

Socialist internationalism and the struggle against Zionism and imperialism

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The following lecture was given by World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board Chairman David North at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on Tuesday, October 24.

Tonight's lecture is being held under the title "Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the 21st Century." It is part of a series of events within the United States and internationally commemorating the 100th anniversary of the October 1923 founding of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Leon Trotsky. This marked the beginning of the most consequential political struggle of the 20th century, that is, the struggle led by Leon Trotsky against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Communist Party and the Soviet state under the Stalinist regime, and the betrayal of the international program and principles upon which the 1917 October Revolution was based.

When I say it is the most consequential struggle, let me put it this way. If the outcome of that fight had been different, had it ended with the victory of the Trotskyist faction and the defeat of Stalinism, the 20th century would have been the century in which the victory of the world socialist revolution had been secured. In a lecture that I gave in the late 1990s, I answered the claim that there was no alternative to Stalinism, that the Russian Revolution was doomed from the start. That was the appraisal made by Eric Hobsbawm, a noted British historian who had spent 60 years in the British Communist Party. He had a vested political and intellectual interest in denying the possibility of an alternative to Stalinism. It was a way of justifying his own politics.

But that is not the case. The issues that were fought out in the 1920s and the 1930s had a profound impact on the course of the last century, and, therefore, the conditions under which we live today. The defeat of Trotsky in the Soviet Union, the victory of Stalinism, had a catastrophic effect on the outcome of the class struggle in Germany. The critique that Trotsky made of the policies pursued by the Stalinist party in Germany—his warnings of the danger of fascism, his criticisms of the ultra-leftist policies of the Communist Party—was proven correct. Hitler could have been stopped. Trotsky advocated a united front of the Social Democratic and Communist parties, the two mass parties of the German working class. He wrote that nothing was more critical than the defeat of Hitler, and warned that the defeat of the working class and the coming to power of Hitler would be a global catastrophe of unimaginable dimensions. And Trotsky warned as well that one of those catastrophes would be the annihilation of European Jewry.

Those warnings were ignored. Hitler came to power, with horrifying consequences. This set into motion a train of events that remain operative in the political situation we are experiencing today. Without the victory of Hitler, without the victory of fascism, there would never have been a mass Zionist movement, there would never have been a mass migration of Jews to Palestine. And one of the major factors in the escalating crisis that we are now witnessing simply would not exist.

The victory of the German working class—the coming to power of the working class in the most advanced industrialized country in

Europe—would have certainly been a major milestone in the advance of socialism throughout the world.

The initial plan for this lecture was to review the historical events and issues that led to the founding of the Left Opposition, and to explain why the assimilation of the lessons of this history is critical for an understanding of the present world situation and for the development of a revolutionary socialist strategy in the contemporary world.

But, as I think you all can appreciate, the unfolding events require that the structure of tonight's presentation be somewhat changed. I will begin with a discussion of the situation and proceed from there to demonstrate its connection to the critical issues of Marxist theory, political perspective and socialist program that were at the heart of the struggle waged by the Left Opposition against Stalinism.

We are now witnessing the greatest international crisis since the end of World War II. Two wars are raging: in Ukraine and Gaza. It is, in fact, more correct to say that these are two battlefronts in a rapidly escalating Third World War, whose scale and ferocity, unless stopped by a mass anti-war movement of the international working class, will surpass that of World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945). Even as we meet, the United States is assembling a massive military strike force in the Mediterranean, spearheaded by two aircraft carriers. The Biden administration is threatening to intervene if the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah intensifies. This could lead to war between the United States and Iran.

President Biden, in the speech that he delivered last week upon his return from Israel, explicitly connected the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Demanding an additional \$105 billion in military spending—on top of the \$1 trillion already allocated for 2023—he insisted that both wars are critical to the "national security" of the United States, by which he means the global geopolitical interests of American imperialism.

Using its Ukrainian proxies, the United States and its NATO allies instigated and are waging an imperialist war against Russia whose aim is regime change, the smashing up of the country, the redivision of its fragments among the NATO powers, under the supervision of the United States, and the plundering of its vast resources.

As the looming confrontation with Iran makes clear, the Israeli onslaught against the imprisoned population of Gaza is an extension of the global war. The Israeli attack on Gaza, which has assumed genocidal dimensions, is aimed at the annihilation of Palestinian resistance to the Zionist regime. As the Israeli government and military employ the language and methods of extermination, it is entirely appropriate to describe this war as the Zionist regime's "Final Solution" of the Palestinian question.

