

# SPARTACIST



NUMBER 68

ENGLISH EDITION

SEPTEMBER 2023

**THE BREAKDOWN OF  
U.S. HEGEMONY**

**&**

**THE STRUGGLE FOR  
WORKERS POWER**

**A PROGRAM FOR THE**  

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**FOURTH INTERNATIONAL**  

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Documents from the  
Eighth Conference of  
the International  
Communist League

AUSTRALIA...A\$4

BRITAIN...£3

CANADA...CDN\$4

IRELAND...€3

SOUTH AFRICA...R3

USA...US\$3

# Table of Contents

<b>Editorial Note:</b>	
<b>Eighth International Conference of the ICL ...</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Breakdown of U.S. Hegemony &amp; the Struggle for Workers Power.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What Is Revolutionary Leadership?.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The ICL's Post-Soviet Revisionism .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Why the ICL Collapsed &amp; How We Reforged It .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Greetings from Bolshevik-Leninist of Australia .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>In Defense of the Second and Fourth Comintern Congresses .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Permanent Revolution &amp; Women's Liberation .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Puerto Rico: For Independence and Socialism! .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Malvinas/Falklands War: The Main Enemy Was Imperialism .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>In Defense of Permanent Revolution: For Communist Leadership of the Anti-Imperialist Struggle! .....</b>	<b>64</b>

## English Edition

# SPARTACIST

**An Organ of Revolutionary Marxism**

Published by the International Executive Committee of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist)

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*Opinions expressed in signed articles or letters do not necessarily express the editorial viewpoint.*

The closing date for this issue is September 1.

**Number 68**



**September 2023**

## Editorial Note

# Eighth International Conference of the ICL

Crises rock the world as U.S. hegemony breaks down. As the fate of the world proletariat cries out for revolutionary leadership, the workers movement stands disarmed and disoriented.

It is in this context that the International Communist League held its Eighth International Conference this summer, to which this issue of *Spartacist* is dedicated. The document we adopted as our new program, “The Breakdown of U.S. Hegemony & the Struggle for Workers Power—A Program for the Fourth International” (page 3), responds to the main political problems that have plagued the left and workers movement for the last 30 years, providing a Marxist analysis of the post-Soviet period and charting a revolutionary road for working-class struggles today.

The triumph of U.S. imperialism after the fall of the USSR opened a new era in which liberalism became the dominant political ideology. The workers movement and socialist left spent the post-Soviet period tailing liberal movements and politicians whose leadership only produced defeats and demoralization, fueling right-wing reaction.

The central argument in this document is that the task of revolutionaries throughout the last 30 years *and today* is to *break* the workers movement from all variants of liberal forces and their centrist conciliators. This is not a new invention but the central lesson of Leninism adapted to today’s reality.

A crucial thread running throughout the document (and the conference) is the necessity of the Marxist method—basing the intervention of communists on a materialist understanding of the world situation and the obstacles standing in the way of the fight for socialism. Without this, it is impossible to correctly answer the question: “What is to be done?”

