

Seventy years since Cannon's "Open Letter"

# A Letter to Trotskyists Throughout the World — November 16, 1953

**James P. Cannon**  
**15 November 2023**

On November 16, 1953, seventy years ago today, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the United States published an "Open Letter" to Trotskyists throughout the world. The letter, written by SWP National Secretary James P. Cannon, formed the programmatic basis for the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The SWP was at that time the American section of the world Trotskyist movement.

At stake was the defense of the essential political principles upon which the Fourth International, founded under the leadership of Leon Trotsky in 1938, had been based, and its survival as an independent revolutionary organization.

The ICFI was established to defend the Trotskyist movement against a form of revisionism and opportunism known as Pabloism, after its principal leader and proponent, Michel Pablo, who was then the secretary of the Fourth International.

In its essence, as David North explains in *The Heritage We Defend*, "Pabloism was (and is) liquidationism all down the line: that is, the repudiation of the hegemony of the proletariat in the socialist revolution and the genuinely independent existence of the Fourth International as the conscious articulation of the historical role of the working class..."

We are publishing below an excerpt from Cannon's Open Letter. The full letter can be accessed [here](#). A comprehensive review of the origins and significance of Pabloism and Cannon's "Open Letter" is contained in *The Heritage We Defend*.

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To All Trotskyists:

Dear Comrades:

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Trotskyist movement in the United States, the Plenum of the National Committee of the Socialist Workers Party sends its revolutionary socialist greetings to orthodox Trotskyists throughout the world.

Although the Socialist Workers Party, because of undemocratic laws passed by the Democrats and Republicans, is no longer affiliated to the Fourth International—the World Party of Socialist Revolution founded by Leon Trotsky to carry on and fulfill the program betrayed by the Second International of the Social Democrats and the Third International of the Stalinists—we take interest in the welfare of the world-wide organization created under the guidance of our martyred leader.

As is well known, the pioneer American Trotskyists 25 years ago brought the program of Trotsky, suppressed by the Kremlin, to the attention of world public opinion. This act proved decisive in breaching the isolation imposed by the Stalinist bureaucracy on Trotsky and in laying the foundation for the Fourth International. With his exile shortly thereafter, Trotsky began an intimate and trusted collaboration with the leadership of the SWP that lasted to the day of his death.

The collaboration included joint efforts to organize revolutionary socialist parties in a number of countries. This culminated, as you know, in the launching of the Fourth International in 1938. The Transitional Program, which remains the keystone of today's program of the world Trotskyist movement, was written by Trotsky in collaboration with the leaders of the SWP and at his request was submitted by them for adoption at the founding Congress.

The intimacy and thoroughness of the collaboration between Trotsky and the leadership of the SWP can be judged from the record of struggle in defense of orthodox Trotskyist principles in 1939-40 against the Petty-Bourgeois Opposition headed by Burnham and Shachtman. That record has had profound influence in shaping the Fourth International in the past 13 years.

After the murder of Trotsky by an agent of Stalin's secret police, the SWP took the lead in defending and advocating his teachings. We took the lead not from choice, but from necessity—the second world war forced the orthodox Trotskyists underground in many countries, especially in Europe under the Nazis. Together with Trotskyists in Latin America, Canada, England, Ceylon, India, Australia and elsewhere we did what we could to uphold the banner of orthodox Trotskyism through the difficult war years.

With the end of the war, we were gratified at the appearance in Europe of Trotskyists from the underground who undertook the organizational reconstitution of the Fourth International. Since we were barred from belonging to the Fourth International by reactionary laws, we placed all the greater hope in the emergence of a leadership capable of continuing the great tradition bequeathed to our world movement by Trotsky. We felt that the young new leadership of the Fourth International in Europe must be given full confidence and support. When self-corrections of serious errors were made on the initiative of the comrades themselves, we felt that our course was proving justified.

However, we must now admit that the very freedom from sharp criticism which we together with others accorded this leadership helped open the way for the consolidation of an uncontrolled, secret, personal faction in the administration of the Fourth International which has abandoned the basic program of Trotskyism.

