

“Gerry Healy fought against all odds for the continuity of the Fourth International”

Veteran Trotskyist Barbara Slaughter addresses Socialist Equality Party (UK) Seventh National Congress

Barbara Slaughter
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This contribution was delivered by veteran Trotskyist Barbara Slaughter to the Socialist Equality Party (UK)'s Seventh National Congress held November 29-December 2, 2024.

Comrades, I'd like to begin by joining with other comrades in expressing my deep respects to comrade Wolfgang Weber.

I knew Wolfgang over a period of years at summer camps in Germany. As comrades have said, he was a man who took the decision to devote his life to the construction of the Fourth International. He was also a man of profound knowledge, not only of the classics of Marxism, but also of human culture more generally. And the fact that, as Uli Rippert has told us, he participated in the work of the German section up to the very eve of his death, is truly extraordinary. It demonstrates his utter commitment to the struggle to build the ICFI and his conviction that the future belongs to the international working class.

The draft resolution has my full support, as do the opening reports of Chris Marsden and Tom Scripps. The discussion has been of an extremely high level.

This Congress has the task to collectively agree on the political perspective which will provide a way forward for the coming period, in which we will have to turn into the working class and fight for that perspective. As Chris rightly said, the axis of the resolution is the necessity to build a mass movement in the working class against war and for socialist revolution. He also said that never since the end of the Second World War has the danger and imminence of a Third World conflagration loomed so large.

What this means has been spelled out in a lead article in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine, cited on the *World Socialist Web Site* under the headline “The return of total war”. The article states: “indeed, what the world is witnessing today is what the theorists in the past have called Total War, in which the contestants draw on vast resources, mobilize their societies, prioritize warfare over all other state activities, attack a broad variety of targets and reshape their economy and those of other countries.”

The WSWS pointed out that the prioritization of warfare over all other state activities means the ruthless subordination of the working class to war. Everything must be sacrificed on the altar of war and the vast resources required to wage it. Prominent members of the oligarchy are openly declaring that World War Three has already begun. This is why the US, even before the inauguration of Donald Trump, is already investing \$1.7 trillion in upgrading its nuclear arsenal.

As Trotskyists, we understand that, like the two world wars that scarred the 20th century, the present world conflicts all arise from the same source, the irreconcilable contradiction between the globalization of production and the outdated nation state system, and between social

production and private ownership. But today, those contradictions are so sharp, with the development of the productive forces, of automation, artificial intelligence and nuclear power—which all demand objectively the socialist transformation of society to be rationally and creatively utilized—that unless the working class overthrows this rotten, corrupt system, then human society will be destroyed. Oppenheimer recognized this and viewed in isolation it is a terrifying prospect. It's the end of the road for capitalist society. And yet we say we are revolutionary optimists. How can this be?

ICFI demolishes Aidan Beatty's attack on Trotskyism

I would like to turn to something written by Karl Marx 165 years ago in his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. He wrote: “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace the older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks that it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present, or at least in the course of formation.”

This is the source of the optimism of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections. Global production has integrated the international working class on an unprecedented scale. Only the united struggle of the international working class, to fight for its interests against the capitalist system, can establish socialism, a new and objectively necessary form of society based on the common ownership of the means of production.

But to carry out that huge historic responsibility, the working class must become conscious of its role, and that is our task, to bring a revolutionary perspective and consciousness into the working class. That is Gerry Healy's great contribution to the present situation that confronts us. Because during the 1950s and 60s, when the Trotskyist movement was decimated by the counter-revolutionary tendency of Pabloite revisionism, Healy fought against all the odds for the continuity of the Fourth International. When in 1963, the US Socialist Workers Party joined the Pabloites in the United Secretariat, the Socialist Labour League stood alone on the world stage, embodying in its struggle all the lessons of the history of the revolutionary movement going back to the Bolshevik

Revolution of 1917, and beyond.

