

The Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL): The alliance of Stalinism and middle-class radicalism

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Israel's genocide in Gaza, carried out with the weapons and encouragement of US imperialism, has prompted the largest global anti-war movement since the 2003 protests against the Iraq war. After a long period of a seeming de-politicization of workers and youth, millions of people have been shaken up and radicalized by witnessing a genocide-in-the-making in the 21st century.

In the United States, the Democratic Party, in particular, has been discredited. The Biden administration has been providing the weapons, funds and intelligence for this genocide, while enacting a police-state crackdown on protesters on campuses in collaboration with fascist Republicans.

The overwhelming majority of those who have joined the protests in the US were born in the 21st century. They have grown up witnessing unending wars by US imperialism, social austerity, and, most recently, the mass death from COVID-19, as a result of the homicidal response of the ruling class to the pandemic.

Throughout this period, the class struggle has been suppressed by the union bureaucracies, and any understanding of history and society has been undermined by the prevailing climate of reaction and the promotion of anti-Marxism. Under these conditions, it is inevitable that the initial stage of mass radicalization has been bound up with the sudden prominence of organizations and tendencies which until recently were little known.

Among the most prominent of these are the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), which has co-organized many of the protests, and the associated ANSWER Coalition. With its rhetoric, the PSL appeals to anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist sentiments, and presents itself as significantly more radical than the Democratic Socialists of America, which works as a "left" faction within the Democratic Party. In its 2024 presidential campaign, the PSL also portrays itself as a socialist alternative to the Democratic Party, and the nucleus for a new "working class party."

But, like any political organization or tendency, the PSL must be judged, not by what it says about itself, but by its history and its political program. It is only on this basis that the class character of an organization and the implications of its politics can be evaluated. They therefore require a serious analysis.

The historical record of the PSL: Defending Stalinism, the gravedigger of the socialist revolution

The PSL writes and says nothing about its own history. On its website, one will search in vain for an account of its historical roots and an

assessment of the key experiences of the 20th century. There are definite reasons for this silence.

First, like any petty bourgeois tendency, the PSL rejects a historical and class approach to politics, i.e., Marxist politics, and instead develops its policies based on pragmatic considerations.

Second, its entire historical record exposes the PSL as an anti-Trotskyist tendency that is bitterly hostile to the working class and Marxism.

Historically, the PSL emerged out of a split within the Workers World Party. The split between the two organizations was never explained by either one of them, and the publications of the PSL to this day cite what they refer to as the "organizational genius" of Sam Marcy (1911-1998), and claim his politics as their heritage.

Sam Marcy was radicalized in the inter-war period and joined the Communist movement in the United States in the 1930s. He was attracted to Trotskyism and joined the Socialist Workers Party, then the American section of the Fourth International, in the 1940s.

The Trotskyist movement emerged in 1923-24 in a struggle to defend the program of world socialist revolution against the nationalist program of Stalinism. Stalin, expressing the interests of a privileged bureaucracy which had consolidated itself within the workers' state as a result of the international isolation of the USSR, formulated the program of building "socialism in one country." This nationalist program was to form the basis for a decades-long violent reaction against the 1917 October revolution.

The policies of the Stalinists led to devastating defeats of the working class. In China during the 1925-27 revolution, the Stalinists subordinated the Chinese Communist Party to the national bourgeoisie, resulting in a massacre of Communists. This disastrous line was later replicated in the Middle East and other regions, where Stalinism disarmed the oppressed masses in their struggle against imperialism. In the advanced imperialist countries, the Stalinists began collaborating with the "democratic" factions of the bourgeoisie in the 1930s. In the US, this took the form of the CP's eventual complete subservience to the Democratic Party.

Within the USSR, the bureaucracy developed a violent apparatus to suppress the working class. In his scientific study of the emergence of Stalinism, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Leon Trotsky stressed that the usurpation of political power by the bureaucracy could be broken, and the degeneration of the workers' state reversed, only through a political revolution by the working class, aimed at overthrowing the bureaucracy, as part of a struggle to extend the revolution internationally.

In the Great Terror of the 1930s, the Stalinist bureaucracy murdered hundreds of thousands of socialist workers, intellectuals and Trotskyists in the USSR, and elsewhere as well, as in Spain during the Civil War. As Trotsky put it, "the present purge draws between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood." In 1940, Trotsky himself would be assassinated by a Stalinist agent in Mexico.

