

Seventh Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)

Introduction by Thomas Scripps to resolution “War, the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party”

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We are publishing the speech introducing the resolution “War, the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party” at the Seventh National Congress of the SEP (UK) given by Tom Scripps, its Assistant National Secretary. The resolution was passed unanimously. Scripps was re-elected to his position by the Congress.

Comrade Chris Marsden [SEP National Secretary] has engaged—in speaking to the elements of the resolution which must be updated and strengthened—most heavily with its opening sections. I’m going to pick up the thread roughly where the resolution moves to a review of our experience of the last two years and our tasks going forward. I’m not going to do so in point-by-point fashion; I’m going to speak to the key issues as I see they are raised by the document in broadly the order that they appear in the text.

The strike wave and the Gaza protest movement

It’s always necessary to review the experiences that our party and the working class have passed through in writing such a document. But it was especially so in this case, after two years in which the working class and young people have been driven by their socio-economic situation, and their response to international developments, up against the limits of their own present political organisation and understanding.

The experience of the strike wave—which formed part of an international phenomenon—confirmed our analysis of this decade as one of social upheavals, and of the pandemic as an accelerant of that tendency. But it also confirmed our warnings of the state of consciousness which prevails in the class, without a change in which that social impulse cannot be transformed into a sustained political movement.

Similarly, the protest movement over Gaza revealed the well of anti-imperialist sentiment which can be mobilised over issues with which a degree of familiarity and understanding has been built up over decades—as with the oppression of the Palestinians. But it has also provided a terrible demonstration of the consequences, the demobilising consequences, if the dead hand of the bureaucracy and middle class pacifists and semi-reformists is not thrown off.

The challenges are most starkly highlighted by the progress of the war in Ukraine and the popular response to it, which serve as something of a test case for the lag which can open up between objective events and subjective understanding—and the political confusions which can be sown in that gap.

We are at a point where the working class feels itself thoroughly dissatisfied with the status quo, is seeking to escape it, but has not fully embarked on a new road. It is prepared to move much further than the unions and protest leaders will take them, but is not yet prepared to move on the say so of another leadership. That leadership—which must be of a Marxist, Trotskyist character—and the trust in that leadership must be built and expanded.

That’s a situation which the simple momentum of militancy cannot overcome. It requires the introduction of political perspective. And I mean that in a very specific sense: the perspective afforded by a standpoint *outside* capitalism, which refuses to accept its enforced assumptions for what is possible and desirable—the “education, tradition, and habit” by which the working class is encouraged to “look upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws,” in Marx’s words.

We have to attend to the task of introducing that perspective, in all its complexity, into all the aspects of working class experience under capitalism, and the struggle against it. The working class, in Britain and internationally, is being brought into ever sharper opposition with the brutal reality of contemporary capitalism. But that only poses the questions that have to be answered by the revolutionary party.

As Trotsky explains:

It is necessary not only to say what is but also to know how to use ‘what is’ as one’s point of departure ... It is not at all difficult to skip over ... contradictory reality by contenting oneself with a few sociological generalizations. But that does not advance developments by a hairsbreadth. It is necessary to overcome material difficulties in action, that is, by means of a tactic suited to reality.

We fought to do so: through our interventions among striking workers, the protest movement and on the campuses—and I’ll return to these themes in the context of the latter sections of the resolution. Here, I want to focus on how we took up these challenges in the general election campaign, which concentrated these political issues, and served as a crucible for the tendencies claiming to answer them.

The Socialist Equality Party’s general election campaign

It did so because that election had the character of a political conspiracy-cum-crisis meeting: for a ruling class that felt it needed the artificial national conversation forced on the population by the machinery of an election, to inject at least a little more democratic legitimacy into its government, and, ideally for them, to install new managers in the form of a Labour Party which had spent the last years working out the corporatist arrangement we now see in practice.

Chris has spoken to how that's going for them, just a few months down the line. In the moment, it posed us the challenge of waging a campaign in an arena where our opponents are most at home, and us the least so—because it's the politics of parliamentary democracy, meaning of the middle classes, rather than the politics of the masses. We step into hostile territory to fly a flag for Trotskyism, to put ourselves forwards as a political vanguard, to seize from it those people we can—especially young people coming to political awareness for the first time—who are worth seizing.

And we conducted that campaign (always allowing for improvements) in a very powerful way—along the *only* axis which could have the effect of breaking workers from their political encumbrances in the Labour Party and its left appendages: basing ourselves on the fight we had waged, largely in the context of the strike wave and the crisis of the Tory Party, to demand a general election: one which would have taken place under the greatest possible influence of the class struggle and posed the necessity of a working-class party as sharply as possible.

