Report to the Ninth Congress of the Socialist Equality Party

# From the Declaration of Independence to the Third American Revolution

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*We are publishing here the report to the Ninth Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US) given by Tom Mackaman. The Congress was held from August 2–7, 2026. This report introduced the sixth resolution, "From the first to the third American Revolution," which was adopted unanimously.*

Two hundred and fifty years ago this week, another congress of revolutionists, the Second Continental Congress, was meeting in Philadelphia, just 45 miles from the Mack plant where Will Lehman works. One month earlier, on July 4, 1776, they had adopted a crucial resolution of their own: the Declaration of Independence.

It is worth recalling the words of this, one of history's epoch-making revolutionary manifestos.

The Declaration proclaimed before "the opinions of mankind" the "self-evident truth that all men are created equal"—that they are born with "certain unalienable Rights"—not rights that are either bestowed or taken away by governments. It further explained that governments should exist only insofar as they "secure these rights," and, moreover, that "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it"—that is, there exists an original right to revolution against tyrannical government.

But all of this had to be explained "to a candid world." At the center of the Enlightenment social contract theory lay the idea of reciprocal obligation that bound ruler and ruled, government and people, the considerations being allegiance and protection. When the King sent his armies in 1775 to crush colonial resistance, he had withdrawn his protection; the colonists, in turn, withdrew their allegiance. That was the legal theory that gave the people the right of revolt—a development in fact already underway in the thousands of rank-and-file public safety committees then spreading across the colonies. The King himself had made revolution not just permissible but, as Jefferson said, the "right" and even the "duty" of the people.

So the Declaration proceeded to enumerate the King's violations, an indictment that reads as though it were written as much against the present occupant of the White House as the former resident of Buckingham Palace. It condemned a government that had deployed "swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance," that had "kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies… [that had] affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power," and that had protected these swarms "from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States."

These passages, addressing the events in and around Boston in 1775, just as well describe Minneapolis in 2026: swarms of masked and unidentified federal officers sent to harass working-class and immigrant families in their own neighborhoods; the unaccountable standing army of ICE and Border Patrol Gestapo; and the protection by "the civil power" of the police assassins of Renée Good and Alex Pretti.

Never before has the contradiction between the universal ideals proclaimed in the Declaration and social reality assumed such explosive form. The 250th anniversary of the founding of the American republic finds a political and social order rotting alive. The White House, once the home of Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Lincoln, is now occupied by a complete moral and intellectual cipher, the spawn of the shadowy nexus of real estate, casino gambling and organized crime. Trump is in every sense the absolute negation of the Founding Fathers.

But the astonishing decline that has resulted in Trump is the political manifestation of a fundamental transformation in the economic and social foundations of American capitalism. In 1976, at the time of the bicentenary, which many here will remember, the US sovereign debt stood at $627 billion, some 35 percent of GDP; the country still produced more than a quarter of the world's motor vehicles, and finance accounted for a small fraction of national output. Since then, the debt has grown fiftyfold in nominal terms, to nearly $40 trillion, or 125 percent of GDP, finance dominates the economy, while manufacturing has fallen by more than half. The dollar, severed from gold by Nixon in 1971, was worth $125 per ounce in 1976, and now trades at above $4,200, a thirty-four-fold drop. In 1976, only two men could be called dollar billionaires — Daniel Ludwig and John MacArthur. Today the country has 989 billionaires, and in June of this year it minted its first trillionaire, Elon Musk, a single man's fortune equal to some 4 percent of the nation's entire economic output. The top 1 percent of Americans now own nearly a third of the country's wealth; the bottom half own barely 2 percent.

It is this financial aristocracy for whom Trump rules. He indeed is its living embodiment in all of its criminality, greed, vulgarity, stupidity, arrogance and moral squalor. But what defines more than anything else this praetorian caste, that would make even Caligula blush, is its utter contempt for democratic rights. Its virtually unfathomable concentration of wealth—unprecedented in the history of this, or any other country—is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. The political superstructure must be brought into conformity with the social reality. Hence its assault on the democratic and constitutional triumphs established through the First and Second American Revolutions: freedom of speech and assembly, trial by jury, equality before the law, protection against arbitrary detention, torture, and executive violence; and as Eric discussed, citizenship itself. This is an order that demands subjects, not citizens.

