The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada): Part 3

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
6 November 2026

Delegates to the Socialist Equality Party's founding congress held in Montreal from August 22 to 24 unanimously adopted a comprehensive document outlining the party's Historical and International Foundations. *It is being published on the* World Socialist Web Site *in ten parts. Click here to access the first and second parts, respectively.*

The WSWS previously published a report on the congress, which marked a major milestone in the struggle to build the world party of socialist revolution, as well as the SEP Canada's Statement of Principles.

Crisis in the Workers Party of Canada

45. At its founding in late 1934, the Workers Party was a small but vibrant organization. In the preceding period, the Canadian Trotskyists had been able to extend their influence from their initial lone base in Toronto to Montreal, Vancouver, and other centers. In July 1935, the Workers Party was one of the five signatories of the aforementioned "Open Letter to All Revolutionary Proletarian Organizations and Groupings," which explained the counter-revolutionary significance of the Comintern's turn to the Popular Front and the need for a struggle against centrism.

46. Its promising beginnings notwithstanding, the Workers Party would soon be thrown into a political crisis that culminated in the organization's dissolution into the social-democratic Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1937 in a misapplication of the "French Turn" entry tactic.

The Canadian proponents of the Fourth International, like the Trotskyist movement throughout the world, confronted an immensely challenging political situation that demanded a tenacious fight to build the Fourth International as the organizational expression of the struggle for the program of world socialist revolution. World capitalism was mired in a systemic crisis of unprecedented dimensions, to which the rival imperialist bourgeoisies were responding by turning to authoritarianism and fascism and by frantically preparing for world war. The working class was moving sharply left and striving towards revolution, as exemplified by the events in Spain and France and the emergence of an insurgent mass movement for industrial unionism in North America. But the Stalinist and social-democratic bureaucracies, above all through the mechanism of the Popular Front, were doing everything in their power to politically suppress and strangle the working class. While the illusions in the working class undoubtedly posed a major political challenge, the counter-revolutionary character of Popular Frontism had by the end of 1936 already been spelled out in great events. The French CP had betrayed the French general strike of May-June 1936; the Stalinists were emerging as the most vociferous supporters of bourgeois property in a Spanish Republic convulsed by revolution; and the Kremlin bureaucracy had completed the first round of the Moscow Trials. A Trotskyist organization oriented to the clarification of these questions in the working class could have patiently educated the most advanced workers as to the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism and won them to a socialist-internationalist program.

But it was precisely on this issue that the leadership of the Workers Party and its successor organizations in the 1930s and 1940s erred. The Canadian Trotskyists underestimated the significance of their defence of the program of world socialist revolution and the need to review and assimilate the strategic lessons of the struggles of the international working class and the Marxist movement's fight against national opportunism. Instead, they were often preoccupied with immediate tactical questions, to the detriment of the world strategic considerations that must underlie all tactical initiatives if they are to serve to imbue the working class with socialist consciousness and advance the struggle for its independent political mobilization and hegemony.

47. The Workers Party inherited from the early CPC, and prior to that the One Big Union/International Workers of the World, a tendency to see the development of socialist revolution as principally emerging out of ever-widening, trade union-led economic struggles. When Jack Macdonald as CPC national secretary had reviewed the party's work in the trade unions in the 1920s he was forced to concede: "It is clear that the work in the trade unions under the auspices of the (CP sponsored) TUEL (Trade Union Education League) has created the impression among certain sections that a left-wing block is all that is necessary. And that such a block … eliminates the necessity for a political party."[35] Yet soon after its foundation, the Workers Party produced an elaborate resolution on trade union tactics that called for building up a left wing in the unions on a purely syndicalist basis and characterized without qualification the unions as schools for socialism.