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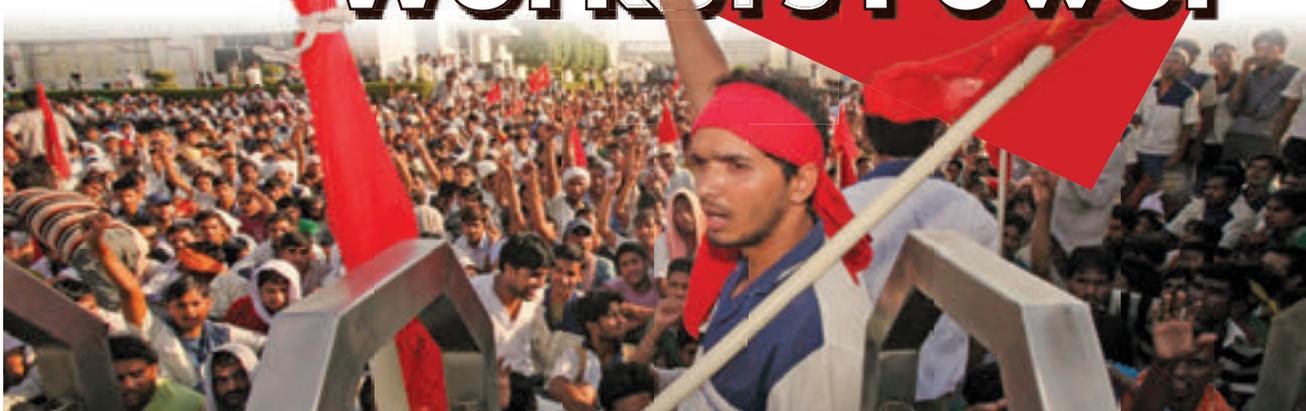
In the epoch of imperialism, it is vital to have a revolutionary strategy for countries of the Global South. As U.S. imperialism declines, it further tightens the screws, reinforcing national oppression on an international scale. This process is fueling the growth of nationalist “anti-imperialist” forces in Latin America, Africa and Asia. But nationalists sabotage the struggle for national liberation at every turn, sacrificing it in the name of private property. For this reason, victory against

*continued on page 21*



# The Breakdown of U.S. Hegemony &

# the Struggle for Workers Power



Top: Chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, August 2021. Bottom: Maruti Suzuki auto workers on strike in Manesar, India, October 2011.

## A Program for the Fourth International

### INTRODUCTION

*The following document was adopted by the ICL's Eighth International Conference.*

By any measure, the 30 years following the collapse of the Soviet Union were years of relative stability on the scale of world history. The period had its crises and bloody conflicts, but they were the exception rather than the norm and mild compared to the upheavals of the 20th century. Armed

conflicts were of lower intensity, the living standards of millions improved and many parts of the world witnessed social liberalization. How was this possible in the wake of the destruction of the USSR, a catastrophic defeat for the international working class?

The imperialist ruling class and its sycophants proclaimed that these developments decisively proved the superiority of U.S. liberal capitalism over communism. What was the response from those claiming the Marxist

mantle? The Communist Party of China (CPC) became the standard-bearer for economic globalization, cozying up to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and relegating socialism to purely ceremonial purposes. Many pro-Moscow Stalinists simply disintegrated. As for the Trotskyist groupings, they chased liberal movements against war, austerity and racism, unable to justify the need for a revolutionary party. While some “Marxists” continued to preach socialism for the future, none built a revolutionary opposition to liberal triumphalism.

Today the wind has left the sails of liberalism. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war marked a turning point in the world situation. Crisis is becoming the norm and stability the exception. As U.S. hegemony is threatened and all the factors which favored stability are unwinding, very few have the illusion that the road ahead will be smooth. While liberalism still has its defenders—not least in the workers movement—they are no longer confident and on the offensive but hysterical and reactive as they feel the ground melting under their feet. Liberalism now faces real challengers, from right- and left-wing populism, Islamism and Hindu nationalism to Chinese Stalinism. The liberals themselves are tearing each other apart over the criteria for political correctness and identity politics. But as the clouds gather and U.S. imperialism and its allies seek to regain the initiative, the vanguard of the proletariat remains disorganized and disoriented.

The fight to break the workers movement from opportunism, started by Lenin and continued by Trotsky, must be taken up once more, applied to the tasks and dynamics of today’s world. The Eighth International Conference of the ICL and this document seek to provide a foundation for this struggle through a critique of the post-Soviet period of liberal triumphalism and by outlining some basic elements of analysis and program for today’s new era characterized by the breakdown of U.S. hegemony. As the working class of the world faces disaster and conflict, more than ever there is an urgent need for a revolutionary international vanguard party capable of leading the working class to power.