This war of annihilation is supported by all the major imperialist governments. Amid the ongoing slaughter of the Gazan people, the imperialist leaders declare their solidarity with Israel. In what has become an obligatory political ritual, President Biden, British Prime Minister Sunak and German Chancellor Scholz have made their pilgrimage to

Israel. French President Macron arrived there earlier today.

These leaders profess their profound sympathy for the Jewish people and invoke the Nazi Holocaust as justification for their defense of Israel's assault on Gaza. The scale of deceit and hypocrisy in such declarations is beyond measurement. They are all the political successors of governments that either organized, collaborated in, or ignored the persecution and mass murder of Jews between 1939 and 1945. The extermination of the Jews by the German ruling class, during the years that it entrusted power and the defense of its economic interests to Adolf Hitler, marked a horrifying milestone in the putrefaction of capitalist society: the utilization of modern technology and industrial organization for the process of collecting, transporting and killing millions of human beings. The French ruling class collaborated with the Nazi regime in this process. Approximately 25 percent of the Jewish citizens of France were turned over to the Nazis for extermination.

Great Britain was not occupied by the Nazis, and its relatively small Jewish population was spared the horrors of extermination. But the antisemitism that was pervasive in the British ruling class was manifested in its cruel treatment of Jewish refugees from Nazi occupied Europe.

Over 20,000 German Jews who had escaped to Britain were classified as "enemy aliens," rounded up, and placed in internment camps located on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea. One of these internment sites, known as Hutchinson Camp, incarcerated 1,200 refugees, among them leading artists, musicians and intellectuals. A detailed account of the British policy of mass internment of Jewish refugees from Nazism is provided in a book titled *The Island of Extraordinary Captives*, by journalist Simon Parkin. The British government has never acknowledged, let alone apologized for, its mistreatment of Jewish refugees.

As for the United States, the indifference of the Roosevelt administration to the fate of the Jews is an irrefutably established historical fact. Hundreds of thousands of European Jews who might have been saved perished in Nazi gas chambers because they were denied entry into the United States. In 1939, the United States refused to allow 900 Jewish refugees to disembark from the *MS St. Louis*. They were forced to return to Europe. Hundreds of these refugees were subsequently murdered by the Nazis. Even after it became well known that Nazi Germany was gassing to death thousands of Jews every day, military measures that might have been taken to disrupt the transport of Jews to extermination camps, such as the bombing of railway tracks leading to Auschwitz, were rejected out of hand.

Was it belated remorse over its failure to save Jews from Hitlerite genocide that led the United States to champion the creation of Israel? Biden boasted last week that the United States, under the administration of President Harry Truman, was the first country to recognize the state of Israel upon its creation in 1948. But the decision of Truman was not motivated by any personal sympathy for the Jewish people.

Notwithstanding his well-documented antisemitic bigotry, Truman's policy was determined by what he considered to be in the best interests of American imperialism: in the first instance, to displace Britain as the principal imperialist power in the Middle East, and, eventually, to use Israel as Washington's main regional attack dog. That is the role it has played for almost all of its 75-year history. As Biden reiterated with remarkable candor in his speech before the Israeli parliament: "I have long said: if Israel didn't exist, we would have to invent it." Israel's services as a client state of American imperialism are more critical than ever to US-NATO imperialism as it prepares for military operations against Iran.

One cannot fail to note that the unquestioning support for Israel proceeds alongside the open alliance of the imperialist powers with the regime in Ukraine, whose principal national hero, Stepan Bandera, was a vicious fascist and antisemite, the leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), which collaborated with the Nazis in the

extermination of the Jews of Ukraine.

Giorgia Meloni, the fascist prime minister of Italy, who traces her political lineage to Benito Mussolini, has also traveled to Israel, declaring her solidarity with the Zionist regime as she stood alongside Netanyahu.

Last month, all members of the Canadian parliament, as well as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the German ambassador, rose to their feet to applaud the Ukrainian fascist Yaroslav Hunka, who served in the Waffen SS as an ally of the Nazis in the war against the Soviet Union.

The flagrant collaboration of the imperialist powers with Ukrainian fascists, which, particularly in Germany, has involved a persistent effort to relativize and justify the crimes of the Nazi regime, has not stopped the United States, its NATO allies and, of course, the Zionist regime, from hurling the charge of "antisemitism" against all those who expose, denounce or even question Israel's brutal violation of Palestinian democratic rights.

