

The Prinkipo commemoration of Trotsky's exile and the global resurgence of the working class

Statement of the WSWs International Editorial Board
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An event titled “An Island at the Center of World History: Leon Trotsky on Prinkipo” was held on Sunday, August 20 on Prinkipo, a Turkish island in the Sea of Marmara.

The event, which was organized on the 90th anniversary of Trotsky's departure from Prinkipo (known as Büyükada in Turkey), commemorated the four years he spent there between 1929 and 1933 after his forced exile from the Soviet Union by the Stalinist regime. The meeting also coincided with the 83rd anniversary of Trotsky's assassination by an agent of the Soviet secret police in 1940.

Mayor Erdem Gül of the Adalar Municipality opened the event with a welcoming speech. Professor of history Mehmet Ö. Alkan served as moderator and made a short introductory speech.

The main speakers at the meeting were David North, chairman of the WSWs International Editorial Board; Eric London, member of the WSWs Editorial Board; and Ula? Ate?çi, editor of Mehring Publishing in Turkey and leading member of the Socialist Equality Group.

More than 160 people were in attendance in-person, and the live stream had attracted approximately 2,000 viewers from all over the world.

There was a palpable sense among all those in attendance that this was an event of both historical and contemporary political significance. The renewed awareness that Prinkipo had provided refuge for a gigantic figure in 20th century history interacted with the realization that the commemoration of Trotsky's exile is acutely related to the current state of the world.

The most striking characteristic of Trotsky's life was the extraordinary degree to which his personal fate was entwined in the vicissitudes of the class struggle on a global scale.

In his autobiography, written during the first year of his exile on Prinkipo, Trotsky remarked: “I know no *personal* tragedy. I know the change of two chapters of the revolution.”

In the first of the chapters to which Trotsky was referring—that is, the chapter of revolutionary upsurge—the movement of the masses had raised Trotsky, within the space of a year, to the pinnacle of power, from an apartment in the Bronx to the Kremlin in Moscow.

The second chapter, marked by a decline in the revolution, reversed the trajectory of Trotsky's life as a revolutionary leader, from power to exile.

In the history of the socialist movement, what is the content of the present chapter that imparts to the island of Prinkipo a renewed revolutionary significance?

The event both reflected and gave highly conscious political expression to the objective change in the relationship between Trotskyism and the international working class. It builds on the decades-long political struggle of the world Trotskyist movement, led by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), against Stalinism, social democracy, bourgeois nationalism and Pabloite revisionism.

When Trotsky landed in Turkey in February 1929, the Soviet and international working class was in political retreat, of which Trotsky's exile was the most acute expression. The Stalinist bureaucracy, basing itself on and instigating a nationalist reaction against the socialist internationalism of the October Revolution of 1917, had usurped power from the working class in the Soviet Union.

The strategy of world socialist revolution that had guided the October Revolution under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky was replaced by the program of “socialism in one country,” which represented the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The defeat of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, which had been formed in 1923, was in essence a political expression of the temporary retreat of the international revolutionary upsurge of the working class that began with the October Revolution of 1917. The rise of Stalinism and the continuing influence of Social Democracy, which exerted the pressure of imperialism on the Soviet Union and the international workers' movement, had the same objective basis.

The German Revolution of 1923 was defeated, while the British General Strike of 1926 and the Chinese Revolution of 1925–27 ended in disaster, all as a result of the destructive policies of the Comintern under Stalin.

The world economic depression that began with the Wall Street crash of 1929 led to the radicalization of the working class on an international scale. But the betrayals of the dominant Stalinist and Social Democratic labor leaderships led to a series of further major defeats and disasters.

As David North explained in his speech in Prinkipo, the coming to power of the Nazis in Germany in 1933, made possible by the disastrous policies of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD), was the greatest defeat suffered by the German and international working class. This was followed by the betrayals and defeats in France and Spain and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

The historic betrayal of the Stalinist Comintern in Germany led Trotsky, while in Prinkipo, to call for the building of the Fourth International in 1933. Despite the catastrophic defeats of the international working class in the 1920s and 1930s, the founding of the Fourth International in 1938 under Trotsky's leadership preserved the political continuity of the Marxist movement.

The second half of the 1930s also witnessed the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, as Eric London summarized in his presentation. A significant part of the political, intellectual and cultural vanguard of socialists, deeply rooted in the working class, was wiped out by the Stalinist bureaucracy. This political genocide culminated in the assassination of Trotsky by an agent of Stalin on August 20, 1940, and his death the following day.

The revolutionary movement of the working class that erupted in Europe

in the final years of World War II was crushed by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Under conditions of the re-stabilization of capitalism with the help of Moscow and the establishment of new Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and China, the power of Stalinism seemed unshakable.