Having beheaded the working class politically, in the post-war period Stalinism played the central role in sabotaging revolutionary movements of the working class in Europe and Asia. It thus ensured the survival of the world capitalist system, which had been deeply discredited by the barbarism of fascism and the Second World War. For the Fourth International, which had been founded by Trotsky in 1938, this created extremely difficult conditions. In 1953, the International Committee of the Fourth International was formed to defend the program of Trotskyism against the middle class liquidationist tendency of Pabloism.

Responding impressionistically to the post-war re-stabilization of capitalism, the Pabloites declared that a “new world reality” had emerged, which was defined by the struggle of “two camps”—imperialism and the Soviet Union. The struggle between these two camps, according to the Pabloites, superseded the international class struggle. The Pabloites thus rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, instead ascribing such a role to the Stalinist bureaucracy. Based on this perspective, the Pabloites worked systematically to liquidate the Fourth International into the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties, as well as into bourgeois nationalist movements.

Marcy initially did not join the Pabloites, but he would soon succumb to the same class and political pressures and developed similar political conceptions. In an obituary of Marcy in 1998, Fred Mazelis, a founding member of the Workers League (predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party) explained the shift to the right of Marcy and broader sections of the middle class:

The postwar restabilization of imperialism, facilitated by the powerful influence and counterrevolutionary policies of the Soviet regime, profoundly disoriented many who had fought in earlier years against capitalist exploitation as well as its agencies in the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies. The rapid bureaucratization of the CIO unions and the relative quiescence of the American working class [in the post-war period] led them to reject the fight for Marxist principles in the working class as a hopeless project. At the same time, the expansion of the Soviet bloc and the Chinese and Yugoslav revolutions were taken as evidence that the Soviet bureaucracy and Stalinist parties elsewhere could be forced to take the road of revolution. The perspective of world socialist revolution, which had animated the founders of the Marxist movement and the leaders of the Russian Revolution, was abandoned in the name of a “new world reality.”

When Marcy broke with the program of Trotskyism in the second half of the 1950s, he did so on an explicitly pro-Stalinist basis. While still in the SWP in 1956, Marcy responded to the political revolution of Hungarian workers against the Stalinist bureaucracy by denouncing the workers as engaging in a “counter-revolution.” He welcomed the crushing of the uprising by the military forces of the bureaucracy. A little over two years later, in early 1959, Marcy split from the SWP and founded the Workers World Party (WWP).

In the years and decades to come, Marcy and the WWP, as the WSWS obituary noted, “managed to combine sycophantic praise for Stalinist tyrants such as the late Kim Il Sung of North Korea and Nicolae Ceaușescu of Romania with groveling support for the anticommunist AFL-CIO bureaucracy.”

Characterizing the WWP in 2000, the late Helen Halyard, a long-time leader of the Trotskyist movement in the US, wrote:

In the WWP several ideological tendencies of an essentially

reactionary character converge. These include the outlook of protest politics, Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism and forms of identity politics such as black nationalism. All of these are hallmarks of what we have often called middle-class radicalism, i.e., a political perspective that reflects the interests not of the working class, but rather of middle class layers that are dissatisfied with their position in capitalist society, but incapable of advancing a genuinely revolutionary opposition to the status quo. In capitalist society, only a program that articulates the independent interests of the working class and fights to establish the unity of the working class and its political independence from all sections of the bourgeoisie—liberal as well as conservative—can provide the basis for a revolutionary socialist movement.

In its essential outlines, the PSL has inherited the outlook and politics of the WWP.

The PSL’s allies today: Subservience to the Democratic Party and bourgeois nationalist regimes

There is a direct line of continuity between the PSL’s historical defense of Stalinism and its political orientation today.

In its political program, the PSL advocates a reactionary, modern-day version of “socialism in one country”—this time in the USA. Meanwhile, despite its radical rhetoric, it is oriented entirely toward pressuring the oldest capitalist party in the world, the Democratic Party, the principal instrument of Wall Street and the US military and intelligence agencies.

In article after article, and speech after speech, the PSL tries to convince young people and workers that, even after 9 months of genocide and over 186,000 dead, “applying pressure” on the Biden administration “works.”

This perspective of pressuring the Democratic Party animated the protests against the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration in 2003-2004 which, in the US, were chiefly organized by the ANSWER Coalition. Then as now, it has proven a complete dead end. Just as this perspective could not stop the invasion of Iraq and the resultant slaughter of up to one million Iraqis in a decade of occupation, the genocide in Gaza has not been stopped or hindered, but rather intensified.

