

Greetings to the Young Guard of Bolshevik Leninists, supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International in the former USSR

# On the centenary of the founding of the Left Opposition

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*These remarks were delivered by David North, chairman of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party (US), to a meeting honoring the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Left Opposition that was held by the Young Guard of Bolshevik Leninists (YGBL) on October 15, 2023. The YGBL is a Trotskyist youth organization in Russia, Ukraine and several other former Soviet republics that has declared its political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International.*

On behalf of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, permit me to bring revolutionary greetings to the comrades of the Young Guard of Bolshevik Leninists.

The significance of this meeting arises from the fact that it establishes, exactly 100 years after the founding of the Left Opposition, that Trotskyism lives in the former Soviet Union. The principles and traditions underlying the struggle initiated by Trotsky and his co-thinkers—the most advanced and politically conscious sections of the Bolshevik Party—are being revived and fought for by a new generation of revolutionary youth in Russia and Ukraine and all the different components of the former Soviet Union.

Trotsky was once described as a “man of history.” The Fourth International, which emerged out of the Left Opposition, is a party of history. Our movement contains within it and is a concentrated expression of the great and often tragic revolutionary experiences of the working class over an entire historical epoch. We cannot avoid being mindful of this great legacy as we meet today.

One hundred years ago on this date, co-thinkers of Leon Trotsky in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, within the Russian Communist Party, addressed a letter to the Politburo of the Central Committee—the *Declaration of the 46*—which criticized the growth of bureaucratism and the incorrect policies that were placing in danger the survival of the newly established workers’ state.

It is important to recognize that they were criticizing not only a given set of policies but an abandonment of a method, the Marxist method, upon which, and only upon which, correct policies for the working class can be formulated. They criticized bureaucratism as a method representing alien class forces, which strangled inner-party democracy and cut off the possibility of genuine theoretical work and political analysis. They recognized that this false method, rooted in hostile class forces and the pressures of imperialism on the workers’ state, confronted the working class with great dangers.

No one could have foreseen in 1923 that this document marked the beginning of a political struggle that would prove to be the most consequential in modern history. And yet, in historical retrospect, we now understand very well that the outcome of the struggle within the Bolshevik Party, which developed on an international scale, was to have vast consequences for the international working class and humanity as a whole.

The defeat of the Left Opposition by the Stalinist bureaucracy is the principal reason for the terrible defeats suffered by the working class in the 20th century. If the Left Opposition had prevailed in its struggle against the Stalinist faction—against the growth of bureaucratism, against the resurgence of nationalism—the world socialist revolution would have been successfully completed in the last century. But that, of course, did not take place.

Why did it not succeed? Trotsky and his supporters initiated the struggle against Stalinism under unfavorable conditions. The month that the founders of the Left Opposition first raised the banner of political opposition to the growing apparatus was the same month in which the German Revolution suffered a massive political defeat. The defeat of the most powerful working class in Europe, which was to be followed just 10 years later by the catastrophic victory of fascism in Germany, had profound consequences for the struggle for Marxism within the Soviet Union itself. It must never be forgotten that Stalinism was ultimately the product of the defeats of the working class, both within Russia and internationally.

Trotsky never succumbed to political pessimism. All the events of that period were subjected to Marxist analysis, and from these experiences Trotsky drew the most far-reaching political lessons. Trotsky declared that the great problem of this historical epoch, the epoch of the death agony of capitalism, was the crisis of working class leadership.

Marxism was not disproven by the events of the 1920s and 1930s. Rather, though in a tragic form, its essential role in the liberation of the working class was confirmed. As capitalism staggered from crisis to crisis in that period, it fully deserved the description given to it by Trotsky. It was in its death agony. Nevertheless, the great problem remained that of proletarian leadership. That was the problem that had to be solved. But he was convinced that it could be.

The centrist opponents of Trotskyism said that it was premature to found the Fourth International. One could not found an International apart from “great events,” by which they meant that an International could only be founded on the basis of a successful socialist revolution. That conception

was entirely incorrect, because it implied that a successful socialist revolution preceded the building of a Marxist leadership. If that were the case, it would not be necessary to have a revolutionary party at all. Its only purpose would be to gather people to celebrate victories already achieved.

Trotsky replied by first of all reminding his critics that the Third International itself, though it held its first Congress in 1919, had actually been founded in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the First World War, in August 1914, when Lenin demanded a break from the discredited and politically bankrupt Second International.

Trotsky said that the Fourth International was being founded on “great events,” the greatest defeats in the history of the working class. But those defeats, to the extent that the lessons were learned, would lay the basis for a new international revolutionary regroupment of the working class. He acted with complete confidence in the power of Marxist thought, the Marxist program and the revolutionary capacities of the working class. And he understood, notwithstanding the ruthlessness and power of the Soviet bureaucracy, that it was politically doomed. Stalinism was a reactionary excrescence of the revolution, and its victory would be short-lived. Its national program, rooted in the false concept of “socialism in one country,” contradicted the basic tendencies of world historical development and could not resolve the problem of socialism in the Soviet Union, let alone on a world scale.

Trotsky’s call for the political revolution was to be vindicated. He said many times that without the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the bureaucracy would destroy the USSR. That is what happened. But the dissolution of the Soviet Union was not the end of Marxism. In fact, political developments today demonstrate the enormous perspicacity of Trotsky’s thought and the program of the Fourth International.