48. The Canadian Trotskyists responded impressionistically and pragmatically to the difficulties they confronted when the Stalinists shifted their political line, abandoning the sterile ultra-leftism of the Third Period for the Popular Front. The CPC's Third period absurdities had repelled many radical workers. But now the Stalinists were agitating for "unity" against fascism and the threat of war. For many workers, the insidious counter-revolutionary character of Stalinist Popular Frontism—how it subordinated the working class lock-stock-and barrel to the malignant world capitalist order—was not immediately apparent. Moreover, the nationalist-populist character of Popular Frontism, the counterposing of an unsocially differentiated "people" to the worst excesses of capitalism, struck a chord among broad sections of the petty bourgeoisie.

49. Further complicating the situation was the emergence of a new

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competitor for the allegiance of the working class, the CCF, which had been founded in 1932 on the basis of the counter-revolutionary tradition of Second International social democracy. The CCF brought together so-called Christian socialists (proponents of the social gospel like J.S. Woodsworth) with agrarian populists (including sections of the former Progressive Party), a smattering of trade union bureaucrats, and the middle-class Fabians of the League For Social Reconstruction. Frank Underhill, a University of Toronto professor, future Liberal, and the author of the CCF's 1933 program, the "Regina Manifesto," later wrote that his aim was "to formulate in language applicable to Canadian conditions a Fabian socialist policy such as the Labour Party had worked out for Great Britain."[36] The Canadian Trotskyists initially made a correct analysis of what the CCF represented. They denounced it as a prop for the capitalist order. They also made the salient observation that historically there had been no strong social-democratic current in the Canadian working class. Its development was being nourished by the political confusion wrought by the Stalinists. A Workers Party resolution adopted shortly after its founding declared, "The essence of the CCF program is reformism and right-wing reformism at that. Its tendency is to lead the masses into the bog of petty bourgeois parliamentary reform. Our attitude toward such an organization is one of consistent opposition, to attempt to forestall as far as possible the growth of reformism which has no historical roots in this country. As communists we regard the CCF as an opponent political party as an enemy of the working class, and we are faced with the necessity of pointing out to the workers who have already been attracted to the CCF, the real character of that organization." [37]

50. However, the Workers Party began to be pushed off its strategic axis in the new political environment created by the Stalinists' promotion of the People's Front and a growth in militant worker struggles. In May 1937, after a brief but bitter internal struggle, the Workers Party was dissolved and a small majority of the Canadian Trotskyists entered into the CCF in what its proponents claimed was an audacious application of the "French Turn." In reality, it was a political retreat—one motivated and developed on a very different basis; one permeated by an adaptation to nationalist pressures, and a prioritization of tactical maneuvering over the fight for the program of world socialist revolution in the working class. The entry, which was carried out with great haste, was not grounded in and animated by the fight to win the working class to socialist internationalism. The Workers Party leadership did not study the experiences of other sections of the movement that had implemented the French Turn.

51. While a minority, comprising most of the party leadership and nearly half of the membership, opposed entry and refused to implement the party decision, the slight majority in favour rushed to dissolve the Workers Party into the CCF. They did so even though the CCF leadership insisted on highly unfavorable terms—the Trotskyists had to give up their newspaper, were prohibited from joining as a group or tendency, and the decision as to whether they would be accepted into the CCF was to be the proviso of individual CCF branches. Significantly, the entry was opposed by those cadres already assigned to conducting entry work in the CCF. Based on their experience, including within the CCF's youth movement, they argued that it was an inhospitable environment for the struggle for revolutionary socialist politics, that the CCF's influence in the working class was declining, and that in 1937 revolutionary-minded workers were coming under the political influence of the Stalinists, not the CCF.

