

# The Cuban Revolution and the SLL's opposition to the unprincipled Pabloite reunification of 1963

**Tomas Castanheira**  
25 August 2023

*The following lecture was delivered by Tomas Castanheira, a leading member of the Brazilian Socialist Equality Group (GSI), to the SEP (US) International Summer School, held between July 30 and August 4, 2023.*

*The opening report by WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman and SEP National Chairman David North, "Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Epoch of Imperialist War and Socialist Revolution," was published on August 7. The second lecture, "The Historical and Political Foundations of the Fourth International," was published on August 14. The third lecture, "The Origins of Pabloite Revisionism, the Split Within the Fourth International and the Founding of the International Committee," was published on August 18. The WSWs will be publishing all of the lectures in the coming weeks.*

## Introduction

Comrades, last June marked 60 years since the infamous congress of reunification between the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), alongside its supporters in Latin America and Asia, and the Pabloite International Secretariat.

The body established through that fusion, the United Secretariat, represented an international alliance of the petty bourgeoisie dedicated to overthrowing the program of the Fourth International, a program based on the exclusive and non-transferable role of the international working class in the abolition of capitalism.

The resolution of that Congress of Renegades proclaimed that a "new epoch in the history of the world revolution" began with the rise to power of a petty-bourgeois nationalist movement in Cuba led by Fidel Castro. It assigned to Trotskyism the servile role of helping to "strengthen and enrich the international current of Castroism," both in the colonial countries and the metropolitan centers of capitalism.<sup>[1]</sup>

This attempt to dissolve once and for all the Fourth International was frustrated by the principled stand taken by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) under the leadership of Gerry Healy and the Socialist Labour League (SLL), supported by the French section, the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI).

The struggle waged by the SLL between 1961 and 1963 secured the preservation of Trotskyism as a distinct international and historic political current. It is one of the great moments in the history of the Marxist movement.

## The crisis of Stalinism after the 1953 split

After 1953, major developments in the international class struggle confirmed the critical character of the political differences that emerged in the struggle against Pabloism. In particular, mass struggles erupted in the USSR and the Eastern European countries against the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Those struggles culminated in the Hungarian Revolution, which was brutally suppressed by the Soviet government in November 1956. That development powerfully vindicated the Trotskyist program of political revolution, defended by the ICFI against the revisions of Pabloism.

Taking up the critical lessons from that experience, the British Trotskyists concluded that while "the spontaneous development of the political revolution can carry it to a high level... the first examples of the political revolution in real life have also underlined the absolute necessity of a conscious leadership."<sup>[2]</sup>

The massacre in Budapest proved that the illusions fostered by the Pabloites in left-wing shifts by the bureaucracy under the pressure of the masses could only disarm the working class and prepare new bloody defeats. But the Pabloite International Secretariat reached the opposite conclusions.

The growing crisis of Stalinism under the offensive of the working class had come to the fore earlier in 1956, with the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The "Secret Speech" given by Nikita Khrushchev recognized that Stalin was a criminal, as the desperate bureaucracy sought to transfer the massive opposition it faced to a single individual.

The Pabloites saw in those developments the realization of their prophecies about a peaceful self-reform of the bureaucracy and the growth of tendencies within it that represented the interests of the working class.

The essential significance of the 1956 crisis, as David North wrote, "was that it heralded a profound change in the world relation of forces between the Fourth International and the degenerate Stalinist bureaucracy." He continued:

*As Labour Review had declared in January 1957, the "Great Ice Age" had come to an end. Objective conditions that favored the resolution of the historic crisis of leadership of the working class were now emerging.<sup>[3]</sup>*

## Emerging differences within the ICFI

In the responses to that major change in the political situation, it became clear that critical differences were emerging within the ICFI itself.

The British section of the ICFI, under the leadership of Healy, began a major political offensive among the working class, the youth and intellectuals to clarify the history and nature of the Trotskyist struggle against Stalinism that was being vindicated.

As North wrote:

The power of the British Trotskyists' intervention in the crisis of Stalinism was derived from the clarification which had been achieved through the struggle against Pabloite revisionism. Precisely because the British section had rejected conciliation with and capitulation to Stalinism, Healy was able to achieve important breakthroughs within the Stalinist ranks...<sup>[4]</sup>

As a result of this campaign, the British Trotskyists reached a new and higher relationship with the working class and emerged as a powerful political tendency in Britain. These conquests took form in the foundation of the Socialist Labour League in 1959.

