the response of the ruling class to the crisis of the capitalist system. As Trotsky wrote in January 1932 in “What Next?,” “At the moment that the ‘normal’

police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium—the turn of the fascist regime arrives.”<sup>[17]</sup>

In Germany, on March 24, 1933, all bourgeois parties without exception voted for Hitler’s Enabling Act, thus laying the “legal” foundations for the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship. In doing so, the German capitalist class pursued two interrelated goals: first, the crushing of the workers’ movement, and, second, the preparation for another imperialist war after the catastrophe of the First World War.

Trotsky elaborated on this in “What is National Socialism?”:

The compulsory concentration of all forces and resources of the people in the interests of imperialism—the true historic mission of the fascist dictatorship—means preparation for war; and this task, in its turn, brooks no internal resistance and leads to a further mechanical concentration of power. Fascism cannot be reformed or retired from service. It can only be overthrown. The political orbit of the regime leans upon the alternative, war or revolution.<sup>[18]</sup>

In response to the victory of the Nazis in Germany, opposition to capitalism and fascism grew enormously in the working class across Europe. But the revolutionary offensives of the working class in France and Spain also ended in defeat. The reason for these defeats was the Comintern’s policy of the “popular front,” i.e., an alliance of the Stalinized Communist parties not only with Social Democratic parties and trade unions but also with the leading capitalist parties. Ideologically, this alliance was justified by the Stalinists with the argument that it was about defending democracy against fascism. But, essentially, it amounted to the defense of capitalist interests against the revolutionary aspirations of the workers.

Trotsky fought against the position that in the struggle against fascism the working class must support the supposedly democratic wing of the bourgeoisie—or, as today’s pseudo-leftists would say, the “lesser evil.” He did so from the standpoint of clarifying the central political questions and tasks confronting the working class.

Trotsky wrote in “The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning”:

Fascism ... is not feudal but bourgeois reaction. A successful fight against bourgeois reaction can be waged only with the forces and methods of the proletariat revolution. Menshevism, itself a branch of bourgeois thought, does not have and cannot have any inkling of these facts.

The Bolshevik point of view, clearly expressed only by the young section of the Fourth International, takes the theory of permanent revolution as its starting point, namely, that even purely democratic problems, like the liquidation of semi-feudal land ownership, cannot be solved without the conquest of power by the proletariat; but this in turn places the socialist revolution on the agenda.<sup>[19]</sup>

Trotsky developed the necessary revolutionary perspective and leadership for the working class in a constant polemic against centrist political tendencies, which sought to find a middle way between the Stalinist parties and the Trotskyist movement, i.e., between reformist and revolutionary politics.

In his article “Centrism and the Fourth International,” Trotsky explained the most important features of centrism as a political tendency: “Theoretically, centrism is amorphous and eclectic; so far as possible it

evades theoretical obligations and inclines (in words) to give preference to ‘revolutionary practice’ over theory, without understanding that only Marxian theory can impart revolutionary direction to practice.” A centrist “views with hatred the revolutionary principle: State that which is,” and inclines to “substitute for a principled policy personal maneuvering and petty organizational diplomacy.” His “shilly-shallying the centrist frequently covers up by reference to the danger of ‘sectarianism,’ by which he understands not abstract-propagandist passivity ... but an active concern for purity of principles, clarity of position, political consistency, organizational completeness.” And he does not understand “that in the present epoch a national revolutionary party can be built only as part of an international party.”<sup>[20]</sup>

The socialists and Stalinists could not have strangled the revolutionary offensive of the Spanish working class without the help of the anarcho-sindicalists and the centrist POUM. They formed the left wing of the Popular Front and joined the government at the crucial moment, preparing the way for counterrevolution. In 1937, Trotsky concluded in his article, “The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning”: “Contrary to its own intentions, the POUM proved to be, in the final analysis, the chief obstacle on the road to the creation of a revolutionary party.” He summed up the lessons of the POUM’s role as follows:

It is necessary to think out the problem of the revolution to the end, to its ultimate concrete conclusions. It is necessary to adjust policy to the basic laws of the revolution, i.e., to the movement of the embattled classes and not the prejudices or fears of the superficial petty-bourgeois groups who call themselves “Popular” Fronts and every other kind of front. During revolution the line of least resistance is the line of greatest disaster. To fear “isolation” from the bourgeoisie is to incur isolation from the masses. Adaptation to the conservative prejudices of the labor aristocracy is betrayal of the workers and the revolution. An excess “caution” is the most baneful lack of caution. This is the chief lesson of the destruction of the most honest political organization in Spain, namely, the centrist POUM. The parties and groups of the London Bureau obviously either do not wish to draw the necessary conclusions from the last warning of history or are unable to do so. By this token they doom themselves.<sup>[21]</sup>