Throughout his recent world tour, the legendary musician Roger Waters has been under relentless attack and accused of antisemitism because he has had the courage to defend the Palestinian people. And everyone who knows the work of Roger Waters knows very well that he is one of the most significant artists at the forefront of the fight for human rights, and that his opposition to the policies of the Israeli regime has absolutely nothing to do with antisemitism.

From the time it emerged in the late 19th century as a powerful reactionary movement, initially in Vienna under Mayor Karl Lueger, antisemitism was understood to be a weapon of political and ideological struggle against the emerging working class and socialist movement. The connection between the antisemite's hatred of Jews and his hatred of socialism and the labor movement was widely recognized.

This insidious connection found its most malignant expression in the worldview and politics of Adolf Hitler. Based on a careful reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, the journalist Konrad Heiden, one of Hitler's earliest biographers, explained that the source of the Nazi leader's violent antisemitism was his identification of the Jews with the working class and socialism. Heiden wrote:

The great light dawned on him; suddenly the "Jewish question" became clear ... the labor movement did not repel him because it was led by Jews; the Jews repelled him because they led the labor movement. ... But one thing is certain: it was not Rothschild, the capitalist, but Karl Marx, the Socialist, who kindled Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism.

And what was it about the labor movement that aroused Hitler's hatred? He despised above all else appeals for the equality of all people. As Heiden wrote:

One of Hitler's most characteristic reproaches to the labor movement is that in Austria it had fought for equal rights for all—the detriment of the master race chosen by God.

But now, in the interests of imperialism, antisemitism has acquired an entirely new meaning. It is used as a swear word to denounce and discredit those who fight for democratic rights, human equality and, of course, socialism.

There is another element of the propaganda campaign that is now playing a central role in legitimizing Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinians. The breakout of Gaza on October 7, which was led by Hamas and resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,500 Israelis, is

presented as nothing other than an act of monstrous criminality, the manifestation of what Biden has described on several occasions as “pure unadulterated evil.”

The death of so many innocent people is a tragic event. But the tragedy is rooted in objective historical events and political conditions that made such an event inevitable. As always, the ruling classes oppose all references to the causes of the uprising. Their own massacres and the entire bloody system of oppression over which they preside so ruthlessly must go unmentioned.

Why should anyone be surprised that decades of oppression by the Zionist regime led to an explosive eruption of anger? It has happened in the past, and, as long as human beings are oppressed and brutalized, it will happen in the future. Those who suffer oppression cannot be expected during a desperate rebellion, when their own lives hang precariously in the balance, to treat their tormentors with tender-hearted courtesy. Such rebellions are often marked by acts of cruel and bloody vengeance.

Many examples come to mind: the Sepoy mutiny in India, the uprising of the Dakota Indians against the settlers, the rebellion of Boxers in China, of the Hereros in Southwest Africa, and, in more recent times, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. In all these cases, the insurgents were denounced as heartless murderers and demons, and subjected to brutal retribution. Decades, if not a century or more, had to pass before they were belatedly honored as freedom fighters.

In explaining the causes of the American Civil War, which resulted in over 700,000 deaths, Lincoln spoke of the tragedy as the consequence of 250 years of slavery, and invoked the words of Matthew: “Woe unto the world because of offenses, for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” In the case of the Palestinians and the people of Gaza, the offense has come from the Zionist state and its imperialist patrons.

The long history of Zionist massacres of Palestinians, without which the State of Israel could not have been founded, is excluded from the condemnation of Hamas and the Palestinians. Even events as recent as the gunning down by Israeli soldiers of over 200 Gazans in 2018 as they demonstrated peacefully on their side of the border is kept out of the media narrative.

Just today, John Kirby, the Biden administration spokesman, specifically said that the United States opposes a ceasefire. He acknowledged that many civilians will die, but said that’s the way it is. In so doing, he undermined the whole basis of his condemnation of Hamas. He was simply saying, “Yes, civilians die in a military action, but it’s all right if those civilians are killed by Israelis. It is only an example of ‘pure unadulterated evil’ if civilians die in the midst of a military action undertaken by the Palestinians.”

