

Ten years since the death of leading British Trotskyist Dave Hyland

David North

7 December 2023

Ten years ago, comrade Dave Hyland, a leading figure in the British Trotskyist movement, died on December 8, 2013, at the age of 66.

Hyland took up the fight, in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), against the attempt of the central leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party to liquidate the British and international movement in 1985-86. In the years following the split with the Healy-Banda-Slaughter leadership and the breakup and disintegration of the WRP, he was the national secretary of the International Communist Party and its successor organization, the Socialist Equality Party (UK), before retiring due to ill health.

Hyland's decision in October 1985 to contact the Workers League in the United States, after finally having the opportunity to read the criticisms of the WRP leadership made by its national secretary, David North, played a decisive role in maintaining the continuity of British Trotskyism.

Below we republish the remarks of comrade North to a January 18, 2014, memorial meeting honouring comrade Hyland.

The death of Dave on December 8 did not come as a shock. He had been grievously ill, with extremely aggressive rheumatoid arthritis, for more than 20 years. But despite the gravity of his illness, Dave had manifested powers of resistance that seemed to defy scientific explanation. His willpower, his desire to live and to participate in life as fully as possible, exerted itself as a real physical force.

Four years ago, Dave had lapsed into unconsciousness, and the physicians told his family that it was unlikely that he would live more than a few days. But he regained consciousness, and, despite immense physical handicaps, resumed an active political and intellectual life.

It was still possible to hope until very recently that Dave would remain with us for some time to come. But in November, it became clear that Dave's illness could no longer be held at bay. He accepted this fact with dignity, rejecting further, what he believed to be fruitless, efforts to prolong his life.

I was told that on one occasion, in the midst of the most trying physical circumstances, he said to his daughter Julie, "Life is beautiful."

Dave had endured the hardships of his illness without a trace of self-pity. He retained his optimism, and his love of life. For many, the experience of protracted illness, the sheer weight of physical difficulties and pain, leads to resignation, intellectual disengagement, and emotional withdrawal. But this was not the case with Dave.

In November, Dave and I spoke for what we both knew would be the last time. It might appear strange, but the discussion was not at all somber. Dave remained intensely involved with the world, passionate in his political commitment to the cause of international socialism, and interested in all that was taking place.

Dave told me that he had no regrets about the main course of his life. His decision to join the Trotskyist movement in the early 1970s flowed necessarily from the political conclusions that he drew, as a class-

conscious worker, from the great struggles of that era. He viewed his decision in 1985 to base his opposition to the national opportunism of the Workers Revolutionary Party on the history, principles and program of the International Committee as the most important of his life. As his life drew to a close, Dave expressed his pride in the development of the *World Socialist Web Site* and confidence in the future of the movement to which he had made such an imperishable contribution.

Every one of the speakers has referred to the events of 1985. Next year it will be 30 years since that struggle took place. To those of us who participated in that fight, it seems as if it was only yesterday. But the photographs displayed in the exhibit tell us otherwise. Back then we were still young men. But though three decades have passed, the events of 1985 remain embedded so vividly in our minds that it seems as if they occurred only yesterday. That is because there remains a powerful connection between those events and the lives we are still leading.

Dave would have liked to have made it into his seventies or eighties. But not everyone is granted that longevity. Yet, more important than longevity is what one does with the years one is granted. The real measure of the success of one's life is to have retained at the end of one's life the best qualities of one's youth, and to understand the inner logic of the experiences through which one passed.

Dave was able to understand the course of his life as interconnected chapters of a broader historical narrative. It was a life that was guided by socialist principles to which Dave adhered over many decades. His life made sense and could be understood in relationship to the great historical events of his time.

We all live amidst objective forces of monumental power. As one becomes older, one acquires a better sense of the extent to which the course of our lives has been determined by forces beyond our direct and immediate control. But we are not powerless. Each of us must decide how to respond to the great objective forces of history.

The photographs and documents in the exhibit illustrate the principles that connected one period of his life with another. There is no sadder fate than to come to the end of one's life without being able to identify any central purpose that guided one's actions—to be unable to answer the question, "What was it all about?" Or even worse, when asked about the past, to reply, "I don't remember." People who don't remember generally don't want to remember, because they have departed so far from the ideals that inspired them in their youth.

Dave knew what his life had been about. He remembered and wanted to remember the experiences through which he had passed. That is the key to the calm and equanimity with which Dave confronted the final stage of his life. I think he expected that a meeting such as this would take place, and that the estimation of his life would be objective and fair.

There is no question but that Dave will be remembered as a major figure in the history of the British and international working class.

