# The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada): Part 6

**Socialist Equality Party (Canada)**
**20 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, second, third, fourth and fifth 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.

**The Global Working Class Offensive and the resumption of the fight for Trotskyism in the Canadian working class**

**117.** Working under the political authority of the International Committee of the Fourth International and in close collaboration with its American section, the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) and its predecessor organizations—the Workers League/Ligue des Travailleurs and the International Workers Party/Parti ouvrier internationaliste—have fought for over five decades to win the working class to the program of socialist internationalism.

The lessons of this more than half-century struggle are essential to the program and strategy of the SEP (Canada) and constitute a powerful foundation for its fight to resolve the central political problem of the imperialist epoch—the crisis of revolutionary working-class leadership.

"The road to the working class," declared the Workers League in a 1988 document, "Build the Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International," "lies not through maneuvers aimed at gaining influence with its present false leaders, nor through pandering to the prevailing forms of bourgeois consciousness within the mass movement. Rather it lies through the struggle to forge, in an unrelenting battle against opportunism, a party that defends the objective and historic interests of the international working class. Through the struggle to render the working class conscious of its historic tasks and for its unconditional programmatic and organizational independence from all other class forces, the Fourth International prepares for the inevitable revolutionary upsurge which will demonstrate the perfidy of the old leaderships, and that the only means through which the proletariat can prevail in the struggle against capital is a revolutionary combat party of the Lenin-Trotsky type."[79]

**118.** Work to refound the Canadian section of the ICFI was initiated in the early 1970s by young people seeking to turn to the working class and provide its struggles a revolutionary orientation. They had been radicalized by the Vietnam war, the social struggles of the 1960s, and beginning in 1968 a growing global revolutionary offensive of the working class.

In opposition to the Pabloites, the ICFI had insisted that the post-war boom was laying the basis for a new era of capitalist crisis that would impel the working class into revolutionary struggle. This perspective was more than vindicated. The May-June 1968 general strike in France heralded a global working-class upsurge that shook the Stalinist regimes (Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1970), forced the resignation of conservative governments (Britain 1974), precipitated the fall of dictatorships (Greece and Portugal in 1974) and sealed the defeat of American imperialism in Vietnam.

**119**. In Canada, there was a quickening of the class struggle from the mid-1960s on. By the early 1970s, the country was convulsed by a strike wave whose only parallels in scope and militancy were those that erupted in the immediate aftermath of the First and Second World Wars. Many of the strikes were wildcat strikes organized in defiance of the union top brass, restrictive labour laws, and court injunctions. In 1974, there were more than 1,200 strikes and lockouts across Canada and in 1975, 1,171. In the latter year, 10,908,000 working-days were lost to labour disputes, a more than four-fold increase from 10 years before and on a per capita basis among the highest in the world. At first, the ruling class responded, albeit grudgingly, with concessions, including a further expansion of public and social services and collective bargaining rights. But the basic structure of society remained unchanged, such that in 1971 the income share of the richest 20 percent of the population was actually marginally higher than two decades before.[80]

**120.** As the capitalist boom unravelled, these concessions became unsustainable from the standpoint of the ruling class. Increasingly, it sought to counter the explosion of working-class militancy with state repression. In October 1970, the ostensibly progressive Pierre Trudeau-led Liberal government imposed the War Measures Act. On the manifestly bogus claim that two Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnappings constituted an "apprehended insurrection," the government deployed the army in Quebec and the streets of the national capital, suspended basic civil liberties, and sanctioned the detention without trial of 500 leftists and militant workers, only a handful of whom had any connection to the FLQ whatsoever. By 1972, Canada's military was actively planning for civil war against the working class. A leaked planning document for "Operation Neat Pitch," a military exercise in the streets of Montreal, painted a scenario necessitating armed intervention to quell "disorders" after a "new popular movement" arose "throughout North America" in response to financial crisis and mass unemployment. Ultimately, the Trudeau government suspended normal collective bargaining. In October 1975 it imposed a three-year program of wage and price controls that in the name of fighting inflation slashed workers' real wages.

**121**. Significant as was the state assault on worker and democratic

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rights, the Canadian bourgeoisie depended above all on the trade union bureaucracy and the NDP to contain and politically suppress the working class. The Canadian Labour Congress denounced the spontaneous general strike that erupted across Quebec in May 1972 in response to the jailing of the leaders of the province's principal labour federations as a threat to bourgeois order. The CLC, declared its president, Donald MacDonald, "will not be party to any attempt to overthrow a democratically elected government."[81] Meanwhile, the Quebec unions worked to quarantine and divert an explosive working-class upsurge behind the PQ, a bourgeois party whose principal component was a split-off from the Quebec Liberal Party. The NDP governments in Saskatchewan and Manitoba policed Trudeau's wage controls. In an action that no doubt encouraged Trudeau to proceed, BC's first-ever NDP government passed a battery of laws to break four strikes the week prior to the Liberals imposing national wage controls. Shortly thereafter, BC's New Democrats called a snap election that handed power back to the avowedly pro-big business Social Credit.