The lessons from the experience with Popular Front politics in France were also central to the development of the Fourth International. Writings such as *Whither France* are essential foundations of our movement. They illuminate, above all, the crucial importance of the subjective factor in an objectively developing revolutionary situation. Trotsky polemicized sharply against the attitude of the Stalinists, who replaced “the theory of revolutionary action with a religion of fatalism” and justified their orientation toward the bourgeoisie by claiming that the situation was “not revolutionary.” Trotsky wrote:

The diagnosis of the Comintern is entirely false. The situation is revolutionary, as revolutionary as it can be, *granted the non-revolutionary policies of the working-class parties*. More exactly, the situation is pre-revolutionary. In order to bring the situation to its full maturity, there must be an immediate, vigorous, unremitting mobilization of the masses, under the slogan of the conquest of power in the name of socialism. This is the only way through which the pre-revolutionary situation will be changed into a revolutionary situation. On the other hand, if we continue to mark time, the pre-revolutionary situation will inevitably be

changed into one of counter-revolution, and will bring on the victory of Fascism.<sup>[22]</sup>

Trotsky stressed the crucial role of political preparation in the development of the revolution, explaining what it consists of:

It is in the revolutionary cohesion of the masses, in their liberation from servile hopes in the clemency, generosity and loyalty of “democratic slave-owners,” in the education of revolutionary cadres who know how to defy official public opinion and who know how to display towards the bourgeoisie one-tenth the implacability which the bourgeoisie displays towards the toilers.<sup>[23]</sup>

To the Stalinists’ claim that the “final crisis of the capitalist system” has not yet begun, Trotsky replied:

The revolutionary worker must, before all else, understand that Marxism, the only scientific theory of the proletarian revolution, has nothing in common with the fatalistic hope for the “final” crisis. Marxism is, in its very essence, a set of directives for revolutionary action. Marxism does not overlook will and courage, but rather aids them to find the right road.<sup>[24]</sup>

He continued:

There is no crisis which can be, by itself, fatal to capitalism. The oscillations of the business cycle only create a situation in which it will be easier, or more difficult, for the proletariat to overthrow capitalism. The transition from a bourgeois society to a socialist society presupposes the activity of living men who are the makers of their own history. They do not make history by accident, or according to their caprice, but under the influence of objectively determined causes. However, their own actions—their initiative, audacity, devotion, and likewise their stupidity and cowardice—are necessary links in the chain of historical development.<sup>[25]</sup>

These questions are of burning actuality today. Under conditions in which revolutionary struggles of the working class are beginning to emerge, today’s pseudo-left organizations once again insist that the situation is “not revolutionary” and that the workers therefore do not need a revolutionary socialist perspective and leadership but must rather confine their actions to the existing framework of bourgeois capitalist politics.

Unlike the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties in the 1930s, they do not have a mass base in the working class and cannot be called workers’ organizations in any sense. However, the essential class content and political orientation of these Popular Front politics is the same. While the ruling class as a whole is increasingly turning to fascism and dictatorship, pseudo-left organizations declare that the working class must support the allegedly more “democratic” representatives of the bourgeoisie. They are thus themselves part of the right-wing, counterrevolutionary conspiracy against the working class.

Only the ICFI is basing its policies on the lessons of the 1930s. Today, as then, the struggle against fascism and war requires the independent

political mobilization of the working class, which must be united internationally on the basis of its common class interests, against capitalism and its political defenders and for socialism. The question of political leadership is decisive and can only be resolved on a clear political reckoning with the counterrevolutionary experiences of the 1930s and especially the nature of Stalinism.

While the bureaucracy was strangling revolutionary struggles of the working class in Europe, it embarked on a campaign of mass murder of revolutionaries within and outside the borders of the USSR. On August 19, 1936, the first of three show trials began in Moscow. In these trials, the most prominent leaders of the October Revolution, many of whom had been oppositionists, were accused of “counterrevolutionary activities.” Forced to give false confessions, they were dragged through the mud in public, before being executed. The main defendants were Leon Trotsky and his son and close collaborator Lev Sedov. Trotsky responded to the trials by initiating the independent Dewey Commission. This is how Trotsky spoke about the Trials in January 1937 in a brief speech in which he announced the creation of this Commission.