Dave was born in the aftermath of the Second World War, a period which witnessed the resurgence of working class militancy. Like so many

hundreds of thousands of British workers who came of age in the 1960s, Dave believed that the time had come to avenge the defeat of the 1926 General Strike and the indignities of the “Hungry 30s.” From his father he had a direct connection to that period of social struggle. In 1945, the British working class had swept the Labour Party to power in the hope that this would lead to a socialist Britain. But in the quarter century that followed—whether in or out of power—the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC), aided by the Stalinist Communist Party, devoted the bulk of their energies not to fighting the hated Tories, but to restraining, opposing and betraying the struggles of the working class.

It might be difficult for the younger generation that has experienced only setbacks and has never seen the power of the working class in struggle to understand the optimism and determination that existed in the Britain of the 1960s and early 1970s. It is conveyed to some extent in the music of the times. There was contempt for the old system and a determination to put an end to it. And it was evident that there existed a force that could carry it out.

The 1970 victory of the Tory Party in the national elections set the stage for a wave of struggles by the working class. The new government was determined to employ its new Industrial Relations Act to suppress strikes, but the British workers refused to accept the legitimacy of laws that were seen as nothing other than the exercise of ruling class interests. Between 1970 and 1974, the struggles of the working class brought Britain closer to socialist revolution than any time since the 1926 General Strike.

In 1973-74, the British miners—in their second national strike against the policies of the government of Edward Heath—achieved what their grandfathers had not. The strike forced Heath to call a general election. The central issue, declared the beleaguered prime minister, was “Who ruled Britain?” The answer was given. “It won’t be you.” Heath lost the election. For the first time in history, the British working class had brought about, through the exercise of its industrial power, the resignation and defeat of a Tory government.

The defeat of the Tories did not solve the strategic problem of socialist revolution in Britain. Rather, the working class now confronted in the new Labour government, allied with the trade union bureaucracy, an implacable enemy determined to employ all the experience and skill it had acquired over decades of political treachery to restrain, disorient, paralyze, demoralize and disarm the mass movement that had brought Britain to the brink of socialist revolution. In other words, between 1974 and 1979, the Labour governments of Prime Ministers Wilson and Callaghan—abetted by the TUC and its accomplices in the British Communist Party—did everything in their power to prepare the political ground for the triumph of Thatcherism and all the subsequent political disasters that befell the working class.

However, there was one political tendency in the British working class that had developed during the 20 years that preceded the great strike movement of 1973-74 on the basis of a struggle against the Labour Party, the trade union bureaucracy, Stalinism and various forms of middle class radicalism—principally, the Pabloite and state capitalist tendencies. I am speaking, of course, of the Socialist Labour League, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, led by Gerry Healy.

In the 20 years between 1953 and 1973, the Trotskyist movement in Britain had experienced an extraordinary growth.

These gains initially arose on the basis of the principles that were defended in the 1953 struggle against the revisionist tendency in the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. The essential issue in this struggle was the irreplaceable role of the Fourth International in the development of Marxist consciousness in the working class and the victory of the world socialist revolution. The International Committee, formed in the autumn of 1953, rejected the claims of the Pabloites that socialism could be realized under the leadership of Stalinist, social

democratic and bourgeois nationalist organizations or various other types of socially and politically heterogeneous petty-bourgeois radical organizations.

Healy had played an important role in the 1953 struggle. Collaborating closely with James P. Cannon, the leader of the Socialist Workers Party in the United States, Healy defeated the Pabloite tendency within the British organization, which actually demanded an end to the independent existence of a Trotskyist party and its liquidation into the Communist Party. That was the Pabloite line. The Communist Party, it claimed, would represent the revolutionary aspirations of the working class and there was no need for an independent Trotskyist organization.

The relentless fight against Pabloite liquidationism laid the basis for the subsequent growth of the Trotskyist movement in Britain. The defense of the Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism—the insistence upon the unalterably counterrevolutionary role of the Kremlin bureaucracy and all the national communist parties—prepared the British Trotskyists for the political opportunities that emerged in the aftermath of Khrushchev’s “secret speech” of February 1956, in which Stalin was exposed as a murderer, and the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in October of that same year.

These events, which hurled the Soviet bureaucracy and the international Stalinist movement into deep crisis, vindicated the stand taken in 1953 by the British Trotskyists under Healy’s leadership. Moreover, their clarity on the nature of Stalinism—the absence of any illusions, assiduously promoted by the Pabloites, in the supposedly revolutionary potential of the Kremlin regime—enabled the Trotskyists to intervene in the crisis of the British Communist Party. They won a number of recruits from the Stalinist organization who were to play an important role in the subsequent development of the Trotskyist movement.