In the general election we ultimately got, we were right to choose to stand against Starmer specifically: we counterposed our Marxist opposition to Labour to Corbyn's effective abstention, and Andrew Feinstein's half-way house between a protest candidacy and a project for a new Corbynite party—which stood for, and had the backing of, the whole fraternity of the “left” from which socialist-minded workers and young people must disentangle themselves.

What we showed was that these people have almost nothing to say to the genuinely socialist aspirations of a wide layer of workers and youth; nothing which meets up to the scope of change that is necessary. We put ourselves forward as the political party able to articulate that and which has represented, stood for and defended that programme for decades: against social counterrevolution and ecological collapse, in defence of democratic rights, and especially of migrant workers—and above all, in this election, against the genocide in Gaza.

And we met our responsibility to introduce to that suite of concerns the war in Ukraine and the widening war for the redivision of the world of which it forms, as yet, the bloodiest part.

In our campaign in Scotland, we made the same points, but also landing blows against the now very beleaguered but still no less reactionary division and division of Scottish nationalism.

In the webinar “The Election Debacle and the Fight Against Dictatorship,” comrade David North made the point—in connection with the fight against the Trump presidency, but it extends more broadly—“that fight must be prepared. It requires analysis. It requires a sober and careful approach to political events. The last thing it needs is panic and hysteria. ... The time for serious politics has begun.”

Our campaign was an exercise in that approach. It hardly suffices as a summary of our tendency and its positions and history, it's not meant to, but the phrase “serious politics” does capture something of what recommends us to workers and students. Ours was a campaign standing unapologetically on the ground of social and political reality, not the fantastical politics of “if only” and of moral appeals. And basing itself on a political programme of the historic and international scope that's necessary to address that reality: of war, genocide, fascism, social and ecological collapse.

In the course of discussion on the US election campaign, this point made by Lenin in “The Election Campaign and the Election Platform,” in 1911,

was cited:

The principal question for Social-Democrats who value the elections primarily as a means for the political enlightenment of the people, is, of course, the ideological and political content of all the propaganda and agitation to be carried on in connection with them. That is what is meant by an election platform. To every party at all worthy of the name a platform is something that has existed long before the elections; it is not something specially devised “for the elections”, but an inevitable result of the whole *work* of the party, of the way the work is organised, and of its whole trend in the given historical period.

Again, that was our approach, and one which resonated with those coming into conscious opposition to capitalism.

Our actual vote, of course, was small; more fuel for John Kelly's exacting tabulations of so-called Trotskyist performances in elections, proving the verdict that has been delivered on the Trotskyist movement for all time, in all examples, of its political irrelevance. Which is rather like proving a baby can never become an adult by performing hundreds of measurements of the child, and saying “the overwhelming evidence is that not one of these proportions matches those of a fully grown human.”

To make the same point a different way, Kelly writes triumphantly in his book that “no revolution has ever been launched against a functioning parliamentary democracy.” Which would be very reassuring to capitalism if it was in any way capable of sustaining functioning parliamentary democracies.

What this died-in-the-wool anti-socialist bureaucrat is incapable of grasping are the processes which upend and transform old assumptions and turn what seems the unworkable and extreme into the urgent and necessary—the processes which characterise a revolutionary situation. The opening sections of our resolution, and the report given by Chris, make clear that it's precisely these political waters that we are entering.

There will be no shortage of events which, as we put it in the resolution, will “energise the class struggle and produce the impulse for social revolution.” But we don't take that as the end of the matter. As comrade David put it in one of his answers to the recent discussion on his two books, “revolutionary optimism isn't some Panglossian happiness that everything will work out well,” it “identifies in any given objective situation the conflicting social forces.”

We engage in campaigns such as the election to identify those forces, and the pressures they exert within the class which must be overcome. We *are* winning a great deal of sympathy, but we have to transform that into commitment and practical collaboration—and to grow the party.

We have frequently commented that time is a factor in politics. It's worth thinking about what this means, which is that delay in the adoption of socialist politics by the working class, or its advanced sections, is not simply a problem of postponement. It contributes to a qualitatively different development of the class. Because in the *meantime*, other forces—other social classes and their political leaders and ideologues—intervene to exert their own hegemony over the class, or sections of it; to advance a claim to speak for workers' interests and win them to particular conceptions of those interests.

As Lenin warns, in the absence of the conscious construction of a socialist movement, while “The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree.”