52. The CPC, through its promotion of the Popular Front, was even more systematic and crude in advocating the political subordination of the working class to Canadian capitalism than the social democrats. By 1937 it was openly supporting the Mackenzie King Liberal government and even courting "progressive" Conservative and Social Credit politicians in the name of the fight against fascism, but they also projected themselves as the party of the October Revolution and revolutionary Marxism. Moreover, while the CCF focused all but exclusively on electoral politics, the Stalinists were active in worker struggles, which they confined to militant trade unionism while relentlessly promoting their political subordination to the bourgeoisie via the Popular Front. In a February 1938 report to the Fourth International's All America-Pacific Commission, the Executive Committee of the Canadian Trotskyists nonetheless baldly justified the entry into the CCF as a means of overcoming the movement's isolation: "During the latter part of the 'third period' days, our organization experienced a period of relatively rapid growth in membership and in influence. … [Subsequently, however] we entered a period in which we began a slight decline, which could be measured more by the dwindling of the enthusiasm of the members than by actual numerical losses. The fundamental reason for this decline was the change to the People's Front by the CP … People's Front propaganda made considerable headway among the workers who had been sympathetic towards our movement. Particularly towards the latter end of 1936 we began to feel our isolation most keenly."[38] Rather than deepening the fight to clarify the confusion in the working class over the character of the Popular Front, the Trotskyists carried out a major political retreat with their entry into the CCF. It was rooted in the opportunist conception that a tactical short-cut could be found to the movement's relative isolation—that is a temporary unfavourable relationship of forces due to the objective situation and major problems in the development of the political consciousness of the working class. In this case specifically, it was an attempt, through a turn to the reformist CCF, to find a tactical answer to the confusion that prevailed in the working class over the Popular Front and the increased influence of the Stalinist CPC, which it need be emphasized met Trotskyist criticism with a torrent of vile slander and violence.

53. Exemplifying the nationalist pressures—and in what, without doubt, proved pivotal in exacerbating the crisis and confusion surrounding the entry conflict within the Canadian section—neither side sought the assistance of the world Trotskyist movement in clarifying the political issues at stake and moderating the bitter factionalism that characterized the dispute. Had they done so, the leadership could have drawn critical lessons from the entry into the Socialist Party half a year earlier by their Workers Party US comrades. That tactical initiative has been politically prepared through an extensive inner-party discussion and was explicitly justified in a public statement affirming the need to wage an education campaign among the revolutionary-minded workers and youth who were joining the Socialist Party on the basis of its stated opposition to war so as to prepare the building of a mass party fighting for the program of world socialist revolution. "Such an educational campaign will scarcely be complete unless it involves all the basic questions which are inextricably involved in the war question—the international nature of the class struggle, the road to power, the nature of the workers' state, etc.—questions on which clarity in the Socialist ranks lags considerably behind the development of the war issue," wrote the Workers Party US National Committee. [39] The persistent struggle of the American Trotskyists within the Socialist Party over the central issues of the day—above all the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism in crushing the Spanish Revolution and the defence of Trotsky against the Stalinist slanders propagated through the Moscow Trials—won many new recruits to Trotskyism, while politically steeling the cadre. This laid the basis for the founding of the Socialist Workers Party as an openly Trotskyist party at the beginning of 1938.

54. The Workers Party of Canada leadership failed to elaborate such a program of revolutionary work—one that counterposed the program of world socialist revolution to the national-reformist, parliamentary and pacifist politics of the social democrats—for its members joining the CCF. Macdonald, who had pressed for entry, abandoned his leadership responsibilities almost as soon as it was implemented—thereby confirming that for him entry was the result of political demoralization, and but a