## I. ORIGINS OF THE UNIPOLAR WORLD

The United States emerged from World War II as the undisputed leader of the capitalist world. Its domestic economy accounted for 50 percent of the global GDP. It held 80 percent of the world’s hard currency reserves, had the strongest military and was the world’s main creditor. It used this dominance to reshape the international order. The Bretton Woods system established the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency and a whole series of institutions were created (UN, IMF, World Bank, NATO) to enshrine U.S. dominance and lay the foundation of a liberal capitalist world order.

Despite the overwhelming economic power of the U.S., the USSR represented a major counterweight. The Red Army was a formidable force and its control extended over all of East Europe. Despite Stalin’s attempts at securing a lasting agreement with U.S. imperialism, no deal was possible. The very existence and strength of the Soviet Union represented a challenge to American capitalism’s domina-



Globe Photos

**1957 Paris summit of U.S.-led anti-Communist NATO alliance.**

tion. Around the world, anti-colonial struggles were in full swing and anti-imperialist forces looked to the USSR for political and military support. The victorious 1949 Chinese Revolution further increased the weight of the non-capitalist world, creating hysteria and panic in the U.S. The world was effectively divided into two competing spheres of influence representing two rival social systems.

As the other imperialist powers rebuilt themselves and the U.S. engaged in one anti-Communist military adventure after another, the first clear signs of overextension appeared. The U.S. defeat in Vietnam was a turning point, opening a period of economic and political turmoil at home and abroad. In the early 1970s there were strong reasons to believe that the so-called “American Century” was facing an early demise. However, the revolutionary openings of the late 1960s and early ’70s—France (’68), Czechoslovakia (’68), Quebec (’72), Chile (’70-73), Portugal (’74-75), Spain (’75-76)—all ended in defeat. By ensuring these defeats, the opportunist leadership of the working class provided imperialism with the necessary room to stabilize. By the late ’70s and early ’80s it was back on the offensive, marking the start of the neoliberal era of privatization and economic liberalization. In 1981 Reagan dealt a decisive defeat to the U.S. working class by crushing the PATCO air traffic controllers strike. This was followed by further defeats for the international working class, notably that of the British miners in 1985. In this period ever more pressure was exerted on the USSR, with the Cold War hiked up to new heights and the U.S. exploiting the Sino-Soviet split through its anti-Soviet alliance with China.

By the end of the ’80s, the USSR and the Eastern bloc were in deep economic and political distress. The retreat of the Red Army from Afghanistan and the counterrevolutionary victory of Solidarność in Poland further demoralized the ruling bureaucracy in Moscow. After Moscow sold out the DDR (East Germany) and acceded to German reunification, it wasn’t long before it sold out the Soviet Union itself. The pressures of world imperialism combined with working-class demoralization from decades of Stalinist treachery led to the final liquidation of the gains of the October Revolution. By

1991 the international balance of class forces had decisively shifted in favor of imperialism at the expense of the working class and oppressed of the world.

## II. REACTIONARY CHARACTER OF THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

### Ultra-Imperialism, Made in the USA

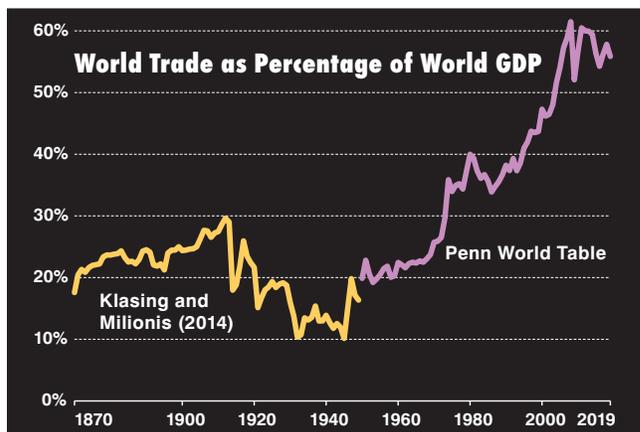
With the collapse of the USSR, the world order was no longer defined by the conflict of two social systems but by the hegemony of the United States. There existed no individual country or group of countries that could rival the U.S. Its GDP was almost twice that of its closest rival, Japan. It controlled the flow of global capital. Militarily, no power could even come close. The American model of liberal democracy was proclaimed the pinnacle of progress with which every country was expected to converge.