**The Challenges confronting the Workers League and the Emerging Crisis in the ICFI**

**122**. Despite their lack of political experience, the young cadres of the Workers League were able to win a hearing in the working class for the program of Trotskyism. Initially based in Montreal, the center of a powerful but still politically limited working-class upsurge, the Workers League provided a revolutionary socialist-internationalist orientation to workers and young people. In several important struggles, most notably the 1974-75 United Aircraft strike, it emerged as the pole of opposition to the trade union bureaucracy and its efforts to politically harness the working class to the Parti Québecois. The Workers League nonetheless faced immense political challenges due to the liquidation of the IC's original Canadian section. The Pabloites, whose influence had grown markedly thanks to an influx of middle-class youth, everywhere worked to politically wall off the supporters of the IC. Out of splits from the LSA and among the myriad New Left tendencies, including the dissident Canadian nationalist Waffle faction of the NDP, a multiplicity of Pabloite organizations emerged advancing different tactical variations on the same liquidationist theme.

**123**. In Quebec, as the unions struggled to contain a surge in worker militancy, a section of the bureaucracy adopted, for a time, Marxist sounding rhetoric in speeches and resolutions that they penned with the help of recent university graduates schooled in New Left, Stalinist and Pabloite politics. Thus in 1971-72, whilst developing closer ties to the PQ, the three main labour federations issued manifestos under the titles: *Il n'y à plus d'avenir pour le Québec dans le système écononomique actuel*/There is no future for Quebec in the current economic system (CSN); *L'État, rouage de notre exploitation*/The state: a machine for our exploitation (FTQ); and *L'école au service de la classe dominante*/Education at the service of the ruling class. (CSQ).

**124**. The political difficulties and challenges that confronted the politically inexperienced cadre of the Workers League were compounded by a growing crisis in the ICFI, as its two oldest sections those in France and Britain, adapted to nationalist pressures. The problems they faced, it must be emphasized, were complex. The working class was moving sharply to the left, but even the bulk of its most advanced layers were still politically oriented to the mass social-democratic and Stalinist parties. From the mid-1960s on there had been a political radicalization among middle class youth that was symptomatic of a growing crisis in bourgeois society and an anticipation of the resurgence of proletarian class struggle. But, as David North has explained, "To the extent that the implications and lessons of the 1963 split were not continuously studied and deepened,"[82] the sections of the ICFI were susceptible to the pressures of a radical petty bourgeois movement in which the anti-Marxist conceptions propagated by the Frankfurt school, the French existentialist philosophers, Franz Fanon, Castro, Che Guevara, Mao and other New Left icons flourished. The special contribution of the Pabloites was to translate these conceptions into pseudo-Trotskyism, while propping up the labour bureaucracies, and mounting political provocations against the ICFI.

**125.** The French Trotskyist OCI had supported the SLL in opposing the SWP and LSA's reunification with the Pabloites. But by the late 1960s the OCI was discounting the significance of that struggle and rejecting the most pivotal conclusion the ICFI had drawn from it—that the Fourth International could build its forces in the working class and establish new sections only on the basis of the fight against Pabloite opportunism. "It is a big mistake to see the long battle against Pabloite revisionism as an unfortunate gap, fifteen or twenty lost years," wrote the SLL in 1967 in answer to the OCI. Rather it was the "fight to develop Marxism and at the same time to defend every past conquest of Marxist theory."[83] "[T]he living struggle against Pabloism, and the training of cadres and parties on the basis of this struggle," the SLL insisted, "*was* the life of the Fourth International in these years."[84] In the name of "reconstructing the Fourth International," the OCI oriented more and more explicitly to the Pabloites and maneuvering within French establishment politics, including secretly entering into the French Socialist Party soon after its founding in 1969.