Despite immense problems—proscriptions by the Labour Party, attacks by the Stalinists, the chronic lack of financial resources—the influence of the Trotskyist movement grew steadily in the late 1950s. It must be stressed that during this fruitful period of organizational growth, the British Trotskyists were playing a major role in the on-going theoretical and political struggle against Pabloism within the Fourth International. Indeed, it was during this period that the British Trotskyists began to develop their criticisms of what they perceived, correctly, as a drift by the US Socialist Workers Party toward reconciliation with the Pabloites.

As early as 1957, Healy recognized that the SWP was retreating from the Trotskyist principles that it had defended in 1953. The SWP became embroiled in a “regroupment” campaign in the United States that signaled an opportunist reorientation toward the milieu of left middle class radicalism. In contrast to the opportunist vacillations of the SWP, the British Trotskyists were steadily developing the fight against Stalinism and Social Democracy. Since the late 1940s, the British Trotskyists had conducted work within the Labour Party. The purpose of this work had not been to convert the Labour Party into a socialist organization—an impossible task—but to expose the treacherous role of Social Democracy and, on this basis, win the best elements within the Labour Party to the program and perspective of the Fourth International.

As the influence of the Trotskyists grew in the late 1950s, the Labour Party resorted to witch-hunts and expulsions. Healy could not be cowed. In 1959, the Trotskyists formed the Socialist Labour League to prosecute the struggle against Labourism. Significantly, in the United States, the SWP opposed this necessary organizational break, ignoring the fact that the alternative was complete political surrender to the discipline and authority of the Labour Party. Cannon, by now a thoroughgoing opportunist, accused Gerry Healy of having embarked on an “ultra-left binge.”

Refuting the claims of Cannon that life outside the precincts of the Labour Party was impossible, the Socialist Labour League built a formidable opposition to the Social Democratic bureaucracy within the

Young Socialists, at that time the youth movement of the Labour Party. By the early 1960s, it had won the leadership of the Young Socialists. When the Labour Party retaliated with expulsions, the YS reconstituted itself as the youth movement of the Socialist Labour League.

Between 1961 and 1963, the SLL opposed the efforts of the US Socialist Workers Party, which was now led by Joseph Hansen, to engineer a reunification of the International Committee and the Pabloites' international organization. The political pretense used to justify the reunification was the overthrow of the Batista regime in Cuba by the guerilla forces led by Castro (who, it is worth recalling, initially enjoyed the support of the United States). Castro's victory, the SWP claimed, demonstrated that a socialist revolution could be led to victory and a workers' state established under the leadership of a political movement that was neither Marxist or Trotskyist, nor even explicitly socialist and based on the working class.

Thus, the aim of the reunification was the dissolution of the Fourth International into the reactionary political swamp of leftish middle class politics. Efforts to build an international socialist movement of the working class, based on Marxist theory and guided politically by the heritage of Trotsky's struggle against the betrayal of the October Revolution, were to be abandoned. The fate of the socialist revolution was to be entrusted to an array of bourgeois nationalists and petty-bourgeois radical organizations allied with or dependent upon, in one form or another, the Soviet bureaucracy.

The opposition of the SLL and the French Trotskyists in the PCI (later to become the OCI) to the unprincipled reunification of the SWP with the Pabloites prevented the liquidation of the Fourth International. Moreover, the struggle waged by the SLL led to the expansion of the work of the International Committee—with the formation of the Workers League in the United States, the Revolutionary Communist League in Sri Lanka, and, later, in the early 1970s, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter in Germany and the Socialist Labour League in Australia.

The SLL underwent a substantial growth in the years that followed its rejection of the SWP-Pabloite reunification. This growth, as we shall explain, was not without political contradictions. There was, however, no question but that the SLL advanced an internationalist revolutionary program that attracted the most politically conscious and self-sacrificing sections of the working class in Britain, especially under conditions of the upsurge in working class struggle that followed the events of May-June 1968 in France and, especially, the return of the Tories to power in June 1970.