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convenient stepping stone to the abandonment of revolutionary politics. Overall, the entry was marked by passivity and conciliation, as the majority, to use its own characterization, "entrenched" itself in the CCF. The anti-entry minority, which refused to participate in it, similarly spun its wheels. Under these conditions, the League for a Revolutionary Workers Party, a small centrist group that professed to favour the creation of a Fourth International, was able to posture as the incarnation of revolutionary intransigence towards Stalinism and social democracy, win recruits among the ex-members of the now defunct Workers Party, and for a time eclipse the genuine Trotskyist movement in both Toronto and Montreal. The LRWP opposed the French Turn, wherever implemented, arguing any entry, whatever the perspective animating it, was a betrayal of the independence of the revolutionary party. They did so while simultaneously supporting the POUM, which had entered the Popular Front government in Catalonia, thereby assisting the Stalinists' suppression of the Spanish revolution. The LRWP's combination of sectarianism and opportunism underscored the correctness of Trotsky's reply to those who had denounced the French Turn on principle: the organizational independence of the revolutionary party is subordinate to its political-theoretical independence; it is quite possible to maintain an organizationally independent grouping while pursuing an opportunist course of political adaptation. Like many such centrist groupings internationally, the LRWP disappeared during World War II without leaving so much as a trace.

55. Trotsky, when apprised in late 1937 of the situation in the Canadian section, drew trenchant conclusions about its entry into the CCF and initiated urgently needed steps to reorient the movement. Replying to Earle Birney, one of the leading proponents of entry, Trotsky wrote, "During the last year, and it was a very important one, the Canadian section as a section didn't give any sign of political life. … Our comrades 'entrenched' themselves in the reformist organization, and, I am afraid, in reformism itself, because passivity in an extremely acute period is an unmistakable sign of a reformist, and not a revolutionary, spirit … [I]t is necessary to have in Canada an active revolutionary section. Further loss of time would be criminal."[40]

The founding of the Fourth International and the outbreak of the Second World War

56. The founding congress of the Fourth International, which was held near Paris in September 1938, represented an historic milestone for the socialist movement and the international working class. Its founding document, authored by Trotsky and entitled *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (The mobilization of the masses around transitional demands to prepare the conquest of power*), defined the chief task of the epoch as the resolution of the crisis of proletarian revolutionary leadership: "Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period … a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership."[41]

Answering the skeptics and centrists who argued that it was premature to build a new International, because it could only arise out of "great events," Trotsky insisted, "The Fourth International has already arisen out of great events: the greatest defeats of the proletariat in history. The cause for these defeats is to be found in the degeneration and perfidy of the old leadership. The class struggle does not tolerate an interruption. The Third International, following the Second, is dead for purposes of revolution. Long live the Fourth International!" The Fourth International was at present weak in numbers, but "it is strong in doctrine, program, tradition," and "in the incomparable tempering of its cadres." Trotsky's assessment that outside of the Fourth International and its cadres "there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name" would be vindicated by the subsequent history of the 20th Century. [42]

57. In order to overcome the gulf between the maturity of the objective, revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard, the *Transitional Program* formulated a set of economic and political demands—such as a sliding scale of wages, the nationalization of industry and the banks, the formation of factory committees, soviets (councils of action) and workers' defence guards, and the fight for a workers' and peasants' government. These transitional demands were a bridge, "stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat." [43] They were aimed at developing the revolutionary consciousness, combativity, and independent class action of the working class and exposing the old leaderships. Revisionist tendencies would later try to turn the Transitional Program into a recipe for opportunist adaptation, tearing isolated demands out of their context and separating them from the fight for workers' power and to develop socialist consciousness. Against any such opportunist conceptions, Trotsky insisted, "The program must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers. It must reflect society as it is, and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to overcome and vanquish the backwardness."[44]

58. Through the intervention of Trotsky, the SWP, and the Fourth International's Pacific Bureau, in late 1937 and early 1938 a principled basis for overcoming the crisis in the Canadian section and prosecuting the struggle for the program of world socialist revolution was developed. With a view to politically rearming the movement and identifying and educating any revolutionary-minded elements within the CCF, the Trotskyists formally constituted an opposition group within the CCF on the basis of a statement on the fight against imperialist war, and began producing a newsletter. Furthermore, through the intervention of the SWP, the majority and minority were politically reconciled, and an agreement reached for them to work together. Welcoming these developments, the May 1938 All-American and Pacific Pre-Conference of the Fourth International urged the Canadian Trotskyists to intensify the programmatic and political fight within the CCF with a view to rapidly "completing the experience within this declining reformist organization and re-establishing the Canadian section of the Fourth International."[45] No sooner did the Trotskyists begin to politically challenge the CCF leadership, than they were targeted for expulsion—a process completed by November of 1938 and that was rightly recognized to be part of the preparations of the CCF leadership to repudiate its pacifist opposition to war and line up behind the Canadian ruling class in the coming global conflagration.