The struggle against Corbynism

In our review of the election result we were sure to pay particular attention to the role of Corbyn, who remains, despite himself, the figurehead of this general political fraternity. And we did so because he, or rather what he represents, the conceptions in the working class of which he is the beneficiary, remain to be fully overcome.

We cite the key passage, which I won't repeat in full, which notes that he relies "on the pragmatism of electoral politics and cynicism towards the possibility of overthrowing capitalism" and goes on to urge, "Such debilitating conceptions must be broken with. They play far more of a role in keeping the Starmer of the world in power than any of their own non-existent strengths."

This fight is still a live one, under conditions in which a "left of Labour" party remains under discussion, and there are murmurs too—changing what needs to be changed for American politics—of some sort of US formation which can at least occupy the space left by the rank betrayals and exposure of the Democratic Socialists of America's "squad"—in which Bernie Sanders, of all people, is a key voice. Confirming, along with Corbyn, that what we are dealing with is not the charisma of individuals but the combination of a well-resourced bureaucratic, cultural apparatus of the middle class and persistent illusions among workers.

On the actual development of what would be, as we say, a Labour Party Mark II, or Corbynism redux: we should neither write this off as a possibility nor claim it as a certainty. What we know is that there is—and cannot fail to be, under these conditions—a discussion among our opponents about whether a new formation can be put together. And we also know that their ability to do so is severely impeded: they are working with damaged materials, and in political conditions of such sharp class tensions that the fundamentally anti-working-class politics of these groups is more rapidly exposed.

What matters for us is that we take cognisance of these efforts, which form a part of the political landscape within which we operate, the better to navigate it and see the working class past this swamp. Ultimately, it's that work, our work, that is decisive—in the sense that only the successful interventions of the revolutionary party can bring an end to this political vicious circle, whose only outcome otherwise can be a victory for barbarism—the forces of the far-right.

We note in the resolution that Corbyn took action to prevent the "Pasokification" of the Labour Party, referring to the collapse of the Greek Social Democrats as support shifted to Syriza. Syriza's performance has been rotten enough for long enough to hand the balance back to PASOK—though within the context of a domination of the electoral landscape by the conservatives and the far-right, despite the huge social anger and militancy that exists in the Greek working class. That's the outcome of the pseudo-left project.

A revolutionary, Trotskyist alternative has to be provided to the working class. We have to prove the party's capacity to lead the working class—or, what amounts to the same thing, prove to the working class its own capacity to act as a historical force.

In Lenin's words:

the objective of the class-conscious vanguard of the international working-class movement, i.e., the Communist parties... is to be able to *lead* the broad masses... to their new position, or, rather, to be able to lead *not only* their own party but also these masses in their advance and transition to the new position... the advanced contingent; we must act in such a way that all the other contingents recognise and are obliged to admit that we are marching in the vanguard.

And as the resolution indicates, we must do so not only to seize the initiative from the "left" betrayers, but increasingly from the right.

The rise of the far-right and the trap of the popular front

This is a phenomenon that it is vital we be clear in explaining. Because we intend, we *have*, to build a party—to use an American example—of workers who voted for Trump and against him. Not in a pragmatic, reactionary way, through a "left-right unite" smothering of the class issues, in the style championed by George Galloway and Sahra Wagenknecht. But precisely by bringing the class issues to the fore, into the consciousness of workers. As we've written, it's their enforced exclusion over a whole period which has provided the opportunity for right-wing forces to frame workers' interests—fraudulently, of course—in a nationalistic, national exclusivist, way.

To reiterate a point we've made many times, we are not talking about mass fascist movements—though that should never be taken as waving away the threat of a government nonetheless run by fascists. Millions of workers are not signed up to participate in a programme of smashing of all forms of working-class collectivity and all traces of democracy.

The far-right danger proceeds in the absence of a conscious constituency for socialism rather than in the presence of a conscious constituency for fascism—under conditions in which workers are nevertheless increasingly moved to reject what has been offered as mainstream politics for the last decades.

In combatting this danger, we are engaging with some of the most fundamental questions to have confronted the socialist movement: pivoting on the point of nationalism or internationalism.

In the far-right we have an appeal to the nation state and its borders, to nationality, as the guarantor of living standards. A nostalgia backward in every sense: that identifies the harm done to the social standing of the working class by globalisation—and this is its strength, its persuasiveness—but which then holds out the prospect of some better past that can be recreated in the present by throwing up national barriers and throwing overboard demonised, largely racialised, groups of migrants.

