

The Workers League's defence of the Theory of Permanent Revolution against the opportunism of the Workers Revolutionary Party

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The following lecture was delivered by Tom Peters, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group of New Zealand, and Thomas Scripps, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), to the SEP (US) International Summer School, held between July 30 and August 4, 2023. All lectures to the school are available here.

It is a privilege to be able to contribute to the work of this extremely important school, which has already covered a vast wealth of historical and theoretical material, and which truly gives expression to the continuity of the world Trotskyist movement. It would be entirely possible to devote a whole week, or longer, to discussion of the period from 1982 to 1986, which may be the most well documented split in the history of socialism. As other comrades have said: What we are presenting here is an introduction and a guide to further reading and study.

The previous lecture by comrade Christoph Vandreier examined the beginnings of the theoretical and political struggle by the Workers League against the opportunist degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). This was launched with David North's 1982 critique of Gerry Healy's travesty of Marxism in his "Studies in Dialectical Materialism,"^[1] as well as the series of articles titled "Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism."^[2]

The political summary at the end of comrade North's critique states that the "vulgarization of Marxism, palmed off as the 'struggle for dialectics,' has been accompanied by an unmistakable opportunist drift within the International Committee, and especially in the WRP."

Healy's idealist "practice of cognition" served to suppress discussion of political problems and differences within the party and to justify the crassest opportunist practices. The study of Trotsky's writings was abandoned, along with the political and theoretical fight against Pabloite revisionism. "For all intents and purposes," North wrote, "the Theory of Permanent Revolution has been treated as inapplicable to present circumstances."^[3]

This theory remains the fundamental programmatic foundation of Trotskyism as the revolutionary Marxism of our time. It can be traced to the call made by Marx and Engels. Drawing the lessons of the 1848 Revolutions, Marx insisted that there could be no political unity between the democratic petty bourgeoisie and the working class. He wrote:

While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, the proletariat has conquered state power, and the

association of proletarians, not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far that competition among the proletarians in these countries has ceased and that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians.^[4]

This basic conception was developed and enriched by Trotsky, drawing upon the lessons of the 1905 Revolution. In opposition to the Mensheviks, who insisted on the subordination of the working class to bourgeois liberalism, Trotsky explained the organic incapacity of the bourgeoisie to achieve the democratic revolution. The tasks of the revolution could only be fulfilled by the working class coming to power, through its own revolutionary party, leading the peasantry and all the oppressed masses. This was conceived not as a national revolution but as the opening of the world revolution.

This perspective was substantiated in practice by the 1917 October Revolution. Lenin arrived at the same conclusions as Trotsky: He abandoned the old formula of the Bolsheviks of a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry," and in April carried out a fundamental reorientation of the party towards the seizure of power—in opposition to Stalin and leading members in the Bolshevik Party who were moving towards regroupment with the Mensheviks and support for a bourgeois government.

In 1933, Trotsky summed up the enduring significance of the Theory of Permanent Revolution in the rearming of the proletariat after the disastrous defeat in China brought about by the Stalinist bureaucracy's adoption of the two-stage theory.

The theory, he said, was underpinned by three basic concepts:

- a. The national bourgeoisie, which during the initial stages seeks to utilize the revolution for itself (Kuomintang, Gandhi), invariably goes over to the other side of the barricades, to the feudal classes and the imperialist oppressors, in the course of the further development of the revolution.
- b. The petty bourgeoisie (peasantry) can no longer play a leading role in the bourgeois revolution and, consequently, cannot take power. Hence flows the rejection of the bourgeois-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.
- c. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the bourgeois-democratic revolution passes over into the socialist revolution, which can only triumph completely as a link in the world

revolution.^[5]

The WRP would betray all these principles. Beginning in the late 1970s, it established opportunist alliances and relations with bourgeois nationalist organisations and regimes. This included uncritical support for the Palestine Liberation Organisation, for the national liberation movement in Zimbabwe, for Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Khomeini regime in Iran. A financial relationship was established with Gaddafi's regime in Libya, which the leaders of the WRP concealed from the party and from the International Committee.

The perspective of building Trotskyist parties in these countries was abandoned. Instead, the WRP promoted bourgeois nationalist leaders as the legitimate leadership of the working class. This was accompanied by an increasingly uncritical promotion of sections of the Labour and union bureaucracy in the UK.

This lecture will examine how, following David North's October 1982 critique, the Workers League undertook a principled struggle to defend the Theory of Permanent Revolution against the opportunism that had come to dominate the perspective and practice of the WRP.

The record completely disproves the false and self-serving position advanced by Cliff Slaughter that there had been an "equal degeneration" across all sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) because no one was able to challenge Healy's domination and bullying. Slaughter wrote to David North in November 1985: "All the leaders of the IC were part of Healyism as well as its victims, and that must be confronted, analyzed and corrected."^[6]

Slaughter thereby sought to absolve himself of any responsibility for the crisis in the WRP and to discredit the ICFI as the embodiment of the continuity of the Trotskyist movement. This was a first step towards open renunciation of the ICFI and Trotskyism.

The degeneration of the WRP did not take place overnight. The SLL had led the fight against the reunification of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) with the Pabloite International Secretariat in 1963. Healy and Slaughter had exposed the embrace of Castroism by the SWP and the great betrayal carried out by the LSSP in Sri Lanka. But 10 years later, the British section was in retreat, adapting to powerful nationalist pressures in Britain, including widespread illusions in the Labour Party and the union bureaucracy.

The radicalization of broad layers of the working class and the middle class in response to the revolutionary upheavals of the late 1960s led to an influx of members. But these members were not trained as internationalists and Trotskyists. The WRP leadership gradually came to see the fight for political clarification and training as an impediment to the growth of its resources and membership.

In the years following the SWP's reunification with the Pabloites, which resulted in the relative isolation of the British section, Healy increasingly came to view the growth of the Trotskyist movement as the by-product of growing a powerful national party in Britain.

Ultimately, as David North explains in *Gerry Healy and his Place in the History of the Fourth International*, the shift to reliance on middle-class layers in the UK, and opportunist financial relationships with bourgeois regimes in the Middle East, reflected "a lack of political confidence in the possibility of winning the working class to the program of Marxism ... a rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class as the gravedigger of capitalism and the builder of a new socialist society."^[7]

The historical development of the Workers League, as well as the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) in Sri Lanka, was very different. Both organisations had been founded in the struggle against Pabloism. The Workers League's founding cadre were expelled from the SWP in 1964 for demanding a political discussion on the entry of the LSSP into the Bandaranaike government in Sri Lanka—the first time in history that a

party claiming allegiance to the Fourth International had entered a bourgeois coalition government. This historic betrayal demonstrated the role of Pabloite revisionism as a vital support for the bourgeois order.

The Revolutionary Communist League, founded in 1968 in opposition to the LSSP's betrayal, soon came into conflict with the backsliding of the British section. RCL secretary Keerthi Balasuriya sharply opposed a statement issued by the SLL in December 1971 in the name of the ICFI that gave "critical support" to the deployment of Indian troops to East Pakistan, ostensibly in support of a national liberation struggle in what was to become Bangladesh.