59. An independent Trotskyist party, the Socialist Workers League, was formally refounded at the beginning of 1939 and immediately sought affiliation with the Fourth International. But this unquestionable advance was undermined by the persistence of a pragmatic and subjective attitude toward the entry episode. The leadership blamed the difficulties that attended the entry solely on the minority's refusal to participate. No less significantly, they insisted that there was no point in reviewing the entry experience, including re-examining the political conceptions that had motivated the decision to liquidate the Workers Party, since the entry was now over and the onrush of events was presenting the party with new challenges and opportunities. This was a political evasion. The entry had ended, but the problem of the political domination of the working class by opportunist parties and organizations remained. The entry had raised a host of critical questions, including: the relationship between the party's

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international strategy and program and the tactics that it must develop within the national arena to win the working class to international socialism; the nature of the anemic CCF left; how to combat working-class illusions in Stalinist Popular Front politics; the struggle against centrism; how serious differences within the leadership should be approached; and what is "isolation" and how do Marxists strive to overcome it. The drawing of a proper balance sheet of this experience would have required a careful review and assimilation of the struggles waged by the Trotskyist movement internationally at least since the Stalinist betrayal in Germany had compelled the Trotskyists to undertake the building of new parties and a new international. It could have transformed what had been a serious retreat into a salutary lesson for the Canadian party and the Fourth International as a whole. As it was, these crucial questions remained to be clarified—when the outbreak of world war in September 1939 and the Canadian state's illegalization of the Socialist Workers League just nine months after its founding—compelled the Trotskyists, with the agreement and sanction of the Fourth International, to re-enter the CCF so as to provide legal cover for their work.

60. In a calculated show of its "independence," Canada waited one week after the eruption of war in Europe in September 1939 to formally enter the Second World War. The war, which would rage for six years, was not a war for "democracy" or, as the Stalinists would later claim, an "anti-fascist" war. It was a continuation—on a far wider and more destructive scale—of the struggle that had erupted in 1914 among the imperialist powers for resources, colonies, markets and pools of labour to exploit. Writing at the war's outbreak, Trotsky declared, "The present war, which its participants started before they signed the treaty of Versailles, grew out of imperialist contradictions. It was as inevitable as the crash of trains which are let loose one toward the other on the same track."[46] In *The Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War* written in May 1940, Trotsky elaborated the revolutionary internationalist program in opposition to Stalinism and social democracy:

"In contradistinction to the Second and Third Internationals, the Fourth International builds its policy not on the military fortunes of the capitalist states but on the transformation of the imperialist war into a war of the workers against the capitalists, on the overthrow of the ruling classes of all countries, on the world socialist revolution. The shifts in the battle lines at the front, the destruction of national capitals, the occupation of territories, the downfall of individual states, represent from this standpoint only tragic episodes on the road to the reconstruction of modern society.

"Independently of the course of the war, we fulfill our basic task: we explain to the workers the irreconcilability between their interests and the interests of bloodthirsty capitalism; we mobilize the toilers against imperialism; we propagate the unity of the workers in all warring and neutral countries; we call for the fraternization of workers and soldiers within each country, and of soldiers with soldiers on the opposite side of the battle front; we mobilize the women and youth against the war; we carry on constant, persistent, tireless preparation for the revolution—in the factories, in the mills, in the villages, in the barracks, at the front, and in the fleet."[47]

61. The last years of Trotsky's life were dedicated to preparing the Fourth International for the coming global war. Of fundamental importance was his opposition to a number of tendencies that began to designate the Soviet bureaucracy as a new, exploiting class, defined variously as "state capitalism" or "bureaucratic collectivism". Trotsky wrote *In Defence of Marxism* against a faction in the US Socialist Workers Party led by James Burnham and Max Shachtman, whose positions echoed those of Bruno Rizzi in Italy and the Urbahn group in Germany.