That is the background of the entry of Dave Hyland into revolutionary politics. Dave Hyland was one of the workers who were attracted to the Socialist Labour League. He wrote a letter to me in October 2005 in which he recalled the conditions under which he joined the SLL:

"I was a 25-year-old worker at Kodak's plant in Wealdstone and involved in a struggle against the Stalinists in a factory and in the film union ACTT when I first read the *Workers Press*. I disliked the Stalinists intensely, both for their duplicity and their condescension to workers, but I did not understand them politically. The first copy of the *Workers Press* that I ever bought carried a center article about the historical role of Stalinism in the Middle East. It was like having a blindfold removed. The article explained the counterrevolutionary political role of Stalinism and made clear to me that the struggle against it could only be carried out as part of an international movement." [Letter to David North, October 9, 2005]

Dave joined in the midst of intensifying class struggle in Britain. In 1972, a virtual general strike erupted when the Heath government jailed five dock workers, who had defied the anti-picketing provisions of the new Industrial Relations Act. The government was compelled to release the workers. That same year, a national strike by coal miners forced another retreat by the government.

Dave remained to the end of his life immensely proud and grateful for the political education that he had received within the Socialist Labour League. He was particularly appreciative of the work of a section of artists and intellectuals who had been won to the party. In 2010, following the death of Corin Redgrave, Dave wrote a letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"I joined the WRP's forerunner about the same time as Corin [Redgrave] in the early 1970s. I didn't know him very well, but for a few years I had a close political relationship with two other artist/intellectuals within the leadership—the director Roy Battersby and script-writer Roger Smith. This was the result of our membership of both the SLL/WRP and the ACTT union.

"I worked at the Kodak factory in Harrow and together with local comrades we began building a party branch. Roy and Roger threw themselves into this work with a great deal of enthusiasm. I remember that Roy did a series of public lectures on the 'Dialectics of Nature' and Roger gave a number of party branch classes on 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,' while both did the odd paper sale at the factory gates. They were very good at explaining complex ideas and making them easier to understand. These lectures and classes were extremely important, as they took the discussion away from the immediate problems in the factory and union to address questions of theory, history and science.

"These were popular among the members, as were the issues surrounding important international developments in Chile, Ireland and Portugal. The inside of the factory was like a pressure cooker. The management and union bureaucracy were combining to try and victimise the Trotskyists. The majority of workers, while sympathetic, saw no real need for a revolutionary party when it appeared they could bring down governments simply through their trade union strength alone." [Letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*, April 16, 2010]

The period between 1970 and 1974 saw huge growth in the Socialist Labour League. This is not the time and place to undertake a thorough review of all the political problems that had developed within the Socialist Labour League within the antecedent period, but there are some points that really need to be stressed if the crisis that subsequently evolved is to be understood.

It is always dangerous for a movement, when it undergoes rapid growth, to view that growth uncritically, and to adapt to the consciousness that prevails in the mass movement. The consciousness of the mass movement in Britain remained predominantly trade unionist—the conception that, through the victory of the Labour Party and the defeat of the Tories, the main problems of the working class could be solved.

Gerry Healy had no equal in the British workers' movement as an organizer, as an orator, and as a political strategist. He represented decades of political struggle for principles against all forms of opportunism. His political persona, forged in decades of struggle, expressed an unswerving and single-minded devotion to the cause of socialist revolution that was immensely attractive to Dave Hyland.

Healy possessed the capacity, in his best period, to project his immense confidence in the strength of the working class. That ability found its consummate expression during the upsurge of 1970 to 1974. To hear Gerry Healy speak during that period was an inspiring and unforgettable experience. The collapse of the Tory government in February 1974 vindicated Healy's confidence.

Healy had underestimated the enormous problems that would arise after the defeat of the Tories. During the period of the great upsurge, while the SLL was growing very rapidly, Healy would often say that if the working class can beat the Tory master, it can deal with his servants. But as we know from countless British television series, the butler is not infrequently more skillful and resolute in looking after the interests of the household than Milord and Milady who employ his services.

In 1974, the political butlers of the Labour Party, with their long

tradition of reformist treachery, understood very well that their central task was to bring the mass working class movement under control. They were determined to exploit every form of political confusion in the working class, its residual illusions in the Labour Party, to give the ruling class time to take its revenge for the humiliating defeats of the 1970s. And that is exactly what happened. While the Labour government betrayed the hopes of the mass movement, the ruling class groomed Margaret Thatcher for power.

Despite the impressive gains that had been made by the SLL during the anti-Tory movement, it was, in the final analysis, politically unprepared for the challenges that followed the return of the Labour government to power. There had developed within the SLL, alongside of its practical successes, significant political contradictions over the previous period. These were contradictions rooted in both objective circumstances and the subjective mistakes of the leadership.

In the aftermath of the split with the SWP, the fight against Pabloite liquidationism came to be seen more and more as a largely organizational, rather than theoretical and political question that required constant attention.

The practical growth of the movement in Britain—the expansion of its influence among the youth and in the trade unions, the expansion of its material resources—was seen as the fundamental and decisive answer to the problem posed by Stalinism, Social Democracy, Pabloism and diverse forms of opportunism.