A completely different attitude was taken by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the United States. While the SWP's analysis of the Hungarian Revolution and the Khrushchev speech had a principled character, stemming from its recent international struggle against Pabloism, that line came into direct conflict with the increasingly opportunistic policies it had developed since 1953.

North wrote:

The protracted economic boom, the quiescence of the labor movement, the stranglehold of the bureaucracy over the unions, and the lingering effects of the anticommunist hysteria [in the United States] had built up enormous pressures on the cadre of the SWP.<sup>[5]</sup>

In contrast with the British Trotskyists, the practical response of the SWP to the crisis of Stalinism was the adoption of a "regroupment" policy, oriented to dissolving the party into the poisonous milieu of American middle class radicalism. Instead of reaffirming the political principles separating the Trotskyist movement from bankrupt Stalinism, the SWP sought to attenuate those differences to accommodate the repentant elements of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

### **1957: The SWP's march toward reunification**

The essential significance of the proposals that emerged at that moment for a "reunification" between the International Committee and the International Secretariat was synthesized by North:

In the aftermath of 1956, the efforts of the Pabloites were directed, to use a military analogy, toward reinforcing the beleaguered forces of the weakened bureaucracies against the danger of an offensive by the revitalized forces of Trotskyism. The Pabloites responded to the crisis of 1956 by seeking, under the guise of reunification (i.e., ending the split of 1953), to split the International Committee.<sup>[6]</sup>

The initial positions adopted by the SWP in relation to Hungary and the USSR could not in any way justify a reunification with the Pabloites. But its orientation towards that policy "was the organic expression of its capitulation to the pressures of hostile class forces within the United States."<sup>[7]</sup>

In March 1957, without consulting its comrades from the ICFI, SWP National Chairman James Cannon wrote a letter to the Sri Lankan centrists of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) accepting their demands for an "immediate unification of Trotskyist forces in all countries." The unprincipled basis of that move was made clear by Cannon's intentions to brush aside political differences and find a convenient agreement for "common political action."<sup>[8]</sup>

Healy's response to Cannon's opportunistic maneuver set the political grounds upon which the discussions between the British and the SWP over the reunification with the Pabloites would develop during the following years.

In his May 1957 letter to Cannon, Healy shifted the emphasis from organizational questions, claiming that such proposals could not overcome "the very deep-going political differences that exist" with the Pabloites.

Instead, Healy emphasized the need to develop the struggle initiated in 1953. He wrote: "The strengthening of our cadres is decisive in this present period and this can only be done in a thorough-going education around the problems of revisionism." His letter concluded: "The British Section will never agree to anything which may cut across essential clarification."<sup>[9]</sup>

### **The 1958 Leeds Conference**

A conference of the ICFI held in Leeds, in June 1958, analyzed the new developments in the world situation, reaffirming the principles of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloism.

Answering the crisis of Stalinism, the conference resolution stated the ICFI's "rejection of all conceptions that mass pressure can resolve the question of leadership by forcing reform of the bureaucratic apparatus."<sup>[10]</sup>

While admitting unity in action with the tendencies breaking from the bureaucracies, it demanded that it be "coupled with an ideological offensive against Stalinism, social democracy, centrism, trade union bureaucracy and the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships of national movements in colonial and semi-colonial countries."<sup>[11]</sup>

The resolution also rejected the conception being developed by the Pabloites about a shift of the center of world revolution to the colonial countries. It declared: "The world revolution cannot take a decisive leap forward until it breaks through in the metropolitan countries." It added that the "counteroffensive of the workers in the metropolitan countries," in its turn, "will spur the colonial revolution forward to new heights."<sup>[12]</sup>

The leadership of the Socialist Workers Party rejected the conference's conclusions. Revealing their opportunist conception of reunification with the Pabloites, they denounced the documents for reviving "the discussion around the 1953 issues which have been long superseded by events upon which there has been essential political agreement."<sup>[13]</sup>

### **Nahuel Moreno's opposition to the Leeds documents**

These documents were also denounced by another political leader, Nahuel Moreno, who participated in the Leeds conference in the name of the Argentinian section. Moreno's contributions anticipated some of the

critical issues that soon emerged in connection with the Cuban Revolution. They revealed the class pressures that existed in Latin America and formed the basis of support among its sections for the policy of reunification with the Pabloites.

