Report to the Second National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party

By David North, 8 July 2012

This is the opening report to the Socialist Equality Party (US) Second National Congress, given by David North, SEP National Chairman and Chairman of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board.

We are opening the Second National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party. This congress is being held in the midst of the greatest economic, political and social crisis of American and world capitalism since the 1930s. One does not have to be a Marxist to recognize the extreme fragility of the entire international economic system. Judging from the commentaries that appear in the bourgeois press, the "catastrophe" theory seems to have gained a large number of adherents. Four years after the spectacular collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, there is no sign that the world economic crisis is abating.

The stagnation in jobs' growth and the sharp deterioration of manufacturing output within the United States make a mockery of the Obama administration's claims that a "recovery" is in progress. The likelihood of a substantial and lasting revival of the US economy is being significantly reduced by the worsening downturn in Europe and Asia. The simultaneous cut in interest rates on Thursday by China's central bank and the European Central Bank, combined with the decision of the Bank of England to accelerate its stimulus program, testify to the widespread belief within the ruling elites that the condition of the world economy is rapidly deteriorating.

The crisis is of a systemic character. Institutions central to the growth and stability of world capitalism in the aftermath of World War II are breaking down. The chronic crisis of the euro portends the failure of the project of European "unity." The ruling elites have no credible response to the crisis, which was to a significant extent triggered by their own recklessness. They are, as a class, both politically and morally bankrupt. The phenomenon of financialization—defined by a contemporary economist as a "pattern of accumulation in which profit making occurs increasingly through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production" [1]—represents the triumph of economic parasitism, and, with it, the descent of bourgeois society into the lower depths of criminality.

The latest scandal has come to light as a result of the admission of Barclays Bank in London that it had manipulated the London Inter-Bank Offered Rate (Libor). It is, without question, just one of many institutions involved in this fraud. The implications and impact of fixing Libor are almost beyond quantification. "Fixing" Libor is the financial equivalent of fixing the World Series! Libor is the benchmark that determines interest rates on bank loans for countless commercial transactions throughout the world every day.

Describing a far less developed form of financialization some 92 years ago, Trotsky observed: "The systematic extraction of surplus value from the process of production—the foundation of profit economy—seems far too boresome an occupation to Messrs. Bourgeois who have become accustomed to double and decuple their capital within a couple of days by means of speculation, and on the basis of international robbery." [2] The breakdown of legality in the economic realm is mirrored in its disintegration in the political realm.

The parasitism that pervades capitalist society underlies the blatant violation of the US Constitution. Lawlessness prevails at the summits of capitalist society. In December 2000, as Gore v. Bush was on its way to the Supreme Court, I said that the outcome of the case would reveal the extent to which there still existed a constituency for democratic principles within the ruling class. The Supreme Court sanctioned, without protest from any significant section of the establishment, the theft of the election. In the decade that followed, there has been a relentless assault on core democratic rights. We now live in a country whose government launches wars on the basis of brazen lies, practices torture, and claims the right to kill people all over the world, including American citizens, without due process of law. President Obama is not, we may assume, the first president to order assassinations. But he is the first to boast of it, and to let it be known that he devotes a significant portion of his time to the supervision and selection of targets for a program of extra-judicial killings.

In the aftermath of an article in the New York Times which detailed Obama's central role in the program of extra-judicial and illegal killings, former President Jimmy Carter issued a public protest. Carter is not a political innocent. But he fears

1 Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 4.

2 *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 1 (London: New Park, 1973), p. 138.

the consequences of the government's abandonment of the constitutional foundations of bourgeois rule. The former president knows that the Constitution is the essential source of the US government's legitimacy. Without the authority of the Constitution, which the president has sworn to "preserve, protect and defend," the state has no legitimacy. To the extent that it abandons constitutionalism, the ruling class must resort ever more openly to force and violence.

The abandonment of constitutional principles signifies not simply a change in policy by an administration. Rather, it is the political expression of changes in the relations between the main classes in society. These changes in the forms of class rule are the outcome of intractable contradictions in the US and world economy. Several years before the outbreak of World War I, Lenin warned, in an article analyzing the evolution of the German social democracy, that a "half-century phase" in history, in which conditions of political legality predominated, was giving way to another phase. Lenin foresaw that objective conditions were leading to "the destruction of all bourgeois legality," the first signs of which were "panicky efforts on the part of the bourgeoisie to get rid of the legality which, though it is their own handiwork, has become unbearable to them." [3]

History substantiated Lenin's analysis. The outbreak of World War I brought to an end a long "phase" of social-economic and political development. An era of gradualness, of legality, gave way to one of wars and revolutions. We are now witnessing the end of another long phase of historical development, during which inter-imperialist antagonisms were contained and the social resistance of the working class was suppressed. In fact, it might be more correct to say that we have already entered into a new phase of historical development, one which will be characterized by the greatest social convulsions in world history. Indeed, this is the meaning of the main political resolution's assertion that the crisis of 2008 represented, no less than 1914, 1929 and 1939, a turn in world history.