The problem of social revolution thus came to be seen increasingly within a national, rather than international framework. Immediate opportunities within Britain were seen apart from the broader historical and international context of the socialist revolution. This encouraged the illusion that tactical gains in Britain would somehow resolve problems that were lodged in the international relation of forces. The International Committee was only to tag along and provide a bit of auxiliary support for the activities of the growing SLL in Britain.

The international struggle against Pabloite revisionism, at the level of theory and political perspectives, came to be seen as a distraction from the pressing problems of party building in Britain. Inevitably, the focus on national problems assumed the form of an adaptation to the limited political consciousness that dominated the mass anti-Tory movement. The most serious expression of this adaptation was the transformation of the SLL into the Workers Revolutionary Party in November 1973 on the basis of a largely national perspective. The sections of the International Committee did not participate in the discussions that established the WRP, and were not even asked to participate in the proceedings of the founding congress.

The conceptions and attitudes that I have outlined did not emerge all at once. Indeed, it is possible to find in various documents and articles produced by the SLL during the period of the anti-Tory upsurge entirely orthodox statements on the question of revolutionary internationalism and the fight against Pabloism. But a more careful study of the evolution of the SLL—which the ICFI carried out in the aftermath of the split in 1985-86—proved that a drift toward national opportunism developed in the late 1960s and gathered strength in the early 1970s.

The International Committee has, in a number of documents, called attention to the abrupt and politically unclarified character of the split in 1971 with the OCI, the French section of the IC. The essential issues of political perspective that underlay the conflict between the SLL and OCI were barely discussed. The evasion of these issues meant that the critical problems of international revolutionary strategy arising out of the great events of May-June 1968 in France were not dealt with and incorporated into the program of the International Committee.

Moreover, to the extent that the opportunist tendencies evinced by the OCI were seen as merely the expression of problems of the French organization, the Socialist Labour League failed to probe how similar

problems manifested themselves within the British organization.

There was yet another element of the conflict with the French organization whose significance the SLL failed to recognize. Almost since the end of World War II, the French intelligentsia had been at the forefront of the struggle against Marxism. Though discredited in Germany due to his despicable collaboration with the Nazis, Heidegger found innumerable acolytes in France. Existentialism became the rage of the French intelligentsia.

In the aftermath of the upheavals of May-June 1968, terrified by the specter of socialist revolution, large sections of the French intelligentsia and student youth severed whatever connections they had previously maintained with Marxism. In the post-1968 environment of intellectual reaction, even Sartre was seen as too conciliatory with Marxism. A new generation of theoretical irrationalists came to the fore. The age of Lyotard and Foucault had dawned.

Having broken with the OCI, the SLL was largely unaware of these developments and their far-reaching implications for the theoretical and political work of the revolutionary party.

But even before the significance of the theoretical issues was to clearly emerge, the political consequences of the careless handling of the differences with the OCI made themselves felt within the WRP.

In October 1974, Alan Thornett, the leading trade unionist—and that's all he really was, the leading *trade unionist*—in the Workers Revolutionary Party, announced differences at a meeting of the Political Committee. Thornett's positions, which expressed illusions in the new Labour government, had been formulated by the OCI. Politically disloyal and dishonest, Thornett did not reveal that he had been working with an opponent organization.

It did not take Healy more than five minutes to realize that Thornett had not formulated the positions that he was presenting to the WRP's political committee. He understood that the arguments of Thornett mirrored the political positions of the OCI, which by then was allied with Mitterrand's Socialist Party. The fact that Thornett was now advancing the positions of the OCI within the leadership arose from the neglect of the struggle against the OCI.

The conflict with Thornett provided the WRP with the belated opportunity to clarify the differences with the OCI. But again, the response of Healy was not to pursue the political questions, but to proceed rapidly to an organizational settlement with Thornett. The result was that between October and December 1974, the Workers Revolutionary Party lost several hundred members, including a substantial section of its base in the trade unions.

It is a testimony to the political strength of Dave Hyland that he did not go with Thornett. He was not impressed with Thornett's provincial trade unionist perspective. He was repelled by Thornett's duplicity, his indifference to the traditions of the Trotskyist movement, and his opportunist perspective. Dave remained loyal to the party. But the crisis within the WRP deepened. With the Labour Party in power, many of the recruits won during the anti-Tory movement left the party, and this increased the organizational pressures. Healy sought to find a way out of this crisis by developing all sorts of unprincipled relationships with bourgeois national movements and governments in the Middle East.

The opportunist degeneration of the WRP led to the conflict with the Workers League within the International Committee.