Moreno's main proposal at the conference was for the dissolution of each national section into what he called "Revolutionary United Fronts" based upon a "whole new strategy" for the epoch. This distilled Pabloite program was based on the following premises:

The crisis of the apparatus releases unconscious revolutionary tendencies... Its emergence has a deep objective meaning: it is the beginning of a new revolutionary leadership of the mass movement...

It is a utopia to claim that the unconscious revolutionary tendencies that exist and will continue to exist in the workers' movement and in the colonial masses of the entire world are immediately or automatically incorporated into the Fourth International.<sup>[14]</sup>

These "unconscious revolutionary tendencies," and not the party, would be responsible for carrying out "the most urgent revolutionary needs of the country, zone or union, university or intellectual group where we act."

Upon his return to Argentina, Moreno reported his disagreements with the perspectives of the Leeds conference in a report to other Latin American sections in January 1959. Titled "Permanent Revolution in the Post-War," the report declared "total opposition" to the following paragraph of the Leeds resolution:

In the colonial and semi-colonial countries, our central task is to build revolutionary proletarian parties. Armed with the theory of permanent revolution, these will participate in united anti-imperialist fronts with the aim of establishing proletarian leadership of the masses. We reject all conceptions of subordinating the program of the social revolution to the limited aims of the bourgeoisie or the petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>[15]</sup>

Moreno's disagreement with this formulation stemmed from his total opposition to the Theory of Permanent Revolution. Under the guise of updating it, he presented a diametrically opposed conception of historical development:

The bourgeois democratic revolution and the socialist revolution were formerly combined, closely linked, only in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. But today we find that within the heart of the workers' revolution itself in the metropolitan countries, the democratic revolution plays a role of the first magnitude, it is intimately linked to the workers' revolution. The Negro problem in North America and that of the Algerians in France is the best example. ... England will not be an exception, and within two or three years will follow in the footsteps of France and North America; in England we will have a racial problem posed directly or indirectly by imperialism with its economic crisis.<sup>[16]</sup>

## The Cuban Revolution and the SWP's repudiation of Marxism

The Cuban Revolution was the channel found by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) for the complete revision of its program to match its opportunistic practice and its drive for reunification with the Pabloites.

The course of that process gave rise to Joseph Hansen emerging as the leading theoretician of the SWP. As the ICFI later found out, Hansen acted as an agent of the GPU and later the FBI. He was a physical manifestation of the infiltration of the Trotskyist movement by conscious agents of hostile class forces.

But the rise of Hansen's political authority expressed, more deeply, the SWP's capitulation to the ideological pressures of the petty bourgeoisie in the heart of imperialism. Once it abandoned the perspective of carrying out the socialist revolution in the United States, and it felt the need to break free from the shackles of Marxism to follow its opportunist path, Hansen was the man for the job.

The overthrow of Batista's dictatorship in 1959 by the 26 of July Movement, led by Fidel Castro, was part of a whole series of anti-imperialist struggles and revolutions that emerged in the aftermath of the war. While the SWP had initially characterized it as a bourgeois nationalist regime, in the course of 1960 it completely changed its line.

As Castro's regime, pressed by intransigent demands by American imperialism, carried out a series of nationalizations and cemented its ties with the Soviet Union, Hansen claimed that it had established a "workers' state" and was leading a socialist revolution in Cuba.

The SWP argued that, under the influence of the mighty force of new objective conditions, the "petty-bourgeois leadership, beginning with a bourgeois-democratic programme, followed the dialectical logic of the revolution instead of the formal logic of their own programme, and ended up establishing the first workers state in the Western Hemisphere and proclaiming it an example for all of Latin America."<sup>[17]</sup>

Like Moreno, Hansen claimed to be simply updating the Theory of Permanent Revolution. He argued that the automatic development of unconscious petty-bourgeois elements to the conclusion of the necessity of the socialist revolution was a vindication of Trotsky's theory.

The objective of such revision was to deny the conclusion—established by the Russian Revolution and confirmed in the negative by the catastrophic experiments with the two-stage theory under the Stalinists' leadership—that the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry could not play an independent political role in the epoch of imperialism. Directed at first to the colonial countries, its natural conclusion was that, in the advanced countries too, the petty bourgeoisie could play a leading role.