The task before this congress is to comprehend the political implications of this "turn" from the standpoint of the historical development of the Fourth International. Seventy-four years ago, Trotsky began the founding document of the Fourth International with the sentence: "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." In determining its response to the advanced crisis of the world capitalist system, this congress must consider the question: Within the context of an examination of the interaction of the objective contradictions of world capitalism and the class struggle and the development of the Fourth International, how do we presently assess the crisis of working class leadership?

3 "Two Worlds," in Collected Works, Volume 16 (Moscow: Progress, 1977), p. 311.

This question requires a review of the history of the Trotskyist movement. This is not an academic exercise: the study of the history of the Fourth International provides a deeper insight into essential socio-economic processes underlying the development of the class struggle. An attempt to analyze the present situation and determine "concrete" tasks, apart from a review of the historical experience, will amount to little more than political impressionism, based on a more or less eclectic selection of empirical data gleaned from the media, various government and academic reports, and, perhaps, personal observations. Such an approach cannot attain the deeper understanding that comes from an examination of the historical movement of social forces which, influenced by objective tendencies of economic development, have found distinct expression at different periods and "phases" of the class struggle.

This historical approach demands of this congress a high level of political consciousness. This congress is itself a significant "moment" in the development of the class struggle. The delegates assembled in this room are participating in the deliberations of this congress not as a collection of random individuals, but as representatives of a distinct international political tendency that has been defined by the struggle, spanning many decades, for the program of world socialist revolution. As the historical record demonstrates, the struggles within this movement have developed either as a direct result of, or as an anticipation of, major shifts in the international political situation and the corresponding relation of class forces.

To act consciously within the historical process requires of a revolutionary that he or she appropriate all that can be appropriated of the experiences and traditions of the Fourth International. A Marxist must locate his or her own practice within the historical trajectory of the struggle to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership. Almost exactly 30 years ago, in the autumn of 1982, as I was seeking to clarify, first of all in my own mind, the significance of the differences over theory, political perspective and practice that had arisen inside the International Committee of the Fourth International, I wrote:

> The history of Trotskyism cannot be comprehended as a series of disconnected episodes. Its theoretical development has been abstracted by its cadre from the continuous unfolding of the world capitalist crisis and the struggles of the international proletariat. Its unbroken continuity of political analyses of all the fundamental experiences of the class struggle, **over an entire historical epoch,** constitutes the enormous richness of Trotskyism as the **sole** development or Marxism after the death of Lenin in 1924.
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> A leadership which does not strive collectively to assimilate the **whole** of this history cannot adequately fulfill its revolutionary responsibilities to the work-

> ing class. Without a real knowledge of the historical development of the Trotskyist movement, references to dialectical materialism are not merely hollow; such empty references pave the way for a real distortion of the dialectical method. The source of theory lies not in thought but in the objective world. Thus the development of Trotskyism proceeds from the fresh experiences of the class struggle, which are posited on the entire historically-derived knowledge of our movement.
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> "Thus cognition rolls forward from content to content... it raises to each next stage of determination the whole mass of its antecedent content, and by its dialectical progress not only loses nothing and leaves nothing behind, but carries with it all that it has acquired, enriching and concentrating itself upon itself ..."
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> Quoting this passage from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Lenin, in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, wrote: "This extract is not at all bad as a kind of summing up of dialectics." Nor is this extract bad "as a kind of summing up of" the constant dialectical development of Trotskyist theory. [4]

We must now bring to bear on this congress the entire "antecedent content" of the experiences of the Fourth International. This effort will contribute significantly to an understanding of the present stage of the crisis of working class leadership and what must be done to resolve it.

Let us contrast our emphasis on historical consciousness—and on the significance of the reworking of historical experiences—with the attitude that prevails within the milieu of the middle-class pseudo-left. Alain Krivine, the main leader of the New Anti-capitalist Party in France, has written:

> Unlike the LCR, the NPA however does not resolve some issues, it leaves them open for future Conferences. For example, all the strategic debates about taking power, transitional demands, dual power, etc. It does not claim to be Trotskyist, as such, but considers Trotskyism to be one of the contributors, among others, to the revolutionary movement. Unwilling, as we had to do under Stalinism, to arrive at policy by the rear view mirror, the NPA has no position on what was the Soviet Union, Stalinism, etc. Policy is based on an agreement on the analysis of the period and on tasks. [5]

In other words, the NPA takes no position on the political experiences of the twentieth century. It practices historical abstentionism. The NPA has nothing to say about the past. But how, one must ask, can it develop revolutionary policy on any issue without working through the lessons of the most tumultuous period of world history? It wants to pass over the Russian Revolution, the existence of the Soviet Union, the betrayals of Social Democracy and Stalinism, the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, the imperialist world wars, the rise and fall of the anti-imperialist movements of the twentieth century, and the collapse of trade unions and liberal reformism. How can all this be forgotten? Krivine and his cohorts respond to political events on an entirely impressionistic, ad hoc basis. Such a method, which is rooted in their social position, can produce nothing but the most opportunist, short-sighted and reactionary politics.