This aristocracy, moreover, finds itself compelled to repudiate not merely the laws and institutions that once served its rule, but the principles and history from which they arose. Above all else it must destroy the idea of equality, the most powerful idea in all of American and world history. This, inevitably, puts the oligarchy on a collision course with the working class, for whom the principles of the Declaration are held deeply,

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emotionally, almost viscerally. For far too long the American workers have tolerated this oligarchy—incorrectly thinking, to paraphrase Hemingway's exchange with Fitzgerald, that the rich are no different than you and me; they just have more money. But whoa unto the rich man who "lords it over" and declares himself superior! No one, every worker knows, is better than anyone else. That's what the Declaration taught. But that is not what the American ruling class thinks.

Vice President, J.D. Vance, speaking before the Claremont Institute in July 2025, rejected the traditional understanding of the United States as what historians have called a "creedal nation," founded upon the universal principles of the Declaration. America is, to the vice president, a *völkisch* race-nation, as Hitler conceived Germany. America, Vance insisted, "is not just an idea," but "a particular people;" the Founding Fathers were not bound together by what Washington called the "Glorious cause" of revolution and the principles laid out in the Declaration, but by what Vance imagines were "shared qualities" such as "heritage" and "manners and customs."

"If you think about it," Vance explained, "identifying America just with agreeing with the principles... of the Declaration of Independence, that's a definition that is way overinclusive and underinclusive at the same time." It is overinclusive, in Vance's thinking, because it extends the nation to anyone who accepts the principle of equality in the Declaration; underinclusive, because it excludes the politics of those who *reject* human equality—namely, the fascists. Lest his point be lost, Vance defended specifically individuals and groups whom the Anti-Defamation League has identified as right-wing "domestic extremists." Belief in the principles of the Declaration would unfairly, Vance said,

> reject a lot of people that the ADL would label as domestic extremists, even though those very Americans had their ancestors fight in the Revolutionary War and the Civil War... I think the people whose ancestors fought in the Civil War have a hell of a lot more claim over America than the people who say they don't belong.

Among the groups the ADL defines as right-wing extremist is none other than the Ku Klux Klan, which emerged as a violent rejection of the outcome of the Civil War, that is, the freeing of the slaves and the extension of democratic rights, including birthright citizenship, as Eric London discussed, to their descendants.

When just this sort of thinking was advanced by the fire-eating defenders of slavery and the Know Nothing anti-immigrants of the 1850s, Abraham Lincoln opposed it. In a speech he delivered in Chicago in 1858, Lincoln explained that belief in the principles of equality made everyone, immigrants included, who accepted the Declaration, as though they were one with those who had waged the American Revolution, "as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration." Belief in equality, Lincoln said, was "the electric cord…that links.. the hearts of men together… so long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world."

But Vance does not read Lincoln. He reads Curtis Yarvin, a progenitor of the so-called Dark Enlightenment, mentioned earlier by Evan Blake. Rejecting the central premises of the Enlightenment—the idea of historical progress, and that one should, following Kant's famous injunction, "dare to know" the answers to why things are as they are—Yarvin argues that democracy is a failed experiment, dismisses equality as a destructive illusion, and advocates replacing constitutional government with a highly centralized, CEO-style executive authority answerable to no electorate, what we aptly call Bonapartism in the second resolution. As he writes in his *A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations*:

> [The] endpoint of fragmentation [is] universal suffrage. At the start of the entropic process, the State has one owner, guardian, and trustee: the Crown. At the end of the process, an equally microscopic sliver of authority is entrusted to every resident who, without too much comedy, can be portrayed as capable of using it responsibly. So the ritual self-congratulation of democracy, the entire theory of progress, is a fraudulent edifice constructed to rationalize what is in fact a decline.

Yarvin's writings have been embraced and funded by influential circles within the Silicon Valley oligarchy, including by Peter Thiel, the billionaire co-founder of PayPal and Palantir. It is well known that Thiel was crucial in the selection of Vance as Trump's running mate. But he had taken Vance in hand long before that. The latter, after he graduated from Yale Law School, went to work for Thiel's investment firm Mithril Capital, and in 2022 Thiel put $15 million behind Vance's Senate campaign—the largest single donation to any Senate candidate that cycle—making Vance less the Senator from Ohio than the Senator from Thiel.