Regarding Castro, Guevara and their colleagues as political virgins who were still growing as conscious Marxists, Hansen came to declare Cuba the only "uncorrupted workers' regime" in the world!

By praising these men of action, who supposedly initiated a revolution without a preconceived plan and by intuitively reacting to events defeated capitalism and started the socialist transformation of society, the SWP declared the Leninist party and the Fourth International to be useless tools.

## The political implications of characterizing Cuba as a "workers' state"

The SWP's characterization of the Cuban regime as a workers' state carried vast implications for Marxist theory. These are carefully considered in *The Heritage We Defend*. North writes:

In 1939–40, during the battle inside the SWP over the class nature of the Soviet state, Trotsky taunted the Burnham-Shachtman minority to explicitly state what strategic and

programmatic conclusions were to be drawn from their proposed finding that the Soviet Union was no longer to be considered a workers' state. In this way, he made clear that the struggle was not simply a dispute over terminology. The minority's rejection of the Fourth International's designation of the USSR as a workers' state was inextricably connected to profound differences with Trotskyism on all fundamental questions.

Similarly, the question of Cuba was not merely a difference over terminology. Hansen sought to evade the formulation of a principled explanation of the implications, both for Marxist theory and the program of the Fourth International, of the definition of Cuba as a workers' state. He refused to state precisely what conclusions the Trotskyist movement ought to draw from the alleged formation of a workers' state under the petty-bourgeois non-Marxist leadership of Castro.<sup>[18]</sup>

What were these implications?

If workers' states could be established through the actions of petty-bourgeois guerrilla leaders—based principally on the peasantry, who possessed no significant historical, organizational and political connections to the working class, and under conditions in which there existed no identifiable organs of class rule through which the proletariat exercised its dictatorship—there then followed a whole new conception of the historical path to socialism, entirely different from that foreseen by Marxists...

It implicitly rendered anachronistic Marx's writings on the Commune and Lenin's assessment of the universal significance of soviet power as the new form of state power "discovered" by the proletariat, the first non-bourgeois type state...

The relevance of the strivings of generations of Marxists to organize the proletariat independently of all other classes, including the oppressed peasantry, and to infuse the workers' movement with scientific socialist consciousness was being flagrantly challenged.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Liquidationism in Latin America

The liquidationist conceptions developed by the SWP in its drive to reunification with the Pabloites had immediate and disastrous consequences for the development of the Trotskyist movement in Latin America.

It demanded that the Trotskyists in Cuba completely subordinate themselves to "the soon-to-be-formed unified revolutionary party where they can work loyally, patiently and confidently for the implementation of the fully revolutionary-socialist program which they represent."<sup>[20]</sup>

Within short order, the Castro regime seized the printing press of the Cuban Trotskyists, smashed the type set for a Cuban edition of Trotsky's *Permanent Revolution* and imprisoned their leading members.

Extending that criminal political orientation to the revolutionaries across the region, the SWP's resolution of 1962 declared:

Trotskyists throughout Latin America should try to bring together all those forces, regardless of their specific origins, ready to take the Cuban experience as the point of departure for the revolutionary struggles in their own countries.<sup>[21]</sup>

Those pieces of advice were followed in a series of countries with catastrophic results. Preparing the dissolution of the Workers Revolutionary Party (POR) of Chile into the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), an amalgam of middle class tendencies, the POR adopted a resolution published by the SWP in its *International Socialist Review* in 1961. It claimed:

*These developing militant currents tend to form movements that break out of the molds of the old centrist formations, in the final analysis fostering revolutionary currents that want to carry things through once and for all "a la cubana."*

The new forces liberated by the impact of the Cuban Revolution pave the way for regroupment of various revolutionary groups, of independent militant sectors and of left tendencies while splits occur among the centrist formations mentioned above. The task of the Trotskyists, consequently, is to encourage and to develop all these militant and intuitively revolutionary currents, at the same time backing every anti-imperialist mobilization.<sup>[22]</sup>

This liquidationist move left the Chilean working class without a Marxist leadership in the critical revolutionary situation that emerged in the coming years, causing its defeat and the assumption of power by the brutal Pinochet dictatorship in 1973.