Between October 1982 and February 1984, the Workers League presented detailed criticisms of the theoretical conceptions and political program of the WRP. However, we believed that it would be a serious political error for the Workers League to break with the WRP without discussion of the differences within the International Committee. We recognized that the political positions of the Workers League were hardly known, let alone understood, within the international movement.

In particular, the situation within the WRP itself was of immense

concern to us. Despite my political differences with the leadership of the WRP, I had great respect for that party. I knew of its history, its decades of struggle. I knew that its cadre worked extremely hard, often for 12, 15 and even 18 hours a day. I was convinced that there were party members who were devoted to Trotskyism and would welcome a discussion, if they had the opportunity, on the critical issues of the international program. I found it hard to believe that there was not concern within that organization about the ever more apparent opportunist drift. But how was one to reach the ranks of the party?

I had virtually no contact with the rank-and-file members. I spoke at public meetings. I was on platforms in London for the occasional commemoration of the anniversary of the Workers Press, or the anniversary of Trotsky's assassination. But my contact with members of the party, particularly outside the centre, was minimal. And the WRP was determined for it to remain that way.

The situation changed suddenly in the late summer of 1985. On the evening of September 3, 1985, a day that I will never forget, I received a call from Michael Banda, general secretary of the Workers Revolutionary Party, asking me, cryptically, to "resume the alliance." He was referring to an earlier agreement, dating back to October 1982, when Banda pledged that he would support my efforts to initiate a discussion on the false theoretical and political conceptions of the WRP. Within weeks Banda reneged on his commitment, having worked out a thoroughly opportunist deal with Healy.

The next day I informed the Workers League's Political Committee of the call from Banda. We agreed unanimously that the Workers League was not entering into an alliance with any leader of the WRP. We now understood that the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party conducted itself in a totally opportunist manner. It thought it could exploit and utilize the International Committee to regulate its own factional disputes. But the International Committee, as far as the Workers League was concerned, was not going to tolerate the unprincipled subordination of the needs of the world movement to the factional interests of WRP leaders.

In the middle of September 1985, Larry Porter and I flew over to England to find out what was really taking place within the organization. We had simply been told that Healy was resigning due to ill health and old age. I can assure you, we didn't believe that explanation. But we understood that this crisis, whatever its immediate cause, was the outcome of political disorientation and the opportunist backsliding of the leadership.

When I met with Banda, it became apparent that he had no political explanation for the crisis in the WRP. I reminded him of the political criticisms that had been made in 1982 and 1984. He rummaged through his disorganized files and discovered a copy of my February 1984 report.

Banda conceded that I had been correct. He wished to discuss the issues with me and he asked if I would accompany him to Yorkshire, where he planned to meet with a comrade who had played a major role in the recently concluded miners' strike. The comrade he planned to visit was Dave Hyland in Rotherham.

I knew of Dave Hyland only by name. I had never spoken to him. The three hour drive up to Rotherham proved to be the most important of my many excursions on the British motorway. After Banda arrived at Dave's home, there was a rather unfocussed discussion on issues relating to work among the miners. It was a desultory discussion and my attention was more focused on the remarkable dog that was playing in the Hyland kitchen. Aside from inconsequential pleasantries, Dave and I did not speak.

But as we were leaving, somewhat to my surprise, Banda suddenly pulled out of his pocket a copy of the report I had given to the International Committee in February 1984. He gave it to Dave Hyland and then we left.

In 2005, Dave wrote to me:

"When I read your [critique of] *Studies in Dialectics* in 1985, and other documents outlining the discussion which had been taking place in the Workers League since 1982, it was a revelation. The approach to historical and theoretical questions as well as politics generally was entirely different to that which had existed at that time in the WRP, where everything began from immediate sense perception and practical initiatives, in opposition to a Marxist historical perspective and scientific method. This is why I phoned you 20 years ago, and subsequent events have proved it was the most important political decision of my life."

I recall that phone call very well. I was in Germany with Uli Rippert. On the afternoon of October 9, I called Detroit to check in and see how things were going, and I was told that a call had been received from a member of the WRP in Britain. The name of that member was Dave Hyland and that he had asked to speak with me. I was overjoyed to receive this news. I told Uli what I had learned and I said to him: "It has finally happened. A section of the British party is now reaching out to the International Committee and wants to speak to us about the political issues."

I cannot overstate how critical and important that was. Until that moment, we were still on the outside looking in. It was as if we were political interlopers in an organization to which we had no access. But now there was someone who wanted to speak to us about the crisis inside the WRP and who was interested in the documents we had written.