Keerthi wrote:

The logic of the false political position of the IC on Bangladesh would have and has led to the abandonment of all the past experiences of the Marxist movement regarding the struggles of the colonial masses.^[8]

The RCL had insisted that the Indian military intervention was undertaken precisely to suppress a revolutionary struggle to unify East and West Bengal. It warned in a statement that none of the bourgeois governments in the region could be relied upon by the working class. The SLL ensured that the RCL's criticisms remained unknown within the ICFI and worked to isolate the Sri Lankan section.

The SLL/WRP also created enormous difficulties for the RCL in its fight to unify Sinhala and Tamil workers on the basis of a socialist programme that included recognition of the right to self-determination for the Tamil people. Mike Banda initially opposed self-determination, thereby supporting the state established by imperialism in 1948, based on Sinhala chauvinism. In 1979, however, the WRP switched its position to one of uncritical support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—essentially promoting it as the legitimate leadership of the Tamil people and denigrating the fight by the RCL to establish Trotskyist leadership in the working class.

Previous lectures have examined the significance of the renegacy of Tim Wohlforth and the Security and the Fourth International investigation, which were crucial developments in the political struggle against Pabloite liquidationism in the United States. This fight was continually deepened by the Workers League and was central to the recruitment and training of its cadre during the 1970s and 1980s.

At the same time that the Workers League was coming into direct conflict with the WRP opportunists, it was intensifying its exposure of the Socialist Workers Party's revisionism. Comrades understood that these two struggles were profoundly interconnected.

On December 31, 1982, SWP National Secretary Jack Barnes gave a speech to the Young Socialists national convention in which he explicitly repudiated the entire heritage of Trotskyism. The speech was not immediately published, but the Workers League was able to obtain a partial transcript and prepared a politically devastating response, published in August 1983 as a pamphlet titled *A Provocateur Attacks Trotskyism*.

It is clear, although this is not stated explicitly, that the document is also aimed against the positions that had been embraced by the WRP.

The statement defends the Theory of Permanent Revolution as "the programmatic essence of Trotskyism as the Marxism of our time," which interpreted the October Revolution as "a turning point in world history, i.e., the beginning, on a world historical scale, of the transition from capitalism to socialism, and [which revealed] the interconnection between this world-historical development and the class struggle in every country."^[9]

The statement laid bare the extreme degeneration of the SWP to the

point where nothing remained of the party founded in 1938 other than the name. Barnes' speech advanced a particularly vulgar form of Pabloism. He denounced the Theory of Permanent Revolution as a deviation from Marxism and Leninism, which led to the Fourth International being "shoved off the axis of the Comintern."^[10]

According to Barnes, the theory "broke the post-Russian-revolutionary unity between Lenin and Trotsky, in the political sense. It opened the door to sectarian, ultra-left interpretations and utilizations of the theory of permanent revolution."^[11]

He said:

Permanent Revolution is not a correct generalization, or an adequate one, or one that doesn't open up more problems than it solves, as to what our program is. We will get much, much more by reducing the permanent revolution, by pointing out, in my opinion, that it is not useful as a general term for our program.

Summing up the perspective of the SWP leadership, Barnes declared: "Trotskyism, that term itself, I predict, none of us will call ourselves before this decade's out."^[12]

Barnes' argument, the Workers League explained, "is not only with Trotskyism; it is with history itself."^[13] Barnes asserted that Trotsky had misrepresented Lenin by claiming that the latter had abandoned the theory of "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" upon returning to Russia in 1917 and adopted the Theory of Permanent Revolution in his *April Theses*. This was precisely the Big Lie advanced in 1924 by Stalin, whose campaign against Trotsky and the Left Opposition began as an attack on the Theory of Permanent Revolution and accusations that Trotsky had "underestimated" the peasantry. This went hand in hand with the bureaucracy's rejection of internationalism in favour of the "theory" of "socialism in a single country."

In fact, Lenin had repeatedly stated from April 1917 that the old formula was "obsolete." He said, "It is no good at all. It is dead. And it is no use trying to revive it."^[14] He identified the same problem that Trotsky had stressed: that the formula did not solve the problem of which class would rule. This limitation was confirmed in the February revolution: the Soviet embodied a dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, which had "ceded" power to the bourgeoisie.

Lenin's *April Theses* rejected the two-stage theory and called for an uninterrupted, or permanent, revolution:

The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is *passing* from the first stage of the revolution—which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie—to its *second stage*, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.^[15]

The SWP revived the old Stalinist lies to justify its complete abandonment of any perspective for building independent revolutionary parties based on the working class. As the Workers League explained:

Stalinists, centrists, and all petty-bourgeois radicals who hate the working class have always had a "problem" with the Permanent Revolution because it is the theoretical guide for the struggle against every form of class collaboration and subordination of the working class to the political agencies of the bourgeoisie.^[16]

Comrade North again stressed the Stalinist character of Barnes' positions in his report to the International Committee in February 1984. Barnes was calling for a "workers' and farmers' government," i.e., not the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Stalinists themselves were very explicit about this.

Comrade North quoted the leading Soviet theorist on "national liberation," Rostislav Ulyanovsky, who wrote that the task in developing countries was to take "steps toward socialism" by placing "mass pressure on bourgeois democracy, thus helping it to realise its progressive potentialities. ...

"It is also necessary to bear in mind that the promotion of the slogan calling for the adoption of the non-capitalist path by no means implies that it also calls for a socialist revolution, the establishment of a people's democracy and the assumption of power by the communists..."^[17]

The orientation of the SWP was towards the petty-bourgeois nationalist regimes in Central and South America.

In March 1982, Barnes had declared:

We consider ourselves part of a common world Marxist movement with the FSLN [of Nicaragua], with the New Jewel Movement [of Grenada], with the Cuban Communist Party, with the vanguard proletarian leaderships of the revolutionary struggles in El Salvador and Guatemala. ... We think that's how the entire Fourth International should view itself. ... We're part of a common Marxist movement with these revolutionists. We're *not* part of a common movement with a lot of people and organizations that call themselves Trotskyists.^[18]

The Workers League statement reviews in detail how the SWP, with Joseph Hansen playing a leading role, seized upon the Cuban Revolution of 1959 as proof that there was no longer any need for Trotskyist leadership to be built in the working class. The revolutionary tasks could be entrusted to "unconscious Marxists" such as Castro.

This turn by the SWP, and the move towards reunification with the Pabloites, was accompanied by the influx of state agents into the party, via the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Barnes was among a group of 12 agents recruited from the conservative Carleton College, who were quickly elevated into leading positions by Hansen. This group played a major role in preparing the ground for the expulsion of Wohlforth and other supporters of the ICFI.

The purge continued and accelerated in line with the political degeneration of the SWP, with dozens of founding members expelled from the party during the early 1980s.

The 1982 statement of the Workers League makes the important point that

The degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party is not simply the product of Hansen's activities as a government spy. However, under conditions of deepening political crisis within the SWP during the 1950s, with the theoretical issues arising from the 1953 split still unresolved, with leaders such as Cannon far past their physical and political prime, and with factional in-fighting rampant among the top leaders, the work of Hansen assumed enormously destructive proportions.

