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

Part Three

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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.

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The Revolutionary Communist Party during the war

51. The unification of the British section at the height of the Second World War was an advance for the world movement. It was regarded as a political threat by the British bourgeoisie, at a time when all the workers' organisations supported what was universally declared to be a war for democracy against German fascism. The RCP's founding conference stressed that Britain's real war aim was to defend its colonial domination over the peoples and resources of the Empire. It indicted the reformist and Stalinist misleaders as traitors to the interests of the international working class:

> "By their support of the war the Trade Unions, the Labour Party and the Communist Party, with their satellite organisations, have betrayed the historic interests of the working class and the interests of the colonial masses oppressed by British imperialism. It is the duty of revolutionary socialists to mercilessly expose the leadership of these organisations as agents of the ruling class in the ranks of the workers and to win over the broad mass of the workers from the leadership of these organisations to the party of the Fourth International."[13]

52. The "patriotic front" could not postpone class struggles indefinitely. When they emerged, they did so outside the control of, and in opposition to, the official labour movement. By spring 1944, 3 million days were lost due to strikes, including in armaments production, the shipyards and mines. The RCP threw itself enthusiastically into these struggles. It played a leading role in the strike of engineering apprentices on Tyneside against Minister of Labour Bevin's plans for conscription into the mines, organising mass protests that called for workers' control.

53. An insurgent mood was also developing in the army. Along with members of other sections of the Fourth International, RCP members fraternised with civilians and soldiers wherever they were stationed. In September 1943, Trotskyists were involved in the revolt of 191 soldiers in Montgomery's 8th army in Salerno, Italy—the biggest wartime mutiny in British military history. They were active in Egypt, where mock elections in the armed forces produced a Trotskyist prime minister and overwhelming backing for nationalisation, without compensation, of the land and the banks.

54. In response to the Tyneside strike, the War Cabinet held emergency discussions on the RCP, while Bevin attacked the organisation in parliament. One month after its founding conference, the RCP's headquarters and the homes of several of its leaders were raided, and Haston, Heaton Lee, Roy Tearse and Ann Keen were arrested. The RCP leaders were the first to be prosecuted under the 1927 Trades Disputes and Trades Unions Act, passed in the wake of the 1926 General Strike and carrying a penalty of up to five years imprisonment. The raids were accompanied by a media witch-hunt led by the *Daily Mail*. Under the headline, "Stalin-Haters Fan illegal Strikes", it reported, "The Trotskyists seek to bring the whole of civilisation down in ruins in the hope that their brand of communism would then triumph. It is the kind of Communism rejected by Stalin when he expelled Trotsky and set out to build a Russia that has been able to stand up to the greatest military threat in history. Even since then these people have done everything to damage Stalin."

55. An extensive memorandum about the RCP written by Home Secretary Herbert Morrison on April 13, 1944, stated, "The Trotskyists do not regard the form of society which now exists in Russia as socialism—they believe that true socialism can be achieved only by more or less simultaneous revolution over the greater part of the globe; and they are bitterly hostile to the Stalinist regime because it has not only 'betrayed the revolution' in Russia itself, but by using the national Communist parties as the instruments of its 'reactionary' policy abroad has retarded the development of the working class towards world revolution."

56. Noting that the Stalinists, "would very much like to see the Trotskyists and their small paper suppressed", Morrison continued, "The ultimate aim of the Trotskyists is the establishment by means of uprisings all over the world of Workers' Governments which will introduce common ownership and worker's control of the means of production. They believe that world revolution will once more become possible as a result of the war."

57. The use of the 1927 legislation was met with an extensive defence campaign by the Anti-Labour Laws' Victims Defence Committee. In opposition, the Stalinist *Daily Worker* demanded, "Let the Government deal with these saboteurs with a strong hand". In May 1944, the RCP leaders were brought to trial in Newcastle Moor Hall and sentenced to up to one year in prison. Such was the strength of opposition, however, that the Labour Party was forced to postpone its annual conference and the government was unable to enforce the legislation against a miners' strike. In September, the RCP leaders' sentences were quashed on appeal.

The aftermath of World War Two

58. As the war came to an end, there was every reason to anticipate

revolutionary upheavals like those that had erupted in the aftermath of the First World War. Europe lay in ruins. Its economy was devastated, and its ruling elites were either directly implicated in fascist barbarism or had capitulated before Hitler's armies. The Red Army controlled large swathes of the continent, while in Italy and Greece there was civil war. The colonial system was shattered, and mass anti-imperialist movements swept India, China and Africa.

59. Though Britain was a victor, it emerged from the war battered and grievously wounded. The conflict had cleared the way for the consolidation of the US as the dominant capitalist power, at Britain's expense. In addition to massive interest payments on loans it had taken from the US to finance the war, the British bourgeoisie faced revolt in its colonial possessions; at the same time, working people at home demanded it make good on its pledge to create a "land fit for heroes". The radical temper of the working class was underscored by the result of the general election in June 1945. The votes of thousands of British servicemen helped ensure that Churchill was dumped from office in a landslide win for Attlee's Labour Party.

60. However, any evaluation of the objective potential for revolution must factor in the critical question of working class leadership. The political genocide of the Marxist vanguard by Stalinism, the destruction of the workers' movement by the fascist powers, and the sheer weight of human loss incurred in the war meant that the revolutionary cadre marshalled within the Fourth International numbered only in the hundreds. The physical destruction of the most conscious elements in the working class proved central to the ability of imperialism to survive this period of profound crisis.

61. The Stalinist bureaucracy was able to misuse the prestige acquired by the Soviet Union from its defeat of Nazi Germany to suppress any independent initiative by the working class. In France, Italy, Germany and Greece, the Kremlin instructed local Stalinist parties to support bourgeois governments and disarm resistance fighters. In Eastern Europe, where, for reasons of military defence, the Kremlin concluded that it could not tolerate the creation of bourgeois puppet regimes controlled by the US, the Soviet Union established a series of "buffer states" under its control. The establishment of nationalised property in these states, sometimes delayed for several years, was accompanied by the systematic disenfranchisement of the working class.

62. The role played by Stalinism provided American imperialism with the time it needed to marshal its vast economic resources for the restabilisation of world capitalism. Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin had agreed on the division of Europe into "spheres of influence" in talks at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam. But left open was the question of how to deal with their wartime opponents, Germany and Japan. Consideration was given to laying waste to Germany, in order to prevent its industrial revival. In the end, however, both nations were loaned substantially more monies by the US, and on better terms, than were extended to its British ally. The Bretton Woods Agreement in 1944 fixed the value of all national currencies to the dollar, which was itself tied to gold. US-sponsored institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, along with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, regulated economic relations between the capitalist states in order to prevent a return to the protectionist policies that had shattered the world market in the 1930s.

The 1945 Labour government

63. The Labour Party played the central role in rescuing British capitalism from the consequences of its eclipse by the US. To this end, Labour was forced to make the most radical appeal in its history to the socialist aspirations of the working class. In the 1945 election, it pledged to implement universal free health care, state-funded education, national insurance and social housing that would protect workers "from the cradle to the grave". In addition to fulfilling these pledges, the Labour government nationalised one fifth of the country's productive capacity—including major industries essential to the general interests of British capitalism and post-war reconstruction. This was proclaimed as only the first step towards the realisation of Labour's goal of common ownership.

64. The wartime role of the trade unions was extended to running the nationalised industries, which combined representatives of the government, management and the unions to regulate production, wage rates and working conditions. Such corporatist measures provided the basis for the trade unions to become the direct administrative agents of capital in disciplining the working class.

65. The Attlee government was forced to relinquish direct rule of the Indian subcontinent by a mass anti-imperialist movement, accompanied by an army rebellion. Independence was proclaimed in August 1947, but the subcontinent was divided along communal lines into India and Pakistan. Partition, the result of the betrayal of the national independence struggle by the Indian bourgeoisie, unleashed a bloodbath. Labour oversaw the brutal repression of insurgent movements in Britain's dominions and "protectorates", while joining with US imperialism in suppressing resistance in Greece and Korea. With the advent of the Cold War, Labour could boast that its own efforts to preserve British interests were responsible for the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), under the leadership of the US.

66. The combined impact of the post-war reforms was to consolidate the broad mass of the working class behind the Labour Party.[14] This was reinforced by the CPGB. In 1951 it adopted *The British Road to Socialism* , which declared, "Britain will reach socialism by her own road. The people of Britain can transform capitalist democracy into a real People's Democracy, transforming parliament, the product of Britain's historic struggle for democracy, in to the will of the vast majority of her people."

Haston/Grant and the Morrow/Goldman faction

67. The political complexities of the war and its aftermath posed critical issues of revolutionary perspective. The rapidly changing situation was to produce a protracted crisis in the Fourth International. Differences raised by Felix Morrow and Albert Goldman in the US, with the support of Haston and Grant in Britain, regarding the tempo of revolutionary developments were, over time, to reveal themselves as only the initial manifestation of a growing scepticism towards the historical perspective of the Trotskyist movement.

68. Pointing to the prospect of an economic upturn in the US and the strengthened position of the Stalinist and social democratic parties in Europe, Morrow argued that the Fourth International should confine itself to agitation around democratic demands. With Morrow and Goldman virtually isolated in the SWP, Haston and Grant intervened in their defence. The basis of their support for Morrow was made explicit by Grant, who argued that, whereas Trotsky had predicted the emergence of a mass revolutionary movement against Stalinism and imperialism, capitalism had not been overthrown and the Soviet bureaucracy had extended its rule over Eastern Europe. This served to "falsify the original wartime perspective of the movement," he wrote.

69. It was Grant's assertion that Trotsky had provided a guarantee about the course of developments that was false. In April 1940, Trotsky had written:

> "Every historical prognosis is always conditional, and the more concrete the prognosis, the more conditional it is. A prognosis is not a promissory note which can be cashed on a given date. Prognosis outlines only the definite trends of the development. But along with these trends a different order of forces and tendencies operate, which at a certain moment begin to predominate. All those who seek exact predictions of concrete events should consult the astrologists.

Marxist prognosis aids only in orientation."[15]

70. A revolutionary perspective does not involve asserting that it is possible for the working class to take power at any given moment. It is a historical prognosis, grounded on an understanding of the character of the epoch as one of imperialist decay, leading to wars and revolutions. Moreover, the "final" downfall of capitalism is always conditional upon the construction of a revolutionary internationalist party. As the founding manifesto of the Fourth International stated:

> "The capitalist world has no way out, unless a prolonged death agony is so considered. It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of wars, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars, and new uprisings. A young revolutionary party must base itself on this perspective. History will provide it with enough opportunities and possibilities to test itself, to accumulate experience, and to mature. The swifter the ranks of the vanguard are fused the more the epoch of bloody convulsions will be shortened, the less destruction will our planet suffer. But the great historical problem will not be solved in any case until the revolutionary party stands at the head of the proletariat."[16]

The East European "buffer states"

71. What characterised the Morrow/Haston/Grant opposition was not its concern to identify the problems confronting the revolutionary party at the war's end and to work them through. Rather, these difficulties became the pretext for its adaptation to the very political mechanisms through which capitalism was being restabilised.

72. The Fourth International had refused to rush to a definition of the East European buffer states. Up until 1948, the Stalinist bureaucracy had shown no interest in changing the property relations of those countries occupied by the Red Army. Its goal had been limited to using them as a military buffer against imperialism. This only changed in response to the aggressive actions of the US in the lead-up to the Cold War. Even so, the Fourth International insisted that the criteria for making an evaluation of the changes could not rest on the local results of Stalinist policy, but had to include an appraisal of its role on the world arena:

> "From the world point of view, the reforms realised by the Soviet bureaucracy in the sense of the assimilation of the buffer zone to the USSR weigh incomparably less in the balance than the blows dealt by the Soviet bureaucracy in the buffer zone, against the consciousness of the world working class."[17]

73. In contrast, Grant insisted that the Stalinist apparatus had established workers' states in Eastern Europe by first mobilising the working class, only to then install a form of "proletarian bonapartism". Grant's designation of the East European regimes was to provide a general means of adapting to non-proletarian forces, which were declared to be a substitute for the revolutionary actions of the working class. This was extended to cover virtually anywhere there was extensive state nationalisation established through peasant-based wars under petty-bourgeois or Stalinist leaderships.

74. It was during the conflict with the Morrow/Haston/Grant faction that Healy first emerged as an international political figure. Since the fight over unification, he had worked closely with Cannon and the SWP, and now took up the struggle to defend the position of the Fourth International within the British movement. For this, he was denounced in the most overtly chauvinistic terms. Cannon pointedly referred to the Haston faction's treatment of Healy, when he asked Morrow/Goldman:

> "Do you know what kind of regime your pals in England have? They have a minority led by Healy whose crimes consisted in the fact that he supported the unity line of the International Secretariat, that he broke with the sectarian nationalism of the WIL and became a real internationalist, rejected their nationalistic taint, and has been sympathetic in general to the Socialist Workers Party political position. Do you know what this regime calls Healy? A quisling of the Socialist Workers Party; that is, an agent of an enemy country."[18]

The vexed question of entrism in the Labour Party

75. Hostile accounts of this period written by opponents of the International Committee emphasise disputes over whether to carry out entry work inside the Labour Party or maintain an open tendency as the defining question in the struggle within the RCP. Tactically, the issue was an important one—bound up with consideration of whether measures pioneered by Trotsky in the 1930s were applicable to the post-war situation in Britain. But whereas by 1949 all sections of the RCP were formally in agreement on entry into the Labour Party, this concealed growing differences over political prognosis and orientation.

76. Healy led a semi-clandestine entry group in the Labour Party, known as The Club. Its work around the journal *Socialist Outlook* was based on the recognition that, with the majority of socialist-minded workers viewing Labour as their party, and its left wing as their leaders, it was not enough to abstractly counterpose revolution to reform. It was necessary to participate in the struggle against the right-wing Labour and trade union leaders, and demonstrate the superiority of a revolutionary leadership against the vacillations and compromises of the lefts.

77. The Haston/Grant majority had initially opposed entrism, but was forced to agree by the virtual collapse of its external faction. Underlying its acceptance of the turn was a growing demoralisation as to the possibility of breaking the influence of social democracy over the working class. The Fourth International warned that the political positions it articulated expressed:

> "liquidationist tendencies…. Nothing is to be done because reformism is transforming the working class; nothing is to be done because Stalinism is achieving victories for the working class. They have not much hope to build the Trotskyist organisation; they have no hope in the development of the Fourth International."[19]

78. In 1950, Haston abruptly resigned from the RCP on the basis of an explicit repudiation of the Fourth International and an embrace of the Labour Party. In a letter dated June 10, he declared, "From the thesis that Stalinism and Social Democracy had betrayed the working class, we drew the conclusion that a new International was necessary. We went further and declared that we—who constituted ourselves the Fourth International—were the established leadership of the world working class." Rather, Haston insisted, Labour was "introducing major reforms", India had "achieved political freedom...under the leadership of the Indian bourgeoisie" and capitalism had been overthrown in Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe and China.

79. He concluded, "It follows from the above that we have no right to claim political and organisational authority as the international leadership

of the world proletariat." The Fourth International should be replaced by "some form of international consultative centre", embracing "all left wing currents." Haston went on to state, "I reject the thesis that the Labour Party cannot under any circumstances be the instrument of socialist emancipation and that only through the form of Soviets can a transformation of society take place in Britain. Although I have never excluded the possibility of the parliamentary overthrow of capitalism in the advanced countries, particularly in this country, I now believe that it is our task to advocate the use of parliament as the most economical vehicle for the complete transformation of British society." "The Labour Party has many bureaucratic features," he wrote. "Nevertheless, it is one of the most democratic workers' organisations in existence…the task is to loyally adhere to the mass party and seek to drive it forward on the road to the complete transformation of the system."[20]

80. Haston's position was shared by others in the leadership of the RCP, some of whom also resigned. Grant refused to take a stand against Haston and was expelled. Together with a small group of supporters, he formed the International Socialist League, forerunner of the Militant Tendency (now the Socialist Party).

To be continued

Footnotes:

[13]Prometheus Research Library, http://www.prl.org/prs/prs2/rcp-1.html

[14] The illusions sown in reformism were directed by the bureaucracy against revolutionary Marxism. In his *In Place of Fear*, for example, the leading Labour left, Aneurin Bevan, asserted: "Quite early in my studies it seemed to me that classic Marxism consistently understated the role of a political democracy with a fully developed franchise. This is the case, both subjectively, as it affects the attitude of the worker to his political responsibilities, and objectively, as it affects the possibilities of his attaining power by using the franchise and parliamentary methods."

[15]Leon Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism* (1982), New Park Publications, pp. 218/219

[16] Leon Trotsky *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, *The Transitional Program* (1981), Labor Publications

[17] Cited in *The Heritage We Defend*: *A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, David North (1988), Labor Publications, pp. 158/159

[18] Cited in *Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International*, David North (1991), Labor Publications, p.13

[19] Cited in *The History of British Trotskyism to 1949*, Martin Upham (1980), Open letter from the IS to all members of the RCP, 8 February, 1949, http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/upham/14upham.html

[20]Cited in *What Next?*, Jock Haston (1950), Letter to the "Club", http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/pages/healy/Haston.html