Far from “responding” to the pressure, the Democrats and Republicans have not only escalated the attack on democratic rights at home, but also invited—demonstratively—the butcher-in-chief, Benjamin Netanyahu, to address Congress on July 24 to provide a “report” on the genocide. The main demand by the ANSWER Coalition and the PSL has again been directed toward the Biden administration: To have Benjamin Netanyahu arrested and handed over to the International Criminal Court.

In these efforts, the PSL and ANSWER Coalition have received the endorsement of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union bureaucracy, which is fully integrated into the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, the chief backers of the Israeli genocide in Gaza. UAW President Shawn Fain was a guest of honor at Biden’s State of the Union address and has visited the White House multiple times since his fraudulent election in 2022, pledging to Biden that he would “go to war and put the power of the membership behind you.”

The PSL also champions one of the primary tools of the American ruling class to divide workers: racial and identity politics. In a particularly telling testament to its rejection of Marxism, historical truth and basic democratic principles, the PSL has endorsed the attacks on the American revolutions and Abraham Lincoln that have found their most vile expression in the *New York Times’* 1619 Project.

While engaging in racial and nationalist politics and collaborating with the union bureaucracies in the US, in the Middle East and internationally the PSL supports bourgeois nationalist regimes and opposes the independent mobilization of the working class against imperialism and the nation-state system. In its articles on the genocide in Gaza, the PSL combines the promotion of toothless protest politics aimed at pressuring US imperialism with a shameless glorification of bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalist forces such as Hamas and the Houthis rebels in Yemen, which it has described as the “axis of resistance” that has already inflicted a “strategic defeat” on Israel.

Other political heroes of the PSL include figures such as Jose Maria Sison, who was responsible for bloody defeats of the working class in the Philippines and ended up supporting the fascist Duterte government toward the end of his life. Nevertheless, the PSL described him as a “comrade” and a “brilliant and dedicated revolutionary.”

In China, the PSL glorifies the capitalist regime of Xi Jinping. On October 22, 2022, it described the Chinese Communist Party as a “governing party” that is “deeply concerned with the well-being of the Chinese people.” This was just weeks before the CCP succumbed to the pressure of the imperialist powers and completely abandoned any anti-COVID mitigation measures, leading to over 1 million deaths within a matter of weeks. It should be stressed that the PSL, mirroring the ruling class in the US and internationally, has declared the ongoing COVID pandemic a non-issue, ignoring it entirely in its presidential campaign and on its website.

Though less overtly, the PSL also advocates an orientation to the Putin regime, and has refused to condemn its reactionary invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

In a statement issued two days before the invasion, the PSL described NATO expansion as an existential threat to Russia and “clear justification from a geopolitical standpoint” for Russia’s “decision-making.” As the “solution,” the PSL appealed to NATO, urging it to dissolve itself. The PSL stated, “The abolition of NATO would both resolve the explosive tensions in Eastern Europe and represent a historic step towards world peace.” Needless to say, the ruling class in the imperialist countries did not take this “historic step towards world peace”!

When the Putin regime invaded less than 48 hours later, the PSL issued a statement focusing again entirely on NATO’s role in provoking the war and insisting that NATO was the aggressor. While in and of itself correct, absent a condemnation of the Putin regime’s reactionary invasion and the advancement of a clear line for the working class in Russia, Ukraine, Europe and the US to oppose this war, such calls condemning NATO amount to a de facto adaptation to and justification of the policies of the Putin regime. The PSL even used the language of the Kremlin, describing the war as a “special military operation.” Since then, the PSL has not issued a single programmatic document on the war in Ukraine.

In contrast, the International Committee of the Fourth International, within hours of the beginning of the war, unequivocally denounced the invasion. In a principled statement on February 24, 2022, the IC stated:

Despite the provocations and threats by the US and NATO powers, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine must be opposed by socialists and class-conscious workers. The catastrophe that was set in motion by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 cannot be averted on the basis of Russian nationalism, a thoroughly reactionary ideology that serves the interests of the capitalist ruling class represented by Vladimir Putin.

What is required is not a return to the pre-1917 foreign policy of tsarism, but, rather a revival, in Russia and throughout the world, of the socialist internationalism that inspired the October Revolution of 1917 and led to the creation of the Soviet Union as a

workers state. The invasion of Ukraine, whatever the justifications given by the Putin regime, will serve only to divide the Russian and Ukrainian working class and, moreover, serve the interests of US and European imperialism.