Commenting on the SWP's opportunist perspectives for Latin America, the completely demoralized Jim Cannon wrote to Hansen in 1961:

Strangely enough, these definite proposals may conflict with some sectarian tendencies not only of our own Latin-American co-thinkers but also of the Latin-American Pabloites. But a clear and explicit statement of our position, along the lines of the above proposals, from the SWP which has consistently defended the Cuban revolution under the most difficult circumstances, should carry considerable authority.

It might open the way for possibly better consultation and collaboration with the Latin-American Trotskyists of both camps.<sup>[23]</sup>

As he himself recognized by then, Cannon and his party had completely assumed the perspectives of Pabloism. In some cases, more strongly than the Pabloites themselves.

## The Trotskyists take the offensive

In early 1961, the SLL took a decisive step in the struggle against revisionism that put the Orthodox Trotskyists once again on the offensive.

Writing to the leadership of the SWP in January of 1961, the SLL decisively refuted the attempt by the Americans to reduce the significance of the 1953 split to organizational problems. The British Trotskyists stated their commitment to the principles of Cannon's "Open Letter" and directly asked the American leadership if they still stood for it.

Considering the meaning of Pabloism from the standpoint of the revolutionary tasks confronting the Trotskyist movement, the SLL declared:

It is because of the magnitude of the opportunities opening up before Trotskyism, and therefore the necessity for political and theoretical clarity, that we urgently require a drawing of the lines against revisionism in all its forms. *It is time to draw to a close the period in which Pabloite revisionism was regarded as a trend within Trotskyism.*<sup>[24]</sup>

In a follow-up letter, dated May 8, 1961, the SLL confronted the revisionist line being developed about Castro's regime. It declared that "Even if the bourgeois revolution in Cuba has been forced by US policy to step beyond the normal bounds of the social measures of a bourgeois revolution... this exceptional result of a particular situation" did not justify any revision of the movement's definition of a workers' state.

The letter continued:

Even if Castro and his cadre were "converted" would that make the revolution a proletarian revolution? ... If the Bolsheviks could not lead the revolution without a conscious working class support, can Castro do this? Quite apart from this, we have to evaluate political tendencies on a class basis, on the way they develop in struggle in relation to the movement of classes over long periods. A proletarian party, let alone a proletarian revolution, will not be born in any backward country by the conversion of petit-bourgeois nationalists who stumble "naturally" or "accidentally" upon the importance of the workers and peasants.

The dominant imperialist policy-makers both in the USA and Britain recognize full well that only by handing over political "independence" to leaders of this kind, or accepting their victory over feudal elements like Farouk and Nuri-Said, can the stakes of international capital and the strategic alliances be preserved in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>[25]</sup>

The SLL concluded: "It is not the job of Trotskyists to boost the role of such nationalist leaders."

As the SWP's leadership had already embarked on its one-way trip towards liquidationism, those terms were obviously unacceptable to them. But the British Trotskyists were committed to carrying out a patient struggle to clarify the international movement about the nature of the new political division that had clearly emerged.

In the battle of ideas that followed over the next two years, the SLL had an important advantage. While the SWP saw its arguments as the means to intimidate its opponents and to achieve its immediate petty factional aims—"not a single solitary Trotskyist in all of Latin America" would "touch the SLL position on Cuba with a ten-foot pole," Hansen cried—Healy and his comrades understood this theoretical fight as a critical part of the realization of their revolutionary historical aims.

As Cliff Slaughter stated during the discussion:

In a period of revolutionary developments in the working-class movement, the clearest and most incisive political line is the highest necessity. This line is only arrived at through conflict with incorrect conceptions to arrive at an accurate reflection of the real situation; it necessitates a fight against revisionism, which always reflects the pressure of the ruling class. This means a scientific study of the history of the movement itself. Precisely in order to provide the revolutionary elements in the working class with an international Marxist strategy it is necessary to fight to the end all revisionism, to understand our own present position as the product

of such conflicts, consciously resolved.<sup>[26]</sup>

In that spirit, the British Trotskyists celebrated when the Socialist Workers Party "acknowledged explicitly the questions of principle which at the moment divide the SWP and the SLL"<sup>[27]</sup> in the document "Problems of the Fourth International and the Next Steps," adopted by the Americans in June 1962.