The Dewey Commission found him and all the other defendants of the trials “not guilty.”

When we speak of the terror, we use the term “political genocide.” This is not simply an attempt to express moral outrage. The term has a very specific political and historical meaning. What occurred in the second half of the 1930s and through the early 1940s was a systematic, targeted attempt to physically destroy the bearers of the Marxist and socialist culture which had formed the basis of the development of the international workers’ movement for an entire historical period. As Trotsky explained, with this act of mass murder:

The ruling stratum is ejecting from its midst all those who remind it of its revolutionary past, the principles of socialism, liberty, equality, fraternity and the unsolved tasks of the world revolution. The bestiality of the repressions testifies to the hatred which the privileged caste bears to the revolutionists.<sup>[26]</sup>

This campaign of mass murder of Soviet revolutionaries was complemented by the physical annihilation of large portions of the Communist International, including most of the membership of the Polish Communist Party. Internationally, it was complemented by assassinations of revolutionaries in Spain.

It would be incorrect to state that the terror, which resulted in the murder of at least 1 million people and the arrest and imprisonment of many more, *only* affected socialists and Trotskyists. But it is a documented, historical fact that committed revolutionary workers and intellectuals and, above all, Trotskyists were its principal targets. The thousands of revolutionaries who had signed documents of the Opposition in the 1920s were systematically tracked down, arrested and executed. Among them were hundreds of Trotskyists whose names and works are largely unknown to this day but who never capitulated to Stalinism and continued the struggle for socialism until the very days of their execution. In many cases, their families, including their underage children, were arrested and murdered as well.

For instance, on this image, you can see on the bottom left, the cover for one of these shooting lists. It was signed by several members of the Politburo, including Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich and Voroshilov.

This image shows one page from such a shooting list. This one had several leading Bolsheviks and former Oppositionists on it, including Mikhail Boguslavsky.

This list is an overview of the total number of individuals who were sentenced to death or prison based on such shooting lists between

September 7, 1937 and May 3, 1938. It shows that, for instance, on January 3, 1938, 2,771 people in total were “sentenced” in this manner. Of these, 2,548 were ordered to be shot, and 223 were ordered to be imprisoned.

There was a very targeted persecution of both active and former Left Oppositionists. The secret service compiled detailed lists of signatories of platforms of the Opposition in the 1920s, indicating their names, birthdays, the places of occupation and the years that they joined the party. To name but one of the most outstanding but little known figures that were murdered: Boris Eltsin was the general secretary of the Opposition in 1928-1929 and one of the most outstanding figures in the history of the Russian workers’ movement. He joined the movement in 1897, so even before the Russian Social Democratic Party was founded (in 1898).

He participated in all three Russian revolutions, and not only he but also all three of his children became fighters of the Opposition. The way he was murdered is representative for those who never capitulated. After his arrest, he led a hunger strike at a camp, even though he was by then in his 60s and in very ill health, and he and other strike leaders were executed in November 1937. His son, Viktor Eltsin, was a former secretary of Trotsky and also a leading oppositionist. He was murdered just four months later, along with a hundred other Trotskyists, also after leading a hunger strike in another camp, in Vorkuta. I want to stress that these hunger strikes were not a sign of despair but an act of defiance: It was the only means left to the Trotskyists in the Soviet Union to show that they remained unyielding opponents of Stalinism and fighters for the cause of the working class.

This image gives a sense of the scale of the terror and the degree to which it has not been really worked through in the former Soviet Union. This is the most prominent shooting site of the terror, outside of Moscow. A large portion of the Soviet government and Bolshevik leadership were executed and buried here. The excavation work was only begun well after 1991 and only completed in 2021, just before the war began. There are many more such shooting sites, including many where there are no memorials, and where there have been no excavation works—85 years after the height of the terror.

The mass murder of Trotskyists was international in scope. Several of the most important leaders of the Trotskyist movement in Europe, among them Erwin Wolf, Rudolf Klement and Trotsky’s son, Lev Sedov, were murdered. This campaign of mass murder culminated with the political crime of the century: the August 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico by a Stalinist agent.