We have been asked why we have not condemned Hamas for the violence of October 7. The answer is that we will not participate in, or lend any legitimacy to the reactionary cynicism and hypocrisy that condemns resistance to oppression, or which draws an equal sign between the episodic violence of the oppressed and the far greater, relentless and systematic violence of the oppressor.

The hypocrisy is compounded by the fact that the founders of the state of Israel included terrorists who had no compunctions about organizing bombings and carrying out murders in pursuit of their political ends.

In the film *Exodus*, which was made in 1960 as a glorification of the establishment of the state of Israel, one of the major figures, and in a peculiar way, one of the most honest, is a leader of a terrorist group of Zionists. He explains and justifies, very bluntly, the use of terror. That man is presented in the film as a perhaps misguided, but still heroic figure. That figure was the recreation of a leader of the notorious Zionist terrorist organization known as Lehi, also known as the Stern Gang, whose founder, Avraham Stern, wrote:

Force always forged the destiny of nations ... The destiny of the land of Israel had always been determined by the sword, not diplomacy. The only justice in the world is force and the dearest asset in the world is freedom. The right to life is granted only to the strong, and power, if not given legally, should be taken illegally.

The operational leader of the Stern Gang was Yitzhak Shamir, who in 1948 ordered the assassination of Count Folke Bernadotte, the United Nations mediator who had been assigned to negotiate a settlement of the war that followed the declaration of the Israeli state. What punishment did Shamir receive for the killing of the U.N. mediator? In the years that followed Israeli independence, he occupied a high level position in the state’s secret police, the Mossad. In 1983, Shamir became Israel’s prime minister. His first term ended in 1984. But he regained the office in 1986 and remained prime minister until 1992. He died in 2011 at the age of 96, and all the leaders of the Israeli state paid fulsome tribute to the ruthless terrorist.

Our criticisms of Hamas are of a political, not hypocritically moralistic character. It is a bourgeois national movement, and the methods it resorts to, including a military operation such as that undertaken on October 7, cannot result in the defeat of the Zionist regime and the liberation of the Palestinian people. Moreover, to the extent that Hamas depends upon the patronage of one or another bourgeois regime in the Middle East, its struggle against the Zionist state will always be subordinated to the interests of the capitalist ruling elites of the region, and, therefore, to their reactionary maneuverings with the Israeli regime and world imperialism.

In the final analysis, the liberation of the Palestinian people can be achieved only through a unified struggle of the working class, Arab and Jewish, against the Zionist regime as well as the treacherous Arab and Iranian capitalist regimes, and their replacement with a union of socialist republics throughout the Middle East, and, indeed, the entire world.

This is a gigantic task. But it is the only perspective that is based on a correct appraisal of the present stage of world history, the contradictions and crisis of world capitalism and the dynamic of the international class struggle. The wars in Gaza and in Ukraine are tragic demonstrations of the catastrophic role and consequences of national programs in an historical epoch whose essential and defining characteristics are the primacy of world economy, the globally integrated character of the productive forces of capitalism, and, therefore, the necessity to base the struggle of the working class on an international strategy.

This perspective is no less valid for the Israeli working class. Given the present situation, when the military power of the Zionist state is being utilized to crush Palestinian resistance, attention is focused, and rightly so, on the crimes of the Israeli regime.

But it is a political mistake to overlook the fact that the establishment of the Zionist state was not only a tragedy for the Palestinians; it was, and is, a tragedy for the Jewish people as well. Zionism never was, and is not today, a solution to the historic oppression and persecution of the Jewish people. From its origins, the Zionist project was based on a reactionary ideology and program. It advanced a false analysis of the source of antisemitism—which it endowed with a permanent and supra-historical character—and, therefore, never sought—and in fact opposed—the overthrow of the economic, political and social relations of capitalism that were and are the source of modern political antisemitism.

Beginning with Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, the concept of a Jewish state was directed against the socialist program that was steadily gaining ground among masses of Jewish workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Opposing the international solidarity of the working class as the path to the liberation of the Jews, Zionism staked its future on an alliance with one or another reactionary power. In an open

letter written in 1944, addressed to a conference of the British Labour Party, Trotskyists in Palestine explained:

During its whole history Zionism has always supported the reactionary forces of the world. Dr. Herzl, founder of Zionism, made a deal with the Tsarist Minister Plehve (organizer of the pogrom against the Jews of Kishinev) to the effect that the Zionist Movement be used as a lever against the Jewish socialists, in return for which Plehve would use his influence with the [Turkish] Sultan to obtain a charter for Zionism on Palestine.