In many ways the order that emerged resembled “ultra-imperialism,” a system in which the great powers agree to jointly plunder the world. This wasn’t brought about by the peaceful evolution of finance capital, as projected by Karl Kautsky, but by the supremacy of a single power built on the ashes of European and Japanese imperialism after World War II. The U.S. rebuilt these empires from their remnants and unified them in an anti-Communist alliance during the Cold War. When the Cold War ended, this imperialist united front was not broken up but in many ways reinforced. For example, German reunification did not lead to a ramping up of tensions in Europe, as many feared, but was done with the blessings of the U.S. and NATO.

The exceptional stability of the post-Soviet period can be explained by the overwhelming advantages held by the U.S. over its rivals combined with the opening of great swaths of previously untapped markets to finance capital. One-third of the world population lived in non-capitalist countries that year led to the complete destruction of many of the workers states, or—as in the case of China—opening up to imperialist capital while maintaining the foundations of a collectivized economy. These developments gave imperialism a new lease on life. Instead of tearing each other apart for market share, Germany, France, Britain and the U.S. worked together to bring East Europe into the political and economic fold of the West. The European Union (EU) and NATO were expanded in tandem to the very borders of Russia. In Asia an analogous situation existed: the U.S. and Japan worked together to foster and exploit economic liberalization in China and the rest of East and Southeast Asia.

The united front of the major powers gave the rest of the world little alternative but to abide by U.S. political and economic dictates. In one country after another, the IMF and World Bank rewrote the rules according to the interests of U.S. finance capital. This “neoliberalism” was already well underway in the ’80s, but the destruction of the Soviet Union gave it renewed impetus. The few countries that refused or were blocked from following the path outlined by the U.S. (Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba, Iraq, Afghanistan) posed no significant threat to the global order.

This favorable balance of power not only created lucrative investment opportunities for the imperialists but also



Spartacist graph. Source: Our World in Data

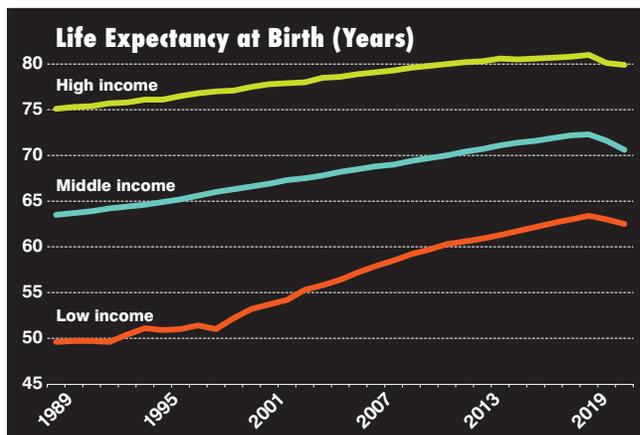
**World trade rose to all-time highs following collapse of Soviet Union, far surpassing previous waves of globalization.**

reduced the risks associated with foreign trade. Capitalists could invest and trade abroad knowing that U.S. political and military dominance insured them against a major conflict or an overly hostile government. These factors led to a significant growth in international trade, the massive offshoring of production and an explosion of international capital circulation, i.e., globalization.