The aftereffects of this political genocide were felt throughout the 20th century and, indeed, are felt to this day. In 1937, at the height of the terror, Leon Trotsky summarized the devastating impact of Stalinism on the consciousness of the working class. He wrote, “No one, not excluding Hitler, has dealt socialism such deadly blows as Stalin.” Trotsky predicted:

[H]istory will not pardon a single drop of blood shed in sacrifice to the new Moloch of self-will and privilege. ... Revolution will unlock all the secret compartments, review all the trials, rehabilitate the slandered, raise memorials to the victims of wantonness and cover with eternal infamy the names of the executioners. Stalin will depart from the scene laden with all the crimes which he has committed—not only as the grave-digger of the revolution but as the most sinister figure in the history of mankind.<sup>[27]</sup>

The brutality and historical magnitude of the crimes of Stalinism notwithstanding, Trotsky never took a subjective approach to the role of

Joseph Stalin as an individual or the Soviet bureaucracy more broadly. The monstrous role of Stalin could only be understood based on the social forces whose interests he represented.

Just two weeks before the beginning of the first Moscow Trial, Trotsky had finished the manuscript of his *The Revolution Betrayed*. This work proved to be foundational to the historical and programmatic orientation of the Fourth International. In contrast to the impressionistic responses to the rise of Stalinism by demoralized middle class radicals, Trotsky subjected the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union to a scientific, historical materialist analysis.

The conditions of international isolation and economic backwardness confronting the workers’ state after 1917 had given rise to a bureaucracy which had usurped political power from the proletariat and enjoyed vast social privileges. Sociologically, the position of this bureaucracy was that of a privileged caste, not that of a social class. In contrast to the socio-economic position of the bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy’s privileges were not rooted in the ownership of the means of production. Rather, they were based on the bureaucracy’s political usurpation of power from the working class in the state, which, as a result of the October Revolution, was in control of the means of production.

Rejecting the simplistic and ahistorical use of categories like “socialism” and “capitalism,” Trotsky explained that the Soviet Union was a “transitional society” whose fate had not yet been determined by history. He wrote:

The October Revolution has been betrayed by the ruling stratum, but not yet overthrown. It has a great power of resistance, coinciding with the established property relations, with the living force of the proletariat, the consciousness of its best elements, the impasse of world capitalism, and the inevitability of world revolution.<sup>[28]</sup>

The Soviet Union remained a workers’ state, albeit one that was undergoing a serious bureaucratic degeneration. Within that workers’ state and the workers’ movement more broadly, the Stalinist bureaucracy functioned as a counterrevolutionary agency of imperialism. Under these conditions, the only way for the working class to defend the conquests of the October Revolution, Trotsky concluded, was to overthrow the bureaucracy in a political revolution as part of a fight to extend the revolution internationally. Absent such a political revolution, he warned, a “backslide to capitalism is wholly possible.”

Indeed, half a century before the Soviet bureaucracy would move to restore capitalism in 1985, Trotsky recognized that the transformation of the bureaucracy into a new property-owning class and its destruction of the Soviet state was *one* of the possible paths of development. However, capitalist restoration was not a foregone conclusion. “In the last analysis,” Trotsky wrote, “the question will be decided by a struggle of living social forces, both on the national and the world arena.”

This scientifically grounded position has historically distinguished the ICFI from all petty-bourgeois tendencies claiming to be “socialist” or even “Trotskyist.” Both the Pabloites and the state capitalists, in different ways, ascribed to the Soviet bureaucracy a role that it did not possess. The state capitalists proclaimed that the bureaucracy was a new ruling class. The Pabloites, for their part, would ascribe to the bureaucracy a revolutionary role, claiming that it could be pressured to “realize” socialism in the USSR by means of “self-reform.”

Despite arriving at seemingly opposite conclusions, both of these positions were ultimately rooted in the social interests of petty-bourgeois layers who rejected the perspective of the October Revolution and wrote off the working class as a revolutionary force. They were also bound up

with a downplaying or outright denial of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and a cover-up of its worst crimes.

The role of the Pabloites as historical accomplices of Stalinism and imperialism was demonstrated irrefutably in their violent opposition to the investigation carried out by the International Committee into the assassination of Leon Trotsky. And leaders of the present-day adherents of state capitalism in the US, the Democratic Socialists of America, openly celebrate the Stalinist assassination of Trotsky.