In the first four decades of the 20th century, prior to the founding of the state of Israel, the strategy of the Zionist leaders was centered on an alliance with British imperialism. The 1917 declaration of Foreign Minister Balfour, pledging support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, was trumpeted by the Zionists as the supreme and irreversible expression of the legitimacy of their project. Of course, the Palestinians were not consulted and had no say in the matter.

This was of no concern to the Zionists, who understood very well that their project was viable only to the extent that the establishment of a non-Arab Jewish state served imperialist interests. This was stated with remarkable clarity by Vladimir Jabotinsky, the leader of the fascist wing of the Zionist movement and mentor of the future Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Jabotinsky wrote:

I need not dwell on the well-known truism of Palestine's importance from the viewpoint of British imperial interests; I have only to add that its validity depends on one paramount condition: namely that Palestine should cease being an Arab country. The defects of all England's "strongholds" in the Mediterranean roots in the fact that (with the only exception of little Malta) they are all of them inhabited by populations whose national magnetic centers lie elsewhere and who are therefore organically and incurably centrifugal. England governs them against their will, and this is a precarious hold under modern conditions. ... Should Palestine remain Arab, Palestine would follow the orbit of Arab destinies—secession, Federation of Arab countries, and elimination of all traces of European influence. But a Palestine predominantly Jewish, Palestine as a Jewish State, surrounded on all sides by Arab countries, will in the interests of its own preservation always seek to lean upon some powerful Empire, non-Arab and non-Mohammedan. This is an almost providential basis for a permanent alliance between England and a Jewish (but only Jewish) Palestine.

The Zionist alliance with British imperialism was undermined by the approach and outbreak of World War II, which compelled the government in London to adjust its policies in the Middle East, limiting Jewish immigration into Palestine. Segments of the Zionist movement responded with violent attacks on British facilities, including, by the way, the hanging of two British soldiers and the bombing of the King David Hotel. But the alliance with imperialism continued. Israel, following its establishment in 1948, functioned as an essential ally of British and French imperialism's struggle against the rising tide of Arab nationalism. In 1956, Israel joined Britain and France in an invasion of Egypt aimed at overthrowing the nationalist regime led by Nasser and regaining control of the Suez Canal. However, after the United States compelled Britain and France to end the war and withdraw their forces from Egypt, Israel

prioritized its relationship with American imperialism.

The maintenance of a Jewish apartheid state, violently suppressing the Palestinian people while at the same time veering toward fascism within Israel itself, is inextricably connected to its role as a linchpin of imperialism in the Middle East. As a massively armed garrison of US imperialism, it must be employed in all the wars instigated by Washington, with ultimately catastrophic consequences.

In December 1938, Trotsky warned that the spread of fascism and the imminent outbreak of a second imperialist world war posed an existential threat to the Jewish people. "It is possible to imagine without difficulty," he wrote, "what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the *physical extermination of the Jews*." In July 1940, one year after World War II had begun, Trotsky declared: "The attempt to solve the Jewish question through the migration of Jews to Palestine can now be seen for what it is, a tragic mockery of the Jewish people. ... Never was it so clear as it is today that the salvation of the Jewish people is bound up inseparably with the overthrow of the capitalist system."

The Second World War resulted in the extermination of 6 million Jews. But in the aftermath of that catastrophe, the "tragic mockery of the Jewish people" of which Trotsky warned has been realized in the conversion of an historically oppressed people into oppressors. Of course, a vast segment of the Jewish population throughout the world, including within Israel itself, recoils from such an identity. They don't want to oppress anyone. But political programs—the program of nationalism—have consequences that are not determined by merely subjective intentions.

The creation of the Zionist state was the direct outcome of the defeats of the working class in the 1920s and 1930s because of the betrayals of Stalinism and Social Democracy. Without the mass of displaced persons, survivors of Nazi concentration camps, and without the political demoralization and loss of confidence in the perspective of socialism, the Zionist leaders would not have had at their disposal the numbers of people required to conduct a terrorist war against the Palestinian people, expel them from their homes and villages, and create, through essentially criminal methods, a Jewish national state.