Healy fought against opportunism in all its forms. He warned about the pressure of idealism on our movement. He said it was not enough to agree with the teachings of Lenin and Trotsky, we had to understand that our movement was built on the profound belief that only the working class, under the leadership of the revolutionary party could take power, and that our struggle must be in line with that strategy in all our struggles. And he was adamant that despite our apparent isolation, the task could not be resolved in Britain alone, but must be fought, first and foremost, as an international responsibility inseparable from the building of the Fourth International as the world party of socialist revolution. That is why he's being attacked in this filthy, unprincipled way so long after his death, because the legacy of his great contribution lives in us and in the ICFI as a whole.

There has been a swathe of books attacking Trotsky's legacy, by Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Robert Service and no doubt others. Now John Kelly and Aiden Beatty have joined the fray. They have produced their attack on Healy—Beatty being financed by supporters of Zionism, which is responsible for the genocidal attacks on the Palestinian people, before the eyes of the international working class. Several books have been written over the course of the last few years by renegades from the Trotskyist movement after the split of 1985-86. Beatty has systematically collected them all together to deliver what he hoped would be a killer blow.

He did so, however, without reckoning with comrade David North and the ICFI of which we are part. The articles written by David, Tom Mackaman, Andrea Peters, and our Tom, have already torn his narrative to shreds. That narrative is built on lie after lie. The whole basis of his case is that Gerry Healy was an ignorant thug and that the SLL was "almost like a criminal gang". I was there in the 1950s and 60s, and I can testify to the contrary.

In 1966 there was the so-called "Tate Affair" which comrade David has written about. It was in fact a political provocation organised by Ernest Tate, who was the representative of Usec [Pabloites United Secretariat] in Britain.

At the time, Cliff Slaughter produced a pamphlet which exposed the whole rotten situation. He wrote: "The SLL knows that it must expect the class enemy to raise their traditional and favourite accusations against Bolshevism, the accusation of the use of violence to settle political differences."

At the same time *Red Flag*, the newspaper of Posadas wrote, "Imperialism is very weak. It is incapable of mobilizing big fascist currents, but it will use what can be used, and the SLL outfit is ideal, with its gangster methods and fascist mentality." These were and remain serious charges and Beatty's book is full of similar charges, all based on outright lies, rumours, innuendo.

Here are some of the allegations that he cites: "Anyone who challenged Healy suffered violent physical assaults." On page 59 he writes, "Healy is credibly alleged to have once broken a chair over the back of his secretary, Aileen Jennings, an action that was hushed up at the time." Beatty says "allegedly", but alleged by whom? He doesn't say. He gives no evidence whatsoever. He just leaves it hanging there.

Healy is supposed to have gloried in his reputation for violence. Beatty says, "Healy was probably quite happy to have rumours of his violence circulate". The words "probably" and "allegedly" appear in almost every paragraph, and the place where much of the violence was "alleged" to have occurred was at SLL summer camps.

I was present at every single summer camp from 1958 to the last one in 1973, before the opening of the Education Centre. Those summer camps were devoted to the study of Marxist classics by Lenin, Trotsky, Marx, Engels, etc. And I never witnessed any violence, any threat of violence, or even a hint of violence. We were living under canvas. It would be

impossible to hide any such evidence. We were living in tents, but it just didn't exist.

Outrageous claims fill every page. Beatty claims, "The high rate of turnover of party members prevented opposition factions from forming and meant party members had no institutionalized memory of what the party had been saying in previous years." If this wasn't so serious, it would be laughable. As comrades have said, we are a party of history, in ways that people such as Beatty just cannot understand.

The founding of the Socialist Labour League and democratic centralism

Regarding the SLL, Beatty claims, "Healy may have established the SLL without actually consulting any members of the Club, and the question of the SLL's actual attitude to and relationship with the Labour Party, remained unresolved." All atrocious lies.

The truth is that the SLL was founded in February 1959, when the group was winning great influence in the unions, and because of this, the Labour Party had begun expelling Club members in many parts of the country. The foundation of the SLL was aimed at countering the Pabloite efforts to politically liquidate the Trotskyist movement into Stalinist and social democratic parties. The SLL recognized the necessity of intervening in the Labour Party to win influence amongst its members and youth, but refused to subordinate its own programme to the bureaucratic leadership. Healy argued that the formation of the league would demolish the false accusation that Trotskyists were a "red conspiracy". He insisted that the SLL was formed to fight for the scientific principles of Marxism, both within the Labour Party and in the trade unions. He said, "These principles are vital weapons in the political and industrial struggle facing the working class movement."