### A Marxist Answer to Globalization

The advocates of liberal imperialism credit globalization with an important rise in living standards in many parts of the world and generally lower prices for consumer goods. It is undeniable that the extension of the global division of labor over the last 30 years has led to a development of productive forces internationally. For example, per capita energy consumption in low- and middle-income countries more than doubled, world literacy increased to almost 90 percent, auto production more than doubled and so did steel production. At first glance these progressive developments appear to conflict with the Marxist theory of imperialism, which argues that capitalism has arrived at its final stage, where

*continued on page 22*



Spartacist graph. Source: World Bank data

**Low-income countries gained most from rise in life expectancy in post-Soviet period, increasing by nearly 14 years until trend reversed for all brackets during pandemic.**

# What Is Revolutionary Leadership?

*The following document was adopted by the ICL's Eighth International Conference.*

Great periods of class struggle fuse the working-class movement in common action against the capitalist class. Periods of reaction have the opposite effect, exacerbating divisions within the working class along lines of nationality, race, gender and craft. These cycles of unification and division find their reflection within the most politically advanced sectors of the working-class movement, the parties and organizations claiming to fight for socialist revolution. In the long period of post-Soviet reaction, the Marxist left has splintered ever more into smaller and smaller groups divided along dogmatic and cliquist lines. With so many groups claiming the mantle of revolutionary leadership, it begs the question: what is revolutionary leadership? As class struggle intensifies in the changing world situation, a correct approach to this question is essential to critically review the record of organizations claiming to fight for revolution and to establish the basis for unifying the revolutionary vanguard internationally.

The question of revolutionary leadership is almost always overcomplicated. And on this basic question of Marxism—as on most others—there is no better response than the simple and clear explanation in the *Communist Manifesto*:

“The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

“The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.”

Communist leadership of the class struggle must be based on a scientific understanding of class relations, from the overall international situation down to the specific conditions on the individual shop floor. It is not defined by purity of heart, by abstract doctrine or by proclaiming the need for “the dictatorship of the proletariat” but by the ability to put forward the course of action which best corresponds to the objective interests of the workers movement as a whole. It is necessary to be guided by the final goal—the overturn of capitalism and the foundation of an international socialist order. But

this goal is only advanced to the extent that its pursuit is grounded in the living reality of a given time and place, not by avoiding but confronting the principal obstacles blocking its march forward.

Flowing from this understanding, the only way to truly evaluate the revolutionary character of a party or grouping is by judging if in the course of events it fights for the interests of the movement as a whole or if those are sacrificed in favor of the interests of other class forces or the narrow interests of isolated segments of the workers movement. At each twist and turn of the class struggle, the party is tested in its ability to guide the working class. In *The Lessons of October* (1924), Trotsky describes the internal workings of this process:

“A revolutionary party is subjected to the pressure of other political forces. At every given stage of its development the party elaborates its own methods of counteracting and resisting this pressure. During a tactical turn and the resulting internal regroupments and frictions, the party’s power of resistance becomes weakened. From this the possibility always arises that the internal groupings in the party, which originate from the necessity of a turn in tactics, may develop far beyond the original controversial points of departure and serve as a support for various class tendencies. To put the case more plainly: the party that does not keep step with the historical tasks of its own class becomes, or runs the risk of becoming, the indirect tool of other classes.”

Great world events—such as wars, revolutions...or a pandemic—exacerbate the pressures from other classes on the vanguard and reveal in the clearest light the true character of a party.

While periods of crisis provide the best test of a revolutionary party, the outcome is prepared by its course in the preceding period. Revolutionary parties do not spring out of thin air on the eve of war or revolution, they are steeled through the ups and downs of the class struggle in a continuous process. Only a correct course of action in periods of reaction can lay the basis for success in outbreaks of revolutionary struggle.