But now, after 75 years, Trotsky's farsighted appraisal of Zionism as a "tragic mockery" is being confirmed. The essence of that tragedy was the embrace of the nation state at a point in history when this form of political organization had already become the principal obstacle to progressive social development. In an essay titled "Message of the Non-Jewish Jew," Isaac Deutscher, the biographer of Trotsky, described the establishment of Israel as "the paradoxical consummation of the Jewish tragedy." It is paradoxical, he explained, "because we live in an age when the nation-state is fast becoming an archaism—not only the nation-state of Israel but the nation-states of Russia, the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and others. They are all anachronisms." The historical period in which nation-states were a progressive factor in man's social, economic and cultural development had come to an end. As this is true for the old established nation-states, it is doubly true for the new states formed on the basis of the anti-colonial struggles of the post-World War II era.

Deutscher wrote:

Even those young nation-states that have come into being as the result of a necessary and progressive struggle waged by colonial and semi-colonial peoples for emancipation—India, Burma, Ghana, and others—cannot, in my view, preserve their progressive character for long. They form a necessary stage in the history of some peoples; but it is a stage that those peoples too will have to overcome in order to find wider frameworks for their existence. In our epoch any new nation-state, soon after its constitution, begins

to be affected by the general decline of this form of political organization; and this is already showing itself in the short experience of India, Ghana, and Israel. The world has compelled the Jew to embrace the nation-state and to make of it his pride and hope just at a time when there is little or no hope left in it. You cannot blame the Jews for this; you must blame the world. But Jews should at least be aware of the paradox and realize that their intense enthusiasm for “national sovereignty” is historically belated. They did not benefit from the advantages of the nation-state in those centuries when it was a medium of mankind’s advance and a great revolutionary and unifying factor in history. They have taken possession of it only after it had become a factor of disunity and social disintegration.

Invoking the example of Spinoza, Marx, Heine, Trotsky and Luxemburg, Deutscher concluded his essay by expressing his hope that

together with other nations, the Jews will ultimately become aware—or regain the awareness—of the inadequacy of the nation-state and that they will find their way back to the moral and political heritage that the genius of the Jews who have gone beyond Jewry has left us—the message of universal human emancipation.

It is at this point that we can return to the significance of the centenary of Trotskyism in the context of the present world crisis. The specific issues that gave rise to the formation of the Left Opposition, as they were explained in the “Declaration of the 46” submitted to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party on October 15, 1923, related to the deepening economic crisis that confronted the Soviet Union and the deterioration of inner-party democracy as a consequence of the growing weight of bureaucracy in both the Soviet state and the Communist Party.

The issues raised in the Declaration were of immense significance. But as was to become increasingly clear as the struggle unfolded in the weeks, months and years that followed, the underlying cause of the political conflict was two irreconcilably opposed conceptions of the significance of the October 1917 Revolution and the nature of the historical epoch.

The overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government and the establishment of the first workers state was based on a program of international socialist revolution. The decision to seize power was based not on an appraisal of merely Russian conditions, but rather, on the crisis of the world capitalist system as revealed in the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The essential cause of the World War and of the revolution that erupted in Russia three years later was the contradiction between world economy and the bourgeois nation-state system.

The capitalist-imperialist solution to this contradiction was the waging of wars of conquest, the seizure of territory, the redistribution of colonies—that is, a redivision of the world. The socialist solution to this crisis was the conquest of power by the working class, the abolition of capitalism, and the dissolution of the nation-state system. This “solution” was not a utopian scheme. The world socialist revolution developed out of the same global contradictions that had led to the world war. The strategy pursued by Lenin in 1917, under the influence of the theory of permanent revolution elaborated by Leon Trotsky during the previous decade, was based on this global strategy. The decisive factor in the formulation of Bolshevik strategy was not whether Russia, as a national entity, was ready for socialism—that is, whether its level of national economic development was sufficient for a transition to socialism. In fact, as the most

economically backward of the major capitalist countries of that time, Russia was not “ready” for socialism. But the problems of economic and political development confronting Russia, in the context of the world crisis, could not be solved except through the overthrow of the capitalist class, the transfer of power to the working class, and the beginning of the reorganization of economic life on the basis of socialist property relations.

However, the transition of the Soviet state to socialism could not be realized with a purely national strategy. The fate of the workers’ state established in October 1917 on the basis of a proletarian revolution led by a Marxist party depended upon the extension of the revolution beyond the borders of Russia into the advanced capitalist centers of Western Europe and North America.