The antagonism between the social interests represented by the petty-bourgeois "left"—or, more precisely, pseudo-left—organizations and those of the working class grows ever more obvious. As the SEP Congress resolution states, these organizations function as tendencies within bourgeois politics. Moreover, to the extent that the political identity of tendencies and parties finds its most essential expression in their international orientation and alignment, organizations such as the ISO in the US, the SWP in Britain and the NPA in France operate as apologists for and accomplices of imperialism. Enthusiastically supporting the neo-colonial operations of the United States, Britain and France in Libya and Syria, the theoreticians of these organizations now go so far as to denounce "knee-jerk anti-imperialism." In other words, they now are willing to accept that military action by the great powers may be justifiable and worthy of their support.

The transformation of these pseudo-left organizations into open instruments of imperialist reaction is the outcome of a historically protracted social, political and theoretical process.

The founding congress of the Fourth International was held in September 1938. The previous five years had witnessed a series of catastrophic defeats of the working class, brought about by the betrayals of the Stalinist and Social-Democratic parties. The victory of the Nazis in1933 resulted in the crushing of the most politically experienced and largest workers' movement in Europe. In the aftermath of the defeat in Germany, the "popular fronts"—alliances between the Stalinists and liberal capitalist parties—formed in France and Spain tied the working class to the bourgeoisie, ensured its political paralysis, and paved the way for defeats. In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist terror resulted in the annihilation of virtually the entire Marxist cadre and socialist intelligentsia that had led the October Revolution and secured the survival of the USSR. These events disoriented and demoralized the intelligentsia in Europe and the United States. In the face of the political defeats suffered by the working class, the left intelligentsia grew increasingly skeptical toward the prospects for, and even the possibility of, socialist revolution.

In August-September 1939 following the signing of the Stalin-

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4 *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism* (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1985), pp. 18-19.

5 *New Parties of the Left: Experiences from Europe*, by Bensaïd, Sousa, et.al (London: Resistance Books, 2011), p. 40.

Hitler Non-Aggression Pact and the outbreak of World War II, the skepticism of the petty- bourgeois intellectuals was reflected within the Socialist Workers Party, the American section of the Fourth International. Three leading figures in the SWP—Max Shachtman, James Burnham and Martin Abern—formed a minority faction opposing the party's definition of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state. The views of the minority were greatly influenced by an Italian writer, Bruno Rizzi, who argued that a new system of "bureaucratic collectivism"—i.e., a new form of class society based on the bureaucracy's control and administration of state property—had come into existence. As Rizzi wrote in his book *The Bureaucratization of the World*:

> In the USSR, in our view, it is the bureaucrats who are the owners, for it is they who hold power in their hands. It is they who manage the economy, just as was normal with the bourgeoisie. It is they who take the profits, just as do all exploiting classes, who fix wages and prices. I repeat—it is the bureaucrats. The workers count for nothing in the governing of society. What is more, they receive no share in the surplus value... The reality is that collective property is not in the hands of the proletariat; but in the hands of a new class: a class which, in the USSR, is already an accomplished fact, whereas in the totalitarian states this class is still in the process of formation. [6]

At the beginning of the factional struggle within the SWP, Trotsky identified the political and **historical** issues raised by the position that the October Revolution and the establishment of the USSR had given rise not to a workers' state, albeit one that had rapidly degenerated, but to a new form of class rule, unanticipated by Marxists. Trotsky had heard this argument many times before. State capitalism does not really base itself on economic theory. Long before the Russian revolution, anticipations of "state capitalist" conceptions can be found in various forms of anti-Marxist petty-bourgeois politics. Neither term, "state" or "capitalist," is used in a Marxist sense. In the political lexicon of anarchism, "state capitalism" is employed generally as an epithet. The exercise of state power, which involves some degree of coercion, is denounced as "capitalist," regardless of the class character of the state. In this usage of the term, capitalism simply means domination and coercion. The claim that the regime established in October 1917 was "state capitalist" was raised by the anarchists almost immediately after the taking of power by the Bolsheviks. Any form of state represented domination, and the socio-economic character of that state was not that significant, so they added to the characterization of the state the term "capitalism," without substantiating this analysis in any credible way.