In *The Revolution Betrayed* Trotsky had stressed that the proper starting point for defining the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state was its origins in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class. While its subsequent isolation had allowed the unchecked growth of a bureaucracy, this layer rested upon the property forms created by the October Revolution, based upon collective planned production rather than private ownership and the market. Using the apparatus of the state, the bureaucracy appropriated the lion's share of production. But its control of distribution did not extend to ownership of the means of production, let alone enable it to impose a new or hitherto unique set of class relations. It was a parasitic excrescence on the body of the workers' state, rather than integral to it. The task facing the Soviet workers was to overthrow the bureaucracy in a political revolution, so as to preserve the economic foundations for the development towards socialism and prevent the restoration of capitalism.

62. The theorists of state capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism repudiated Trotsky's appraisal. Following the signing of the Stalin-Hitler non-aggression pact on August 23, 1939, Burnham and Shachtman urged the SWP to drop its unconditional defence of the USSR against imperialist attack. Their refusal to defend the remaining gains of the October Revolution was an adaptation to the sharp turn right of a left-liberal petty bourgeois layer aligned with the Democratic Party. This layer had evinced sympathy with the Soviet Union when the Stalin regime, in the name of the Popular Front, had strangled revolution in France and Spain and staged the Moscow Trials; but recoiled violently from it when Stalin's latest reactionary diplomatic maneuver placed Moscow in opposition to the Roosevelt administration, which was preparing to advance American imperialism's global interests through war with Germany.

63. In his intervention in the faction fight in the SWP, Trotsky stressed that Burnham and Shachtman's claim that the Soviet Union had become a "bureaucratic collectivist" society had the most far-reaching implications: it wrote off the revolutionary role of the working class and rejected the viability of the program of world socialist revolution. The eruption of imperialist militarism demonstrated that the crisis of capitalism had reached extreme limits, and that a new system for the planned development of the productive forces was required. But according to the advocates of state capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism, the working class had proved incapable of accomplishing such a social transformation. Instead, its place had been taken by a bureaucratic elite, which would replace the decayed bourgeoisie as a new ruling class, not merely in the Soviet Union but on a world scale. Trotsky rejected this pessimistic and impressionistic position. The Fourth International, he wrote, upheld the revolutionary perspective of Marxism, and explained that the defeats suffered by the working class were the outcome of the betrayals of its mass organizations. Wrote Trotsky: "All the various types of disillusioned and frightened representatives of pseudo-Marxism proceed…from the assumption that the bankruptcy of the leadership only 'reflects' the incapacity of the proletariat to fulfill its revolutionary mission. Not all our opponents express this thought clearly, but all of them—ultra-lefts, centrists, anarchists, not to mention Stalinists and social democrats—shift the responsibility for the defeats from themselves to the shoulders of the proletariat. None of them indicate under precisely what conditions the proletariat will be capable of accomplishing the socialist overturn. If we grant as true that the cause of the defeats is rooted in the social qualities of the proletariat itself then the position of modern society will have to be acknowledged as hopeless." [48]

64. Trotsky also emphasized the anti-Marxist and empiricist methodology employed by Burnham and Shachtman to justify their political positions. Replying to Shachtman's assertion that agreement on the "more abstract doctrines of dialectical materialism" had no direct impact on how the party deals with "concrete political issues—and political parties, programs and struggles are based on such concrete issues," Trotsky wrote, "What parties? What programs? What struggles? All parties and all programs are here lumped together. The party of the proletariat is a party unlike all the rest. It is not at all based upon 'such