On the surface, it may appear contradictory for the PSL to appeal to the Biden administration and NATO to “abolish itself,” while at the same time providing de facto support for the Putin regime and the Xi regime. From the basic standpoint of historical and social orientation, however, this line is perfectly consistent.

In fact, especially in its appeals to the imperialist ruling class, the PSL mirrors the neo-Stalinist policies of the Putin regime, which has emerged as a Bonapartist regime out of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s restoration of capitalism in the USSR. With its reactionary invasion of Ukraine, the Putin regime has sought to exert pressure on the imperialist powers and force them to the negotiating table. Even though this calculation has catastrophically backfired, the Kremlin has not abandoned it. The Putin regime, whose principal concern is the safeguarding of the assets of the oligarchs against the threat of a social revolution, shares the Stalinist bureaucracy’s orientation toward “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism. This neo-Stalinist foreign policy is not only pro-capitalist but also unviable.

As David North explained in 2023:

The peaceful distribution and allocation of global resources among capitalist and imperialist states is impossible. The contradictions between the global economy and capitalist nation-state system lead to war. In any event, the realization of a “multi-polar” world, setting aside its incorrect theoretical foundations, requires its peaceful acceptance by today’s dominant imperialist power, the United States. This is not a realistic prospect. The United States will oppose with all the means at its disposal efforts to block its drive for “unipolar” hegemony. Thus, the utopian striving to replace a “unipolar” with a “multi-polar” world leads, by its own twisted logic, to World War III and the destruction of the planet.

Conclusion

It is a basic principle of socialist opposition to imperialist war that it must be rooted in the working class and its international unification. Moreover, since World War I, revolutionary socialists have always insisted that, in a reactionary conflict, workers in every country must take the position of revolutionary defeatism—that is, a policy of revolutionary opposition to their “own” capitalist class which, through means of war, seeks to defend its own national and economic interests against the working class both abroad and at home.

The PSL turns all of these principles on their head: Under conditions of an emerging world war and the discrediting of better-known pseudo-left tendencies such as the DSA, it desperately tries to keep the working class and youth tied to this or that faction of the bourgeoisie. Far from being a genuine socialist tendency, it is a nationalist petty-bourgeois radical outfit whose principal role consists in preventing radicalized youth and workers from finding the path to genuine socialist and revolutionary politics.

This has found a clear expression in the role of the PSL as the “political police” of the anti-genocide protests: While engaging in radical phrasemongering on stage, unbeknownst to most demonstrators the PSL has

routinely prevented IYSSE and SEP members from speaking at protests.

There is a foul smell about the entire history and politics of the PSL, whose politics can best be described as neo-Stalinist. It recycles all the old rotten maneuvers of the 20th century gravedigger of the socialist revolution, be it at the center of world imperialism in the US, or in the oppressed countries. It speaks to the depths of the crisis of the ruling class that it now has to rely on such forces in order to derail mass opposition to its policies and prop up its rule.

It does not require deep historical foresight to predict that this prop is shaky indeed. The PSL is a primary candidate for what Trotsky aptly called the “dustbin of history.” Its politics will not stand the test of the coming shocks of war and the class struggle. The emergence and disappearance of such tendencies is not the exception but the rule of any process of mass radicalization.

The movement of the masses toward revolution does not come overnight. The working class and young people pass through definite experiences of struggle, in the course of which they come into contact with different political tendencies and must overcome the political and ideological obstacles thrown in their path by the ruling class.

But this only makes the task of drawing the political lessons from the past 10 months of protests and the role of organizations like the PSL all the more urgent.

The protest movement against the Gaza genocide is at a crossroads. If it continues to be dominated by petty-bourgeois nationalist organizations and subordinated to the Democratic Party, it will inevitably collapse, aggravating a sense of demoralization and political despair among young people that has already led to the tragic suicide-protest of Aaron Bushnell

The other path lies in a turn to the working class and the building of a powerful socialist anti-war movement, capable of putting an end to the developing World War III, which is metastasizing across the Middle East and Eastern Europe, with Russia, China and Iran in the sights of US imperialism.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the student and youth organization of the world Trotskyist movement, therefore call upon all young people and workers who are opposed to imperialist war to take up the struggle to build a socialist leadership in the working class! Study the history and politics of Trotskyism! Attend the rally organized by the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the IYSSE in Washington DC on July 24 to build a genuine socialist anti-war movement to stop the genocide in Gaza, the war in Ukraine and the escalation toward World War III!



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