The OCI was taken by surprise by the sudden emergence of a revolutionary crisis in France in 1968. Unlike the Pabloites, it did fight to turn the student protests that precipitated the May-June events to the working class. However, it limited itself to syndicalist demands. The OCI failed to raise the demand that the mass bureaucratically-led organizations of the working class (the CP and the CGT union federation) take the power to implement socialist policies; nor did it fight for the formation of worker committees of action as embryonic organs of workers' power. Rather than educate the radicalized student youth who swelled its ranks amid the May-June 1968 events in the historic struggle for the political independence and hegemony of the working class, the OCI leadership adapted to their class prejudices and political conceptions, which were an eclectic, half-baked melange of Marxism and petty-bourgeois radicalism.

**126**. The SLL opposed the OCI's sharp lurch to the right. However, its approach to the emergence of serious political differences with the IC's French section was radically different from its response to the SWP leadership's push for reunification with the Pabloites. Between 1961 and the SWP's desertion of the IC in June 1963, the SLL had resolutely opposed any conciliation with Pabloite opportunism, while insisting on the need for the most thorough-going discussion in order to sharpen the lines of demarcation from contemporary Marxist revisionism, clarify the cadre of the world Trotskyist movement and rally the best elements within the SWP to the ICFI. When it came to the struggle with the OCI, the SLL moved for a rapid settling of accounts and quick divorce. This served the interests of the OCI leadership, which was eager to break free from the political-organizational constraints of membership in the ICFI. More fundamentally, the hasty and politically unclarified split with the OCI constituted a retreat from the SLL's international responsibilities that weakened its Trotskyist foundations. The fight against the OCI's embrace of centrist politics came increasingly to be viewed by the SLL and its foremost leaders, Gerry Healy, Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter, as a diversion from its intervention in the developing mass working-class upsurge against the Heath Conservative government.

**127**. This nationalist orientation had been presaged in Healy's 1966 essay "Problems of the Fourth International" which, based on a false conception of the development of the Third International, conceived of the overcoming of the then unfavourable relation of forces between the genuine Trotskyists and the Pabloite pretenders on the world scale as

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arising from the inspiration that a successful British revolution would give to revolutionists around the world. In fact, the October Revolution was itself the outcome of the Bolsheviks' intransigent struggle from 1914 on to build a Third International—to break politically, ideologically, and organizationally from the social-democratic parties that had betrayed the working class to support their respective bourgeoisies in the war and all those who conciliated with them.

**128**. The SLL correctly viewed the May-June events in France as a harbinger of an explosion of class struggle in Britain. It had also made a prescient warning to the OCI in 1967 of the danger, during the initial stages of a working-class radicalization, that "a revolutionary party responds to the situation in the working class not in a revolutionary way, but by adaptation to the level of struggle to which the workers are restricted by their own experience under the old leaderships, i.e., to the inevitable initial confusion. Such revisions of the fight for the independent party and the Transitional Program are usually dressed up in the disguise of getting closer to the working class, unity with all those in struggle, not posing ultimatums, abandoning dogmatism, etc."[85] However, the SLL failed to heed its own advice. It significantly expanded its influence among the most militant workers, with trenchant criticisms of the trade union bureaucrats, and by popularizing the call for the working class to bring down the hated Tory government. But the party's work was increasingly focussed around tactical demands and practical initiatives in the trade unions, not the forging of Trotskyist cadre on the basis of socialist internationalism. This retreat was bound up with a fatal underestimation of what was involved in the fight to free the working class from the union bureaucracy and social-democratic politicians. Trotsky had insisted British capitalism rested on the labour bureaucracy. Yet Slaughter cavalierly declared, "As the SLL has said many times, a working class strong enough to get rid of the masters (the Tories) will certainly be able to deal with the servants (the Labour leaders.)"[86]

**129**. As the ICFI has explained, "Inasmuch as the new forces (recruited to the SLL) were not grounded in great international principles, reinforced by a clear understanding of the world perspective, relations within the party inevitably assumed an increasingly pragmatic character based on limited tactical agreements centred on immediate goals ('Bring down the Tory government'). Moreover, politically-unclarified members were vulnerable to changes in the moods of different class forces to which the leaders themselves, having failed to theoretically comprehend the principal lessons of the struggles of the previous period, began to adapt."[87]

