The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

Part Ten

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This document, The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain), was adopted unanimously at the founding congress of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), held in Manchester between October 22 and 25, 2010. It reviews and examines the most critical political experiences of the British working class, centring in particular on the post-war history of the Trotskyist movement.

It is being published on the WSWS in 11 parts.

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The significance of the split

236. The defeat of the liquidationist assault on the International Committee expressed a reversal in the balance of forces between the world Trotskyist movement and the various representatives of Pabloite revisionism. For several decades, the SLL had defended revolutionary Marxism under conditions of political isolation created by the dominance of the Stalinist, social democratic and trade union apparatuses over the working class. The eruption of Pabloite liquidationism engendered by these conditions had destroyed much of the Fourth International. Though the SLL had waged a principled struggle against Pabloism, which had registered important gains and won the support of international co-thinkers, it eventually succumbed to the pressures exerted upon it.

237. For the first time, after the split in 1986, the Trotskyists were in the ascendant within the international movement. The struggle against the WRP became the occasion for the most thoroughgoing reckoning ever undertaken by the International Committee with the opportunist political conceptions associated with Pabloism. It provided the opportunity to reassert the central importance of internationalism against all manifestations of national opportunism—the separation of the political work of any national section and any national practice, however important, from the international perspective embodied in the central goal of constructing the Fourth International.

238. The decisive character of the split found expression in the key documents that emerged from it: *The ICFI Defends Trotskyism 1982-1986* and *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973-1985*. To this must be added *The Heritage We Defend: A contribution to the History of the Fourth International*. Written by David North as a polemical reply to Banda's attack on the record of the International Committee, this work became the basis for a re-assimilation of the strategic lessons of the post-war history of the Trotskyist movement.

239. Powerful objective changes were evidenced by the victory over the national opportunists. The crisis within the WRP was ultimately one manifestation of a broader process engulfing all the traditional organisations of the working class, which had been plunged into crisis by fundamental changes within the structures of world capitalism. Those who split from the International Committee believed that in doing so, they were putting behind them the years of what Healy now contemptuously proclaimed as "whiter than white socialism of the purest water and the smallest number". They were now free to consolidate the relations they had begun to establish with the Labour and trade union bureaucracy in Britain, the larger centrist groups and the Stalinist apparatus.

240. All of these grand schemas came to nothing. In reality, the bureaucracies and their Pabloite hangers-on were in an advanced state of political and organisational decay. Instead of great successes, the contending WRP factions disintegrated. Healy ended his days as an open convert to Pabloite apologetics for Stalinism—asserting that Mikhail Gorbachev was carrying through the political revolution in the Soviet Union and "de-Stalinising" the bureaucracy. In the final years of his life, he was to travel to the Soviet Union as a guest of the government.

241. Banda quickly renounced his Trotskyist past altogether and professed his admiration for Stalin as a proletarian Bonaparte. He became an unvarnished advocate of nationalism, working in support of the Kurdish Workers Party. Most of his handful of former supporters joined the Communist Party. These included several who had acted as Stalinist agents provocateurs during the split.

242. Following the split, the Slaughter WRP pledged to work for a speedy international regroupment with the Pabloites. But efforts towards this end only saw Slaughter repeatedly lose sections of his party to the groups he was courting. In 1991, he too publicly repudiated Trotskyism, writing:

"Marxists, having fought for many years, sometimes their whole political lives, to refute in words and deeds the lie that Stalin and the Stalinists were the heirs of Lenin and Bolshevism, find themselves in a situation where this issue seems to be irrelevant…. We must not simply proceed as if there is some 'real Marxism' which we have always known and somehow preserved and counter-pose it to the false consciousness resulting from years of Stalinism".[76]

243. Slaughter was to declare the building of a Leninist-type party to be impermissible, advocating instead loose, popular-front formations that did not seek to "impose" their views on workers. The most notorious action of his group was as apologists for the 1995 US-NATO intervention in Bosnia, and then as cheerleaders for the Kosovo Liberation Army.

244. The ICP proved to be the only viable tendency to emerge from the split. It undertook to educate the advanced workers and youth in its central lessons and to renew the political offensive against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy that had been abandoned by the WRP. Its work was characterised by an intimate collaboration with its international co-thinkers without precedent in the history of the Trotskyist movement.

Globalisation and the perspective of socialism

245. At its fourth plenum in July 1987, the International Committee produced the first serious Marxist appraisal of the phenomenon of globalisation, associated with the revolutionary developments in computer

technology. It placed central emphasis on the "explosive growth in the activity of transnational corporations", which reflected an "unprecedented integration of the world market and internationalisation of production" and had led to the "absolute and active predominance of the world economy over all national economies". The International Committee insisted that this global integration of production, far from opening up new historical vistas for capitalism, had raised the basic contradictions between world economy and the capitalist nation state system, and between social production and private ownership, to an unprecedented level of intensity. The loss by the United States of its economic hegemony, expressed in its transformation from the world's principal creditor into its largest debtor, reflected a breakdown of the entire post-World War II order, which was producing a sharp escalation of inter-imperialist antagonisms.

246. The International Committee also attributed revolutionary significance to the vast expansion of the proletariat in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as a result of the international export of capital in pursuit of higher rates of profit. Globalisation had made the perspective of reorganizing the working class on the basis of an internationalist and socialist programme the only possible means of combating capital organised across national borders. As such, it had rendered bankrupt all the old organisations of the official workers' movement, based on national programmes for the regulation of the class struggle.

247. The ICFI's 1988 perspectives document, *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, explained that the changes in the form of capitalist production had brought with them a change in the form of the class struggle:

"It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character. Even the most elemental struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on an international scale. It is a basic fact of economic life that transnational corporations exploit the labour power of workers in several countries to produce a finished commodity, and that they distribute and shift production between their plants in different countries and on different continents in search of the highest rate of profit.... Thus, the unprecedented international mobility of capital has rendered all nationalist programmes for the labour movement of different countries obsolete and reactionary".[77]

248. These developments constituted the objective impulse for the growth of the International Committee, which had to give them conscious, programmatic and organisational form:

"Precisely the international character of the proletariat, a class which owes no allegiance to any capitalist 'fatherland', makes it the sole social force that can liberate civilisation from the strangulating fetters of the nation state system. For these fundamental reasons, no struggle against the ruling class in any country can produce enduring advances for the working class, let alone prepare its final emancipation, unless it is based on an international strategy aimed at the worldwide mobilisation of the proletariat against the capitalist system".[78]

Capitalist restoration in the USSR

249. The International Committee's analysis of the implications of the globalisation of production was developed against the background of Gorbachev's promise of "democratic reform" in the USSR through *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. Basing itself on Trotsky's historic analysis of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a counter-revolutionary caste, the IC insisted that Gorbachev's programme represented a reactionary attempt to overcome the crisis of the isolated Soviet economy through the destruction of the nationalised property relations and the restoration of capitalism. Its warnings were confirmed by the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, the establishment of the capitalist market, and the subsequent transformation of the leading figures within the Stalinist state, industry and party apparatus into criminal oligarchs. This process was replicated across the "Eastern bloc".

250. The destruction of the Soviet Union was a political blow against the international working class. However, the International Committee rejected the claim that it represented the triumph of the capitalist market and proof that there was no alternative to the profit system. The USSR had been the first to collapse because of the extreme level of economic autarky practiced by the Stalinist bureaucracy. But the same contradictions between the nation state and the global economy were at work internationally. The chain of imperialism had broken at its weakest link, signifying the opening of a new period of economic dislocation, inter-imperialist antagonisms and a renewed drive to re-divide the world through colonial wars of conquest—an appraisal confirmed by the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

251. The International Committee insisted that the complete transition by the Stalinist bureaucracy into the camp of imperialism held universal significance. The phenomenon of renunciationism found expression in the transformation of the trade unions into direct appendages of management and the disavowal by the social democratic parties of their previous commitment to social reforms. To define them any longer as workers' organisations was to blind the working class to reality:

"What has occurred in the former Soviet Union is a manifestation of an international phenomenon. All over the world the working class is confronted with the fact that the trade unions, parties and even states, which they created in an earlier period, have been transformed into the direct instruments of imperialism. The days are over when the labour bureaucracies 'mediated' the class struggle and played the role of buffer between the classes. Though the bureaucracies generally betrayed the historical interests of the working class, they still, in a limited sense, served its daily practical needs; and, to that extent, 'justified' their existence as leaders of the working class organisations. That period is over. The bureaucracy cannot play any such independent role in the present period".[79]

252. This appraisal was in marked contrast to the positions of the various Pabloite groupings, whose defence of Stalinism now assumed the form of a direct apology for the counter-revolutionary liquidation of the Soviet Union. Tariq Ali's book *Revolution from above: Where is the Soviet Union going?* (1988) was dedicated to Boris Yeltsin, who was praised for his "political courage". *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, Ali added, "would represent an enormous gain for socialists and democrats on a world scale." When capitalism was finally restored, he declared that "the game was up for another four or five decades".

253. The Militant Tendency also took the position that Gorbachev represented a "'reforming' wing of the bureaucracy, not a conscious agent of imperialism".[80] Only when it became impossible to conceal the drive to restoration did *Militant* editor Peter Taaffe come into conflict with Grant's analysis. Even then, Taaffe was to complain that Yeltsin represented a break with Stalinism's previous "relatively progressive role", while claiming that capitalist restoration was "the most unlikely scenario".[81] Cliff's SWP similarly aligned itself with the capitalist restorationist wing of the Soviet bureaucracy, hailing its "democratic reforms". Once capitalism had been reintroduced, at terrible cost to the working class, Chris Harman declared that "the transition from state-capitalism to multinational capitalism is neither a step forward nor a step backwards, but a step sidewards".[82]

The national question and self-determination

254. The International Committee's analysis of globalisation occasioned a re-examination and deepening of the Marxist approach to the question of national self-determination. This was necessitated by the tragic experiences of the working class with nationalist movements such

as the African National Congress and the Palestine Liberation Organisation and their ultimate accommodation with imperialism. It was also required in light of the development of separatist movements of a retrogressive character in many countries around the world. In every instance, these movements sought to translate their efforts to establish direct relations with the global corporations into the language of cultural or ethnic separation, with disastrous consequences.

255. The International Committee noted that Lenin's support for the "right to self-determination" had been aimed at combating nationalist influences over the working class and oppressed masses, and striking down ethnic and linguistic barriers characteristic of regimes with a belated capitalist development. It had been framed, moreover, in recognition of the progressive nature of the unification of often disparate peoples in a more viable economic unit, and the anti-imperialist sentiments that generally animated such movements against colonial oppression. The vast development of globalised production meant that the social relations and political conditions that had prevailed at the turn of the 20th Century no longer existed at the dawn of the 21st Century. In Asia, Africa and Europe, the emergence of separatist movements was a result of either the failure of the bourgeois national movements of the past to achieve liberation from imperialist domination, or the break-up of long-established nation states. In the former territories of the USSR, these movements took on an explicit pro-imperialist character, often under the direct tutelage of Washington. They all advanced a perspective for the atomisation of the working class into ethnic cantons, wholly dependent upon imperialism, with the "right to self-determination" invoked only as a means of advancing the selfish interests of the local bourgeoisie.

256. While insisting on the defence of the former colonial countries against imperialism, the International Committee stressed that the social and democratic interests of workers and the oppressed masses could not be realised through the creation of new and ever smaller states. Rather, it meant ending the division of the world into antagonistic nation states through the methods of social revolution. The correctness of this appraisal was given additional confirmation when, six years later, Sinn Fein was incorporated into the British state apparatus in Northern Ireland, sitting alongside the Unionist parties under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The fight for socialist consciousness

257. The central issue posed by these developments was the crisis of political perspective in the working class. The inability of the working class to formulate its own response to the restoration of capitalism was rooted in the impact on its consciousness of decades of domination by the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies, together with the genocidal assault waged by Stalin against the representatives of revolutionary Marxism. It could only be overcome through a struggle to renew the socialist culture that had given rise to the October Revolution, and to make available to advanced workers all the strategic lessons of the 20th Century. The International Committee's 12th plenum report in 1992 explained:

"It is true that without the spontaneous development of the class struggle a mass revolutionary party cannot emerge. However, it is very wrong to see the development of the revolutionary party as merely the outcome of the spontaneous economic struggles of the working class or even as the direct and immediate product of the necessary interventions of the party into these economic struggles…. The intensification of the class struggle provides the general foundation of the revolutionary movement. But it does not by itself directly and automatically create the political, intellectual and, one might add, cultural environment that its development requires, and which prepares the historical setting for a truly revolutionary situation".[83]

258. Since making this appraisal, a major component of the work of the International Committee has been a sustained campaign to subject to a withering critique what it has termed the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification. This school encompasses disparate intellectual trends, including ex-Stalinists, nominal liberals and conservative anti-communists. But they are united in their denunciations of the October 1917 revolution as a terrible mistake; their insistence that there is no alternative to capitalist liberal democracy; that Leninism led to Stalinism and that Trotsky was no different, if not worse, than Stalin. A striking feature is the prevalence of British historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Robert Service in the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification, and their particular focus on slandering Trotsky. This testifies to the continued recognition, within ruling circles and amongst their intellectual apologists, of the danger posed by Trotskyism to their interests.

Renunciationism and the emergence of New Labour

259. In Britain, the ICP's tactical approach towards the Labour Party was radically amended as a result of the changes analysed by the International Committee. Its December 1993 Fourth Congress resolution, "The death agony of reformism and the tasks of the International Communist Party," explained that the degeneration of the Labour Party and the trade unions, and the abandonment of their old reformist programme, had fundamentally changed their relationship to the working class. This meant dropping the tactic of calling for a critical vote for Labour in areas where the ICP's own candidates were not standing in elections, as well as the demand to "make the lefts fight":

"Labour's support for capitalism no longer requires unmasking. It openly proclaims it. Moreover, there is no such thing as a centrist tendency, in the context in which Marxists historically have understood this term, within the Labour Party today…. To demand that any section of this bureaucracy carry out socialist policies now would only serve to recreate dangerous illusions and disarm the working class".[84]

260. Addressing those who called for the formation of a new party based on the trade unions, the perspective declared:

"Such a call is not simply a hankering after the past. Should such a party be formed by sections of the bureaucracy, Labour 'lefts' and the radicals in response to Labour's break-up, its sole aim would be to divert the working class away from revolutionary politics and down the road of national chauvinism. For more than 70 years, the working class in Britain has had such a 'party based on the trade unions', and it has delivered it over to the capitalists time and again…. Moreover, the unions today are not the defensive organisations of the past and, divorced from a socialist programme, cannot serve as anything other than an agency of imperialism. The demand for a return to 'truly working class unionism' is not only utopian, but reactionary. Experience has shown that such a perspective only serves as a left cover for the trade union leaders and leads the working class into a dead end".[85]

261. The resolution anticipated the formation of New Labour, under the leadership of Blair, as a right-wing bourgeois party. The trade union bureaucracy backed Blair every step of the way, with a majority voting in 1995 in favour of the abolition of Clause 4 of Labour's constitution.

To be continued

Footnotes:

[76] *Fourth International*, Labor Publications, Summer-Fall 1991, Volume 18, No. 1, p.37

[77] *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (1988), Labor Publications, pp. 6/7

[78] David North, Report to the 13th National Congress of the Workers League, *Fourth International*, Labor Publications, July-December 1988, pp. 7-8

[79] David North, *The End of the USSR* (1992), Labor Publications, p. 20

[80] Peter Taaffe, *The Rise of Militant* (1995), Militant Publications, p.

[81] ibid., pp. 326/329

[82] The storm breaks, *International Socialism*, Spring 1990, p. 46

[83] David North, *The Struggle for Marxism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, Report to the 12th Plenum of the ICFI, March 11, 1992, *Fourth International*, volume 19, no. 1, p. 74

[84] Fourth Congress resolution, *The death agony of reformism and the tasks of the International Communist Party*, December 1993

[85] ibid.