Throughout the entire history of the Fourth International, the struggle against national opportunism and revisionism has centrally involved an exposure of the crimes of Stalinism and a defense of Trotsky's scientific analysis of the Stalinist betrayal of October. On the basis of this analysis, the ICFI was able to anticipate and develop a struggle against the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1985-1991. In contrast to a myriad of petty bourgeois ex-left forces, the response of the Trotskyist movement to the eventual collapse of Stalinism and destruction of the workers' state was not a renunciation of the perspective of socialism.

On the contrary. The ICFI responded to 1991 by developing, in collaboration with the Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin, a concerted campaign to uncover and defend the historical truth about the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalinism and the entire history of the Trotskyist movement. The initiation of this campaign was a strategic decision: We recognized that the fight for historical truth would have to be the foundation for the revival of Marxist consciousness and a socialist culture in the working class and the training of new generations of revolutionaries. The works produced by the ICFI as a result of this orientation include multiple volumes as well as hundreds, if not thousands, of articles on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The work that has been and is still being conducted by the ICFI in this regard underscores, above all, the extraordinary prescience and historical import of Trotsky's fight for the Fourth International. As David North noted in his August 1987 speech, "Trotskyism versus Stalinism," in founding the Fourth International amidst the campaign of mass murder by the Stalinist bureaucracy, Trotsky "succeeded in ensuring the historical continuity of Marxism, of bequeathing to future generations of the working class a world party which embodied the great theoretical heritage and vast practical experience of the international workers' movement."<sup>[29]</sup>

In *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, David North states that the founding of the Fourth International in September 1938 "represented the culmination of Leon Trotsky's life as a Marxist and proletarian revolutionist."<sup>[30]</sup>

This was also Trotsky's own assessment. On March 25, 1935 he noted in his diary:

The collapse of the two Internationals has posed a problem which none of the leaders of these Internationals is at all equipped to solve. The vicissitudes of my personal fate have confronted me with this problem and armed me with important experience in dealing with it. There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third International.<sup>[31]</sup>

Perhaps the most critical element of the "revolutionary method" is that Marxism must be brought to the working class and that revolutionary leadership is not the product of an unconscious, spontaneous process. The first sentence of the program adopted at the founding conference of the Fourth International in Paris in 1938, entitled *The Death Agony of*

*Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, sums up this question in all its meaning and depth: "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat."<sup>[32]</sup>

David North comments on this in *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century*:

With these words Trotsky summed up not only the situation as it existed in 1938, but also the central political problem of modern history. The objective prerequisites—i.e., the international development of the productive forces, the existence of the revolutionary class—for the replacement of capitalism by socialism were present. But revolution was not merely the automatic outcome of objective economic conditions. It required the politically conscious intervention of the working class in the historical process, based on a socialist program and armed with a clearly elaborated strategic plan. The revolutionary politics of the working class could not be less conscious than the counterrevolutionary politics of the capitalist class it sought to overthrow. Herein lay the historic significance of the revolutionary party.<sup>[33]</sup>

The founding of the Fourth International was based on scientific and principled considerations. It was rooted in and gave expression to a historical necessity. In the opening section of the Transitional Program, Trotsky states that the objective prerequisites for a socialist revolution "have already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism."

Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the state and undermines the unstable monetary systems. Democratic regimes, as well as fascist, stagger on from one bankruptcy to another. ... The bourgeoisie, of course, is aware of the mortal danger to its domination represented by a new war. But that class is now immeasurably less capable of averting war than on the eve of 1914.<sup>[34]</sup>

All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet "ripened" for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only "ripened;" they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.<sup>[35]</sup>

With this, Trotsky also polemicised against centrist tendencies which, using all kinds of subjective arguments, rejected the founding of the Fourth International. While the centrists professed to agree with Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism and his political perspective, they considered the founding of the Fourth International either premature or futile, or both. One of their main arguments was that the Trotskyist movement was too small and too isolated to "proclaim" a new International. A new party could only emerge from "great events."



Trotsky replied:

The Fourth International has already arisen out of great events: the greatest defeats of the proletariat in history. The cause of these defeats is to be found in the degeneration and perfidy of the old leadership. The class struggle does not tolerate an interruption. The Third International, following the Second, is dead for purposes of revolution. Long live the Fourth International!