We had an early taste of that with the Brexit campaign, to which the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party (and Galloway) lent a left cover. Of course, Brexit also showed what this was and always is a front for: the same, in fact the most rapacious, capitalist interests of the major corporations and the financial aristocracy.

And just as the far-right represent different factions of fundamentally the same class interests as their traditional/mainstream bourgeois political opponents, so those opponents engage in substantially the same nationalism as the far-right. We note in the resolution for example, that Trump "fed on the Democrats' own record of trade war, deportations and scapegoating."

Now we have the same experience with Starmer. *Politico* had an interesting article on this score a couple of weeks ago, "How UK's Labour channelled Donald Trump to win." It cites a memo sent round by Starmer's right-hand-man Morgan McSweeney during the election, headed "Labour for the country," which emphasised, "We are patriots," and included the line, "Labour is the party with a plan to make Britain great again."

And of course we've published multiple articles—on Starmer's conference speech, on his and Lammy's overtures to Trump—emphasising the right-wing character of this government.

All of which underscores the totally bankrupt response offered by the Stand Up To Racism, United Front types—really a Popular Front perspective masquerading as a United Front—who see this as another route

to advancing a Corbyn-led formation, and so adapt to his refusal to take up a struggle against the Labour Party and the fuel it provides to the far-right: in direct ideological terms, and through the social consequences of its economic policy.

A real struggle against the far-right means overcoming, to use a line from the resolution, “the stranglehold of the trade union leaderships and the Labour Party that still exercise a malign influence on a working class disconnected from Marxism and its own traditions of class struggle.”

It means winning the working class to a perspective of international class struggle, to an internationalist political perspective. Winning the argument that they cannot ride out the storm of war and economic and social crisis huddled around the national hearth—quite the opposite. They have to turn to their class brothers and sisters.

The essential principles are provided by the theory of permanent revolution, which I think it’s so important we include, spell out, and place towards the top of the document; the analytical, strategic framework is provided by the analysis of globalisation carried out by the International Committee of the Fourth International; and the concrete initiative, in large part, by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

The importance of building this international organisation cannot be overstated. Comrades most closely involved with our rank-and-file committee work will speak in more detail, but in broad strokes: we write that our purpose is to “establish the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers on an international scale. Corresponding to the global character of the working class itself, it represents the means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle against the transnational corporations.”

What we are speaking about is the political education and organisation necessary to re-establish the working class not simply as an exploited and oppressed section of society, but a revolutionary fighting force. It’s worth returning to what Marx and Engels had to say on this process. As they wrote variously across *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

“Competition separates individuals from one another, not only the bourgeois, but still more the workers, in spite of the fact that it brings them together.” The workers “live in daily conditions reproducing this isolation” and so it is only through “long struggles” that this is overcome, that workers “nullify this competition by associations” and combinations—which always have “a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist.”

“The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class.”

Today, the socio-economic, and technical, processes of globalisation and automation; the growth of deeply insecure and atomising work; the political process of the gutting of any forum in which a semblance of labour movement democracy could be said to be operating; the entrenchment of a bureaucratic apparatus, have corroded the sense of class collectivity and power.

The rank-and-file committees and the IWA-RFC point the way out of this situation—create a basis for the resolution of these problems which confront the working class. They are an alternative leadership in the most profound sense. Because they stand for not merely a different industrial policy, but an entirely different class strategy: matching up to the challenges of today’s globalised economy and providing a means to

leverage the potential strength workers have as an international class, with their hands on key resource and trade flows.

Guided by that perspective, they provide fora for discussion among militant workers outside of the supervision of the apparatus and conservative influences, where a Marxist political discourse can begin to take shape. And organising centres: firstly for the spread of those conceptions among their colleagues, and also for such actions as can be taken at whatever the RFC’s present level of influence. Serving as a political-intellectual and practical counterpoint to the bureaucracy *and also* a practical one. A framework through which the worker communists we must recruit can act as, in the words of the Third Congress of the Communist International:

a vanguard that, by pressing for struggle for all the proletariat’s vital necessities, demonstrates how the struggle should be carried out, thus exposing the traitorous character of the non-Communist parties. Only if the Communists are able to take the lead in and promote all the proletariat’s practical struggles will they be able to actually win broad masses of the proletariat.

Of course, as is necessarily the case with all our work at this stage, it has an initial character, but it is the case—and extremely important—that the only organisation which emerged politically strengthened (with its authority improved) from the experience of the strike wave was the IWA-RFC, in the form of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee. And we are now having workers turn to us—in Britain as well as internationally—over the new wave of deindustrialisation and automation that is ushering in the new global trade war.