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concrete issues.' In its very foundation it is diametrically opposed to the parties of the bourgeois horse-traders and petty-bourgeois rag patchers. Its task is the preparation of a social revolution and the regeneration of mankind on new material and moral foundations. In order not to give way under the pressure of bourgeois public opinion and police repression, the proletarian revolutionist, a leader all the more, requires a clear, far-sighted, completely thought-out world outlook. Only upon the basis of a unified Marxist conception is it possible to correctly approach 'concrete' questions." [49]

65. Trotsky's intervention in the 1939-40 faction fight proved critical to the political-theoretical steeling of the world movement, which had to combat similar class pressures as capitalism plunged the world into war. Spector had been a leading figure in the Trotskyist movement in North America from its founding in 1928, serving for a time as the editor of the Communist League of America's newspaper, *The Militant*. In 1936, he moved to the United States, something Trotsky had long urged him to do, and was elected to the SWP's National Committee at its founding convention. However, In April 1939, his name disappeared from the editorial board of the *New International*, the SWP's theoretical journal, and he withdrew from the Fourth international without explanation—in flagrant disregard for his responsibilities to the party and the working class. Nevertheless, it is clear that his resignation anticipated the right-wing trajectory of the opposition led by Burnham and Shachtman. By the 1950s he was active in the Democratic Party-aligned Socialist Party and subsequently became the New York representative of a Zionist labour federation.

With Spector's relocation to the US, Earle Birney, a young academic who had participated under Trotsky's direction in the British Trotskyists' short-lived entry into the centrist ILP, emerged as the principal leader of the Canadian supporters of the Fourth International. He was elected Executive Secretary of the Socialist Workers League at its founding in January 1939. When the faction fight erupted in the SWP, Birney immediately declared his support for the opposition and organized a small pro-minority faction in the SWL dedicated to overturning the Fourth International's defence of the USSR against imperialist aggression. Abandoning revolutionary politics even more rapidly than Burnham and Shachtman, he announced his resignation from the SWL in a letter dated January 12, 1940. In it he conceded his break with Trotskyism expressed "partly a tiredness, I suppose—partly middle-class isolation and despair."[50] He also railed against the Cannon "regime" in the SWP and embraced Burnham's anti-communist claim that Stalinist bureaucratism emerged organically out of Bolshevik organizational methods. By the end of the month, he was declaring his preference for "capitalism over sovietism" and his intention to devote himself to his career as an academic and writer.

66. The arguments that Burnham and Shachtman advanced against the Fourth International anticipated a long line of revisionist attacks upon Marxism that emerged after World War II. While their conclusions varied, all of these groupings—whether in the form of the various theories of "state capitalism" or Michel Pablo's "centuries of deformed workers' states"—regarded the Stalinist regimes as having historical legitimacy and wrote off the working class as a revolutionary force. Invariably their politics were national-opportunist and increasingly evolved to the right.

This is underscored by the political evolution of Burnham and Shachtman in the US, and their principal Canadian supporter, Birney. Burnham renounced socialism within weeks of leaving the SWP in 1940 and went on to become a leading Cold War ideologue, receiving the Medal of Freedom President from Ronald Reagan shortly before his death. Shachtman's evolution was somewhat slower, but by the time of the Korean War he was authoring a leaflet dropped by the US military aimed at persuading the revolutionary Korean and Chinese masses to lay down their arms against imperialism. He would go on to endorse the bombing of Vietnam. Birney decided to "fight fascism" by embracing Canadian imperialism. He became an officer in the Canadian Army and in 1943 he won a Governor-General's Award for his literary efforts, in part, as even his biographer admits, because he wrote a much-promoted pro-war poem, "On Going to the Wars." Many of the key themes he addressed in the literary endeavours that were hereafter his preoccupation anticipated and echoed the concerns of the existentialists and other forms of petty-bourgeois anti-Marxism—revolving around the destructiveness of "mass society" to freedom, individuality and the environment. Socialism with "its great ant-like achievements," he wrote to the pro-Stalinist poet Dorothy Livesay in 1943, "may lead faster than ever to a mere vulgar triumph of our single limited species in a barren world."[51]