A tendency within the Fourth International, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, adapted to these conditions by attributing a revolutionary role to Stalinism and arguing that Trotskyists should liquidate themselves by joining Stalinist, social democratic or bourgeois nationalist parties. It was James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the United States, who in 1953 opposed Pabloite revisionism and called for the creation of the International Committee, which saved the Fourth International from liquidation.

In the decades that followed, the attacks on Trotskyism by the Stalinist and social democratic parties and various petty-bourgeois radical movements were aided and abetted by Pabloite revisionism. While all these forces worked hand-in-hand to isolate and destroy the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee tirelessly defended the historical foundations of the Fourth International for decades.

The International Committee's 1975 investigation into the circumstances surrounding the assassination of Trotsky, "Security and the Fourth International," was a milestone in the historic struggle to defend Trotsky and Trotskyism.

This investigation, succinctly outlined by Eric London, was essentially a counteroffensive of the Trotskyist movement against the bourgeois states and the agents of the Stalinist bureaucracy, ending the decades-long conspiracy of silence surrounding the assassination of Trotsky. As London noted:

For the first time, a systematic investigation was conducted into the penetration of the Trotskyist movement by agents of both the GPU and the government of US imperialism. Questions were posed which, had they been asked and investigated decades prior, could have prevented significant damage to the movement and its members and saved or prolonged the lives of the leadership, including Trotsky's.

The revelations of the ongoing Security investigation and their presentation at Sunday's historic event on Prinkipo show how far this counteroffensive, begun in 1975, has gone.

In 1985-86, the Pabloite tendency within the International Committee was finally defeated as a result of the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain. This ushered in a renaissance of Trotskyism within the ICFI, laying the basis for the establishment of the Socialist Equality Parties and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The International Committee upheld Trotsky's analysis of the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism, stressing that the fate of the Soviet Union depended on the Soviet working class seizing power in a political revolution and returning to the 1917 program of world socialist revolution. Otherwise, the bureaucracy would liquidate the USSR and capitalism would be restored. What happened in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China in 1989-1991 proved the correctness of the Marxist analysis and perspective of Trotsky and the International Committee.

The past 35 years have not only confirmed the Trotskyist perspective, they have brought a tremendous change in objective conditions around the world. Trotskyism represented the internationalist basis and perspective of Marxism and the October Revolution, while Stalinism, Social Democracy and Pabloism shared a historically obsolete and politically reactionary nationalist perspective.

The globalization of capitalist production and the emergence of a

gigantic, interconnected working class around the world allowed the political struggle of the International Committee to develop on a much more favorable objective basis.

During Trotsky's years of exile, the Turkish working class was in swaddling clothes. Today, it is a massive social force concentrated in industrial cities that play a pivotal role in the world economy, alongside a growing number of megacities from Africa to Asia to Latin America.

At the same time, the deep crisis of capitalism in historic centers of imperialism is shattering both the economic and political foundations of bourgeois democracy and even the minimal vestiges of social reformism. The working class is being driven into struggle on a titanic scale.

Stalinism and Social Democracy, as well as Pabloite revisionism and petty-bourgeois nationalism, which dominated the workers' movement until the last decades of the twentieth century, are today, if they even exist, open defenders of capitalism.

While the Stalinists liquidated the Soviet Union and the Communist Parties, the Social Democratic parties are indistinguishable from the right-wing parties of the bourgeoisie. The Maoists restored capitalism in China and created a massive source of cheap labor for transnational corporations and the Chinese bourgeoisie. Wherever they are present, the Pabloites try to put a "left" mask on the right-wing bourgeois parties and play a dirty pro-imperialist and pro-NATO role, as has been clearly seen in the war in Ukraine.

All of these organizations, to paraphrase Trotsky, are "rotten through and through." The International Committee, which they have sought to isolate and destroy, is gaining strength internationally among workers, youth and intellectuals as the only political representative of Trotskyism, that is, classical Marxism.

The Trotskyist movement has entered a new phase of its history, characterized by an intersection between the objective crisis and the program and practice of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The Trotsky commemoration in Prinkipo took place against the backdrop of the escalating capitalist crisis, expressed in the renewed upsurge of imperialist violence that threatens a third world war, an ongoing pandemic that has killed more than 24 million people, a breakdown of democratic forms of rule throughout the world, an escalating ecological catastrophe, and, above all, the growth of the class struggle. Under the impact of mounting anger and social opposition, the ability of the corrupt, nationalist trade union bureaucracies to contain the class struggle is breaking down.

In concluding his introductory speech, North expressed his hope that "the villa where Trotsky lived will be fully restored and become an international center for the study of Trotsky's vast political and intellectual legacy." He added that in undertaking such a project, "with the necessary international support, Prinkipo will not only reaffirm its place in world history, but also make a significant contribution to mankind's future."

The commemoration event on August 20th gave expression to the resurgence and interaction of the global class struggle and the world revolutionary perspective of Trotskyism, the Marxism of the 21st century.



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