Thus, Trotsky was hardly unfamiliar with the charge that the USSR was "state capitalist," or some other form of exploitative society. As an explanation of Soviet economy, he was not inclined to take it all too seriously. In state capitalist "theory," the categories of Marxian political economy were abandoned and replaced with an unscientific descriptive terminology. It was a theory in which the element of economic necessity was replaced entirely with an extreme form of political subjectivism. But what he did take seriously was the fundamental revision of the historical perspective of Marxism implied by the arguments of Rizzi and Burnham. At the heart of the Rizzi and Burnham positions was the repudiation of the Marxist appraisal of the revolutionary role of the working class. Trotsky wrote:

> ... 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.
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> 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. [7]

Trotsky identified the social moods that were gathering strength within broad sections of the middle-class intelligentsia, as it broke all connections with the October Revolution. The pessimism to which Burnham and Shachtman gave expression in 1939-40 anticipated a far broader social process: the break of the left petty-bourgeois intelligentsia with not only a specific political tendency within Marxism (i.e., Trotskyism), but with the entire perspective of socialist revolution, and even the possibility of social progress.

The work of Frankfurt School theoreticians Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is undoubtedly the best known of all the post-World War II proclamations of petty-bourgeois despair. The authors' attack on the Enlightenment, Reason, and the supposedly evil consequences of technology was to exercise far-reaching influence on an entire generation of left intellectuals. But the impact of their work arose not from its originality. Indeed, little of what they wrote was particularly original. Rather, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* articulated moods which were prevalent among broad sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia.

6 New York: The Free Press, p. 69.

7 *In Defense of Marxism*, (London: 1966), P. 15.

Almost at the same time that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appeared, a former member of the SWP, Dwight Macdonald, who had followed Shachtman into the Workers Party, wrote an essay entitled "The Root is Man." The degree to which the arguments of Macdonald anticipated the anti-materialist and anti-Marxist conceptions that would become so widespread among post-war intellectuals is striking.

First, Macdonald expressed quite openly the petty-bourgeois intellectual's fear of science and technology. The fatal error of socialists, he argued, had been their belief in the progressive function of science and emphasis on the material, as opposed to spiritual, condition of society. Thus, he insisted that the dichotomy of "left and right," as it has been understood by socialists, was out of date. It had no relevance to modern conditions. The real division, Macdonald wrote, is between what he called "progressives" and "radicals." He placed himself amongst the radicals, in opposition to the progressives:

> By "Progressive" would be understood those who see the Present as an episode on the road to a better Future; those who think more in terms of historical process than of moral values; those who believe that the main trouble with the world is partly lack of scientific knowledge and partly the failure to apply to human affairs such knowledge as we do have; those who, above all, regard the increase of man's mastery over nature as good in itself and see its use for bad ends, as atomic bombs, as a perversion. This definition, I think, covers fairly well the great bulk of what is still called the Left, from Communists ("Stalinists") through reformist groups like our own New Dealers, the British Labourites, and the European Socialists, to small revolutionary groups like the Trotskyists.
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> "Radical" would apply to the as yet few individuals—mostly anarchists, conscientious objectors, and renegade Marxists like myself—who reject the concept of Progress, who judge things by their present meaning and effect, who think the ability of science to guide us in human affairs has been overrated and who therefore redress the balance by emphasizing the ethical aspect of politics. They, or rather we, think it is an open question whether the increase of man's mastery over nature is good or bad in its actual effects on human life to date, and favor adjusting technology to man, even if it means—as may be the case—a technological regression, rather than adjusting man to technology. We do not, of course, "reject" scientific method, as is often charged, but rather think the scope within which it can yield fruitful results is narrower than is generally assumed today. And we feel that the firmest ground from which to struggle for that human liberation which was the goal of the old Left is the ground not of History but of those non-historical values (truth, justice, love, etc.) which Marx has made unfashionable among socialists. [8]

Another section of Macdonald's book, which anticipated the anti-working class trajectory of post-World War II petty-bourgeois radicalism, is entitled, "The Mirage of the Proletarian Revolution."

> It was to the working class that Marx looked to bring in a better society. And it is in that direction that his followers today still look, as a glance at the minute coverage of labor news in almost any Marxist organ will show. I think it is time for us to recognize that, although the working class is certainly an element in any reconstitution of society along more tolerable lines, it is not now, and possibly never was, the element Marx thought it was. The evidence for this is familiar, and most Marxists will admit almost every item in detail. They shrink, however, and understandably enough, from drawing the logical but unpleasant conclusions that follow...
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> The most obvious fact about the Proletarian Revolution is that it has never occurred. The proletarian revolution today is even less of a historical possibility than it was in 1900. [9]

The rejection of progress and the repudiation of the working class as the central revolutionary force in modern capitalist society became in the decades that followed the essential principle and theme of petty-bourgeois left politics. We find them developed and repeated in the writings of Marcuse, Dunayevskaya and countless contemporary anarchist, post-anarchist, post-structuralist tendencies.