It goes on to explain that this degeneration was not inevitable:

In the late 1950s, the collaboration of the Socialist Labour League with the American Trotskyists could have provided great assistance in overcoming the internal crisis within the SWP. Together with the changes in the political situation in the United States—especially the growth of the mass movement among black workers for civil rights—the SWP could have once again made great strides forward as a Trotskyist movement.^[19]

Instead, Hansen and his proteges worked to poison the atmosphere within the SWP against the SLL, including by spreading lies that “Healy opposes the Cuban Revolution.” The SLL had always taken a principled stand in defence of the Cuban Revolution against US imperialism. This did not, however, justify the embrace of its nationalist leadership as a substitute for the building of the Trotskyist movement in Cuba.

It must be emphasised that the SWP’s complete rejection of the struggle for the political independence of the working class also applied to the United States, where its orientation was towards “left wing” Democrats such as Jesse Jackson, based on black nationalism and identity politics. Barnes claimed that Jackson was “opening up the same starting point that the major figures in the labor movement and in the organizations of the oppressed nationalities who are involved in this claim to take ... [namely] that the alliance of labor, Blacks and Latinos; the working class and the oppressed nationalities—however it gets formulated—must be formed.”

It is, of course, completely false to describe blacks and Latinos as an “oppressed nation” separate from the working class; this served to cover up the class differentiations which exist among blacks and other minorities. With such statements, the Workers League explained, the SWP was “pandering to the petty-bourgeois elements among blacks and Hispanics, and cynically working with them in order to build a bridge to the Democratic Party.”^[20]

The Workers League hoped that exposing the SWP’s attack on Trotskyism—and reminding the SLL of its role in the historic fight against reunification with Pabloism—would assist in clarifying the political problems in the WRP and correcting and reorienting the party. Comrade North was encouraged by the fact that when Gerry Healy was told about Barnes’ 1982 speech, he enthusiastically supported the proposal for the Workers League to respond and expose his positions.

On February 11, 1984, David North again reminded the WRP leaders of the role they had played in the early 1960s in the fight against the SWP’s attempt to revise Trotskyism on the basis of the defeats inflicted on imperialism by the Cuban revolution.

The SLL had warned in its very first letter to the SWP that “the greatest danger confronting the revolutionary movement is liquidationism,” represented most clearly by Pabloism. It continued: “Any retreat from the strategy of political independence of the working class and the construction of revolutionary parties will take on the significance of a world-historical blunder on the part of the Trotskyist movement.”^[21]

North’s report to the IC explained the similarity between the SWP’s open repudiation of Permanent Revolution and the positions adopted by the WRP. The relations established by the WRP with bourgeois leaders throughout the Middle East, which Tom Scripps will elaborate on in the second part of this lecture, were strikingly similar to the orientation of the SWP to those in Latin America.

North’s report explained that

The latest attack by Barnes on Trotskyism must bring this entire history forward; precisely because the International Committee has always recognized that such crucial developments within the ranks of the revisionists inevitably foreshadow great new chapters in the world socialist revolution. Moreover, we don’t simply look upon

revisionism as some sort of bacteria that exists inside a test-tube, safely stored in a laboratory. Precisely because revisionism has material roots in the actual development of the class struggle of which we ourselves are a part, because it reflects the pressure of alien class forces upon the working class and its revolutionary vanguard, our response to revisionism finds its highest expression in the analysis of our own political development.^[22]

The WRP, however, had no interest in making any objective analysis of its own political development and it repeatedly sought to block such a discussion within the IC by attacking the Workers League, suppressing its criticisms, and threatening a split.

The political conflict between the WRP and the Workers League deepened in the course of 1983 and flared up on the issue of the US invasion of Grenada. At a meeting of the IC in October 1983, Mike Banda sharply attacked the response of the *Bulletin*, including a front-page article with the headline “Reagan is a Liar,” which he declared was a propagandist response.

In a subsequent letter to comrade North in December, Cliff Slaughter deepened the attack and criticised the Workers League, making the infamous statement:

Your own heavy emphasis on the “political independence of the working class,” backed by a quotation from *In Defence of Marxism*, will become a weapon in the hands of all those who retain the mark of pragmatism, because it will be treasured by them as something more “concrete” than the explicit struggle to develop and comprehend the categories of dialectics as the method for that life-and-death matter of grasping the rapid and all-sided developments thrown up by the world crisis.^[23]

As comrade Christoph Vandreier has already noted, here we see Slaughter counterposing Marxist method to the fight for the political independence of the working class, rather than Marxist method being the tool to establish the political independence of the working class.^[24] I will say more about this passage and comrade North’s response to it shortly.

Slaughter was objecting to the Workers League Political Committee statement, “Mobilize Labor Against US Imperialism.” This statement, published on October 28, 1983, explained that the invasion was part of a resurgence of US military violence, including the dispatch of Marines to Lebanon and the funding of the Contras to fight against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government.

Driven by their economic crisis, the imperialist powers were being driven towards the violent redivision of the world. The British war in the Falkland Islands and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, both supported by the United States, were part of “the drive to recolonize the vast territories in which at least formal national independence was gained in the period since the Second World War.”^[25]

The invasion of Grenada also served domestic purposes: It was accompanied by hysterical denunciations of communism by Ronald Reagan, whose administration was simultaneously engaged in the ruthless suppression of the class struggle. Reagan claimed that the tiny island had been turned into a Soviet and Cuban satellite that would pose a military threat.

The immediate trigger for the invasion was the bloody coup within the New Jewel Movement (NJM), a radical nationalist party which had come to power in Grenada in 1979. The Reagan administration cynically declared that it had to intervene to protect a group of American medical students in Grenada, who were, in fact, never at any risk of harm.

The New Jewel Movement, despite being hailed by the SWP as “a conscious, proletarian Marxist” leadership,^[26] who had established a “workers’ and farmers’ government,” was a bourgeois nationalist regime, which had carried out limited reforms and sought to develop the country’s economy and establish greater independence from the imperialist powers.

On October 19, 1983, Grenada’s prime minister Maurice Bishop was murdered, along with several of his ministers and trade union leaders, by a rival faction of the NJM led by his former deputy prime minister Bernard Coard and backed by the army. These events were the bloody culmination of a power struggle bound up with conflicts over economic and foreign policy: Bishop had recently traveled to the US and appealed for the normalization of diplomatic relations, which was apparently opposed by his rivals, who were oriented towards stronger ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The Workers League explained that “The bloody events in Grenada demonstrate once again the organic instability and political insolvency of such nationalist tendencies drawn from the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia in the former colonial and neo-colonial countries.” As Trotsky had explained, such elements were incapable of leading the democratic revolution to victory because it required the dictatorship of the proletariat, including the creation of real organs of workers’ power. The statement continued:

Lacking any Marxist perspective, without any scientific comprehension of the relationship between party and class, buffeted by class forces which they hope to manipulate without understanding the logic of the historical process, and simultaneously disoriented and corrupted by the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, these petty-bourgeois leaders settle accounts violently and behind the backs of the masses they claim to represent.^[27]

In its statement immediately after the invasion—the one Slaughter objected to—the Workers League denounced the tacit support for US imperialism from the AFL-CIO and the phony opposition from some Democrats, as well as the perfidious role of the Soviet government, which appeared to have encouraged the coup in Grenada.