Thiel summed up the thinking of the oligarchy in a 2009 essay, writing, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." By freedom he of course means *his* freedom to crush all opposition to his moneymaking. His ideology in fact goes no farther than his material interests: Palantir builds surveillance and data-analysis infrastructure for the NSA, the FBI, and the Department of Homeland Security, so that a techno-police state acting on behalf of the aristocracy is the basis of both his quack philosophy and his lucrative business. Social being, as we say, determines social consciousness.

But the attack on the Enlightenment—and on the American Revolution as one of its highest political achievements—has come not only from the right but also from what passes for the left. In *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left*, David North traces the philosophical origins of these tendencies, so influential on the campuses, showing how they repudiated the Enlightenment's confidence in reason, objective truth, historical progress and the very possibility of scientific knowledge of society, replacing these with irrationalism, relativism and the reduction of reality to competing "narratives." The writings of the postmodernists, to be sure, are arcane and basically unreadable. But they have nonetheless seeped out of the university lecture halls and have seeded various anti-Marxist ideologies, including what we call identity politics, which rejects class as the decisive "narrative" or social category and substitutes race, gender and sexuality for the struggle against capitalism.

Behind these ideologies stands a social layer distinct from, but dependent upon, the oligarchy itself, a broader privileged strata that we have described as the "10 percent": the affluent upper-middle class, enriched by decades of financialization and asset inflation. Concentrated in media, mid-level corporate management, the state bureaucracy, and, importantly, the universities and the trade-union apparatus, this layer forms the principal social base of the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left, whose politics aim to divert opposition to capitalism into struggles over the distribution of privilege within the framework of the existing social order.

This was the social layer to which the *New York Times* directed its 1619 Project, which proclaimed the American Revolution a counter-revolution waged to defend slavery, and the Civil War a dispute between white racist brothers equally dedicated to repression of black people, who had, in the words of project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones, "fought back alone" to redeem American democracy.

It is not the place for a full review of the decisive *World Socialist Web Site* intervention against the 1619 Project. Comrades are encouraged to

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read our volume, noted by Kristina in her presentation. But please let me note that the WSWS answered immediately with a devastating analysis that appeared shortly after the Project's publication. We then organized lectures at major universities and published a series of interviews with leading historians of the American Revolution and the Civil War, including Gordon Wood, James McPherson, James Oakes, Victoria Bynum, and Richard Carwardine. We exposed the Project's falsifications, altered the terms of the debate, and provided a forum to which historians turned in defense of historical truth against the *Times*' racialist mythology. All of this is present in the Mehring Books volume.

This intervention has not ceased, culminating a little more than a month ago in a major webinar, "The American Revolution and Its Place in History: From the War Against Monarchy to 'No Kings,'" marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Co-moderated by David and Eric, the event brought together Sean Wilentz, Adam Hochschild, as well Oakes and Carwardine. It is not a boast to say that our Webinar was the only serious discussion of the Revolution convened during the anniversary year—a fact that itself deserves serious reflection. The Webinar defended the Revolution's world-historical character, traced its principles through the Civil War and the labor movements that followed, and drew the connection between the assault on 1776 and the Trump administration's attack on democratic rights. It has drawn many thousands of viewers internationally, demonstrating the hunger among workers and youth for history.

Now let me pose two questions that I think should not be taken for granted: *Why* is it that we intervened to defend the American Revolution? And what does that intervention signify about the present crisis? Or put somewhat differently, of what objective processes is that intervention an expression?

In answering, I want to first lay stress on what it was *not*: A clever improvisation or newly devised tactic. Rather, it is consistent with, and arises from, the entire history of our international movement.

We have stated that the purpose of this Congress is to bring the party's practice into alignment with the tasks imposed on the working class by the present crisis. It is equally true, it may be added, that no such approximation of objective reality can be reached without an objective interpretation of the past. "Dearly bought," Luxemburg wrote in *The Junius Pamphlet*, "is the modern working class's understanding of its historical vocation." As comrades know, an extraordinary portion of our work has been dedicated to the fight against historical falsification: David North's defense of Trotsky against the fabrications of academics; the PSG's exposure of attempts to rehabilitate Hitler; last year's fight against a writer paid by unknown sources to defame Gerry Healy.