**130**. In November 1973, the SLL was transformed—in truth liquidated—into a new organization, the Workers Revolutionary Party, of a decidedly centrist character. The WRP was established without consultation with the IC, without a review of the Fourth International's struggle to defend and develop the program of world socialist revolution and on the basis of a national tactic, "Labour to power on socialist policies." The WRP was thrown into crisis when, only weeks after its launch, the miners' strike brought down the Tory government and a Labour government was elected to office, effectively realizing the tactic that had formed the political motivation for its founding. Because the SLL/WRP had adapted to the spontaneous anti-Tory movement, recruiting broadly without clarifying the centrality of the struggle against Pabloism and the class nature of social democracy, the new situation confronted the WRP leadership with the haemorrhaging of hundreds of members and, most significantly, the emergence of an unprincipled, right-wing, anti-party faction. Led by Alan Thornett, an autoworker and head of the party's industrial arm, this faction opposed the party's renewed efforts, following Labour's election, to emphasise its Trotskyist perspective and its opposition to social democracy, arguing that the Labour government would come into conflict with the ruling class. Rather than recognizing that the emergence of the Thornett group was the outcome of its previous retreats and using it as a means to politically rearm the party through a patient exposure of Thornett's centrist politics, Healy and the WRP leadership immediately cut off all political discussion and expelled him and his supporters. Thornett was working covertly under the political direction of the OCI—a gross violation of party discipline and certainly grounds for expulsion. Nevertheless, in the context of the crisis then confronting the WRP, the short-circuiting of political clarification through a quick organizational settlement was a politically irresponsible act. One, as the ICFI later observed, that served to "tilt the social base of the party toward the middle class" and away from its formerly powerful working-class base.[88]

**131**. The retreats and errors of the SLL/WRP in the first half of the 1970s did not seal its fate as a Trotskyist organization, but in so far as they went uncorrected, each further weakened its socialist internationalist foundations, making it more vulnerable to alien class pressures and pushing it further and further away from a proletarian class axis. Thereafter, the political line of the WRP was increasingly incoherent, as it pragmatically responded to mounting political pressures. This involved zigzags in respect to its attitude toward social democracy. In the summer of 1975, when the Wilson Labour government introduced legislation to restrict workers' pay rises, the WRP responded by calling for the working class to mobilize to bring it down and force a new election, although the revolutionary party had yet to win the allegiance of significant sections of the working class and the only electoral alternative to the Labourites, whom the working class had raised to power the year before, was the Conservatives. As the ICFI would subsequently explain, under conditions where "the Labour Party was being compelled to turn openly against the working class, creating conditions for a powerful intervention within its mass organizations," the WRP was preempting such a struggle with an impossible ultimatum. This "signified a fundamental programmatic break with the proletarian orientation for which the British Trotskyists had fought for decades."[89] Less than two years later, behind the back of the ICFI, the WRP began to forge unprincipled and mercenary relations with the PLO and various bourgeois Arab regimes in the name of a turn to the "national liberation struggles" of the Middle East.

## The impact of the WRP's Opportunism on the Struggle for Trotskyism in the Canadian working class

**132.** The WRP's descent into opportunism would threaten the very existence of the ICFI. Because of the pivotal role it had played in the struggle against the Pabloites, the WRP leadership enjoyed great authority within the ICFI. Increasingly, however, it abused that authority to overcome resistance to its opportunism. The WRP leadership suppressed political discussion within the international movement, arbitrarily intervened in sections to bully them into changing their political line, and subordinated the work of the ICFI to the perceived needs, political and material, of the British section. Wherever the Trotskyist foundations were the weakest, and this was invariably the case in groups newly turning to the ICFI, the impact of the WRP's opportunist politics was most immediately felt and destructive. After the founding of the Australian section in 1972, none of the groups, apart from the Workers League of Canada, that affiliated with the WRP-led ICFI survived as Trotskyist organizations. By the time the orthodox Trotskyists regained control over the ICFI in 1985-86, those that had not already disappeared were in an advanced state of political and organizational decomposition.

**133.** The Workers League of Canada was largely spared the direct politically disorientating interventions of the Healy-Banda-Slaughter leadership of the WRP. However, the WRP's programmatic retreats and

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its ever more pronounced promotion of neo-Pabloite politics could not but have a detrimental and, ultimately if not opposed, politically fatal impact.

**134.** The politics of the WRP were increasingly characterized by unrestrained tactical opportunism. Changes in its political line were not based on a careful examination of the development of the class struggle and a working over of the experiences of the Trotskyist movement, so as to ensure the party was made conscious of the historical foundations and future implications of its action. Rather they were hasty, pragmatic responses to mounting political and organizational pressures. Attention to the history and traditions of the movement in the working out of the party's political line was denigrated as "propagandism."

In the name of "party building," the WRP sought to inculcate a conception of how the crisis of revolutionary leadership would be overcome that was radically opposed to that historically defended by the ICFI. The measure of success was no longer the extent to which the party's work contributed to the political education of the working class and the tempering of its cadres, but immediate practical-organizational "gains." Thus, emphasis was placed not upon the winning of the vanguard of the working class to Trotskyism, but rather on acquiring, without the necessary preparatory work, a mass and largely paper membership.