Stressing the connection between the eruption of US militarism and the bipartisan assault on the American working class, the statement declared that the invasion could only be defeated by mobilising the strength of the working class. It said: “The central issue facing the American working class is the necessity to establish its political independence through the formation of a Labor Party, and the struggle for a workers’ government committed to abolishing the capitalist system and establishing socialism.”^[28]

Slaughter opposed this statement. He wrote that “the ‘central issue’ is to fight for the defeat of the US imperialist invasion in Grenada and its coming attack in Nicaragua.” And he called on the Workers League to issue a clear statement “that a defeat for US imperialist forces in Grenada would be a victory for the American working class and workers everywhere, making it clear that we are for unconditional support even of the military clique in power in Grenada.”^[29]

Grenada is one of the smallest countries in the world, and in 1983 had a population of just 110,000 people and barely any armed forces, certainly nothing capable of repelling the American invasion force, which easily overran the island. The implication that the Grenadian people could have been victorious on the battlefield was utterly absurd. The defeat of US imperialism was only possible through the mobilization of the American working class.

According to Slaughter, the Workers’ League’s declaration that the

“main target” of the Reagan administration’s attacks was the American working class showed “a tinge ... of reservation about the anti-imperialist content of the colonial revolution, a tinge of reservation about the unity of the proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries and the colonial-national liberation movements.”^[30]

In his response to these provocative accusations, David North rejected the claim that the Workers League had drifted away from a position of revolutionary defeatism. He reviewed the record of the *Bulletin* in the two months leading up to the invasion, which continually opposed US intervention in Lebanon and Nicaragua, and the imperialist conspiracies against the Palestine Liberation Organisation. In every case, the Workers League had “continuously raised the issue of mobilizing the working class in the United States against imperialism and in support of the semi-colonial countries.”^[31]

Comrade North then explained that beyond Slaughter’s immediate objection to the *Bulletin*’s position on Grenada, Slaughter’s letter pointed to a more fundamental difference between the perspective of the WRP and that of the Workers League.

In response to Slaughter’s denigration of the call for the political independence of the working class, North wrote: “I am astonished by this argument, which goes against everything that we have been taught by the International Committee and by you, personally.”

He explained that Slaughter’s approach, “which explicitly separates the fight for the defeat of the US invasion of Grenada from the struggle to establish the political independence of the working class, is identical to that of every revisionist and Stalinist group in the United States.” North posed the question: “Wasn’t it against this invidious distinction that the Workers League and the IC based their struggle against the opportunist Pabloite conception of the ‘anti-war’ movement?”

North noted that although Slaughter had criticised the Workers League for taking a pragmatic approach, and for abandoning dialectics, this was in fact the method that Slaughter was using in counterposing the “real developments” in Grenada and Lebanon to the “‘abstract’ matters of principle and program.”

North explained:

What must be studied and developed is the correct application of the dialectical method and historical materialism. However, this is by no means undermined by “heavy emphasis” on the “political independence of the working class.” I believe that a serious study of all of Lenin’s works—and, most explicitly, his earliest economic and philosophical studies—will reveal the inner connection between his concentration on the correct application of the dialectical method and his “heavy emphasis” on the political independence of the working class.

In response to Slaughter’s claim that the Workers League was showing “reservations” about the “anti-imperialist content of the colonial revolutions [and] ... about the unity of the proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries and the colonial-national liberation movements,” North pointed out that, in fact, “All colonial-national movements are a unity of antagonistic class forces ... The pressure of imperialism does not mitigate but rather intensifies the class struggle within the semi-colonial countries.”

He continued:

Again in contradistinction to the Pabloites and the Stalinists, we hold that the anti-imperialism of the colonial bourgeoisie is of a relative and not an absolute character, conditioned by the level of

development of class contradictions within each of the oppressed nations. The objective anti-imperialist content of the colonial revolution and its historical unity with the proletarian struggles in the metropolitan centers must be strengthened and actualized through a consistent struggle against the bourgeois-nationalist leaderships of the mass movements within the oppressed countries.^[32]

This profoundly dialectical understanding of the anti-colonial movement is a central component of the Theory of Permanent Revolution. At this point, David North and the leadership of the Workers League remained confident that a thorough discussion within the IC leadership could clarify the political issues and reorient the WRP.

North concluded by again reminding Slaughter of his own role in the fight against Pabloite revisionism, including his repeated warnings that revisionism reflected the pressure of imperialism on the workers' movement. Amid a deepening crisis of capitalism, and of the Soviet regimes, Jack Barnes' open attack on Trotskyism reflected the deepest need of the capitalist class to disrupt and derail both the revolutions in the former colonial countries and the workers' movement in the centres of imperialism. It was therefore essential, North wrote, for the International Committee to remain alert to any traces of the revisionist outlook in its own ranks.

Cliff Slaughter's 1983 letter is particularly striking because, despite criticising the Workers League for supposedly neglecting "the daily struggle to develop the dialectical method in cadre-training," the letter exhibits the very same impressionistic and pragmatic method that Slaughter polemicalised against 20 years earlier, in the struggle against the SWP's reunification with the Pabloites.

In *Opportunism and Empiricism* (March 1963), Slaughter had written:

With Hansen and the Pabloites, their new reality is actually a list of *abstractions* like "the colonial revolution," "the process of de-Stalinization," "irreversible trends," "leftward moving forces," "mass pressure," etc. Like all statements about social phenomena, these are meaningless unless they are demonstrated to have specific *class* content, for class struggle and exploitation are the *content* of all social phenomena.

Drawing the connection between Hansen's empiricist method and the SWP's glorification of the Castro regime, Slaughter explained:

Marxist analysis of the whole modern epoch has established that the political leaderships representing non-working class social strata can go only to a certain point in the struggle against imperialism. The objective limits to their revolution lead them eventually to turn against the working class, with its independent demands which correspond to the international socialist revolution. Only a course of the construction of independent working-class parties aiming at workers' power, based on the programme of Permanent Revolution, can prevent each national revolution from turning into a new stabilisation for world imperialism.^[33]

Such works read as an indictment of the WRP's abandonment of Permanent Revolution through its promotion of various bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East as the legitimate revolutionary leadership of the masses of the region.

Part Two

With no response forthcoming to North's reply to Slaughter, the Workers League began a political struggle over the WRP's abandonment of Permanent Revolution, most directly in respect to its writings on the bourgeois nationalists in the Middle East.

The first extended criticism of the WRP's line was taken up by North in a January 1984 letter to Mike Banda, ahead of an IC meeting planned for the next month, addressing the *News Line's* recent championing of PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) was a bourgeois nationalist organisation founded by the Arab League in 1964 to wage an armed struggle against Israel for an Arab state in the territory of Mandatory Palestine. It was an umbrella group of various factions. Arafat had co-founded the dominant Fatah faction and became chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee in 1969.

The WRP began developing relations with the PLO in 1976 and from that point increasingly passed over from a legitimate defence of the movement against imperialism, and critical support, to total adaptation and adulation.

North's criticisms in his [January 1984] letter focused on the most recent episode in that process at the time: the WRP's glowing account of Arafat's meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in December 1983.