Simply put, a revolutionary party is one that can guide the working class through events in a manner that will advance its emancipation. It is by this criteria that we must evaluate the course of the ICL and that of any other grouping or party which claims to be providing revolutionary leadership. ■

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# The ICL's Post-Soviet Revisionism

*The following document was adopted by the ICL's Eighth International Conference.*

The collapse of the Soviet Union represented a fundamental change in the world situation. Given that its existence had defined politics on the left for almost 75 years, the USSR's destruction required an in-depth re-evaluation of the world situation and the tasks of communists. In the years following this disaster, the ICL conducted multiple discussions and published substantial documents with this stated aim: the 1992 International Conference document, the 1994 SL/U.S. Conference document, the 1996 IEC Memorandum and the 1998 "Declaration of Principles and Some Elements of Program" (IDOP). These documents are consistent in their analysis of world events and the tasks they set out for the party. However, far from representing a defense of Marxism in the opening years of the post-Soviet era, they are fundamentally revisionist. The tasks set for the party vacillate between a minimum program which is purely liberal and a maximum program which consists of guarding abstract Marxist formulas for future days. The documents all deny—sometimes explicitly but mostly implicitly—that the communist program has any decisive role to play in the struggles of the period at hand.

## The World Situation

Marxism can guide the working class in its struggles because it is based on a scientific understanding of the class's interests—both immediate and historic. A party that claims to be Marxist but does not have a correct political and economic appreciation of the current period cannot guide the working class according to its class interests. Severed from a materialist grounding, the tasks it will set for itself, and for the proletariat, will necessarily reflect the interests of other classes.

The ICL's understanding of the post-Soviet epoch was wrong on practically every count, starting with the way it described the international situation. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the triumph of U.S. imperialism and opened a period of relative geopolitical stability in which the imperialist powers jointly plundered the world under the umbrella of American hegemony. For the ICL, however:

"The end of the Cold War will not bring a new 'American century' but intensifying interimperialist rivalries. The global system of 'free trade'—the economic cement which held



Paulius Lileikis

**23 August 1991: Lenin statue in Lithuanian capital Vilnius brought down as counter-revolution spread through USSR.**

together the U.S.-dominated anti-Soviet alliance—is crumbling as the major capitalist powers seek to redivide the world into regional trade blocs."

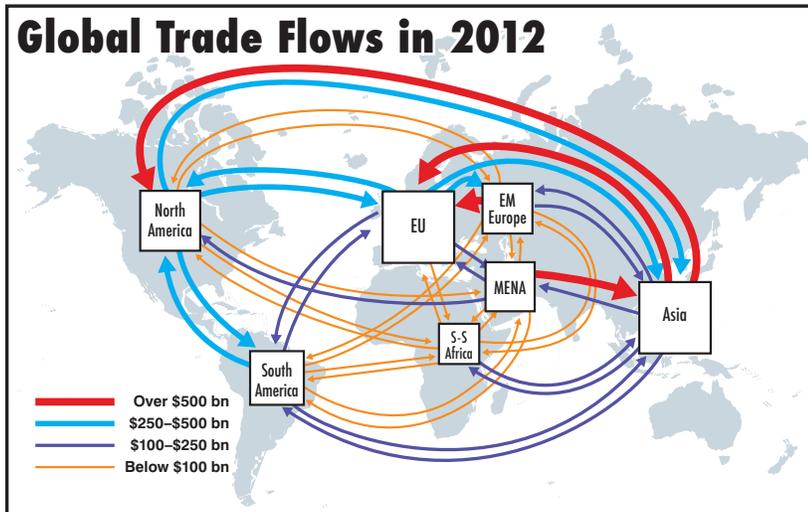
—1992 International Conference document, *Spartacist* (English edition) No. 47-48, Winter 1992-93

This analysis, which was in complete contradiction to actual world events, was consistently upheld by the ICL throughout this period, including in its IDOP:

"But rival imperialisms, especially Germany and Japan, no longer constrained by anti-Soviet unity, are pursuing apace their own appetites for control of world markets and concomitantly projecting their military power. In the conflicts between rival regional trade blocs today, the outlines of future wars are sharpening."