This faction, centered around Pablo, is now working consciously and deliberately to disrupt, split, and break up the historically created cadres of Trotskyism in the various countries and to liquidate the Fourth International.

## The Program of Trotskyism

To show precisely what is involved, let us restate the fundamental principles on which the world Trotskyist movement is built:

1. The death agony of the capitalist system threatens the destruction of civilization through worsening depressions, world wars and barbaric manifestations like fascism. The development of atomic weapons today underlines the danger in the gravest possible way.

2. The descent into the abyss can be avoided only by replacing capitalism with the planned economy of socialism on a world scale and thus resuming the spiral of progress opened up by capitalism in its early days.

3. This can be accomplished only under the leadership of the working class as the only truly revolutionary class in society. But the working class itself faces a crisis of leadership although the world relationship of social forces was never so favorable as today for the workers to take the road to power.

4. To organize itself for carrying out this world-historic aim the working class in each country must construct a revolutionary socialist party in the pattern developed by Lenin; that is, a combat party capable of dialectically combining democracy and centralism—democracy in arriving at decisions, centralism in carrying them out; a leadership controlled by the ranks, ranks able to carry forward under fire in disciplined fashion.

5. The main obstacle to this is Stalinism, which attracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them either into the arms of the Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism. The penalty for these betrayals is paid by the working people in the form of consolidation of fascist or monarchist forces, and new outbreaks of wars fostered and prepared by capitalism. From its inception, the Fourth International set as one of its major tasks the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism inside and outside the USSR.

6. The need for flexible tactics facing many sections of the Fourth International, and parties or groups sympathetic to its program, makes it all the more imperative that they know how to fight imperialism and all of its petty-bourgeois agencies (such as nationalist formations or trade-union bureaucracies) without capitulation to Stalinism; and, conversely, know how to fight Stalinism (which in the final analysis is a petty-bourgeois agency of imperialism) without capitulating to imperialism.

These fundamental principles established by Leon Trotsky retain full validity in the increasingly complex and fluid politics of the world today. In fact the revolutionary situations opening up on every hand as Trotsky foresaw, have only now brought full concreteness to what at one time may have appeared to be somewhat remote abstractions not intimately bound up with the living reality of the time. The truth is that these principles now hold with increasing force both in political analysis and in the determination of the course of practical action.

### **Pablo's Revisionism**

These principles have been abandoned by Pablo. In place of emphasizing the danger of a new barbarism, he sees the drive toward socialism as “irreversible”; yet he does not see socialism coming within our generation or some generations to come. Instead he has advanced the concept of an “engulfing” wave of revolutions that give birth to nothing but “deformed,” that is, Stalin-type workers’ states which are to last for “centuries.”

This reveals the utmost pessimism about the capacities of the working class, which is wholly in keeping with the ridicule he has lately voiced of the struggle to build independent revolutionary socialist parties. In place of holding to the main course of building independent revolutionary

socialist parties by all tactical means, he looks to the Stalinist bureaucracy, or a decisive section of it, to so change itself under mass pressure as to accept the “ideas” and “program” of Trotskyism. Under guise of the diplomacy required in tactical maneuvers needed to approach workers in the camp of Stalinism in such countries as France, he now covers up the betrayals of Stalinism.

This course has already led to serious defections from the ranks of Trotskyism to the camp of Stalinism. The pro-Stalinist split in the Ceylon party is a warning to all Trotskyists everywhere of the tragic consequences of the illusions about Stalinism which Pabloism fosters.

In another document, we are submitting a detailed analysis of Pablo's revisionism. In this letter we will confine ourselves to some recent tests that show in the decisive field of action how far Pablo has gone in conciliationism to Stalinism and how grave the danger is to the existence of the Fourth International.

With the death of Stalin, the Kremlin announced a series of concessions in the USSR, none of them political in character. In place of characterizing these as nothing but part of a maneuver aimed at further retrenchment of the usurping bureaucracy and part of the preparation for a leading bureaucrat to assume the mantle of Stalin, the Pabloite faction took the concessions as good coin, painted them up as political concessions, and even projected the possibility of the “sharing of power” by the Stalinist bureaucracy with the workers. (*Fourth International*, January-February, 1953, p.13.)