Of course, Trotsky himself waged a ferocious fight against what he called the Stalin School of Falsification. The lie, he explained, is the cement of political reaction. We, as the proud inheritors of his great tradition, are acutely sensitive to lies about history. Our vigor often takes even our enemies aback, as Robert Service, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Jörg Baberowski, and the unfortunate Aidan Beatty have discovered.

Nor is our defense of the American Revolution some new departure.

Thirty years ago, David North wrote a critical essay, *Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism*, tracing the Enlightenment origins of the modern conception of equality through the American and French Revolutions, insisting that the fight for genuine social equality was present at the very birth of the democratic revolutions. He drew particular attention to Jefferson's substitution of "the pursuit of happiness" for Locke's defense of "property" in the Declaration of Independence, arguing that this endowed the Revolution's conception of human rights with a universal significance whose democratic logic reached far beyond the historical limits of bourgeois society. As North concluded, "The revolutionary spirit of the Enlightenment animates the principles and struggles of the Socialist Equality Party."

Indeed it does. And it has from the beginning, as shown in David's 1995 report to the Workers League membership, published as the pamphlet *The Workers League and the Founding of the Socialist Equality Party*, in which he explained the origin of our party's very name. The demand for social equality, he wrote, "evokes the egalitarian traditions that are so deeply rooted in the genuinely democratic and revolutionary traditions of the American workers," for "all the great social struggles of American history have inscribed on their banners the demand for social equality." This was incorporated into *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (US)*. The fact that all the sections of the ICFI have taken this name expresses the explosive revolutionary significance of equality, not just in America, but all over the world.

And we can go farther back. In 1951, James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, wrote that when the delegates of 1776 declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident," they "started something that opened up a new era of promise for all mankind." The Revolution, he wrote, had "a progressive content which no reactionary developments could ever completely erase," and he pointed to the abandonment of this democratic inheritance as "one of the biggest mistakes of American radicalism."

And farther back still. Trotsky, in *Their Morals and Ours* defended the American Civil War as a revolutionary war, invoking Lincoln's refusal to "hesitate before the most severe means" once they were necessary to achieve "a great historic aim posed by the development of a young nation." Earlier, in 1925, answering the leaders of the British Labour Party for doubting that Cromwell could be called "a pioneer of the labour movement," Trotsky insisted that "the advanced British workers will have to re-discover the English revolution and find within its ecclesiastical shell the mighty struggle of social forces"—arguing, in that same work, that British reformism itself was parasitic on the great revolutions that had gone before it, "such as the French Revolution and the US Civil War."

And it goes back to Lenin, who in 1918, writing to the American working class from a Soviet Russia under siege, called the First American Revolution "one of those great, really liberating, really revolutionary wars of which there have been so few compared to the vast number of wars of conquest."

And it reaches back, finally, to Marx himself, who wrote to Lincoln on behalf of the workers of Europe that the fate of the Civil War "carried the destiny of their class."

I present these examples *both* to show the continuity of our position on this question, and because it has become the most common position in the pseudo-left to deny that the American Revolution was really a revolution at all. Similar positions are advanced against the great French Revolution of 1789. The idea that they were not revolutions, or that they simply reimposed old power structures under new names, is modern thinking. *No one* in the 19th century thought this.

And none of the great Marxists did either. Marxism does not judge revolutions by abstract moral standards, but by their objective place in the development of the productive forces and the emancipation of humanity. And it was from this standpoint that the classical Marxists developed an extraordinary strategic discussion around the relationship of the democratic revolutions to the socialist revolution. This is a subject that comrade David has dealt with in lectures and writings over the years. And it is a discussion that can't be done justice here, but one premise within it is germane: and that was the understanding that the bourgeois democratic revolutions had played a necessary role in preparing the way for the working class and the socialist revolution, the idea perhaps summed up in the concept the "democratic tasks of the revolution."

Measured by that objective criterion, of the realization of basic democratic tasks, the American Revolution certainly was a great, progressive, world-historic event, as Marx wrote in his letter to Lincoln

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and as Lenin wrote in his letter to American workers.