And the relations with the Labour Party did not remain unresolved, as Beatty claims. Following the announcement of its formation, the SLL applied for political affiliation to the Labour Party, just as the Fabian Society, Co-operative movement and many other organisations were affiliated. It declared itself to be a Marxist tendency within the Labour Party.

However, the SLL and its publication, the *Newsletter*, were proscribed and anyone associated with it could no longer maintain their membership of the Labour Party. All over the country, SLL members were expelled from Labour.

It's interesting to know what actually happened to Healy at this time. Despite this vicious political witch-hunt, Healy was re-elected as chairman of his ward party. And then, when the Streatham Constituency Labour Party refused to implement Healy's expulsion, Labour's National Executive Committee responded by closing the whole organization down and causing it to be "reorganized".

Regarding the banning of any opposition to Healy within the SLL, Beatty's arguments can be proved to be outright lies, and I'm going to do that right now.

Just months after the founding of the SLL, a Pabloite opposition emerged involving Peter Cadogan, Ken Coates, Peter Fryer, Alistair McIntyre, John Daniels and others. This is all discussed and explained in the Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party, which provides a detailed account of this political struggle.

I was new to the movement at that time, and I was very impressed with the way the leadership conducted that fight. On January 16, 1960, the National Committee published an internal 45-page document containing all the correspondence involved, which was circulated to all the branches. It stretched from the August 21, 1959 to December 5, 1959. As far as the

National Committee was concerned, the dispute was conducted strictly in line with the constitution of the SLL, based on the principles of democratic centralism: democracy in arriving at decisions and centralism in carrying them out.

At that time, I only had a hazy understanding of the fundamental importance of democratic centralism, although I had signed up to it as part of the constitution. I think it's important to point out that Peter Fryer and John Daniels claimed to have no political differences with the SLL. Fryer, who had been editor of the *Newsletter* since its launching, disappeared in August 1959 claiming he did not agree with the way the party centre was run. Daniels, co-editor of *Labour Review* along with Bob Shaw, complained about the conduct of the comrades in Nottingham towards Ken Coates, who consistently refused to work under the direction of the branch. But in reality, serious political differences were emerging. For example, Peter Cadogan did not agree with the SLL on nuclear disarmament. He produced and made public a document which called for a "vast united front for peace, a front that cuts across class boundaries because of the inclusive annihilation threatened by atomic warfare."

This proposal was, as an NC resolution pointed out, an issue which was "in violation of the unanimous decision of the inaugural resolution of the SLL, which far from cutting across class boundaries as the reformists urge, has as its major aim the intensification of the class struggle and the victory of the working class."

Both Cadogan and Fryer used the columns of the capitalist press, the *Daily Herald* and the *Manchester Guardian*, as it was then called, to attack the SLL. Cadogan, having done so, expected to remain a member of the League. Fryer wrote to the *Daily Herald* about differences on the *Newsletter*, calling for the removal of the leadership of the League. Cadogan, with others, formed the Stamford faction, which included individuals who had been expelled from the SLL.

Despite all of this, Coates and the rest were invited to attend meeting after meeting of the National Committee to discuss their differences. Cadogan's response was to produce a document titled, "The 1959 situation and the Socialist Labour League". The document was circulated to non-members, including Pat Jordan, a representative of the United Secretariat Pabloite group in Britain, whom Cadogan insisted in a meeting of the executive committee of the SLL was not an enemy of the ICFI.

Daniels had written a letter to E. P. Thompson of the *New Reasoner* revealing internal material about the SLL, adding that Thompson could use the letter in any way he chose. Behind the scenes they were working with Michel Pablo, who was urging them on in their attacks. Nevertheless, through this whole period until the point of expulsion, the National Committee attempted to have a discussion with the renegades to fully clarify the political issues involved, for the benefit of the membership.