Macdonald, as an intellectual and theoretician, was not an important thinker. Actually, Trotsky once remarked that Macdonald had the right to be stupid, but asked that he not abuse the privilege. However, the issue here is not Macdonald's stature as an intellectual. Rather, it is the extent to which the positions advanced by Macdonald were echoed in the writings of far more polished intellectuals. The prose of Horkheimer and Adorno was far more ponderous, and no one can doubt that their philosophical education was far more profound. But the ideas advanced in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* rhymed with those of Macdonald. The same may be said of the writings, from the same period, of "state capitalist" theoreticians such as Dunayevskaya, C.L.R. James and Cornelius Castoriadis. The latter was the founder of the French journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*,

8 Dwight Macdonald, *The Root is Man*, Brooklyn, NY: Automedia, 1995, pp. 38-39.

9 Ibid, pp. 61-65.

which was to exercise substantial influence on the development of post-modernist thought.

Reading their writings in the light of subsequent political developments, one is struck by how short-sighted and superficial they were. In their analyses of the Soviet Union, nothing seemed more powerful to them than the Stalinist bureaucracy. They dismissed as laughable the Trotskyist program and perspective of political revolution. The Soviet bureaucracy represented a new and powerful social force unanticipated by Marxism. As Castoriadis wrote:

> The fact that the bureaucracy exited from the war not weakened but considerably strengthened, that it extended its power over all of Eastern Europe, and that regimes in all respects identical to the Russian regime were in the process of being established under the aegis of the CP unavoidably led one to see the bureaucracy not as a "parasitic stratum" but very much as a dominant and exploitative class—confirmation of which, moreover, was allowed by a new analysis of the Russian regime on the economic and sociological level. [10]

The attribution of a distinct historical role to the bureaucracy complemented the dismissal of the working class as a revolutionary force. As Castoriadis stated with the arrogance and cynicism that were his trademark:

> ... The proof of the truth of the Scriptures is Revelation; and the proof that there has been Revelation is that the Scriptures say so. This is a self-confirming system. In fact, it is true that Marx's work, in its spirit and in its very intention, stands and falls along with the following assertion: The proletariat is, and manifests itself as, the revolutionary class that is on the point of changing the world. If such is not the case—**as it is not**—Marx's work becomes again what in reality it always was, a (difficult, obscure, and deeply ambiguous) attempt to think society and history from the perspective of their revolutionary transformation—and we have to resume everything starting from our own situation, which certainly includes both Marx himself and the history of the proletariat as components. [11]

The aftermath of World War II saw the development within diverse sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia of an increasingly self-consciously anti-materialist, anti-Marxist, anti-Trotskyist, anti-socialist and anti-working class outlook. Especially as capitalist rule was restabilized in the United States and Western Europe, and the Soviet bureaucracy consolidated its position, the petty-bourgeoisie sought to develop the intellectual conceptions and elaborate the political program which best suited the defense of its own interests in the post-war order. The emergence of Pabloism between 1949 and 1953 was an expression within the Fourth International of this social, political and intellectual process.

Hegel observed that "The owl of Minerva flies at dusk." It is only at an advanced stage of historical development that one can identify far more precisely than was possible in the 1950s and 1960s the social forces that motivated the growth of revisionism within the Fourth International. It was not a matter of a few confused people making unfortunate political mistakes. Rather, the theoretical and political "errors" of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, to name only the most important opponents of orthodox Trotskyism (that is, the political expression of revolutionary Marxism), arose as the expression of socio-economic processes that developed in the aftermath of World War II. Through the tendency known as Pabloism, the petty-bourgeoisie attempted to seize control of the Fourth International and utilize its prestige in its own interests. The release of the "Open Letter" by Cannon, the break with the Pabloite International Secretariat and the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International in November 1953 was a necessary measure of self-defense to prevent the liquidation of the World Trotskyist movement.

The events of 1953 opened up a 32-year civil war within the Fourth International. The immense difficulties that confronted the defenders of Trotskyism flowed from the fact that the interests of real social forces, operating on a world scale, were involved; and that the struggle was waged under objective conditions that were highly unfavorable to those who upheld a revolutionary line based on the interests of the working class. Keep in mind the international forces that were involved: the Stalinist regimes in power in the USSR and Eastern Europe, the Maoist regime in China, the bourgeois national movements of the "Third World," and, in the advanced capitalist countries, the Social Democratic, Stalinist and trade union bureaucracies, and the rapidly expanding and relatively privileged petty-bourgeois stratum in the universities and other higher-paid professions.