## Trotskyism Betrayed

The SLL's response, presented in "Trotskyism Betrayed," declared that its basic differences in method with the SWP "centered upon the basic questions of Leninism, how to proceed to the construction of an international revolutionary party." It continued:

The fact that a new stage has been reached in this discussion is itself part of a new stage in the construction of these revolutionary parties of the Fourth International, for which the defeat of revisionism is necessary.<sup>[28]</sup>

The document declared:

The workers of the advanced countries are entering big struggles. These will result in lasting defeats unless they become struggles for state power, for which Marxist leadership is necessary...

Apologies for the non-Marxist leaderships, assertions that petty-bourgeois leadership can become Marxist "naturally" through the strength of the "objective forces"—these threaten to disarm the working class by disorienting the Marxist leadership...

If capitulation to the centrists takes place now, preventing the working class from breaking with the Social Democratic, Stalinist and trade union bureaucracy, then the revisionists will have the responsibility for enormous working class defeats.<sup>[29]</sup>

Denouncing the SWP's renunciation of the thesis of the crisis of revolutionary leadership and its embrace of the objectivist outlook of Pabloism, the SLL wrote:

Talk of the "laws of history" accomplishing this as a process separate from the development of the party is an abandonment of the Marxist position on the relations between "objective" and "subjective." ...

There must be a conscious construction of this party if the working class is to take power and build Socialism.<sup>[30]</sup>

Explaining that the differences in relation to Cuba were "only part of these general and fundamental disagreements," the SLL exposed the complete fraud of the SWP's claims that its characterization of Cuba as a workers' state was a continuation of Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union:

Trotsky insisted that his discussion and definition of the USSR were to be taken historically, and in relation to the world struggle between the working class and the capitalist class. ... The SWP method is the opposite, taking certain “criteria” from the discussion of one particular manifestation of the revolutionary struggle in one part of the world as a unique stage in the development of the world revolution. They apply this criteria to another part of the world a generation later, to a particular sector at a particular stage of the struggle. Thus nationalization and the existence of workers’ militias are sufficient to make Cuba a “workers’ state” and to make the Cuban revolution a socialist revolution. This “normative” method is the theoretical cover for the practice of prostrating themselves before the present unstable and transitory stage of the struggle—the victory of the petty-bourgeois revolutionary nationalists—instead of starting from the perspective and tasks of the working class.<sup>[31]</sup>

The SLL asked:

What does a “workers’ state” mean in concrete terms? It means the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in one form or another. Does the dictatorship of the proletariat exist in Cuba? We reply categorically no!

The Castro regime did not create a qualitatively new and different type of state from the Batista regime. The nationalizations carried out by Castro do nothing to alter the capitalist character of the state.<sup>[32]</sup>

And, answering the claims of Hansen and the Pabloites that the development of Cuba was “confirming the theory of permanent revolution,” it declared:

Cuba constitutes, in fact, a negative confirmation of the permanent revolution. Where the working class is unable to lead the peasant masses and smash capitalist state power, the bourgeoisie steps in and solves the problems of the “democratic revolution” in its own fashion and to its own satisfaction.<sup>[33]</sup>

Even at this point of the discussion, the SLL continued to maintain its proposal for the realization of principled discussions within the ranks of all international sections:

Our intention in making these proposals is not to arrive at any summit agreement between the leading committees of the IC and the IS, but to carry on an unrelenting struggle against revisionism throughout the ranks of all sections of both organizations.<sup>[34]</sup>

## Opportunism and Empiricism

Attempting to isolate the SLL, Hansen responded to the British Trotskyists’ principled attacks with “Cuba—the Acid Test: A Reply to the Ultraleft Sectarians” in November 1962. Hansen’s document was a vicious attempt to slander the SLL, painting its positions as an idealistic

and dogmatic denial of objective reality.

Hansen claimed:

The world Trotskyist movement has waited now two long and crowded years for the SLL to recognize the facts about the Cuban Revolution. ... Why this obstinate refusal to admit palpable events? Strangest of all, the leaders of the SLL have come to recognize that they are refusing to acknowledge the facts; they have converted this into a virtue and even elevated it into a philosophy.<sup>[35]</sup>

Hansen was speaking here of the differentiation between Marxism and empiricism made by Slaughter in his *Lenin on Dialectics*, in which he argued that “some ‘Marxists’ assume that Marxist method has the same starting point as empiricism: that is to say, it starts with ‘the facts.’”