In the face of the imperialist fight for the redivision of the world, the socialist fight is for the practical-political reunification of the international working class and class struggle.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the education of Marxist cadre

Then we come to the section on the IYSSE, but which I want to discuss in broader terms—and which is presented, quite deliberately, as an all-party task: the task of training new generations of workers as Marxists.

There are particular challenges attending to the work at the universities and among young people generally, but a Trotskyist youth movement, and contingents of Trotskyists on the campuses will ultimately be built by raising the authority of the Socialist Equality Party and ICFI in the estimation of young people, through our record of political activity.

Particularly, as we say, those young people who are turning to socialist ideas, engaging with a critique of capitalism and with the great Marxist thinkers. We have to help them develop those ideas and connect them with the struggles of the working class and the struggles of socialists *within* the working class: “helping the working class,” in the words of the *Labour Review*, “to a clearer consciousness of its position and the actions necessitated by that position.”

That means training cadre as Marxists, as Trotskyists, in the history of our party and the strategic experiences of the struggle for world socialist revolution; educating them on permanent revolution, on the value theory, historical materialism, Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism, fascism, globalisation, imperialism. When we speak of a revival of socialist culture and consciousness, this is it; and it’s the product of enormous intellectual effort and energy. As Trotsky says, “The revolution is a polemic that has

taken up arms.”

The working class has all the power it needs to end the genocide in Gaza, the war in Ukraine and spiralling world conflict; the world hunger, migration, climate crises. But it has to have its feet planted firmly on the foundations of a mass socialist movement to do so. Which means the development of a revolutionary, Trotskyist cadre among its leading elements.

As the 2012 Congress Resolution of the SEP in the US put it, and it’s a document that stays with me because it’s one of the first I read joining the party (and animated by the recent events of the Egyptian revolution):

It is not enough to predict the inevitability of revolutionary struggles and then await their unfolding. Such passivity has nothing in common with Marxism... The Socialist Equality Party must do everything it can to develop, prior to the outbreak of mass struggles, a significant political presence within the working class—above all, among its most advanced elements.

Moreover, that work must aspire to the most comprehensive character. In Lenin’s explanation:

We do not know and cannot know which spark—of the innumerable sparks that are flying about in all countries as a result of the world economic and political crisis—will kindle the conflagration, in the sense of raising up the masses; we must, therefore, with our new and communist principles, set to work to stir up all and sundry, even the oldest, mustiest and seemingly hopeless spheres, for otherwise we shall not be able to cope with our tasks, shall not be comprehensively prepared.

But this activity. This all-sided, intense engagement with the struggle of the working class, must always remain historically rooted and informed.

The citations from *The Newsletter* and the *Labour Review* are their own justification for their inclusion. But they are also in there *because* of their provenance. We cite them, in a sense, for the same reason that their authors—in the form of Gerry Healy—have come under such slanderous attack in the last year. Because they represent the political heritage of Trotskyism without which the revolutionary movement of the 21st century cannot be built.

As we explain, the likes of [Aidan] Beatty and Kelly are seeking to cut off new generations of workers entering into struggle from the revolutionary political tradition they must become familiar with. And if those *new forces* are to become familiar, then we must be doubly, triply so: the reference in the concluding section of the document to the 2023 Summer School in the US which summarised the history of the ICFI (and which we are still steadily working through in our education classes) is crucial.

It’s in the struggle of the ICFI, the Trotskyist movement, that the most conscientious, far-sighted and determined elements of the working class—and of the middle class—have demonstrated the capacity of that social force to find and fight for a revolutionary line, to point that way forward. Under extremely difficult circumstances. But the working class is beginning to find “those circumstances” unbearable; it’s looking for a way out. We have to go and win the argument, in whatever sphere we’re working in, for the socialist way.

I wanted to conclude with another citation, from the 1957 editorial of the *Labour Review*, seizing on the opportunity presented by the post-1956 crisis of Stalinism—an initiative in which Gerry Healy took the lead, and

which led to the massive political strengthening of the Socialist Labour League and the world Trotskyist movement.

I think the sentiments expressed are very appropriate to today. It reads:

It is our belief that the “collective memory” of the socialist movement has to be re-stocked so that the historical record of the last thirty years can be cleansed of the lies which have encrusted it for so long...

Millions of workers and intellectuals, in every country, from Russia to the U.S.A., are stepping forward into struggle. They demand to know, because they need to know, the past history of their movement. These young people want to think, to learn, to use their political initiative... Our duty is to help them find the answers.



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