In February 1960, an SLL document was published, "Internal discussion material for information of members". It contained all the relevant correspondence, and it was clear throughout that the National Committee had acted scrupulously in accordance with the principles of democratic centralism. Cadogan was unanimously expelled by the NC and was informed of his right to appeal to the next annual conference of the SLL.

This was an important document in educating new cadre like myself on the rights and also responsibilities of membership of the League. What is extraordinary is that throughout this whole period, the League was also preparing for a National Assembly of Labour, which was held in November 1959, with an attendance of 800 workers.

The truth behind the expulsion of Brian Behan

Not long after that a new faction led by Brian Behan emerged. On page

36 of Beatty's book he writes, "When Brian Behan questioned Healy's monopolizing of party assets, he was duly expelled from the new organization. Behan had suggested that the party should practice what it preached, and 'nationalize all SLL assets' for which Healy both violently denounced him and arranged to have one of his henchmen assault him."

Here are the facts. Behan and his supporters disagreed with the establishment of the SLL and called for the founding of an open Workers' Party, orientated primarily to industrial struggles rather than the political problems involved in the continuing allegiance of the working class to the Labour Party. However, Healy and the leadership of the League were well aware that the issue of reformism was not a finished question among British workers. A campaign against bans and proscriptions continued, and much of the League's work was orientated towards the Labour Party. Behan's position was very much one of anarcho-syndicalism.

I have a document in my possession, Internal Bulletin Number 5, produced for the National Conference of June 1960, which contains details of the appeals made by Behan's faction against their expulsion from the SLL. It's clear that much of their opposition to the leadership was based on gossip and character assassination. In it, Behan made the outrageous claim that the SLL was led by "pimps and ponces" who lived off the movement. Reflecting this position, he tried to move a motion within the NC that all League finances should be controlled by a committee of lay members of the NC, implying that full-time party workers could not be trusted.

Clearly, he was anticipating a split and was hoping to walk away with all the resources, including the print shop that had been rebuilt after the disastrous court case in 1954 in which the Club had lost all their resources, the print shop and everything else. In the draft programme of the minority faction, which is included in Bulletin Number 5, the leadership of the SLL was accused of being a bureaucratic clique. It stated, "They always shift the line to defeat the enemy in the same way that Stalin did, whilst at the same time holding on to their control of the assets, all real power of the organization."

Although not directly stated in their documents, they accused the SLL of succumbing to the pressure of Pabloite revisionism, claiming, "The majority are really now for total entry into the Labour Party. The basis of this theory is that Marxists must subordinate all their activities to securing a basis within the mass organizations, be they Stalinist or social democratic." Accusing the SLL of favouring total entry they concluded, "It is the firm belief of the minority that if the perspectives document of the majority is implemented, then the Marxist movement will be drowned in the reformist ocean." Their conception of party building was to have "a main orientation towards the working class in industry based on the participation of the party in the immediate struggles of the working class."

It's clear from their document that they had little understanding of, and no agreement with, the split with Pabloite revisionism in 1953. They described it as "a disastrous split that leaves us in the ridiculous position of having two internationals." They accused the "clique leadership" of being, "afraid to unite with other tendencies because their own bankruptcy would be speedily exposed".

Yet despite the subjective vilification which imbued their whole campaign, the minority faction were afforded their full rights under the constitution. I clearly remember Behan attending a special aggregate in Leeds armed with his lengthy document. He also travelled to Liverpool and other places.

At the time, I was impressed that the League would go to such lengths to assert the rights of a group led by somebody who appeared to be a political scoundrel, but Healy insisted on it. The issue was the clarification of the cadre about the formation of the SLL itself, and what the main orientation of our work should be. All members of the minority appealed individually to the congress, against their expulsion and all were expelled.

Behan and his supporters then set up the Workers Party, which published a paper, *Workers Voice*. The party was short lived, however, and Behan subsequently left politics and entered academia, becoming a lecturer in Media Studies at the London College of Printing.

Keep Left, the Labour Party and the fight for Trotskyism

Now I want to raise another question, which I think is important. Two pages on from what he says about Behan, on page 39, Beatty writes the following about the Young Socialist paper, *Keep Left*: “Labour youth members associated with their in-house paper *Keep Left*. *Keep Left* defected to the SLL and became the youth movement of the latter.

He then states, “*Keep Left* had a circulation of perhaps as high as 10,500 but was proscribed by the Labour Party in May 1962 and three SLL supporters were removed from the National Committee of the Labour Party’s Young Socialists towards the end of that year.”

The proscription of *Keep Left* was in fact over accusations of violence, and at first I couldn’t understand why Beatty had not cited this, backing it up with so-called evidence provided by the Labour Party. Then I realised, this must have been because there is printed evidence to prove that the expulsions and proscriptions were based on a conspiracy dreamt up at the highest echelons of the Labour Party itself, including by Labour’s future Foreign Secretary, George Brown and old Etonian, Lord Walston.

I need to explain this in some detail, because it gives you an insight into what goes on behind closed doors and how they recognize the significance of our organization.

On the first day of the Young Socialist Conference held at Easter 1962, a secret session was called, ostensibly to discuss YS organization and the report of the outgoing National Committee. Under the section dealing with *Keep Left*, which at that time was not proscribed, a delegate from Birmingham leapt to his feet and launched an attack against the paper. A furious debate ensued in which even delegates who didn’t support *Keep Left* declared they were tired of the smear campaign against the paper and stressed its democratic right to be published. An overwhelming majority of the 368 delegates showed their support for this view by voting in favour of next business, thus terminating the debate without any decision being made.

The election of the new National Committee resulted in a left-wing majority, including three supporters of *Keep Left*, Liz Thompson, David Davis and Mike Ginsburg.

On the following morning, however, after a short debate on education, the chairman of the Standing Orders Committee reported that he had received three emergency resolutions and that he intended to place one of them—from the Redditch branch in Birmingham concerning *Keep Left*—on the agenda. After a heated debate, the report was rejected by 161 votes to 108, clearly a majority against.

However, the right-wing was undeterred, and before the lunch break, the Standing Orders Committee returned to the platform and calmly announced the conference would go into private session at 2pm to discuss the emergency resolution on *Keep Left* and in an atmosphere of great confusion, points of order, points of information, counts and recounts, a vote was finally taken to accept the report by 168 votes to 155.

The resolution read, “Because of the threats made of physical violence to a delegate and visitor from Redditch Young Socialists who have positive evidence that *Keep Left* is directly connected with the proscribed Trotskyist organization, the Socialist Labour League, this conference calls for an immediate inquiry into *Keep Left* so that its attempts to destroy the Young Socialists as a democratic socialist organisation, can be defeated.”

The allegations of violence purported to come from two young YS

members from Redditch, and it was undoubtedly the accusation of violence, which was assumed without a scrap of evidence, that swayed the conference to vote 183 votes in favour with 150 against.

The individuals involved were David Todd and Keith Biddle. What was not known by the conference was that Todd had insisted that the threat against him was, “not intended seriously, and was more or less a joke”. And the threat against Biddle, which was also a joke, was made by Todd!

This was revealed in an affidavit signed by Todd on July 19, later that year, because he was so appalled at the way the issue had been misrepresented and used for political purposes by the right-wing of the Labour Party. His affidavit also revealed that the wording of the Redditch resolution was “cooked up” at a party in a flat belonging to the Labour peer and old Etonian Lord Walston. All this occurred in the middle of the Young Socialist conference. Present at the gathering were Julia Gaitskell, the daughter of Hugh Gaitskell, leader of the Labour Party at the time, as well as leading Labour politicians, including the aforementioned George Brown, who had been Foreign Minister in the Attlee government post the Second World War. According to the affidavit, Brown addressed the gathering, saying, “What the right-wing had to do to kick out the fascist left-wingers!”

The affidavit proves beyond all doubt that the proscription of *Keep Left* and the subsequent expulsion of three members of the YS National Committee came about because of a conspiracy at the highest level of the Labour Party. They thought that by beheading the youth moment in this way, they could control it and force it in a right-wing direction. Of course, they were mistaken.

At the national conference of the Labour Party, held in Brighton in October that same year, Gaitskell and his supporters were determined to strengthen the right-wing’s grip on the party. The Young Socialists was not even on the agenda despite an investigation into *Keep Left* having been called for at the Young Socialist conference. When challenged about this, the chairman of the Standing Orders Committee said there was no time. And “anyway, you can’t go on discussing these affairs year after year.”

By October 1962, our political support in the East Leeds Constituency was such that I was elected as one of two delegates to attend the Labour Party conference. This meant that I could attend every session, including the secret session. And it was there that the NEC proposed an amendment to the Constitution to strengthen the right-wing grip on the party by making “association with”, as well as being “a member of” proscribed organisations, a ground for expulsion.

This amendment was defeated, however, because some of the unions had strong Communist Party membership and were afraid of losing support within their own unions. But the real purpose of the amendment became clear when, in the discussion, George Brown, whom I mentioned earlier, began fulminating against the Trotskyists. He said, and I recorded it at the time, “We can keep out known members, but there is a new factor, the drive and energy of these Trotskyists! They are not devoted to the principles of the party. They are using a new technique, by setting up an organisation that does not have a membership, and the NEC will be failing in its duty if it did not address the issue.”

Before the secret session ended, a young delegate raised a point of order and said that on Tuesday morning he’d been assured that the Young Socialists, although it was not on the agenda, would be discussed under the National Report. Chairman Harold Wilson said he was very, very sorry, but he pleaded shortness of time. At this point, another delegate jumped to his feet and shouted, “We have had calls from the platform about building the membership. The people who are building the party are the Young Socialists. This is where the recruitment is coming from. Surely, once in three years, we can find some time to discuss them.”

Another delegate raised the issue of David Todd and his affidavit. He said, “There is a document currently circulating the conference where a

member of YS has made a sworn statement involving members of the NEC and full-time officials. It's impossible to expect the conference to accept the report without delegates having a chance to discuss the issue."

Wilson cynically insisted that the NEC was anxious to reach that part of the report so it could be discussed, and the NEC would have time to reply. But unfortunately, it wasn't possible.

A composite resolution from the Glasgow Woodside Constituency had been submitted to the conference demanding the proscription of *Keep Left* be rescinded, and that the suspended Young Socialist NC members be reinstated. But it wasn't discussed because it was not put on the agenda.

The truth was that the NEC could not, and would not, allow any discussion on the Young Socialists. Their position was indefensible, and when a delegate from Liverpool, Jimmy Rand, called for discussion on the Todd affidavit, he was howled down by the right-wing, and his motion was defeated on a show of hands.

That is why, in my opinion, Beatty did not fulminate on the accusations of violence against *Keep Left*, because he knew that the affidavit evidence existed.

"An attempt to wall us off from the youth and young students who are being radicalised"

In the final chapter, with its outrageous attacks on comrade David North, Beatty makes it clear that the central purpose of the book is to discredit our party today, to spread lies and slanders in an attempt to wall us off from the youth and young students who are being radicalised in the current political situation. We must not allow this to happen. That is why the continued exposure of the cabal of Beatty, the Zionists and Kelly which North and the other comrades have already carried out, is a crucial part of our work.

In conclusion, I would like to read the whole of point 54 of our conference resolution, which I think is very strong:

The SEP and the IYSSE will take up a struggle against Beatty, Kelly and all attempts to cut students and young people off from the revolutionary traditions they must become familiar with. This must include a particular focus on Healy and the British Trotskyist's defence of a revolutionary internationalist perspective in the crucial period following World War II. Drawing the lessons from the years in which Healy led the fight for Trotskyism is essential in the political arming of the working class, just as is a comprehensive understanding of the struggle waged by the ICFI against the subsequent political degeneration of Healy and the Workers Revolutionary Party out of which the SEP in Britain emerged. This political offensive must spearhead a broader effort to encourage a flourishing of Marxist culture and debate among young people, including on the campuses in a fight against the censorious and repressive regime created by government 'extremism' and 'counter-terror' legislation, and false accusations of "antisemitism". The *World Socialist Web Site* stands at the centre of this work, providing a daily Marxist analysis of world events.

Trotskyism is the only basis on which the working class can advance its interest against war, fascism, and ecological catastrophe. Thank you, comrades.



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