Trotsky's place in history

67. The outbreak of the world war placed Trotsky's life in greater danger than ever. The revolutionary consequences of the First World War remained fresh in the memory of the imperialist powers and the Soviet bureaucracy. As long as he lived, Trotsky remained the leader of the revolutionary government in exile. Was it not possible, even likely, Stalin feared, that the upheavals of war would create a revolutionary movement that would restore Trotsky to power? To complete the elimination of the leadership of the Russian Revolution and prevent the development of the Fourth International, Stalinist agents infiltrated the Trotskyist movement. Their central goal was the assassination of Leon Trotsky. Among those working for the GPU in the Trotskyist movement were Mark Zborowski (the secretary for Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov), Sylvia Callen (the secretary for James Cannon), and Joseph Hansen (Trotsky's secretary and guard after 1937 and future leader of the SWP). Zborowski, who was known as "Etienne" inside the Trotskyist movement, assisted the GPU in the assassinations of Erwin Wolf, one of Trotsky's secretaries, in July 1937; Ignace Reiss, a defector from the GPU who had declared himself a Trotskyist, in September 1937; Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov, in February 1938; and Rudolf Klement, secretary of the Fourth International, in July 1938, less than two months before the Fourth International's founding congress.

68. On May 24, 1940, Trotsky escaped one attempt on his life, which had been facilitated by a GPU agent working on his guard detail, Robert Sheldon Harte. On August 20, 1940, Trotsky was assaulted by a GPU agent, Ramon Mercader, at his home in Coyoacán, Mexico. He died the next day. Trotsky's assassination was a devastating blow to the cause of international socialism. He was not only the co-leader of the October Revolution, the implacable opponent of Stalinism and the founder of the Fourth International. He was the last and greatest representative of the political, intellectual, cultural and moral traditions of the classical Marxism that had inspired the mass revolutionary workers' movement that emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. He developed a conception of revolutionary theory, rooted philosophically in materialism, directed outward toward the cognition of objective reality, oriented to the education and political mobilization of the working class, and strategically preoccupied with the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Fully engaged in the historic tasks of the new revolutionary epoch, Trotsky viewed with contempt those who sought to evade their political responsibilities under the banner of personal freedom. "Let the philistines hunt for their own individuality in empty space," he declared. [52] Nor did he give an inch to those who claimed that the defeats suffered by the working class demonstrated the failure of Marxism itself. For Trotsky, such arguments were based on political demoralization, not theoretical insight. Those shouting loudest

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about the “crisis of Marxism” were precisely those who had capitulated intellectually to the spread of political reaction. They were translating their personal fears, Trotsky wrote, “into the language of immaterial and universal criticism.” The innumerable critics of Marxism, however, had no alternative but demoralized resignation for the working class. The opponents of Marxism, observed Trotsky, “are disarming themselves in the face of reaction, renouncing scientific social thought, surrendering not only material but also moral positions, and depriving themselves of any claim to revolutionary vengeance in the future.”[53]

As cited in Donald Muldoon, *Capitalism Unchallenged: A Sketch of Canadian Communism 1939–1949* (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1977), 13

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[39] Workers Party National Committee, “Workers Party Calls All Revolutionary Workers to Join the Socialist Party,” *The New Militant*, vol. 2, no. 22. https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1936/v02n22/joinsp.html

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[52] Leon Trotsky, “The Founding of the Fourth International,” *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1938-39]*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 1975) 86.

[53] Leon Trotsky, “Once Again on the ‘Crisis of Marxism’,” *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1938-39]*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 1975) 205 and 206.

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