The question arises: Why should such emphasis be placed on this 100th anniversary? Is this only a matter of historical study? What is the relevance of this history to the present day?

I think this question can be answered on both theoretical and political grounds.

First, the struggle of the Left Opposition demonstrates, and this has been extensively documented in particular in the books of Comrade Vadim Rogovin, that there was an alternative to Stalinism, that the fate of the Soviet Union was not predetermined, that Stalinism was not the natural and necessary outgrowth of the October Revolution and of Bolshevism, but rather its negation; and that there was a powerful opposition with an extensively developed program, which correctly analyzed and provided an entirely different orientation for the development of the Soviet Union. That program, had it prevailed, would have led to very different outcome. That is the first point which we make and insist upon.

Second, within the context of the present world situation, it can be demonstrated that all the issues raised by the Left Opposition contained in embryonic form the issues that confront the working class within the former USSR and on a world scale today.

For example, the issue that played a central role in the emergence of the Left Opposition, and which preoccupied Lenin in the final months of his active political life, was the question of the nationalities. Lenin came to realize that Stalin more and more openly represented a dangerous and reactionary nationalist tendency within the Bolshevik Party, a tendency upon which he was determined to declare war, and would have declared war openly at the scheduled Twelfth Party Congress of April 1923, had he not succumbed to a stroke.

The documents of that period are essential to understanding the roots of the tragic, fratricidal struggle that has erupted between Russia and Ukraine. The war has been instigated by American and European imperialism. But this war is the historical outcome of the Stalinist regime’s repudiation of socialist internationalism.

The policies of Putin in Moscow and Zelensky in Kiev—regimes arising

out of the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism—are rooted in the chauvinism of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which inflamed national divisions.

Or let us take the present tragic events which are unfolding in Israel and in Gaza. One cannot help but be struck by the degree to which these events fully vindicate the warnings made by Trotsky in 1938 and 1939, that an attempt to solve what was called the “Jewish question,” apart from the socialist revolution, was impossible. Well, Palestinian and Jewish workers are now paying the price of the tragic betrayal of Stalinism, and they are experiencing the hopelessness of attempts to solve such a historical question apart from the struggle for socialism, and socialist internationalism, in the working class.

Our party builds its program, conducts its work within the working class on a world scale, on the basis of the strategic experiences of the working class during the past century. No other party has anything to offer the working class. One hundred years after the Left Opposition was founded, what alternative has emerged to the program of Trotskyism? Where are other and better answers to be found to the great political questions of our time? In the writings of Gramsci? Mao Zedong? Fidel Castro? The Frankfurt School? All of these variations of bourgeois ideology, petty bourgeois politics, and nationalist perspectives are frauds. None of these individuals and tendencies have left behind a program and a legacy which answers the problems of our time. Only the work of Trotsky, as it has been developed by the Fourth International, has proved itself equal to the historical period.

I want to conclude by stressing that we are observing two anniversaries this year. The first is the anniversary which we are celebrating today, the centenary of the founding of the Trotskyist movement. Next month, on the 16th of November, we will also be taking note of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the International Committee. These anniversaries are profoundly interconnected. They answer the two great questions of our time.

The first question is: “Was there an alternative to Stalinism?” And that is answered by the review of the history of the Left Opposition.

But once that question is answered in the affirmative, once one has established that Trotskyism was the alternative to Stalinism, a second question arises: “Who are the Trotskyists?” Does there exist a movement today which can legitimately claim to be based on the legacy of Trotskyism? That question is answered no less decisively in the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Of the 100 years of Trotskyism, 70 of those years have developed under the banner of the International Committee. In the “Open Letter” written by James P. Cannon and issued in November 1953, breaking with Pabloism, Cannon reasserted the basic principles upon which the Trotskyist movement had been founded. All of them have been vindicated. Several months later, in March of 1954, Cannon reiterated that the International Committee alone upholds the Leninist-Trotskyist theory of the revolutionary party.

The past 70 years have been years of relentless struggle against those who would revise and abandon the principles upon which the Left Opposition and the Fourth International were founded. These dual anniversaries—the 100th anniversary of the Left Opposition and the 70th anniversary of the issuing of the Open Letter—acquire therefore immense historical and political significance in the present situation.

We all realize that we are passing through a global economic, social, political and intellectual crisis. Nevertheless, this situation, characteristic of a revolutionary epoch, creates the possibility for the transformation of society on the basis of socialism. The old order is breaking down, and a new and higher form of civilization is emerging.

We see throughout the world the resurgence of revolutionary opposition. It is not yet conscious of its tasks. But our movement will bring into that growing process of struggle an awareness and understanding of the

political tasks which it confronts. This is an epoch where it is possible to achieve that unity of the international working class which has always been the principal objective of our movement. This is the epoch of Trotskyism. No other movement, no other party, no other tendency has prepared for the situation which we face today.

I must finally say, comrades, as one who has been active in the Trotskyist movement for more than a half century, the very fact that we are celebrating 100 years of Trotskyism with our comrades in Russia, Ukraine and other components of the Soviet Union, is not only a vindication of the struggle of Trotskyism, but a source of enormous optimism. Trotskyism lives. Its influence is expanding throughout the world. The Fourth International will prove itself in practice to be the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

Long live the Fourth International!

Long live the International Committee!

Long live the struggle for world socialist revolution!



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