As long as Lenin was in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, this conception prevailed. It found its most advanced expression in the establishment of the Communist International in 1919, whose first four annual congresses assembled revolutionists from all over the world for the purpose of developing national sections capable of conquering power and advancing the world revolution. But the deterioration of Lenin’s health in 1922, his total removal from political activity as a result of a stroke in March 1923, and his death in January 1924 coincided with and facilitated the resurgence of nationalist tendencies within the Bolshevik leadership.

Increasingly, the problems of economic development in the USSR were interpreted in national, rather than international terms. This tendency was closely related to the growing weight and influence of the party and state bureaucracy. The rise to power of Josef Stalin was an expression of this process. The initial stages of the factional struggle were dominated by the bureaucracy’s resentment of the criticism of the party regime by Trotsky and the Left Opposition. But as the struggle continued into 1924, the underlying and fundamental programmatic differences emerged. The bureaucracy’s attack on Trotsky became focused on the theory of permanent revolution; that is, on his insistence on the essential connection between the fate of the Soviet Union and the victory of world revolution.

Throughout 1924, Trotsky’s opponents in the Bolshevik leadership—spearheaded by an unprincipled faction consisting of Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and Stalin—set out to discredit Trotsky by claiming that his theory of permanent revolution was anti-Leninist and expressed a lack of confidence in the Russian peasantry’s commitment to socialism. A critical point in the increasingly bitter struggle was reached on December 17, 1924, when Stalin unveiled for the first time the theory of “socialism in one country,” explicitly advancing—in opposition to permanent revolution—the possibility of a transition to socialism on the basis of Russian resources, without the expansion of the socialist revolution into the advanced centers of world capitalism.

Stalin’s speech legitimized a nationalist program that severed the link between the Russian and world socialist revolution. It was to have a profound effect not only on the internal policy of the Stalinist regime. It fundamentally changed the nature of the Communist International, which was converted from an instrument for the extension of world socialist revolution into an auxiliary agency of Soviet foreign policy, subordinating revolutionary political strategy to the pragmatically conceived interests of the Soviet Union as a national state. Initially, the nationalist policy of the Soviet regime led to the disorientation of the sections of the Communist International, resulting in major defeats of the working class in Britain, China and Germany.

By the mid-1930s, in the aftermath of the victory of the Nazis and the complete crushing of the German working class, the policies of the Stalinist Communist International acquired a consciously counterrevolutionary character. The eradication of socialists in the Soviet Union during the terror that began with the Moscow Trials in 1936 was accompanied by the Stalinist betrayal of the Spanish revolution, which cleared the path for the outbreak of World War II.

The struggle of the Left Opposition was, first and foremost, a defense of

socialist internationalism and the strategy of world socialist revolution. In 1930, after he had been expelled from the Russian Communist Party and the Communist International and exiled from the Soviet Union, Trotsky restated the essential postulates of the theory of permanent revolution. He wrote:

The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follows on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a new and broader sense of the word; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.

Following the logic of the struggle within the Russian Communist Party, which became centered on the fundamental issues of world revolutionary strategy, the work of the Left Opposition passed beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union. In 1928, during the Sixth Congress of the Stalinized Communist International, Trotsky's Critique of the Draft Program, which he had written from his temporary place of exile in Alma Ata in Central Asia, accidentally came into the possession of the American revolutionary James P. Cannon and the Canadian revolutionary Maurice Spector. They smuggled the document out of the Soviet Union and the fight they began for Trotsky's internationalist program marked the beginning of the International Left Opposition.

Five years later, in July 1933, in response to the Stalinist betrayal of the German working class and the victory of Hitler, Trotsky issued the call for the formation of the Fourth International. In September 1938, its founding congress was held.

We are now marking the centenary of the Trotskyist movement. The persistence of this movement over such an extended period has immense objective significance. It cannot be explained as the product of the personal devotion of individuals. Those who founded this movement are long gone. This movement has worked on an international scale, usually under the most difficult conditions. It was a minority, a small minority, in the workers movement, if it had a presence at all. Why then did it persevere?

When I joined the Trotskyist movement in the autumn of 1970, during a period of great student radicalization and mass movements throughout the world, radical politics was still dominated by the Stalinists, by the Maoists, by the Castroites. The Communist Parties were mass movements. People like Allende were the heroes of the hour. But what legacy have they left? They all have been swept from the scene. Trotsky, speaking of the Stalinist and revisionist movements of his day, said, "of these outlived organizations, not one stone will be left upon another." And why? Because their program did not correspond to the objective characteristics of the epoch. They were attempts to impose false policies, largely nationalist policies, reformist policies, which could not answer the demands of the objective crisis.