With this meeting, the WRP claimed, "Arafat's audacious diplomacy has helped to undermine the treaty between Egypt and Israel." *News Line* declared that it signaled "the Egyptian government's recognition of the PLO, its legitimacy in the Middle East struggle, and its inalienable right to fight for the liberation of Palestine," reversing the earlier "Camp David conspiracy between Sadat, Begin and Carter."^[34]

Anwar Sadat was the third president of Egypt, from 1970 to 1981. He oversaw policies of economic privatisation and liberalisation and a realignment of Egypt towards the United States. In negotiations after the Yom Kippur War (or Fourth Arab-Israeli war) of 1973, he began a normalisation of relations with Israel, becoming the first Arab leader to visit the country officially in November 1977, meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in Jerusalem.

The two then held talks mediated by the United States and President Jimmy Carter at the US presidential retreat of Camp David in 1978, signing the Camp David Accords after 12 days of secret negotiations. This set up the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, for which Egypt was expelled from the Arab League.

These were fundamental experiences, demonstrating the bankruptcy of the Arab bourgeois nationalists. Egypt's accommodation with Israel was part of a broader move to accommodation with imperialism. It helped to set the stage, as North notes in his letter to Banda, for the bloody Israeli invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut in June 1982, aimed at driving the PLO out of the country, which it had used as a base of operations.

The claims made by the WRP of the Arafat-Mubarak meeting suggested that this history—and the enormous inter- and intra-class processes it contained—had been somehow reversed by a diplomatic masterstroke. That claim—which as North notes is more appropriate to the bourgeois idealist historiography of the great deeds of individuals—expressed a political drive to whitewash the Arab regimes and champion Arafat's attempt to base the Palestinian struggle on manoeuvres between them. The meeting with Mubarak was only the latest example of many, all ultimately leading to betrayals of the PLO by the Arab regimes.

As North notes in his letter:

The stench of Camp David was not buried with Sadat. The Arab bourgeoisie—shattered by the virtual collapse of OPEC and terrified by the specter of socialist revolution—is searching desperately for a formula which will allow them to bury the hatchet with Egypt. Then the stage will be set for an accommodation with Israel itself.^[35]

He then identifies the essential error:

The actual relations between imperialism and its clients in the Middle East as well as the changes in class relations within each Arab country are not even referred to.^[36]

Of course, this was working both ways. The false approach encouraged an adaptation to the bourgeois nationalist regimes, but the false approach was itself encouraged by the imperative to maintain the WRP's mercenary relationship with these regimes, to the great cost of the Arab working class—perhaps none more so than the Palestinian working class.

In fact, the PLO was increasingly exploited by the WRP as a steppingstone to various deep-pocketed factions of the Arab bourgeoisie—just as these forces made use of the PLO to boost their reputations at home.

In a superficially contradictory way, this took the form of the constant glorification of the PLO's every action, with any correct notion of critical support replaced by invocations of the sanctity of the "armed struggle" and the organisation's status as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."^[37] To the point, as North notes in his letter, that the WRP was defending Arafat against sections of the PLO at least partially critical of his opportunist manoeuvres.

In other words, the working class was abandoned to the leadership of the bourgeois nationalists, with any policy of building the ranks of the Fourth International among the Palestinians, or in the Middle East more broadly, dispensed with. In place of the fight to arm the working class with a Marxist programme, establish its political independence and prepare it to carry out the liberation from imperialism and completion of national democratic tasks in the process of a socialist revolution, the WRP put forward the PLO as the "leader of the struggle for the emancipation of the whole Arab nation."^[38]

North writes:

By writing articles which serve only to justify what has already been done by Arafat, and which paint in bright colors this or that pragmatic maneuver, the danger arises that we are falling victim to a political outlook that calls into question the real necessity to build the Trotskyist movement in the semi-colonial countries and within the anti-imperialist national liberation movements.^[39]

The only programme on which the Trotskyist movement could have been built in the region—and the only basis for defeating imperialism and the national bourgeoisie—was an orientation to the class struggle and a fight on that basis for the unity of workers across the Middle East.

North makes a point of referencing ongoing struggles not only in Marrakesh, Tunis and Cairo, but also Haifa (in the north of Israel)—evoking the Fourth International's original and correct 1948 statement on the formation of the Israeli state, declaring that the "total renunciation of Zionism is the *sine qua non* condition for the merging of Jewish workers' struggles with the social, national and liberationist

struggles of the Arab toilers."^[40]

History, unfortunately, has had the opportunity to show what the alternative offered: the ongoing slaughter of Palestinians in a vastly unequal conflict, leading to the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority and the current moves by Israel to raze the West Bank to the level of Gaza—all taking place as the Arab regimes proceed with a normalisation of relations with Tel Aviv, in service to imperialism's anti-Iranian axis.

North's letter focuses on the PLO but is clearly written as an initial critique of the WRP's whole line towards the bourgeois nationalist regimes and liberation movements—as the beginning of a political struggle for a change of course. He calls for a "balance sheet" of this activity, "making an analysis of each concrete experience through which the International Committee has passed" as part of an "exhaustive discussion on international perspectives, aimed at the drafting of a comprehensive international resolution."^[41]

That is, the Workers League was pursuing international and comradesly clarification. And it was guided by the conception of the absolute necessity of a world perspective as discussed in the first half of this lecture.

North explains:

No matter how promising certain developments within the national work of the sections may appear—such as our own experiences in various trade union struggles—these will not produce real gains for the sections involved unless such work is guided by a scientifically-worked out international perspective.^[42]

And, finally, for this document, the Workers League's criticisms are rooted explicitly in key historic experiences of the Trotskyist movement: the SLL's struggle against Pabloism, particularly over the questions of Algeria and Cuba in the 1950s and 1960s, and the recent events involving the SWP and Jack Barnes's open repudiation of Permanent Revolution.

In making this critique, the Workers League had the benefit of experiences made not just with the PLO, but with Libya, Iraq and Iran—which I will discuss in the context of the next major document of this period, North's February 1984 report to the International Committee—and also with Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka, which I want to outline briefly at this point.

The WRP set out its anti-Trotskyist position on the struggle against British imperialism in Zimbabwe at its Fourth Congress in March 1979, in a resolution authored by Banda. The document never referred to the independent class interests of the proletariat, instead speaking in non-class terms of the "multi-millioned masses."^[43] Workers in Zimbabwe were encouraged to place their trust in the Patriotic Front of Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo.

The Patriotic Front was a coalition of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), led by Nkomo, and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), the main faction of which was led by Mugabe. Each had its own military wing, which had been waging a guerilla campaign against the white minority government of Ian Smith since the late 1960s.

These were bourgeois nationalist organisations. But Banda assigned them the leadership of the struggle in Zimbabwe under the duplicitous formulation: "We support the Patriotic Front of Mugabe and Nkomo in so far as the Front continues the armed struggle against Smith and rejects a constitutional compromise."

In the same way as with the PLO, "the armed struggle" was identified as, quoting North in "How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism," "the supra-class strategy of anti-imperialist struggle," rather than a "tactic ... employed by definite social forces in pursuit of their class interests."^[44] The WRP acted to cover up the fundamentally opposed interests of the

bourgeois nationalists and the Zimbabwean working class and peasantry.

As for the “in so far as” condition for the WRP’s support, this was dropped within a year. In November 1979, the Patriotic Front called off the armed struggle and entered negotiations with the Smith government—the Lancaster House talks—overseen by British imperialism. The WRP spent the duration of these talks in a degrading game of catch—justifying every retreat and sellout authored by Mugabe and Nkomo.