It is worth quoting Slaughter at length. He continues:

Of course every science is based on facts. However, the definition and establishment of “the facts” is crucial to any science. Part of the creation of a science is precisely its delimitation and definition as a field of study with its own laws: the “facts” are shown in experience to be objectively and lawfully interconnected in such a way that a science of these fact[s] is a meaningful and useful basis for practice. Our “empiricist” Marxists in the field of society and politics are far from this state of affairs. Their procedure is to say: we had a programme, based on the facts as they were in 1848, or 1921, or 1938; now the facts are obviously different, so we need a different programme. ...

It is a false and non-Marxist view of “the facts” which leads to these revisionist ideas. What our “objectivists” are saying, with their message “history is on our side,” is this: look at the big struggles taking place, add them together without analysing them, go on your impressions of their significance, and add all these together—and you have “the facts.” Colonial revolutions are successful here, and successful there, and in another place; then the success of the colonial revolution is a fact. Nationalist leaders like Nkrumah and Mboya and Nasser make “anti-imperialist” speeches and even carry out nationalizations; this suggests that history is tending irreversibly and inexorably to force non-proletarian politicians in a socialist direction. But “objectivism” of this kind is a collection of impressions and not a rich dialectical analysis of the whole picture, with the parts related to one another. A truly objective analysis begins from the economic relations between classes on a world scale and within nations. It proceeds through an analysis of the relations between the needs of these classes and their consciousness and organization. On these it bases its programme for the working class internationally and in each national sector. A list of the “progressive forces” is not an objective analysis! It is the opposite, i.e., simply a collection of surface impressions, an acceptance of the existing unscientific consciousness of the contemporary class struggle as held by the participants, primarily by petty-bourgeois politicians who lead the national movements and bureaucratized labour movements. To overlay this theoretical blunder by suggesting that Castro and others are “natural” Marxists serves only to confirm that the “theorists” concerned are little aware of how far they have gone. They seem to suggest that the periods of maximum revolutionary tension are those when the participants in mass struggle arrive easily and spontaneously at revolutionary concepts. On the contrary, it is precisely at such times that there is a premium on

scientific consciousness, on the theory and strategy developed in struggle over a long period.<sup>[36]</sup>

The SLL utilized Hansen's defense of the empiricist method—falsely identifying “empiricism systematically carried out” with Marxism—to further expose the unprincipled character of the SWP's opportunist policies. It revealed the historical and class foundations of the anti-Marxist philosophical method it used as its basis.

In March 1963, the SLL published *Opportunism and Empiricism*, signed also by Slaughter. It declared:

Hansen leads the tendency which calls for “unification” with a revisionist tendency on the basis of purely practical political agreement on immediate tasks. From this point of view he rejects an examination of the history of the split and of the differences between the tendencies...

What is the methodological basis of Hansen's approach here? The dominant question for him is always “what will work best?”—asked always from the narrow perspective of immediate political appearances.<sup>[37]</sup>

The SLL laid down the fundamental differences separating Marxism from the objectivist method that united the SWP and the Pabloites:

All this argument that “the facts” are the objective reality and that we must “start from there” is a preparation to justify policies of adaptation to non-working class leaderships.

Empiricism, since it “starts with the facts,” can never get beyond them and must accept the world as it is. This *bourgeois* method of thought views the world from the standpoint of “the isolated individual in civil society.”

Instead of taking the objective situation as a problem to be solved in the light of the historical experience of the working class, generalized in the theory and practice of Marxism, it must take “the facts” as they come. They are produced by circumstances beyond our control.

Marxism arms the working class vanguard in its fight for the independent action of the Labour movement; empiricism adapts it to the existing set-up, to capitalism and its agencies in the working class organizations.<sup>[38]</sup>

The British Trotskyists had established the essence of the conception of the “new reality” that served as the basis for the reunification of the SWP with the Pabloites. It was the justification of and adaptation to the bourgeois reality and continuation of the domination of the world by imperialism.

## Conclusion

As the reunification was consummated, Healy wrote a final letter to the National Committee of the SWP. As North observed, it provided a “scathing review of the fraud and deceit which attended the convening of the SWP-Pabloite reunification congress. But it was in the concluding paragraphs of the letter that Healy's contempt for the political betrayal of

the SWP found its most biting expression.”<sup>[39]</sup>

Healy wrote:

Of course you have no time for the “sectarian SLL.” Our comrades in the ranks and in the leadership fight day in and day out against reformism and Stalinism in the best traditions of the Trotskyist movement. But they do not yet speak to tens of thousands at public meetings like Ben Bella, Castro and the so-called Ceylon May Day meeting. In your eyes we are merely small, “ultra-left fry”...