The “sharing of power” concept, promulgated most bluntly by [SWP member George] Clarke, a high priest of the Pablo cult, was indirectly sanctioned as dogma by Pablo himself in an unanswered but obviously leading question: Will the liquidation of the Stalinist regime take the form, Pablo asks, “of violent inter-bureaucratic struggles between elements who will fight for the status quo, if not for turning back, and the more and more numerous elements drawn by the powerful pressure of the masses?” (*Fourth International*, March-April, 1953, p.39.)

This line fills the orthodox Trotskyist program of political revolution against the Kremlin bureaucracy with a new content; namely, the revisionist position that the “ideas” and “program” of Trotskyism will filter into and permeate the bureaucracy, or a decisive section of it, thus “overthrowing” Stalinism in an unforeseen way.

In East Germany in June the workers rose against the Stalinist-dominated government in one of the greatest demonstrations in the history of Germany. This was the first proletarian mass uprising against Stalinism since it usurped and consolidated power in the Soviet Union. How did Pablo respond to this epochal event?

Instead of clearly voicing the revolutionary political aspirations of the insurgent East German workers, Pablo covered up the counter-revolutionary Stalinist satraps who mobilized Soviet troops to put down the uprising (“...the Soviet leaders and those of the various ‘People's Democracies’ and the Communist Parties could no longer falsify or ignore the profound meaning of these events. They have been obliged to continue along the road of still more ample and genuine concessions to avoid risking alienating themselves forever from support by the masses and from provoking still stronger explosions. From now on they will not be able to stop half-way. They will be obliged to dole out concessions to avoid more serious explosions in the immediate future and if possible to effect a transition ‘in a cold fashion’ from the present situation to a situation more tolerable for the masses.”) (Statement of the International Secretariat of the Fourth International. Published in *The Militant*, July 6.)

Instead of demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops—the sole force upholding the Stalinist government—Pablo fostered the illusion that “more ample and genuine concessions” would be forthcoming from the Kremlin's gauleiters. Could Moscow have asked for better assistance as it proceeded to monstrously falsify the profound meaning of those events, branding the workers in revolt as “fascists” and “agents of American

imperialism,” and opening a wave of savage repression against them?

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## What to Do

To sum up: The lines of cleavage between Pablo’s revisionism and orthodox Trotskyism are so deep that no compromise is possible either politically or organizationally. The Pablo faction has demonstrated that it will not permit democratic decisions truly reflecting majority opinion to be reached. They demand complete submission to their criminal policy. They are determined to drive all orthodox Trotskyists out of the Fourth International or to muzzle and handcuff them.

Their scheme has been to inject their Stalinist conciliationism piecemeal and likewise in piecemeal fashion, get rid of those who come to see what is happening and raise objections. That is the explanation for the strange ambiguity about many of the Pabloite formulations and diplomatic evasions.

Up to now the Pablo faction has had a certain success with this unprincipled and Machiavellian maneuverism. But the qualitative point of change has been reached. The political issues have broken through the maneuvers and the fight is now a showdown.

If we may offer advice to the sections of the Fourth International from our enforced position outside the ranks, we think the time has come to act and to act decisively. The time has come for the orthodox Trotskyist majority of the Fourth International to assert their will against Pablo’s usurpation of authority.

They should in addition safeguard the administration of the affairs of the Fourth International by removing Pablo and his agents from office and replacing them with cadres who have proved in action that they know how to uphold orthodox Trotskyism and keep the movement on a correct course both politically and organizationally.

With fraternal Trotskyist greetings,  
National Committee of the SWP

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Read more from *The Heritage We Defend* by David North:

- The Origins of Pabloism
- The Metaphysics of Nationalized Property
- The Nature of Pabloite Opportunism
- Cannon’s Struggle Against the Cochranites
- The Split in the Fourth International
- James P. Cannon’s “Open Letter”



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