—*Spartacist* (English edition) No. 54, Spring 1998

This totally wrong analysis did not originate from a lack of available facts or the complexity of the political dynamics of the time but from how the ICL conceived of its tasks. Nowhere in the hundreds of pages setting the tasks of the ICL is it demonstrated that the Marxist program provides the essential answers to the political and economic situation confronting the working class in the post-Soviet period. Whether strike waves in France, the situation in Germany following the counterrevolution or the peasant uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, our portrayal of events did not lead to the conclusion that Trotskyist leadership is decisive. We certainly asserted this fact, but such assertions were merely grafted onto events instead of flowing from the portrayal of the struggles themselves, whose every turn highlighted the conflict between the class interests of the proletariat and the program of its leadership. Rather, the ICL answered the wave of liberal triumphalism and the left's defeatism by proclaiming that "Communism lives in the struggles of the working people and in the program of its revolutionary



Spartacist graphic. Source: Barclays research/IMF DOTs

**Everyone trading with everyone. Far from collapsing due to imperialist rivalries, free trade expanded after collapse of USSR.**

vanguard.” From a scientific program to guide the working class on the road to power, Marxism was transformed into an idealistic spirit of rebellion.

With this starting point, the ICL’s analysis of the world situation necessarily papered over the contradictions of the post-Soviet period in favor of impressionism and liberal exposure, as in the 1992 Conference document:

“In Latin America, saddled with an imperialist debt of \$450 billion (more than \$1,000 for every man, woman and child); with 183 million people officially living in desperate poverty; with health and sanitary conditions so bad that cholera, a disease all but wiped out at the turn of the century, has struck 400,000 people and killed 20,000 in the last year and a half; in a continent with 20 million homeless children, a ‘Third World’ where 40,000 children die of hunger *every day*, and a world where some 10 million people have been infected with the deadly AIDS virus—conditions cry out for socialist revolution.”

The conditions of life under capitalism are certainly brutal, but exposing this reality is not sufficient to motivate the need for social revolution. Empirical data showing human misery can be countered by empirical data showing social progress—especially in the 1990s and 2000s. The difference between a UNICEF flyer and the communist program is that the former presents facts that will evoke liberal outrage while the latter explains the class dynamics of world events to guide the working class in its struggle to overthrow imperialism. Since the method and aim of the ICL’s program was closer to the UNICEF leaflet than the communist program, its analysis of the world simply refracted the dominant ideology through a Marxoid prism. The result was an understanding of the world totally disconnected from reality and a capitulation to liberalism.

### Liberalism as a Paper Tiger

The victory of U.S. imperialism over the Soviet Union expressed itself ideologically in the form of liberal triumphalism. Liberalism became the dominant ideology throughout the world and exerted a huge pressure on the workers movement. The ICL acknowledged the threat of liberal triumphalism only to brush it off as insignificant as early as 1992:

“A gauge of the U.S. imperialists’ intoxication over the *semblance* [!] of their power was the 1989 publication of State

Department ideologue Francis Fukuyama’s article, ‘The End of History?’ Amid the proclamations of the capitalist West’s ‘victory’ in the Cold War, he argued that ‘liberal democracy’ constituted the ‘end point of mankind’s ideological evolution’ and the ‘final form of human government.’ This fatuous ‘bourgeois-democratic’ triumphalism *has since largely dissipated.*” [emphasis added]

—1992 International Conference document

The ICL instead presented the world as defined by right-wing reaction:

“This world-historic defeat for the proletariat has led to heightened and rekindled interimperialist rivalry, nationalist bloodbaths, all-sided attacks on the working class, a resurgence of fascist political movements, anti-immigrant frenzy, assaults on the rights of women and a sharp rise in reactionary obscurantism.”