It took you some time. (As the saying goes “Those who come late to Christ come hardest.”) It is approximately 12 years since George Clarke joined forces with Pablo and published the message of the infamous Third Congress in the *Militant* and what was at that time the magazine *Fourth International*. You failed to understand Pablo at that time, and then we had the split of 1953. Cannon hailed this split with the words that we were “never going back to Pabloism.” Until recently he has been a really stubborn convert to Pabloism. But at last you have made it. You now have allies all over the place, from Fidel Castro, to Philip Gunawardene and Pablo.

We want to say only one thing and in this our congress was unanimous. We are proud of the stand which our organization has taken against such a disgraceful capitulation to the most reactionary forces as that to which the majority leadership of your party has fully succumbed.<sup>[40]</sup>

What is left of the “new forces” and the “blunted instruments,” these “facts” that the SWP and the Pabloites claimed had overcome the fundamental pillars of the Fourth International?

They have proved themselves completely unable to free either their own countries or any other part of the world from capitalism. Obeying the fundamental laws of the Permanent Revolution already verified by Trotsky, those bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships have betrayed and disarmed the working class, preparing the path for fascistic military dictatorships and the reestablishment of balance within imperialism.

The political price of the Pabloite opportunism was paid in the blood of hundreds of thousands of youth, workers and peasants that either followed their orientation to disastrous guerrilla struggles or were victimized by the defeats it produced.

---

*Dynamics of World Revolution Today*, June 1963.

[2] W. Sinclair, “Under A Stolen Flag,” May 22, 1957 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Volume 3.

[3] ~~Cliff Slaughter~~, *A Political Biography (1928–1963)*, Part 3, August, 2021.

[4] ~~Cliff Slaughter~~, *David North and his Place in the History of the Fourth International*, 1989.

[5] ~~David North~~, *The World We Defend*, 1988.

[6] North, *Cliff Slaughter*, Part 3.

[7] North, *The Heritage We Defend*.

[8] Letter from James P. Cannon to L. Goonewardene, March 12, 1957 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Volume 3.

[9] Letter from G. Healy to James P. Cannon, May 10, 1957 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Volume 3.

[10] “Political Statement Adopted by the International Conference” – *Education for Socialists: The Struggle to Reunify the Fourth International (1954–63)*, Vol. IV.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

- [13] North, *The Heritage We Defend*.
- [14] Nahuel Moreno, "Tesis de Leeds (Tesis sobre el Frente Único Revolucionario)," Centro de Estudios Humanos y Sociales, Buenos Aires, 2016.
- [15] Nahuel Moreno, "La revolución permanente en la posguerra," Centro de Estudios Humanos y Sociales, Buenos Aires, 2018.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] The Socialist Workers Party's resolution on the World Situation, 1961 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*.
- [18] North, *The Heritage We Defend*.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] ] Draft resolution of the SWP Political Committee May 1, 1962 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] *International Socialist Review*, Vol.22 No.3, Summer 1961.
- [23] Correspondence of James P. Cannon, May 1961 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*.
- [24] Letter of the National Committee of the SLL to the National Committee of the SWP, January 2, 1961 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*.
- [25] Letter of the NEC of the Socialist Labour League to the National Committee of the Socialist Workers Party, May 8, 1961 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*.
- [26] A reply to Joseph Hansen, by C. Slaughter – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*.
- [27] "Trotskyism Betrayed: The SWP accepts the political method of Pabloite revisionism" by the National Committee of the SLL, July 21, 1962 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*.
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Ibid.
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] Ibid.
- [35] "Cuba – The Acid Test: A reply to the Ultraleft sectarians," by Joseph Hansen, November 20, 1962 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 4*.
- [36] "'The Theoretical Front', Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks, Second Article" *Labour Review, Summer 1962, Vol. 7, No. 2*.
- [37] Opportunism and Empiricism SLL National Committee, March 23, 1963 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 4*.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] North, *Gerry Healy and his Place*, 1989.
- [40] Letter from G. Healy (for the SLL) to the National Committee of the SWP, June 12, 1963 – *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 4*.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**