The first American Revolution shattered colonial and monarchical rule and established the democratic republic as well as the basic civic conditions for political activity. It swept aside hereditary privilege, disestablished church authority, broke the mercantilist restraints that had bound the colonies to the British Empire, proclaimed the universal rights of man, and, by its example, helped inspire the French Revolution, opening up the Age of the Democratic Revolution. Rejecting nationality founded on blood and inherited allegiance–which the oligarchy now seeks to impose–1776 advanced the revolutionary conception of a political community grounded in birth and citizenship, so that the new republic might become what Tom Paine called an "asylum for mankind." It laid the foundations for the vast expansion of the capitalist market and, with it, the emergence of the American bourgeoisie and the childhood of the working class.

The second American Revolution, the Civil War, completed the democratic revolution by destroying chattel slavery, overthrowing the slaveholders' oligarchy, and transforming the Constitution through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. The Fourteenth Amendment at last gave constitutional expression to the birthright citizenship implicit in the first Revolution, extending it to the millions of slaves and African descent people targeted in the Supreme Court's Dred Scott ruling. It forged the world's largest capitalist market and, in the same historical process, birthed the world's most formidable and dangerous capitalist class and its most powerful detachment of the working class.

The great struggle for socialists has always been to imbue that class, our class, with knowledge of its history, its position in capitalist society, and arising from that, its revolutionary destiny. This has been a difficult fight, to be sure, waged as it is in the very center of world imperialism, within a working class of one thousand and one different races, nationalities, languages and religions, and one that developed historically in the social and cultural shadow of a vast petty bourgeoisie. But, as we have noted, the times are changing workers' minds.

I mentioned earlier the intense debates among the 19th and early 20th century Marxists over the relationship between the democratic revolution and the socialist revolution. Out of those debates emerged Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. Again, David has crucial lectures related to this this, including "The Revolutions of 1848: The Historical Foundations of Marxist Strategy." and "Witnesses to Permanent Revolution,"—both collected in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*.

Trotsky's extraordinary development of revolutionary strategy is often presented as an explanation as to why, in countries of belated capitalist development, the democratic tasks of the revolution cannot be completed by the bourgeoisie. This "application" is of course correct, as proven in the positive in Russia and in the negative scores of other times elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America. But the Theory of Permanent Revolution goes beyond that. Its deeper significance is that, in the epoch of world imperialism, the bourgeoisie *as a whole* has exhausted its historically progressive role. In the present world situation, the theory of permanent revolution remains the essential foundation of revolutionary strategy. In *every* country, the defense of democratic rights can no longer be separated from the fight for workers' power and socialist measures, conducted on the basis of an international strategy of the world working class. The Theory of Permanent Revolution does not just apply to what were once called backward countries. It expresses the reality of global working-class revolution in the age of imperialism, and it has a greater actuality, even imminence, than it ever has had. Internationalism is the key.

The great figures of the First and the Second American Revolutions—Jefferson, Paine and Franklin; Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, among many others—were, in a limited sense, internationalists. They never thought they were engaged in creating merely national projects, as the late Gordon Wood showed in an important chapter of his *Radicalism of the American Revolution*. Their writings and speeches are replete with references to "mankind" and universal brotherhood. They imagined that their revolutions might inspire a fraternal, harmonious world. When Jefferson wrote "All men are created equal," he did not mean "all rich white males,"—the latter interpretation, by the way, unites the identity politicians with the white nationalists. He meant what he said.

That discovery, and that audacious assertion of universal equality overthrew the received wisdom of a divinely sanctioned world of human *in*equality that had prevailed since the Dark Ages. That Old Regime could never be put back together again, and it never will, with apologies to Misters Yarvin, Vance and Thiel. But the objective conditions had not yet been created in 1776, 1789, or 1865 to make the Declaration's proclamation of equality real in a material sense.

Now they have. Capitalism itself has created what earlier revolutionaries could only intuit: an integrated global economy and a working class whose labor, supply chains and struggles cross every border. The idea of universal brotherhood and sisterhood is rooted in objective social relations. Workers today, for the first time in history, possess the material conditions that make Tom Paine's promise issued in 1775 concrete. They have it in their power, in a far more literal sense than the Great Pen of that revolution could have imagined, "to begin the world over again." The Third American Revolution will be international, inseparable from the fight of workers everywhere, or it will be nothing at all.

I therefore urge adoption of this Resolution.

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