The faction of orthodox Trotskyists within the International Committee was reduced to a small minority. Not only did most of the sections of the Fourth International follow the Pabloites and liquidate themselves into the milieu of Stalinism and left petty-bourgeois radicalism. The ICFI remained highly unstable even as it resisted the pressure exerted by the many hostile political forces.

Many of the political themes that would come to define what we now quite correctly refer to as the "pseudo-left" politics of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s—centered on individual identity and lifestyle—emerged within the milieu of Pabloism and the petty-bourgeois left in the 1950s and 1960s. This was the era when Freud and psychology, especially as interpreted by

10 *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1997), p. 2.
11 Ibid, p. 28.

Marcuse, were hailed as the alternative to Marx and materialism. Marcuse's pessimistic rejection of the revolutionary capacities of the working class sanctioned, even demanded, a search for alternatives to the class struggle as the basis for personal liberation within a supposedly omnipotent oppressive society. He found, especially on the universities, many enthusiastic acolytes. A well-known expression of the intellectual temper of the times is Theodore Roszak's 1968 book *The Making of a Counter-Culture*. He wrote with rapture of the advances made by Marcuse and Norman Brown (the author of *Love's Body*) over Marx:

> ... the tone in which Marcuse and Brown speak of liberation is distinctly non-Marxian. For Marcuse, it is the achievement of a "libidinal rationality;" for Brown, it is the creation of an "erotic sense of reality," a "Dionysian ego." When they seek to elucidate these ideals, both must become perforce rhapsodic, introducing the imagery of myth and poetry. So they sound a note that has been scandalously lacking from the literature of social ideology and even more from that of the social sciences...
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> Myth, religion, dreams, visions: such were the dark waters Freud fished to find his conception of human nature. But for all this occult matter Marx had little patience. Instead, he chose to spend dismal hours poring over the industrial statistics of the British Blue Books, where man has little occasion to appear in any role but *homo economicus, homo faber*...
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> Marx the incensed moralist, the smoldering prophet of doom, the scholarly drudge: what time did he have in the heat and pressure of the crisis at hand to think of man as anything but *homo economicus*, exploited and joyless? [12]

Roszak wrote somewhere else that Freud understood that the decisive battles for the future of humanity were not being waged on the field of class struggle, but over the human body.

The 1960s witnessed a significant radicalization of middle class youth. Large sections of these youth identified themselves as socialists, even Marxists. But what they meant by this was something quite different than what those terms meant in classical Marxism. Whether they believed themselves to be Marxists is really beside the point. But whether they knew it or not, their theoretical objections to classical Marxism—which they cloaked with denunciations of supposedly "vulgar" materialism—merely repeated longstanding subjective idealist criticisms of Marxism that dated back all the way to the 1890s, when Marxism became, in the form of the Social Democratic Party in Germany, a mass political movement of the working class.

Nineteen sixty-eight marked a turning point in the intellectual and political evolution of the radical student movement. This was the year of immense protests in opposition to the imperialist war in Vietnam and other social issues. The high point of these protests was the student movement that erupted in France. The events of May-June 1968 began with a student strike that led to the invasion of the Sorbonne by the police. This bloody attack triggered a massive intervention by the French working class into the protests against the de Gaulle government. Almost overnight, the student protests were dwarfed by a mass working class movement that raised the possibility of the overthrow not just of de Gaulle, but of French capitalism.

Petty-bourgeois protests were overwhelmed by the specter of a proletarian revolution. Red flags were raised over factories all over France. The country's economy came to a halt. De Gaulle returned from a state visit to Romania to find his own regime disintegrating. De Gaulle made an urgent trip to consult with his generals stationed in Baden, Germany, to ask if they could be mobilized to march on Paris. His generals told him they could not count on the loyalty of the troops under their command. Thus, everything depended upon the French Communist Party and the Stalinists who controlled the trade union federation (the CGT) to bring things under control. Their first attempt to end the general strike failed. Charles Séguy, the head of the CGT, went before the workers at the largest factory, Renault, and he was shouted down. Finally, through the combined treachery of the Communist Party and the CGT, the general strike was betrayed and ended. The French ruling class was saved from revolution.

When the working class went on strike, its intervention overwhelmed the petty-bourgeois movement, which faded into insignificance. Overnight, the revolutionary potential of the working class was demonstrated. However, it remained under the leadership of the Communist Party. But the experience had a traumatic effect on broad sections of French intellectuals. They recoiled in fear. They asked themselves, "What are we, for God's sakes, playing at? A few protests here and there... okay. But the overthrow of capitalism? The dictatorship of the proletariat? *Mon Dieu*, heaven forbid!" In May-June 1968, the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia looked over the abyss, and they were terrified. Their brush with revolution set into motion a sharp movement to the right.