Several days later, I contacted Dave Hyland after making it to Britain. We met for the first time on the morning of October 12, 1985. And, believe it or not, the first meeting took place at the home of Cliff Slaughter. But neither Dave nor I felt particularly welcome. "Uninvited guests" was how Slaughter referred to us. Dave and I went to a nearby pub for a discussion.

After reviewing the crisis inside the WRP, Dave expressed the view—I think more to challenge me than as a position he held—that there had never been a Trotskyist movement in Britain. This was the line that was being promoted by Banda. I spent about three hours reviewing the entire history of the struggle of the International Committee since its founding in 1953. Dave listened intently, occasionally asking me to expand on one or another point. At the conclusion of my review, Dave shifted his position. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say whatever doubts he still had he now felt had been answered. He agreed that the fight in the WRP had to be waged on the basis of an international program and perspective, and on the basis of the continuity of the Trotskyist movement against the growth of Pabloism within the International Committee.

Dave warned me to be wary of all factions involved in the struggle inside the Workers Revolutionary Party. I agreed with his assessment. The central issues were not the factional matters that divided Healy, Banda and Slaughter, but the historical and political questions that underlay the crisis in the WRP.

From that point on, Dave fought to develop the discussion within the WRP on an international basis. In contrast to all the other pseudo-oppositions within the WRP, Dave Hyland insisted that the British organization had to accept the political authority of the International Committee.

Banda and Slaughter sought to place the blame for all that had gone wrong within the WRP on Healy. They were, or so they sought to convince everyone, the hapless and helpless victims of a political megalomaniac. There was nothing they could do. Of course, we knew better. We had not forgotten that it was Slaughter himself who had introduced a motion at a congress of the WRP investing Healy with supra-constitutional and unchallengeable authority. Moreover, both he and Banda, as I well knew, had collaborated with Healy to suppress the criticisms of the WRP's political line and theoretical conceptions.

In November 1985, the WRP Central Committee accepted a resolution that stipulated that membership in the organization required acceptance of

the political authority of the ICFI. They soon sought to overthrow and void this decision.

And they lashed out bitterly against Dave Hyland, who led a minority faction in the WRP Central Committee. His “minority” faction actually represented a majority of the members of the WRP, if membership was open to only those who accepted the authority of the international movement.

The WRP leadership peddled the line of “equal degeneration,” as if the International Committee was responsible for the opportunist practices of their organization.

In the meantime, in November 1985, an interim report was prepared by an International Control Committee that had been established by the IC. This interim report documented the unprincipled financial arrangements that the WRP leadership had made with various bourgeois national movements and bourgeois governments in the Middle East.

The report was presented at a meeting of the ICFI on December 16, 1985. The key paragraph in the resolution adopted by the International Committee stated:

“The interim report of the International Control Commission has revealed that the WRP has carried out a historic betrayal of the ICFI and the working class. In order to defend its principles and integrity, the ICFI therefore suspends the WRP as the British section.”

That was the most critical resolution ever presented at a meeting of the International Committee. The International Committee was asserting its authority over the WRP. It was declaring that political opportunism would be severely punished and that only those organizations that accepted the authority of the ICFI and its Trotskyist principles could be members.

There were four delegates representing the British section at that time in attendance. The four delegates of the WRP were Cliff Slaughter, Tom Kemp, Simon Pirani and Dave Hyland. Dave Hyland was the only delegate who voted for this resolution, who agreed that only on the basis of accepting that resolution, and of working to overcome the legacy of the WRP’s opportunism, could the WRP be returned to the road of Trotskyism.

Slaughter, Kemp and Pirani opposed the resolution. Kemp behaved in the most disgusting, provocative manner, as did Slaughter. Pirani, as was his wont at the time, feigned bewilderment.

The adoption of that resolution marked the decisive defeat of opportunism within the Fourth International. At long last, the civil war within the Fourth International that had begun in 1953 was brought to a conclusion. The orthodox Trotskyists of the International Committee finally regained control over the international organization founded by Trotsky in 1938.

Now, if one is to understand the political implications of that meeting, one has only to consider the subsequent evolution of the delegates who represented the Workers Revolutionary Party.

At the time of that meeting, Cliff Slaughter was already seeking to engineer a regroupment with Stalinists and Pabloites. In late November, at a meeting in London’s Friends Hall—which he called to discuss the crisis of the Workers Revolutionary Party in the presence of every rotten anti-Trotskyist tendency in Britain—Slaughter shook the hand of the notorious anti-Trotskyist “expert” of the British Communist Party, Monty Johnstone.