**135.** After the mid-1970s, the WRP leadership could countenance no serious discussion of international perspectives for fear it would disrupt and expose its opportunist maneuvers. But only on the basis of the elaboration of a world perspective—based on the strategy of permanent revolution and a sober appraisal of the outcome of the 1968-75 global revolutionary offensive—could the complex problems involved in the fight to win the working class in Canada to the program of world socialist revolution, including the struggle against social democracy and the political significance of "left" Canadian and Quebec nationalism, be addressed. Underscoring that in revolutionary politics no misdeed goes unpunished, the WRP's failure to prosecute the struggle against the OCI served to handicap the Workers League, which seemingly out of the blue was confronted from 1974 on with an OCI-affiliated group in Quebec. Many times its size and with a base of support in the lower echelons of the trade union bureaucracy, the Groupe Socialiste des Travailleurs du Québec (GSTQ) cravenly adapted to the NDP and Quebec nationalism in the name of Trotskyism. In keeping with the OCI's promotion in Brazil and elsewhere of the building of "new left" parties as a supposed stepping stone to a fight to win the working class to a socialist program, the OCI's Quebec sister organization championed the call for the unions to build a Quebec Labour Party.

**136.** Under the influence of the WRP's neo-Pabloite politics, the young cadres of the Workers League adapted to the political dominance of Quebec nationalism over the working class, issuing between 1980 and 1984 a series of statements that endorsed the petty bourgeois nationalist conception that Quebec is an "oppressed nation." This error could only be properly understood and corrected as a result of the renewal of the ICFI's socialist international foundations as a result of the 1985-86 split with the national opportunists of the WRP. As they abandoned permanent revolution, the Healy-Banda-Slaughter leadership effaced the fundamental distinction between defence of the struggles of oppressed peoples against imperialism and support for bourgeois nationalism, painting in glowing colours various bourgeois nationalist movements and governments in the Middle East. Then in 1979 the WRP made a major concession to reactionary Scottish nationalism, calling for a vote in favour of a scheme aimed at boosting illusions in the rotting system of bourgeois democracy by establishing a Scottish parliament. The WRP explained this stand, which was a reversal of its longstanding opposition to Scottish nationalism, by declaring: "The measures of administrative devolution proposed in the Scotland and Wales Acts—however trivial and irrelevant they appear to many workers fighting for their livelihoods—cut across the requirements of the dominant section of the ruling class."[90] In effect, the WRP stated that the working class could further its class interests by supporting one section of the bourgeoisie against what it termed the dominant wing. This of course is the classic justification for all popular frontist politics, and has been repeatedly advanced by the Pabloites and other opportunist forces as a reason to support Quebec nationalism.

**137.** It was in the context of this attack by the WRP leadership on the very class axis of the Fourth International that the Workers League, in 1980, embraced the claim that Quebec is an "oppressed nation" and declared its support for Quebec's "self-determination." Compounding these already grave concessions to petty bourgeois nationalism, the Workers League called for a "critical" Yes vote in the May, 1980 Quebec referendum—a stance that went well beyond acknowledging a "right" of Quebec to secede. The referendum question asked if the electorate authorized the Parti Québécois to undertake negotiations on its proposal for "sovereignty-association." The Workers League's call for a yes vote, notwithstanding the disclaimer about it being critical, objectively implied support for the Parti Québécois government, and for the attempt of a faction of the Quebec bourgeoisie to win increased powers. Deepening the error made at the time of the referendum, in 1983 when mass struggles broke out against the PQ, the Workers League called for the Quebec unions to build a "Quebec Labor Party." This constituted acceptance of the NDP, CLC, and Quebec union bureaucrats' splitting of the working class, and lent support to the efforts of the Pabloites to block the working class from breaking from the framework of nationalist politics.

**138.** At the 10th Congress of the IC in January 1985, Banda, for his own factional reasons, and in a manner which could only impart maximum political confusion, made a hue and a cry about the Workers League's incorrect positions on Quebec. His injunction to the League to rectify its position by studying the writings of Stalin not only presaged Banda's own political evolution. It added to the confusion surrounding the Quebec question, for Stalin's catechism-like explanation of what constitutes a nation only lent credence to claims that the Workers League was obliged to champion Quebec's "right to self-determination."

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[79] Workers League, "Build the Canadian Section of the International Committee of the Fourth International," (Unpublished Internal Resolution, 1988), 20.

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[82] David North, *Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International*, (Labor Publications: Detroit, 1991) 51.
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[90] *News Line* editorial, Feb. 28, 1979




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