The result was a Zimbabwean parliament with 20 of 100 seats reserved for the white minority (5 percent of the population) and policies of nationalisation of land *with* compensation (purely on a voluntary basis for the first 10 years), acceptance of the capitalist base of the economy with seizures of private property and blanket nationalisations foresworn, and peaceable relations with imperialism. Within three years, President Mugabe had slaughtered 20,000 civilians in Nkomo’s home region, presumed supporters of his faction, and forced Nkomo to flee the country.

As has already been indicated, the WRP’s glorification of the armed struggle of bourgeois nationalist groups had its most disruptive impact *within* the ICFI in Sri Lanka, where its swing behind the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1979 severely handicapped the RCL’s political work in opposing Tamil nationalism and Sinhala chauvinism and fighting for the unity of the Sri Lankan working class.

The LTTE was founded in 1976 to fight for an independent Tamil state, carrying out attacks on government targets and, officially from 1983, fighting a bloody civil war with the Sri Lankan government. The WRP uncritically embraced the LTTE, as it had the PLO, establishing relations with the organisation and even publishing the work of one of its pamphleteers, Anton Balasingham, while demanding that the RCL do the same.

The work in question, *On the Tamil National Question*, argued that socialists must uncritically support the separatist ambitions of the Tamil bourgeoisie. The reactionary character of this policy was made very clear in 1980, when an LTTE polemic declared, “Tamil people have had enough of the rotten ideology of the unity of the working class and an all-Sri Lankan revolution.”^[45]

The RCL was thus heavily restricted in its ability to politically challenge the Tamil nationalists and clarify the issues involved in an escalating conflict, with tragic consequences for the Sri Lankan working class. The civil war in Sri Lanka cost the lives of tens of thousands of fighters and over 100,000 civilians, serving only to harden divisions and strengthen the state and the forces of political reaction.

Even prior to its support for the LTTE, the WRP (actually going back to the period of the SLL) had not approached the political problems in the region in line with the Theory of Permanent Revolution, causing serious problems for the development of Trotskyism.

In 1971, the Indian government of Indira Gandhi declared war on Pakistan, intervening in the ongoing war between Pakistan and Bengali nationalist forces in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The RCL prepared a powerful statement aimed at unifying the working class of the whole subcontinent, supporting the legitimate struggle in East Pakistan while insisting that it could only be carried through in a socialist revolution.

As a vital part of this perspective, the RCL called for a revolutionary defeatist policy in Pakistan *and* in India, whose intervention on the side of East Pakistan/Bangladesh was aimed at setting the terms of its victory and quelling the revolutionary potential of the struggle, including within the borders of India.

But the WRP imposed a position of supposed “critical support” for the Indian government, claiming it was aiding the liberation of Bangladesh. When Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya raised his objections in a letter to the IC requesting international discussion on the matter, the WRP prevented its circulation.

At this time, the early 1970s, the WRP was opposed to any, even

critical, support for the self-determination of the Tamils in Sri Lanka: the polar opposite of the position it would later take up.

These two positions were closely connected. Comrade Balasuriya explained shortly after the split, in the essay “The Tamil Struggle and the Treachery of Healy, Banda and Slaughter,” in regard to the WRP’s early position on the Tamil question in Sri Lanka:

In Banda’s view, any demand to uphold the right of self-determination of minority nations in the newly formed “independent” states would play into the hands of imperialism for the ostensible reason that such demands would disrupt the tenuous unity forged among various nationalities in the backward countries in the course of the struggle against imperialism...

This position implicitly accepted the bourgeois states created in the aftermath of the Second World War as formations representing more or less the democratic aspirations of the masses oppressed by imperialism.^[46]

For the same reason, Banda supported the actions of the Indian bourgeoisie against Pakistan aimed primarily at securing the integrity of the Indian state.

By the time of the switch to support for the LTTE—with the previous policy left totally unexamined—the WRP was all the more driven to search for shortcuts and all the less concerned with theoretical consistency.

Needless to say, the political standing of Trotskyism was damaged—and would have been far more so if not for the principled struggle of the party in Sri Lanka led by Comrade Balasuriya—by these gyrations and contradictions, which, as the next sections of this lecture will demonstrate, were, if anything, all the more glaring in the Middle East.

The relations entered into by the WRP with Middle Eastern bourgeois nationalist regimes are taken up in Comrade North’s report to the February 1984 meeting of the IC, which will be the focus of the remainder of this lecture.

An alliance was signed with Muammar Gaddafi’s Libyan Jamahiriya (roughly translated as “people’s republic”) in July 1977. Shortly afterwards, relations were developed with Saddam Hussein’s Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party in Iraq. Not long after the Iranian Revolution of February 1979, a hand was extended to the Khomeini regime.

Beginning briefly with Libya, Gaddafi came to power as the leader of a young officers’ coup in 1969 against the puppet regime of British and US imperialism led by King Idris I, the ruler of the Kingdom of Libya.

In power, Gaddafi enacted a programme of nationalisations and social reforms, coupled with repression, while maintaining the bourgeois-capitalist character of the state and the economy. He developed a political theory, published as *The Green Book*, identifying the Soviet Union as imperialist, praising nationalism as a progressive force and advocating Islamism.

All of this was given a glowing write-up by the WRP, in terms that could only disorient and demoralise a cadre that had dedicated its life to Trotskyist principles.

Gaddafi had, the *News Line* claimed, “set Libya on the road of socialist development and expansion.”^[47] It elaborated: “The experience of the Libyan Revolution” had “demonstrated that the struggle for the world socialist revolution can and will destroy bureaucracy forever.”^[48] The WRP stood ready to “explain the teachings of the *Green Book* as part of the anti-imperialist struggle.”^[49]

Gaddafi himself had supposedly, entirely in the manner of the Pabloites’ “unconscious Marxists” like Castro, spontaneously “developed politically in the direction of revolutionary socialism.”^[50] The WRP applied a similar formula to all the Arab nationalist leaders, writing in

1979 that the pressure of imperialism would “only serve to exacerbate tensions within the national movement and push the most radical elements in the Arab national movement to recognize that the ‘historical weapon of national liberation can only be the class struggle.’”^[51] As if the class struggle was simply a policy to be employed by the likes of Gaddafi and Hussein.

Turning to Iraq, the Ba’athist tendency, of which Hussein was a leader of its Iraqi wing, was an Arab nationalist movement that made use of certain socialistic phrases and ideas, founded in the 1940s. Its representatives came to power in Syria and Iraq in 1963.

Ba’athism’s political successes grew substantially out of the false policy of Stalinist Communist Parties throughout this period. By the mid-1970s, both the Iraqi Communist Party and the Communist Party of Syria were signed up to so-called National Progressive Fronts with the Ba’athists, recognising the latter’s right to leadership.

Hussein came to power formally in 1979, but had in reality assumed leadership some years earlier. He rewarded the Iraqi Communist Party with a campaign of savage repression, including the execution of several of its members.