In the years that have followed the split, Slaughter has rejected Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism. He has explicitly denounced the struggle for Marxist consciousness in the working class and reoriented himself politically toward anarchism. The faction of the WRP that he led became active in the US-NATO war in the Balkans, under the cover of human rights.

Tom Kemp, at the time of that meeting, was sitting on the editorial board of the Stalinist publication *Science and Society*, and no one in the old WRP seems to have objected to this. And he soon abandoned any

contact with the Trotskyist movement.

As for Simon Pirani, he later wrote a book on the Soviet working class in the 1920s that dismissed the significance of the Left Opposition and had a distinctly anti-Bolshevik character. He has developed a career as an expert on the international oil industry, and he works with the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. Among his most recent works is an article entitled “Russian Energy Policy,” published by the Center for Security Studies. I invite you to draw your own conclusions.

After the meeting in December 1985, events proceeded rapidly. The WRP moved to instigate a split with the International Committee. It repudiated the authority of the ICFI.

In February 1986, Slaughter’s faction called the police to bar members of the minority led by Hyland from entering the hall where the party’s congress was to begin. Slaughter was escorted by a phalanx of policemen into the congress. The minority led by Hyland was not in the least disoriented. It immediately constituted itself as the International Communist Party, the legitimate representative of the International Committee and the historical continuity of Trotskyism in Britain.

As for Slaughter’s faction, it rapidly broke apart and disbanded. There is not one member of that organization who remains active in revolutionary socialist politics!

This was a very difficult time for Dave Hyland and his family. But Dave’s actions were guided by political principle. He refused to be swayed by subjective considerations. Having adopted a principled political line, he could not be shaken from this. And he inspired the very best elements within the WRP to support the International Committee, including his daughter Julie and his son Tony.

On Oct 9, 2005, I wrote a letter to Dave to mark the 20th anniversary of the call he placed asking for discussions. I wrote:

“It was exactly 20 years ago this week that you placed a transatlantic call to the offices of the Workers League, and asked for a discussion of the issues that had been raised in my critique of Healy’s *Studies in Dialectics* and of the policies of the International Committee under the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party. This decisive and principled action marked a turning point in the political crisis inside the WRP and dramatically changed the relation of forces within the International Committee between opportunism and orthodox Trotskyism.

“For the first time, as a result of your determination to uncover the real theoretical, historical and political roots of the crisis that had erupted in the British section in the summer of 1985, the grip of the national opportunist leadership over the WRP faced a major and significant challenge. In profound distinction from various opposition tendencies that had emerged from time to time inside the British organization, you recognized that the struggle against the factional leadership of Healy, Banda and Slaughter could only be conducted under the political discipline of the International Committee and on the basis of the strategic lessons of the Fourth International’s long struggle against Stalinism and the myriad forms of Pabloite revisionism.

“In the discussions that took place in the days that followed your call, we rapidly came to an agreement on the major cause of the crisis within the WRP, that is, its retreat from and repudiation of the principles that underlay the issuing of the Open Letter in 1953 and the fight against the 1963 reunification of the SWP and Pabloite International Secretariat.

“Your firm rejection of the attempt of Banda and Slaughter to denigrate the history of the International Committee with their repugnant and self-serving theory of equal degeneration made it possible to win the best elements within the British section to the banner of internationalism. This contributed to an enormous extent to the decisive victory of the International Committee over all the national opportunist factions of the old Workers Revolutionary Party.

“In this very difficult fight, you based your political work on the entire history of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist

Revolution, which, it must be stressed, included all that was positive in the earlier work of the British Trotskyist movement. It is now possible to look back on the events that occurred 20 years ago within the International Committee and recognize that the struggles of that autumn laid the programmatic foundations for the renewal of the Fourth International.

“The fight against the national opportunism of the WRP prepared the ICFI to meet the historic challenge posed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the profound changes in the nature and the structure of globalized capitalism.

“The combined impact of these developments ended for all time the viability of working class struggles and organizations that proceeded from a national rather than international perspective. From the decision that you took in 1985 to fight on the basis of internationalism, you made a contribution of immense and enduring significance to the building of the International Committee and its section in Britain. For this, I and all of your many comrades throughout the world owe you an unforgettable debt of gratitude.

“With warmest regards.”

Comrade Dave will never be forgotten. His work lives on in our international movement. He will be remembered by his comrades and remain an inspiring example of revolutionary steadfastness and principle for generations to come.

Read more about about the life of comrade Dave Hyland, visit the WSWs topic page here.

Read the pamphlet: *Dave Hyland: A tribute to a fighter for the international working class*, available here from Mehring Books



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact