

The International Bolshevik Tendency: Pseudo-left apologists for the union bureaucracy and Stalinism

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The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand received an email from a representative of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) earlier this year, inviting it to “attend and/or promote” a rally titled “Smash US Imperialism: Hands Off Latin America,” ostensibly opposing the assault on Venezuela and threats against Cuba.

The SEG rejected the invitation to promote the event, which was organised by a “broad coalition” including Peace Action Wellington, the IBT and Unions Wellington, a “campaigns group” linked to the trade union bureaucracy. These organisations are hostile to the mobilisation of the working class against war. They are consciously seeking to divert growing anti-war sentiment into making futile appeals to the National Party-led government and the bourgeois opposition parties, Labour and the Greens.

The role of the IBT in joining the “coalition,” and urging the SEG to follow suit, was to provide the unions with “anti-imperialist” credentials. At the demonstration, a speaker from the IBT called for strike action “to shut down the war machine” and declared: “We all agree the US must be driven out of all Latin America.” That is simply false.

New Zealand’s trade unions have refused to call a single strike or industrial action against the genocide in Gaza, the attack on Venezuela and the expanding war against Iran. These are pro-war organisations. The country’s largest union openly supports increased military spending to “build a modern, combat-ready defence force,” preparing NZ to join a US-led war against China.

The IBT is well aware of these facts but keeps quiet about them. Its most recent statement on the Gaza genocide—published on October 17, 2025—called for “coordinated joint action within the trade unions and across Mediterranean ports” to stop weapons getting to Israel. It failed to mention that union leaders internationally have been the central force blocking precisely such actions.

This cover-up stems from the IBT’s class orientation. Far from being Marxist or socialist, it is one of several pseudo-left formations that reflect the interests of definite layers of the middle class, including the union bureaucracy, whose aim is not to overthrow capitalism, but to secure a more comfortable position for themselves within the capitalist system.

The IBT opposes the call by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) for workers to rebel against the union bureaucracy by building rank-and-file workplace committees under their own democratic control.

In addition, the IBT seeks to trap workers by fostering illusions that bogus reformist parties—such as Your Party in Britain and, in an earlier period, NewLabour in New Zealand—and the Chinese Stalinist regime can play a progressive and anti-imperialist role.

Clarifying the political role of the IBT—which has a presence in Europe, North America and New Zealand—is part of the ICFI’s fight to establish

the political independence of the working class from every capitalist party and their middle-class nationalist defenders.

The Spartacist League, the IBT and Stalinism

The middle class nationalist politics of the IBT are deeply rooted in its history. The organisation originated in a series of splits in the early 1980s from the Spartacist League, itself founded in the 1960s in opposition to the ICFI. The current IBT leaders in New Zealand, Bill Logan and Adaire Hannah, previously held leading positions in the Spartacist League in both Australia and Britain until the late 1970s.

The IBT defends the positions advanced by the Spartacists in the 1960s and 1970s, claiming that they “upheld the banner of revolutionary Trotskyism.”^[1] Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Spartacist tendency was an adaptation to Pabloism, a revisionist current that emerged in the Fourth International following World War II, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. Pablo repudiated Trotsky’s conclusion that the Stalinist bureaucracy had become a counter-revolutionary force in the Soviet Union and internationally, which had to be overthrown by the working class in a political revolution in order to preserve and extend the gains of the Russian Revolution. Trotsky had founded the Fourth International in 1938 as the world party of socialist revolution, to lead the working class in an uncompromising struggle against Stalinism, social democracy and bourgeois nationalism.

Drawing deeply pessimistic conclusions from the temporary stabilisation of capitalism after World War II, Pablo claimed it was not possible to build independent Trotskyist parties and that Stalinist regimes, under mass pressure, could carry out revolutionary tasks. He instructed Trotskyists to enter “the mass movement as it exists,” including Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist organisations.

In 1953, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was founded to defend orthodox Trotskyism against Pabloism’s liquidationist program, which directed national sections to dissolve into Stalinist, reformist and bourgeois nationalist movements on the false premise that such forces could be pushed leftward.

The American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) initially led the international struggle against Pabloism. A decade later, however, the ICFI waged an intense battle against the SWP’s opportunist decision to reunite with the Pabloites in the United Secretariat.

Two oppositional groupings arose within the SWP: the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI), aligned with the ICFI in defence of orthodox Trotskyism, and the Spartacist League, led by James

Robertson, which concentrated on US tactical questions rather than the international struggle against revisionism.

At the ICFI's Third World Congress in London in 1966, Robertson revealed his hostility to the central strategic issue of building a revolutionary leadership through an unrelenting fight against opportunism. He rejected "the notion that the present crisis of capitalism is so sharp and deep that Trotskyist revisionism is needed to tame the workers in a way comparable to the degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals. Such an erroneous estimation would have as its point of departure an enormous overestimation of our present significance and would accordingly be disorienting."

As the ICFI later explained, "This was nothing less than a repudiation of the entire analysis which Trotsky had made of the significance of the founding of the Fourth International, and an embrace of the Pabloite perspective. Trotsky had insisted that outside of the cadres of the Fourth International, limited in number as they were, there was not a revolutionary tendency on the entire planet worthy of the name."

Notwithstanding Robertson's claim that imperialism did not need revisionism to "tame the workers," the Pabloite liquidationist program had already saved capitalist rule by derailing a revolutionary situation in Sri Lanka. In June 1964, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), hailed by the Pabloites as "the largest Trotskyist party in the world," had entered the bourgeois coalition government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka. This historic betrayal disoriented the working class and paved the way for decades of bloody communal civil war.

Claiming that the Fourth International had been "destroyed" by Pabloism, and dismissing the ICFI's fight for the continuity of Trotskyism, the Spartacist League stated that the movement would be rebuilt "through a process of splits and fusions" with other tendencies.

This provided the justification for the Spartacist League (SL) to orient towards Stalinists and the union apparatus. It rejected, in practice, the Trotskyist perspective that the Stalinist bureaucracy posed the greatest danger of capitalist restoration, and that only a political revolution by the working class to overthrow the bureaucracy could defend and extend the gains of the Russian and Chinese revolutions.

As the ICFI explained, the SL's call for "unconditional military defence" of the Stalinist regimes "was not directed to the working class, and this group certainly possessed no means of executing this tactic itself. Instead it amounted to an hysterical appeal to the Stalinist bureaucracy itself to pursue a more confrontational military stance abroad while using violent repression against its political opponents at home, principally the working class."

The International Bolshevik Tendency originated in the "External Tendency," formed in 1982 by members in the US, Canada and Germany who had been expelled or who split from the Spartacists during a series of factional crises in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The US-based External Tendency, which had renamed itself the Bolshevik Tendency, fused with the New Zealand Permanent Revolution Group—led by former Spartacists Logan and Hannah—to form the IBT in 1991.

The IBT still glorifies the Spartacist League of the 1960s and 1970s but claims that during the 1980s it degenerated in a "Stalinophilic direction" and Robertson's leadership took on "hyper-centralist, paranoid and personalist characteristics."^[2]

The IBT's differences with the SL, however, were limited and tactical, rather than principled. It retained the same pro-Stalinist orientation. The IBT distanced itself from some of the Spartacists' crudest apologetics, such as the slogan "Hail Red Army!" which glorified the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979. While saying that the slogan was too uncritical of the Soviet bureaucracy, the IBT still called for "military support to the Stalinists," backing the invasion—which was a reactionary response to the US funding of the *mujahadeen* rebels against the Moscow-aligned regime.

The IBT portrayed the invasion as progressive, based on the Pabloite and Spartacist argument that the Red Army was defending "socialized property forms" and opposing imperialism. In fact, the war—paid for by the Soviet working class through brutal attacks on living conditions and thousands of deaths—accelerated the economic crisis that culminated in the bureaucracy's decision to dissolve the Soviet Union.^[3]

Similarly, the IBT gave its "unconditional military support" to the Stalinists to crush the mass strike movement of Polish workers in 1981, which it smeared as "counter-revolutionary." It merely criticised the Spartacists' pledge to "take responsibility in advance for whatever idiocies and atrocities" the Soviet troops committed.^[4]

As the Soviet bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev was preparing the imminent dissolution of the USSR and restoration of capitalism, the IBT insisted that it was the "duty" of socialists to back rival Stalinist factions who attempted a military coup in August 1991. The coup plotters agreed that capitalism should be restored, but feared that the rapidity of the transformation would spark an uncontrollable movement in the working class.^[5]

In the case of China, the IBT continues to deny the obvious fact that capitalism has been restored. It refers to China as a "deformed workers state" and on this basis defends its repression of workers and portrays its military as a progressive force.

The IBT recently urged China to directly confront US forces in the Caribbean. In a Facebook post on February 26, it said China should break the blockade of Cuba by "using its powerful naval resources to escort ships carrying oil, renewable energy supplies, and other goods through the US perimeter."

The claim that workers in Cuba, or any oppressed country, can defend themselves by siding with China in a military confrontation with US imperialism is both dangerous and delusional. Insofar as this perspective is taken seriously, it can only undermine the essential task of unifying the international working class—including workers in the United States and China—in a socialist, anti-war movement.

In reality, Beijing is responding to Washington's far-advanced war preparations against China by desperately seeking an accommodation with the imperialist powers. At the same time, in response to provocations by the US and its allies in Taiwan and the South China Sea, China is staging its own military exercises, playing into the hands of the US and heightening the danger of a catastrophic nuclear war.

The overriding fear of the Chinese ruling elite is that the worsening global economic crisis and approaching war could trigger a movement in the working class against its capitalist police-state regime. The IBT has indicated where it will align in such a confrontation: when millions of people protested in Hong Kong in 2019 to demand democratic rights and an end to police brutality, the IBT smeared the demonstrations as "pro-imperialist" and called for "the suppression of the leadership of the movement and its most intransigent adherents."^[6]

The IBT and the NewLabour Party in New Zealand

The restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist regimes was only the most dramatic response to the unprecedented globalisation of production during the 1980s, which fatally undermined the basis for all national-reformist political programs. It was part of a global rightward shift by all the parties—whether Stalinist or social democratic—that workers had previously looked to to defend their interests.

In New Zealand, the 1984–1990 Labour Party government of Prime Minister David Lange and Finance Minister Roger Douglas abandoned the program of social reform and adopted the same right-wing agenda as

Reagan in the US and Thatcher in Britain. It privatised state assets, slashed corporate taxes, and introduced a consumption tax and university fees. These attacks were enforced by the Stalinist-led union bureaucracy, which collaborated with factory closures and the destruction of about 70,000 manufacturing jobs.

As Labour's support collapsed, numerous Stalinists and former Pabloites, along with the Permanent Revolution Group (PRG)—which became the New Zealand section of the IBT in 1990—swung into action to channel discontent back into illusions in reformism and block the emergence of a working class movement in opposition to Labour.

The PRG joined the NewLabour Party, (NLP) founded in 1989 by senior Labour MP Jim Anderton—who described himself as “barely left of centre”—in a split from the government. The NLP drew in union officials, Labourites, Stalinists, Maoists and former Pabloites from the Socialist Action League.

The PRG fraudulently claimed that the NLP had the potential to become “a genuine mass workers’ party.” It had supposedly “put working-class politics back on the mainstream political agenda. It promised a focal point for mobilising for some important immediate reforms and a forum for left-wing discussion and debate.”^[7]

In fact, Anderton advocated mild welfare reforms alongside a national-protectionist program of import controls to boost the “international competitiveness” of NZ manufacturing businesses.

NewLabour supported the “Compact” between the trade unions and the government. This scheme, through which the Stalinist-led union bureaucracy policed the working class and suppressed demands for an industrial and political campaign against the Labour right wing, had been bitterly opposed by workers.

Once they had exhausted their usefulness in providing “socialist” cover for Anderton’s con job, the PRG members were expelled from the NLP. Afterwards, the PRG lamented that the party “could have been a vital and dynamic gathering place for people with a broad range of viewpoints from the working-class movement.” In reality, it brought together middle class tendencies, oriented to the Labour Party, the unions, as well as feminism and M?ori identity politics—the so-called “new social movements”—to oppose the construction of an independent revolutionary movement in the working class.^[8]

The IBT continues to heavily promote racial and gender identity politics, which serves both to divide workers and to subordinate them to sections of the upper middle class and the capitalist political establishment. In New Zealand, the IBT supports “the movement for M?ori autonomy” based on the Treaty of Waitangi, a colonial document which has been used by successive governments as a mechanism to hand out multi-million dollar settlements to the M?ori bourgeoisie.^[9]

It also uses the issue of transgender rights in order to boost the unions, the Green Party and other middle class groups, based on the claim that elements of “the ‘progressive’ bourgeoisie or reformist workers’ parties can at times be convinced” to support access to healthcare for transgender people and anti-discrimination measures, even if “these reforms are reversible under capitalism.”^[10]

After purging the PRG and other middle class groups, the NLP was renamed the Alliance in 1991. It joined a coalition government with Labour in 1999, and then imploded in 2002 after voting to send New Zealand troops to join the criminal US invasion of Afghanistan.

The IBT is currently carrying out a similar opportunist entry into Your Party in Britain, founded last year by former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and MP Zarah Sultana. In August 2025, the IBT falsely claimed it was “far too early to tell what kind of party” Your Party will be, but said it could become a party of “revolutionary social change.”^[11]

In opposition to the many pseudo-left groups that have hailed Your Party, the Socialist Equality Party in Britain warned from the outset that it is a political trap that will lead to betrayal and defeat for working people.

It explained Corbyn’s right-wing record of support for NATO and nuclear weapons; his enforcement of austerity; and his capitulation to the state-orchestrated campaign against “antisemitism” that aimed to criminalise the left. Corbyn’s aim is to build a Labour Party Mark II to block, neuter and prevent the growth of a mass socialist movement in the working class.

The IBT and the union bureaucracy

The IBT’s promotion of Stalinism and “left” capitalist parties, and its defence of the union bureaucracy, are two sides of the same nationalist perspective, rooted in the rejection of the fight to mobilise the international working class under the leadership of the Trotskyist movement.

In a March 2025 article, the IBT was forced to admit that “the unions have failed to fight, even in limited ways, when workers needed it,” but attributed this to mistaken policies that can be corrected through pressure. It called on “communists” to “struggle for a militant pole, for open discussion of strategic differences, and to challenge the leadership.”

A February 28 article calling for workers to strike against the US-Israeli war on Iran similarly stated: “The current leadership of the organized labor movement is too beholden to their respective ruling classes to launch such actions, but there is hope that the rank-and-file may push for sanity.”

This position—that the union leadership can be “pushed” to fight—echoes that of the Spartacist League, which attributed the wave of working class defeats in the 1980s to the union leaders’ failure to “play hardball to win.”

As the ICFI noted, this explained nothing. The corrupt and reactionary character of the union leaders could only be understood as “the subjective expression of more fundamental objective processes.” Globalisation had “undermined the viability of trade unions as nationally-based defensive organizations of the working class. This process is expressed in the decay of these organizations and their transformation into appendages of the employers and the state.”

As organisations which “arose historically on the soil of the national economy and the growing power of the national state,” the unions had no progressive response to globalisation. For more than 40 years their role has been to sabotage strikes, enforce mass redundancies and assist in lowering workers’ living standards to defend the “international competitiveness” of the national bourgeoisie.

In response to the Spartacists’ insistence that what was required was to pressure the unions, the ICFI stated: “To tell workers that they must place demands on the unions to do things that these organizations are neither willing nor able to do, is not to enlighten, but rather to confuse, miseducate and, ultimately, demoralize the masses.”

Today, subordinating workers to the unions means aiding these organisations in the defence of the bourgeois state and imperialism—most starkly exposed in the unions’ refusal to call strikes against the Gaza genocide and the war against Iran.

The explosive struggles in the US in January 2026 also demonstrate that any serious mass movement against fascism must develop in opposition to the union apparatus. The demand for a general strike to stop the reign of terror by ICE and Donald Trump’s drive to dictatorship gained popularity in the working class independently of the unions, which are deeply hostile to such a strike.

To fight against war and austerity, and defend democratic rights, workers must build rank-and-file committees that they control, independent of the union bureaucracy and all capitalist parties. These committees must fight to unify all workers, including the vast majority who are not union members. The ICFI has initiated the International

Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees as a mechanism to link up workers' struggles across borders and overcome the national divisions enforced by the unions.

Conclusion

Sharp political lessons must be drawn from the record of the IBT and the Spartacists. All the theories they advanced about the “progressive” role of Stalinism, and the possibilities of “transforming” the unions and “broad left” capitalist parties into “revolutionary” organisations, have been shattered by events.

The right-wing degeneration of all these nationalist organisations has paved the way for the eruption of imperialist war and the return of fascism. These developments are radicalising millions of people, but this objective process will not automatically produce a conscious socialist movement.

The urgent task facing socialist-minded workers and young people is to build the revolutionary leadership required for the coming mass struggles of the working class. This in turn requires a political fight to differentiate Trotskyism—the program of world socialist revolution—from every variety of pseudo-left politics, which seeks to corral workers and young people behind illusions in bourgeois parties and regimes and the unions. As the crisis of the capitalist system continues to deepen, the pseudo-lefts will be brought forward as the last line of defence for bourgeois rule.

The ICFI alone provides the necessary strategic perspective for this fight, due to its principled struggle to defend the Trotskyist program against Stalinism, Pabloite liquidationism, and all forms of nationalist politics.

We call on workers and youth in New Zealand who agree with the analysis advanced in this article to join the Socialist Equality Group and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, which are fighting to build the NZ section of the ICFI.

“Spartacist League: The Early Years”
<https://www.bolshevik.org/1917/no14geof.pdf>

“Stalinophilia, Stalinophobia, Flinches & Opportunism: Whatever Happened to the Spartacist League?”
https://bolshevik.org/Pamphlets/Whatever/ibt_whatsoeverhappened_01.html

“On the Slogan ‘Hail Red Army!’” <https://www.bolshevik.org/1917/no5/no05slaf.html>

“Solidarnosc: Acid Test for Trotskyists”
<https://www.bolshevik.org/Pamphlets/Solidarnosc/solidarnosc.html>

“Soviet Rubicon & the Left”
<https://www.bolshevik.org/1917/no11/no11ussr.html>

“Defend China against Pro-Imperialist ‘Democracy’ Campaign!”
https://bolshevik.org/1917/no42/ibt_20190927_hong_kong.html

Quoted in Bryce Edwards, “NewLabour Party History”, Liberation blog: <https://liberation.typepad.com/liberation/2009/05/newlabour-party-history-6-the-development-of-factions.html>

“The ‘French Turn’ in New Zealand: Trotskyism and the New Labour Party” <https://bolshevik.org/1917/no9/no09prg.html> (April 1990)

“Maori Rights under Attack”
https://bolshevik.org/1917/no49/ibt_20241120_maori_rights_under_attack.html

“Transphobia & Fascism: Mobilise the workers’ movement for trans rights!”
https://bolshevik.org/1917/no47/ibt_20230419_transphobia_fascism.html

“First Steps for a New Workers’ Party: Proposals for discussion”

https://bolshevik.org/statements/ibt_20250819_first_steps_new_workers_party.html (August 19, 2025)

<http://www.bolshevik.org/TheEarlyYearsof.pdf>

[2] “Stalinophilia, Stalinophobia, Flinches & Opportunism: Whatever Happened to the Spartacist League?”
https://bolshevik.org/Pamphlets/Whatever/ibt_whatsoeverhappened_01.html

[3] “On the Slogan ‘Hail Red Army!’”
<https://www.bolshevik.org/1917/no5/no05slaf.html>

[4] “Solidarnosc: Acid Test for Trotskyists”
<https://www.bolshevik.org/Pamphlets/Solidarnosc/solidarnosc.html>

[5] “Soviet Rubicon & the Left”
<https://www.bolshevik.org/1917/no11/no11ussr.html>

[6] “Defend China against Pro-Imperialist ‘Democracy’ Campaign!”
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[7] Quoted in Bryce Edwards, “NewLabour Party History”, Liberation <https://liberation.typepad.com/liberation/2009/05/newlabour-party-history-6-the-development-of-factions.html>

[8] “The ‘French Turn’ in New Zealand: Trotskyism and the New Labour Party”
<https://bolshevik.org/1917/no9/no09prg.html> (April 1990)

[9] “Maori Rights under Attack”
https://bolshevik.org/1917/no49/ibt_20241120_maori_rights_under_attack.html

[10] “Transphobia & Fascism: Mobilise the workers’ movement for trans rights!”
https://bolshevik.org/1917/no47/ibt_20230419_transphobia_fascism.html

[11] “First Steps for a New Workers’ Party: Proposals for discussion”
https://bolshevik.org/statements/ibt_20250819_first_steps_new_workers_party.html (August 19, 2025)



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