The so-called "new philosophers," represented most prominently by Jean-Francois Revel and Bernard-Henri Levy, embraced anti-communism under the hypocritical banner of "human rights." But another group of philosophers—some of whom had been theoretically conditioned by Stalinism or an association with *Socialisme ou Barbarie*—justified their repudiation of Marxism with the intellectually nihilistic formulations of post-modernism.

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12 Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 98-99.

Even those tendencies that identified themselves as left were emphatic in their repudiation of classical Marxism and, in particular, its insistence upon the revolutionary role of the working class. As a theoretician of contemporary "post-structuralist" anarchism, Saul Newman, acknowledges: "This new Left that emerged from May '68 was a post-Marxist Left, or at least a Left which questioned many of the central tenets of Marxist-Leninist theory, particularly the central importance of the Party, the truth of the dialectic and historical materialism, and the universal and essential status of the proletariat." [13]

It is striking that the disavowal of the working class developed in the midst of the largest sustained movement of the working class since the Russian Revolution. Working class militancy swept across Europe, South America and North America. The powerful movement of the working class between 1968 and 1975 posed more sharply than ever the central problem of revolutionary leadership. But this was precisely the moment chosen by the petty-bourgeois left to proclaim the failure of the Marxist theory and perspective of proletarian revolution. The well-known French left theoretician Andre Gorz wrote a book with the arrogant and provocative title: *Farewell to the Working Class!* He declared that "Any attempt to find the basis of the Marxist theory of the proletariat is a waste of time." [14]

Jean-François Lyotard, a former member of the Communist Party, announced the arrival of the era of post-modernism, which he defined as a "profound incredulity toward all metanarratives." What Lyotard meant by "metanarrative" was an approach to the study of history as a law-governed process. The fundamental "metanarrative" was that developed by Marx and Engels in their elaboration of the materialist conception of history. In the twentieth century, the most enduring of all "metanarratives" was that presented by Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, in which the overthrow of tsarism was explained as the historically necessary outcome of the contradictions of international capitalism. The refutation of this analysis required an attack on all the central elements of the materialist conception of history. As one specialist in intellectual history has recently noted, "Marxism is arguably the most frequent, if not always the explicit, target of post-modernist critics of modernism." [15]

A study of this intellectual history—especially the increasingly explicit repudiation of the philosophical foundations and revolutionary program of Marxism—is vitally necessary for an understanding of the political experiences through which the Fourth International has passed.

The Workers League developed in the struggle against the betrayal of Trotskyism by the Socialist Workers Party. When we review this history, we tend to emphasize the theoretical and political issues that were central to this struggle. However, it did not develop in a social vacuum. There was a sociological component of this struggle. The party—and I cannot overestimate the importance of this—sought in every way possible to maintain a clear political orientation to the working class. But the early years of the party were dominated by a process of political and social differentiation. The substantial growth of the Workers League between 1970 and 1973 inevitably produced a severe political crisis. Many recruits were won out of the milieu of the petty-bourgeois radical protest movements. Tim Wohlforth himself, the national secretary of the Workers League, had come out of the Shachtmanite movement.

As the petty-bourgeois anti-war protest movement collapsed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the implications of the social divisions within the Workers League became more pronounced. It is not the case, by any means, that the evolution of each and every individual was determined directly by his or her social background. However, the severe loss of members in 1973-74—while certainly exacerbated by the disruptive behavior of Wohlforth and his companion Nancy Fields—reflected a broader social and political process. Sections of the middle class who had been radicalized in the 1960s were anxious to return to their old familiar social milieu. This journey brought them inevitably back into the orbit of bourgeois politics.

Both the Workers League and the Workers Revolutionary Party were deeply affected by the rightward movement within the middle class. But in the United States, the crisis produced by Wohlforth's renegacy was overcome by the Workers League on the basis of a systematic analysis and working through of the theoretical and political differences that underlay the conflict. In Britain, on the other hand, the political issues that arose in the fight with Alan Thornett were not worked through. Thus, despite a rapid organizational settlement of accounts with Thornett, the social and political pressures of which his tendency was an expression were not clarified. In particular, the WRP failed to place the conflict with Thornett within the historical context of the antecedent struggle against Pabloism. Thus, the influence of the rightward-moving petty-bourgeois elements continued to grow within the party, which expressed itself in the increasingly opportunist political line of the WRP that led in 1985 to the explosion inside the British organization.

However, the theoretical and political criticisms developed by the Workers League between 1982 and 1985 prepared the International Committee for this crisis. The critique of the WRP's opportunism won the support of a decisive majority of the sections. In December 1985, the International Committee

13 Saul Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2007), p. 179.

14 London: Pluto Press, 1982, p. 21.

15 David West, *Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 214.

suspended the WRP from membership. Thus, the 32-year civil war within the Fourth International, which had begun with the issuing of the Open Letter, concluded with the victory of the orthodox Trotskyists.