The persistence of the Trotskyist movement can be explained only by the fact that its analysis corresponded to the nature of the epoch, an epoch which has not been transcended. We live in the same historical epoch, albeit at a very advanced and terminal stage of its existence, the epoch of imperialist crisis and decay through which Trotsky passed. The Russian Revolution, the World War that preceded it, were the product of the emergence of the imperialist epoch. We have not passed beyond it. It is

striking the parallels that exist between our present day and our present situation and those which gave rise to the First World War and the Second World War. The terminology we use is the same terminology, and that becomes enormously important in understanding the approach that must be taken to the present problems.

The economic crises arising from the contradiction between the social process of production and private capitalist ownership of the productive forces, the geopolitical conflicts produced by the incompatibility of a highly integrated world economy and the archaic national state system, the destructive consequences of the subordination of all problems confronting advanced mass society to personal wealth accumulation, and the escalating social tensions produced by the exploitation of labor by the capitalist class and the mindless concentration of staggering wealth even as masses of people go hungry—these are the conditions that have placed world socialist revolution on the political agenda.

In fact, we are witnessing throughout the world a rising tide of working class struggle. It will assume dimensions of a magnitude unprecedented in world history. The events of the last several weeks have demonstrated how rapidly social consciousness changes, how rapidly people are radicalized by events which they had not foreseen.

One of the elements of the last 40 years, particularly in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, was a certain apathy, ennui, a sense of hopelessness, a retreat into the individual, the personal, the concentration and focus on questions of personal identity, lifestyle, inordinate amounts of time spent in gyms, improving one's figure, watching one's weight, monitoring every aspect of one's personal petty activity, while ignoring the great events unfolding all around. Suddenly, and we can see this in the mass demonstrations taking place all over the world, a change has begun.

Trotsky once wrote that in periods of reaction, ignorance bares its teeth. But then life changes, events come breaking through, and over a long period of time and after many experiences, the recognition emerges that the world has changed. No one believes the media and its propaganda. The bankruptcy of all political parties becomes evident. The president resembles a doddering, senile ignoramus. The Republican Party, a bunch of gangsters. None of these forces have anything to say, and the petty-bourgeois radicals, the denizens of postmodernism, preoccupied with one or another question related to personal identity, endlessly full of grudges and complaints, denunciations for one or another personal faux pas, they become insignificant in the light of events.

What preoccupies the world today is the danger of global war, the use of genocide against innocent people, poverty, the destruction of the environment, a massive pandemic which kills millions and for which no government has an answer, not even one so simple as asking people to wear masks rather than becoming ill, because to do so in one way or another gets in the way of accumulating personal wealth and profit. But what is really stimulating and changing world conditions is the sudden resurgence of the most basic and powerful of all social forces, the working class as an international force.

For much of your young lives, you did not hear very much about strikes, about working class activity. In fact, one of the basic conceptions of post-modernist theory was that the old historical narratives centered on class struggle and socialism were no longer relevant. But today, there are strikes everywhere, embracing broad sections of the working class, and it is certainly becoming clear that the class struggle is the motor force of social development. That doesn't mean that the problems which confront workers are easily resolved. They enter the struggles with rotten leadership, with organizations that betray them, and with little understanding of the history of the class struggle, not only in their own country but on an international scale.

And herein lies the immense significance of the Fourth International. Our party is the concentrated expression of the whole historical

experience of the class over an entire epoch. We are often asked how it is possible for the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has been published every day without fail for 25 years, to have exhibited such extraordinary accuracy and prescience in the evaluation of events. We have the advantage of being able to work off of an enormous historical experience, to relate the present to the experience of the past, not to simply see the present as a repetition of what took place, but to have an orientation that allows us to focus on the basic and essential driving forces of political development.

We are now witnessing, as I've said, a great political radicalization. Our task is to bring into this movement a perspective and program that enables it to develop an understanding of its essential tasks. The working class and the young people who are entering the road of struggle must assimilate the experiences of the last century, study the history of the Trotskyist movement—and you must do so in struggle. And, therefore, I urge all of you to draw conclusions from what is now taking place, become active in the fight for socialism. Prepare yourself by joining the Socialist Equality Party.



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