The WRP’s uncritical embrace of this regime was such that it defended these executions, taking what North described in his report as a position with “no precedent within the Trotskyist movement.”^[52]

The *News Line* wrote:

This is a straight case of Moscow trying to set up cells in the Iraqi armed forces for the purposes of undermining the regime. It must accept the consequences ... It is a principle with Trotskyists that we defend workers, whether they are Stalinists, revisionists or Social Democrats, from the attacks of the capitalist state. But, as the facts show, that has nothing to do with the incidents in Iraq.^[53]

This frankly grotesque statement demonstrates the degree to which the WRP at this point held up the bourgeois nationalist regimes as sacrosanct, as an arena from which even formal acknowledgement of the necessity of a revolution establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat was excluded.

In fact, in a document presented at its Fourth Congress in 1979, the WRP wrote that the “strategy of Anglo-US imperialism” in the Middle East was “dictated solely by its desire to protect the oil fields from expropriation by a radical regime,” relegating the working class to (at best) an entirely secondary role.^[54] A year later, the WRP was describing the Ba’athists as “in the long run, the real threat” to the intrigues of imperialism and Stalinism “in the Middle East.”^[55]

Basing its perspective for the Middle East on the actions of the bourgeois nationalist regimes, the WRP was deeply compromised by the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, in which Hussein hoped to take advantage of an Iran he assumed would be weakened by the revolution a year earlier and seize territory. That war continued to 1988 and was devastating for both sides, costing an estimated half a million lives and over a trillion dollars.

After three months of progress, Iraqi military forces were halted. Iran then invaded Iraq in 1982 and a bloody stalemate developed from 1983.

The Iraqi invasion was deeply reactionary, carried out with the support of US imperialism and part of a prolonged swing to the right by the Iraqi regime, including closer alignment with the imperialist powers. The WRP correctly opposed it, but felt compelled by its previous positions to muddy the issues, refusing to denounce Iraq for acting on behalf of imperialism.

In fact, as North noted in his report, a WRP Political Committee statement absurdly declared: “We call for full support for the national revolutionary movements including the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party and the Iranian Revolution in their fight against imperialism.”^[56] A few

months into the conflict the WRP declared:

Our opposition to the war does not diminish our support for the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party in Iraq in so far as it continues to uphold its struggle against imperialism and Zionism and support the Palestinian revolution.^[57]

The invasion was treated as an aberration from the otherwise progressive record and future of Ba’athism. Rather than seek to mobilise the working class against it, the WRP appealed to Hussein to stop and suggested a “peace conference” of Iran, Iraq and the PLO for a deal to be worked out entirely behind the backs of the working class.

Iran’s counter-invasion, having defeated Iraq’s aggression, was likewise a reactionary act—driven by its own expansionist aims. But by September 1983, the WRP had turned 180 degrees and declared for the military victory of Iran. By this point the WRP was so beholden to the bourgeois nationalists that it was essentially caught in the slipstream of whichever regime seemed to be on the up.

North summarises in his report:

We are disorienting our cadre and the working class. We are inviting cynicism toward our political line. The continuous shifts in our political line, in which no analysis connects a new conclusion with the one it both replaces and contradicts, are the hallmark of pragmatism.^[58]

That pragmatism, North’s report establishes, was based on a method of the most abject impressionism, glaringly highlighted in the on-the-spot report of the Iranian Revolution penned by Savas Michael in February-March 1983.

For context, the Iranian revolution mobilised millions on fundamentally class questions against the brutal US-backed dictatorship of the Shah. Lacking a revolutionary leadership, however, and misled by the Stalinists, the working class allowed power to fall into the hands of the bourgeois-clerical forces led by Ruhollah Khomeini, who then carried out fierce repression—including thousands of executions, arrests and the use of torture—against all vaguely left-wing forces.

In its initial February 1979 statement on the revolution, the IC had correctly warned, in a statement published in the *News Line*, how “in the absence of an organized revolutionary leadership and because of the cowardly class-collaborationist policies of Iranian Stalinism,” the religious leaders under Khomeini had been able to dominate and were defending the interests of “the bazaar merchants and other elements of the Iranian native capitalist class and petty-bourgeoisie.”^[59]

But this analysis was rapidly abandoned by the WRP, to the point where Savas could write of his visit and have published: “one fact is striking: nowhere can one see a policeman. ... If we consider the degree of popular support as a basic criterion for estimating the degree of political stability of a regime, then, undoubtedly, the Islamic regime in Teheran must be considered as extremely stable. Its foundation is the masses. Between the masses and their leadership, especially Imam Khomeini, there are mighty bonds, forged in the furnace of the revolution.”^[60]

This was observed, and Savas actually made a television appearance, during a time of mass arrests and repression. As North criticised in his IC report:

We have here an outstanding example of the complete and

unabashed substitution of impressionism for Marxism. Class forces no longer exist. Everything has become the “masses”—a category which explains nothing about the class dynamics and contradictions within Iran. Analysis is reduced to casual observation.^[61]

The same impressionist method dominated in respect to the WRP's relations with Libya and Iraq. Both countries experienced an enormous leap in fortunes in the post-war period. Average income per capita was lifted from among the lowest in the world to the highest in the region, and even rivalling some of the poorer European countries. This took place at breakneck speed, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.

And, as we've touched on, some of that wealth made its way into significant reforms: education, housebuilding, infrastructure, healthcare. Life expectancy increased dramatically. A range of social welfare indices saw marked improvements. Again, as we've seen, this was coupled with a fair amount of socialistic rhetoric.

These developments undoubtedly had their influence on the WRP leadership. Interpreted in a purely empiricist way, they contributed to a political line which assumed that a path was open to sustained social progress, and even a socialist society, which did not pass through the establishment, by a socialist revolution led by a Bolshevik-type party, of the dictatorship of the proletariat—just as Barnes' resurrection of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry discussed earlier proposed.

In fact, what was taking place in Libya and Iraq was dependent on particular and politically unsustainable conditions, which a historical materialist method could clearly disclose. The source of the increased wealth was oil revenues—to give a sense, Iraq's oil export revenues increased from \$1 billion in 1972 to \$26 billion in 1980.

However, the ability of these governments to claim a significant share of those revenues depended on particular and transitory historical conditions: the existence of the Soviet Union, allowing such states to balance relatively profitably between it and world imperialism, and a period of weakness in the imperialist camp, wracked by crisis and the class struggle.

Relatedly, the ability of the population to claim a significant share of the new wealth in the form of reforms was rooted in its mighty struggles, which had toppled the old regimes and which the bourgeois nationalist leaders lived in fear of, but which had not conquered the ownership of production and therefore stood to be reversed.

In other words, just as the world perspective of Permanent Revolution insists, the gains were not sustainable outside of the progress of the world socialist revolution. With that forestalled, the imperialist camp was able to use the crisis in oil markets caused by the Iraq-Iran war to heavily undermine OPEC producers' market share. Of course, the effects of the war itself devastated the Iraqi economy. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, any insulation from the pressures of imperialism was removed—as brutally demonstrated by the Gulf War, the Iraq War and the NATO intervention in Libya.

Ignoring these historical factors and their relation to the class struggle, the WRP was proceeding in precisely the same way as the Pabloites. It was following the path of those who, quoting North's report, “substitute their superficial impressions for a scientific study of class relations based on the dialectical materialist method and historical materialism,” and for whom “the need for a revision of Trotskyism and an abandonment of principled positions in line with the ‘reality of living events’ becomes all consuming,” driving “an uncritical adaptation to the illusory stability of imperialism and those political forces who temporarily predominate within the workers' movement and the national liberation struggles.”^[62]

This was graphically proved by Savas's Iran report, which had an uncanny resemblance to the report of American SWP member Mary Alice-

Waters returning from Nicaragua in 1980, where the Sandinistas had just taken power.