The break that took place in the autumn of 1985 was definitive in both a political and social sense. Those within the WRP who were opposed to the International Committee were in the process of breaking decisively with all their past political and personal connections to revolutionary socialism. The leaders of the WRP and those who followed them were not interested in discussing problems of socialist perspective and the interests of the working class. A form of hysteria prevailed among the adherents of Banda and Slaughter. I sought to describe this in *The Heritage We Defend*:

> In October 1985, the pent-up resentments of the middle class exploded inside the WRP. Disillusioned and bitter, fed up with years of hard work which had produced no rewards, dissatisfied with their personal situations, anxious to make up for lost time, and simply sick and tired of all talk of revolution, the subjective rage of these middle-class forces—led by a motley crew of semi-retired university lecturers—was translated politically into liquidationism. Precisely because its source lay not only in the subjective errors of the WRP leadership, but more fundamentally in objective changes in class relations, the skepticism which swept through large sections of the party was the expression of a powerful social tendency within the Workers Revolutionary Party. [16]

In the autumn of 1985, Cliff Slaughter would become angry when attempts were made to explain processes within the party in class terms. He said at one point, "I am sick and tired of people explaining what class they represent." Slaughter certainly did not want to discuss what class forces he represented, and for good reason. The banner of "revolutionary morality" that he unfurled in 1985 as a justification for his unprincipled politics served as a bridge toward pro-imperialist "human rights" politics. Within less than a decade members of his organization were collaborating with NATO's intervention in the Balkans.

In 1985, just as the struggle within the International Committee was approaching its climax, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe completed their major work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It was published by Verso, the main Pabloite publishing house. This book exercised immense influence in both post-modernist and post-structuralist circles. Though we were not aware of their writings at the time (and perhaps Slaughter was not aware of them), the conceptions of Laclau and Mouffe could have served as a theoretical platform for the WRP. Laclau and Mouffe wrote:

> What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital "r", as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective that will render pointless the moment of politics...
>
> Is it not the case that, in scaling down the pretensions and the area of validity of Marxist theory, we are breaking with something deeply inherent in that theory: namely, its monist aspiration to capture with its categories the essence or underlying meaning of History? The answer can only be in the affirmative. Only if we renounce any epistemological prerogative based upon the ontologically privileged position of a 'universal class' will it be possible seriously to discuss the present degree of the validity of the Marxist categories. At this point we should state quite plainly that we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain. It is no longer possible to maintain the conception of subjectivity and classes elaborated by Marxism, nor its vision of the historical course of capitalist development, nor, of course, the conception of communism as a transparent society from which antagonisms have disappeared. [17]

The past quarter-century has been characterized by the extreme polarization of society, within the United States and internationally. Of course, the attention of economists and sociologists has been focused primarily on the staggering concentration of extreme wealth in the richest one percent of the population. But, as the first resolution of the SEP points out, during the last few decades a significant section of the upper-middle class has acquired access to substantial wealth. This affluent layer does not have anything like the wealth of the richest one to five percent. But, relative to the working class, it is doing very well. This process has led over time to the deepening material, ideological and political alienation of this relatively affluent social stratum, which forms the basis of the petty-bourgeois left, from the working class.

The political process that we are examining is not merely the outcome of theoretical inconsistencies. Spurred on by its own increasingly substantial material affluence, the long-standing skepticism of the petty-bourgeois left in the revolutionary capacities of the working class has acquired new and distinct socio-economic and political characteristics. As its economic interests become increasingly focused on achieving a more favorable distribution of wealth and privileges within the top ten percent of society, and as it becomes ever more openly integrated into the political structures sanctioned by the ruling

16 David North (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1988), pp. 13-14.

17 London: Verso, pp. 2-4.

establishment, the hostility of the affluent left to the struggles of the working class can no longer be concealed with empty pseudo-socialist phrase-mongering. Its ideologists are compelled to argue openly for a definition of "left" politics that excludes the working class from any independent, let alone revolutionary role.

Saul Newman calls explicitly for a new form of "left" politics that

> differs from the Marxist working class struggle: it is no longer based on the central subjectivity of the proletariat and, therefore, even though traditional working-class organizations are involved in important ways in these struggles, the movement is no longer intelligible under the rubric of the class struggle. [18]

18 *Unstable Universalities*, p. 176.

The political program of the SEP and the International Committee is irreconcilably opposed to that of the pseudo-left within the United States and internationally. Our politics is based on the centrality of working class struggle. The working class is not merely one constituency among many in the struggle against capitalism. It is the *decisive* revolutionary force within modern capitalist society. All the efforts of the party must be directed toward preparing for and taking the lead in the struggles of the working class. We insist that revolutionary struggle is realistic and, indeed, "intelligible" only when it develops within the "rubric" of class struggle. It is on this basis that the SEP will fight to build its influence among workers and youth in this new period of intensifying class conflict.