But has the time yet arrived to proclaim its creation?... the skeptics are not quieted down. The Fourth International, we answer, has no need of being “proclaimed.” It exists and it fights. It is weak? Yes, its ranks are not numerous because it is still young. They are as yet chiefly cadres. But these cadres are pledges for the future. Outside of these cadres there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name. If our International be still weak in numbers, it is strong in doctrine, program, tradition, in the incomparable tempering of its cadres. Who does not perceive this today, let him in the meantime stand aside. Tomorrow it will become more evident.<sup>[36]</sup>

As the Socialist Equality Party (US) states in its historical foundations document, the history of the 20th century “would prove the correctness of the assessment of the Fourth International as the only genuinely revolutionary leadership.”<sup>[37]</sup> The decisive task of our epoch is to overcome the gap between the maturity of the objective situation and the political maturity of the working class and its vanguard.

In order to achieve this strategic goal, the Transitional Program developed a number of economic and political demands: a sliding scale of wages, the nationalization of industry, the banks and agriculture, the arming of the proletariat, the formation of a workers’ and peasants’ government. These transitional demands were meant to build a bridge between the consciousness of the working class and the ultimate revolutionary task they confronted—the conquest of power by the proletariat.

The demands had one central goal: the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class. They were not meant at all as a justification for opportunist maneuvers or the adaptation to the existing consciousness of workers. “The program must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers,” Trotsky stressed. “It must reflect society as it is and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to overcome and vanquish the backwardness.”<sup>[38]</sup>

It is a historical fact that only the Trotskyist movement understood the character of the Second World War and fought to arm the working class with a clear understanding of the situation and the necessary program to counterpose to the war map of the bourgeoisie the map of the class struggle for the proletarian world revolution. This was not a question of advancing a few radical slogans. Rather, it required the constant defense of Marxism and, on this basis, the development of a revolutionary leadership and cadre.

In his essay “Trotsky’s Last Year,” David North provides a powerful overview of the intense work of Trotsky and the Fourth International in the immediate aftermath of its founding. Particularly significant was Trotsky’s famous “last struggle” against the minority faction in the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) led by James Burnham, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern. They reacted to the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 1939 by revoking the designation of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state.

This was not simply a semantic question of what words should be used to characterize the Soviet state. As David North writes, the dispute

“anticipated many of the most difficult questions of revolutionary strategy, program and perspective that were to arise during and in the aftermath of World War II.”<sup>[39]</sup> At stake were the most fundamental questions of perspective and method: the assessment of the epoch as an epoch of socialist revolution, the role of the working class as a revolutionary force capable of building a socialist society, the character of the October Revolution and that of the Soviet bureaucracy, as well as the Marxist method. Was the bureaucracy a parasitic caste whose dominant and reactionary role was a result of the backwardness and isolation of the Soviet Union and the international defeats of the working class, or was it a new exploiting class whose emergence Marxism had not foreseen?

The positions of Burnham, Shachtman and Abern essentially repudiated the October Revolution and the entire socialist project. They reflected and anticipated a sharp shift to the right of a whole layer of middle class professors and intellectuals whose principal conclusion from the defeats of the working class was that the working class and Marxism had failed—not that the leadership had betrayed.

In his very last article, *The Class, the Party and the Leadership*, Trotsky dealt precisely with this issue and characterized those who sought to unload the defeat of the Spanish Revolution on the working masses.

This impotent philosophy, which seeks to reconcile defeats as a necessary link in the chain of cosmic developments, is completely incapable of posing and refuses to pose the question of such concrete factors as programs, parties, personalities that were the organizers of defeat. This philosophy of fatalism and prostration is diametrically opposed to Marxism as the theory of revolutionary action.<sup>[40]</sup>

Under conditions of war and the betrayals of Stalinism, these “impotent philosophers” shifted sharply to the right and became a new and unabashed basis of support for capitalism and imperialism. In the case of Burnham and Shachtman this evolution was particularly stark. While the former became an advocate of preemptive nuclear war against the USSR and a principal neo-conservative ideologist, the latter became a political adviser to the anticommunist AFL-CIO bureaucracy and supported criminal imperialist operations and wars, such as the CIA-orchestrated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and the US bombing of North Vietnam.