Approaching political events in this way, the WRP was inevitably caught in politically devastating contradictions and swings in policy. Rather than an integrated world perspective, it increasingly based its programme on a series of pragmatic alliances with nationalist tendencies organically incapable of resisting imperialism in the long term, of overcoming their own conflicts of interests, and of formulating a viable programme for the unity of the working class.

Hence North's call, in his letter to Banda and in this report, for a balance sheet of the IC's experience in relation to the national liberation movements, with the emphasis that the task was to work for “the development of the IC as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.”^[63] Such an exercise, properly conducted, would expose and preclude the sorts of mutually conflicting positions taken up in succession by the WRP.

Of course, these positions were not purely a case of methodological errors, but bound up with political pressures and the cumulative impact of having failed to cognise and combat those pressures, and having pursued an opportunist line over a prolonged period. An impressionist method was frequently being employed precisely in order to furnish results pre-decided by the needs of the WRP's opportunist, and increasingly financial, relations—which themselves had their roots in a false conception that the revolutionary party would be built as an extension of a strong national organisation in the UK.

North and the Workers League recognised this and conceived of their criticisms as a continuation of the struggle in the Trotskyist movement against Pabloite revisionism—the conduit for the pressure of world imperialism on the Trotskyist movement.

North explained in his report:

The International Committee is based upon the traditions and principles established through the political, theoretical and organizational struggles of all previous generations of Marxists—and the way in which this continuity of the IC with these previous generations has been developed is through the struggle against every variety of anti-Marxism that has emerged within the workers' movement, especially within the Trotskyist movement itself.^[64]

The class pressures acting on the WRP were expressed at home as well as internationally, where the party was orienting ever more openly to centrist and middle-class radical elements—above all to the left flank of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. This was expressed in an ultraleft refusal to place demands on the Labour Party, in which the working class still had substantial illusions, which served to absolve the WRP of its responsibility to engage in a struggle with the Labourites, which would have cut across its developing relations with figures like Ken Livingstone and Ted Knight, and union bureaucrats.

At the core of this response to the class struggle in Britain and the abandonment of Permanent Revolution as the centrepiece of the strategy of world socialist revolution was a deep pessimism in and impatience with the working class, driving a search for shortcuts, and a related nationalist outlook, interpreting “successes” from the standpoint of apparent advances made in particular countries, rather than from the standpoint of the development of an international socialist party and revolutionary struggle.

Reversing this tendency could only be based on a thorough reassimilation of the struggle led by the SLL against the SWP's reunification with the Pabloites between 1961 and 1964, which, as North explained, “brought to the fore all the fundamental issues involved in the

struggle against Pabloism: the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class as the gravedigger of capitalism and the builder of a socialist society; the rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat; the denial of the struggle against spontaneity and the necessity for a conscious struggle for Marxist theory; the renunciation of the historical role of the Fourth International.”^[65]

The contemporary line of the WRP had to be critically evaluated in the light of these issues, and the lessons of that struggle. North concluded his report with a proposal for a serious discussion within the IC, a circulation of documents and the preparation of an IC Conference.

By that time, however, the rot was very deep. In a call to help prepare this lecture, Comrade Dave told Tom and me that the hysteria at the meeting—which had been rigged by Healy, Slaughter and Banda—while he was making his contribution was such that he never got the chance to finish it. It was confirmed that matters had gone beyond a discussion. A principled political struggle would have to be waged.

Recognising that this is what they confronted, the leaders of the WRP sought to land a pre-emptive blow against the Workers Leagues by posing an ultimatum and threatening a split if the criticisms were not withdrawn. Keeping focussed on the main task to be accomplished, which was to clarify and win to a Trotskyist line as broad a section of the cadre of the ICFI as possible, the WL tactically withdrew its criticisms, pending better circumstances in which the critique of the WRP’s political line could be brought forward.

That, however, begins to trespass on the theme of the next lecture.

[1] David North, “A Contribution to a Critique of G. Healy’s ‘Studies in Dialectical Materialism,’” available: <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/the-icfi-defends-trotskyism-1982-1986/02.html>

[2] David North, “Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism,” *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2023), pp. 1-56.

[3] North, “A Contribution to a Critique of G. Healy’s ‘Studies in Dialectical Materialism,’” Section 6: Political Summary of Critique of G. Healy’s ‘Studies,’ available: <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/the-icfi-defends-trotskyism-1982-1986/02.html>

[4] Karl Marx, “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” March 1850, available: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>

[5] Leon Trotsky, “Contribution Toward a Discussion on the Basic Theoretical Conceptions of the International Communist League,” *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34*, pp. 164-65.

[6] Letter from Cliff Slaughter to David North, November 26, 1985, available: <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/the-icfi-defends-trotskyism-1982-1986/17.html>

[7] David North, “Chapter 7: Trotskyism Betrayed,” *Gerry Healy and his Place in the History of the Fourth International*, 1991, available: <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/healy/07.html>

[8] Letter from Keerthi Balasuriya to a Sri Lankan Comrade in London, January 11, 1972, *Fourth International*, Vol. 14 No. 1, March 1987, p. 44.

[9] Political Committee of the Workers League, *A Provocateur Attacks Trotskyism*, (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1983), p. 8.

[10] Ibid. p. 15.

[11] Ibid. p. 13.

[12] Ibid. pp. 1-2.

[13] Ibid. p. 9.

[14] V.I. Lenin, “Letters on Tactics,” April 1917, available: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/x01.htm>

[15] V.I. Lenin, “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution a.k.a. The April Theses,” available: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>

[16] *A Provocateur Attacks Trotskyism*, p. 14.

[17] Quoted in “Political Report by David North to the International Committee of the Fourth International,” February 11, 1984, available: <http://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/the-icfi-defends-trotskyism-1982-1986/06.html>

[18] *A Provocateur Attacks Trotskyism*, p. 2.

[19] Ibid. p. 20.

[20] Ibid. pp. 24-25.

[21] Letter of the National Committee of the SLL to the National Committee of the SWP, January 2, 1961, *Trotskyism vs Revisionism* Volume 3, Cliff Slaughter, ed. (London: New Park Publications, 1974), pp. 48-49.

[22] “Political Report by David North to the International Committee of the Fourth International,” February 11, 1984, available: <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/the-icfi-defends-trotskyism-1982-1986/06.html>

[23] Letter from Cliff Slaughter to David North, December 1983, available: <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/the-icfi-defends-trotskyism-1982-1986/03.html>

[24] Christoph Vandreier, “1982: Marxism, the revolutionary party, and the critique of Healy’s Studies in Dialectics,” *World Socialist Web Site*, September 28, 2023, available: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/09/28/heal-s28.html>

[25] Workers League Political Committee, “Mobilize Labor Against US Imperialism,” *Bulletin*, October 28, 1983, p. 6.

[26] Statement by the *Bulletin* Editorial Board, “Class issues in the Grenada coup,” *Bulletin*, October 25, 1983, p. 3.

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[28] “Mobilize Labor Against US Imperialism,” *Bulletin*, October 28, 1983, p. 7.

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