In his essay, North notes that—to the surprise of Burnham and Shachtman—Trotsky introduced the question of dialectical logic into the discussion. Burnham, a professor of philosophy at New York University, rejected the dialectical method outright. Shachtman declared that he did not care about philosophical issues and was not particularly interested in considering the relation of dialectical materialism to revolutionary politics. But Trotsky insisted on the significance of the dialectic as a method to analyze and understand objective reality, for the purpose of revolutionary action. North further elaborates on this significant point:

The development of a scientific perspective, necessary for the political orientation of the working class, required a level of analysis of a complex, contradictory, and, therefore, rapidly changing socio-economic and political situation that could not be acquired on the basis of formal logic, diluted with pragmatic impressionism. The absence of scientific method, for all his pretensions to philosophical expertise, found crude expression in the manner in which Burnham’s analysis of Soviet society and policies was devoid of historical content and based largely on impressionistic descriptions of phenomena visible on the surface of society. Burnham’s pragmatic commonsense approach to

complex socio-economic and political processes was theoretically worthless. He contrasted the existing Soviet Union to what he thought, in ideal terms, a genuine workers state should be. He did not seek to explain the historical process and conflict of social and political forces, on a national and international scale, which underlay the degeneration.<sup>[41]</sup>

On the basis of the defense of this historical, philosophical and political method, i.e., Marxism, Trotsky and the Fourth International were able to analyze the character of the Second World War and develop the perspective of world socialist revolution.

The *Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War* adopted by the Emergency Conference of the Fourth International, held on May 19-26, 1940, explained the imperialist character of the Second World War, stating, "It derived its origin inexorably from the contradictions of international capitalist interests. Contrary to the official fables designed to drug the people, the chief cause of war as of all other social evils—unemployment, the high cost of living, fascism, colonial oppression—is the private ownership of the means of production together with the bourgeois state which rests on this foundation."

However, so long as the main productive forces of society were held by isolated capitalist cliques, "and so long as the national state remains a pliant tool in the hands of these cliques, the struggle for markets, for sources of raw materials, for domination of the world, must inevitably assume a more and more destructive character. State power and domination of the economy can be torn from the hands of these rapacious imperialist cliques only by the revolutionary working class."<sup>[42]</sup>

David North explains in his essay that Trotsky was seeking to orient the Fourth International on a longer-term perspective and prepare the cadre for a whole new stage in the crisis of the capitalist system and world revolution. "The capitalist world has no way out, unless a prolonged death agony is so considered. It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars, and new uprisings," the *Manifesto of the Fourth International* emphasized.

In a section titled, "The problem of leadership," the statement stressed:

A young revolutionary party must base itself on this perspective. History will provide it with enough opportunities and possibilities to test itself, to accumulate experience, and to mature. The swifter the ranks of the vanguard are fused the more the epoch of bloody convulsions will be shortened, the less destruction will our planet suffer. But the great historical problem will not be solved in any case until a revolutionary party stands at the head of the proletariat. The question of tempos and time intervals is of enormous importance; but it alters neither the general historical perspective nor the direction of our policy. The conclusion is a simple one: It is necessary to carry on the work of educating and organizing the proletarian vanguard with tenfold energy. Precisely in this lies the task of the Fourth International.<sup>[43]</sup>

The whole record of the ICFI which we will review at this school is proof that the Trotskyist movement lived up to this task. Now, under conditions of a rapidly developing new period of war and revolution, which we defined as the fifth phase in the history of the Trotskyist movement, this work of "educating and organizing the proletarian vanguard" has to be intensified once again. As Comrade North stated in his "Introductory Remarks to an SEP Aggregate Meeting in June 2023":

We are determined that in the developing period of mass working class struggles our party will be able to provide a revolutionary response and revolutionary program to the working class. But for that to take place, our cadre must be familiar with the historical experiences, the struggle over fundamental questions of perspective and program. In other words, the cadre must understand what separates our movement from every other political tendency, why our movement alone, no other movement, represents the historical continuity of the struggle for Marxism. That continuity is, I think, exemplified in the title of the latest book to come out, *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century*. Our particular conception of Trotskyism is that all of historical experience has established that the future development of socialism as a mass revolutionary movement will be based upon the political legacy of Leon Trotsky, as that legacy has been developed through the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International over the last 60 years. ... All the historical experience of the Marxist movement demonstrates that that is the indispensable basis for genuine revolutionary work.<sup>[44]</sup>

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- [44] David North, "Introductory Remarks to the Friday Night Aggregate Meeting on June 23, 2023." Socialist Equality Party Internal Bulletin: June 2023.



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