—1994 SL/U.S. Conference document, *Spartacist* (English edition) No. 51, Autumn 1994

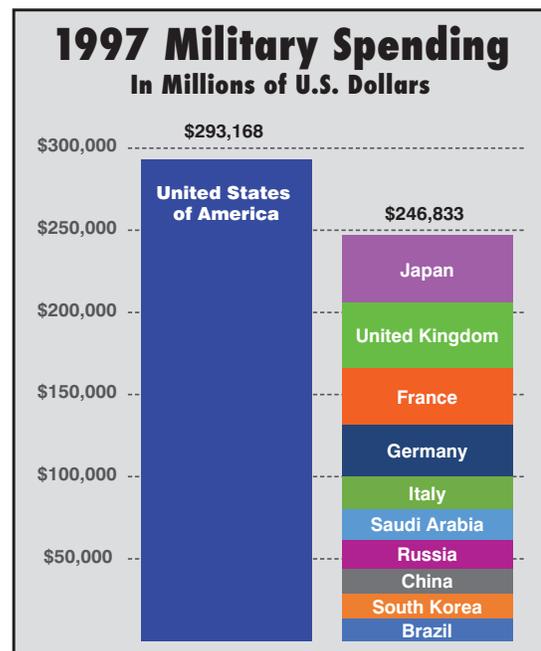
From this and everything else written by our tendency in this period, one would conclude that the main obstacle we were confronting in the workers movement was chauvinist reaction akin to Europe in the 1930s. Flowing from this, the ICL set its task as that of confronting reaction and backwardness, presenting itself as completely unique in this regard:

“Our emphasis on combatting women’s oppression...our defense of immigrants, our combat of homophobia and anti-Semitism, are unique and defining qualities of the ICL in the world today.”

—“Perspectives and Tasks Memorandum for IEC Discussion,” *Internal Bulletin* No. 38 (second edition), July 1996

This was disorienting, to say the least.

By painting the world as being in a dark age of chauvinist reaction with only the ICL defending democratic rights, we



Spartacist graph. Source: SIPRI (Milex)

**U.S. supremacy was not an illusion; its military power dwarfed its rivals, and still does.**

could present the most basic liberal demands as inherently revolutionary:

“Against nationalism, chauvinism and religious fundamentalism, we fight for the right of decent health care and quality education, for free and safe abortion, for such advanced birth control as the RU 486 pill; for the abolition of the barbaric death penalty; against the imposition of the veil; against the poison of anti-Semitism and racism; for the right of those who entered a country other than their native land to stay, work and live a decent life with full citizenship rights. Ironically, it is only we—the communists—who are committed in principle to defense of these rights, understanding that they are not divisible. We must win the masses to our side in these struggles.”

—1992 International Conference document

But why would the masses join a small communist organization to defend abortion or fight racism when there were mass movements and bourgeois parties claiming to stand for these same liberal principles? The only way to win the oppressed to communist leadership is to show how their current leadership—in this instance the liberals—paralyzes and undermines their struggle at every turn due to their loyalty to capitalism. But this required a fight *against liberalism!* Since the ICL denied that liberalism was even a force—the IDOP does not even mention liberalism—not only did it not build a communist pole in the various struggles of the time, but it totally capitulated to and tailed their liberal leaderships. To the extent that the various programmatic documents of the ICL in the post-Soviet period advocate specific intervention in the world, it is generally liberal activism or trade-union economism.

### Marxist Jargon and the Communist Future

One would be remiss, however, to argue that the ICL was simply liberal in the post-Soviet period. The ICL did not solely define its role based on a minimal program of liberalism; it also aspired to the more historic role of transmitting the communist program to future generations. The IDOP describes this perspective as follows:

“Our immediate task is the education and formation of cadres, recruiting the most advanced layers of workers and youth by winning them over to our full program through explanation of our views in sharp counterposition to those of our centrist opponents.”

But what did the ICL mean by its “full program”? In the same IEC Memorandum which claimed the ICL was unique in opposing homophobia, we make the following reaffirmation of the need for communist intervention:

“Even as small, fighting propaganda groups, the sections of the ICL embody the revolutionary program. It is our role to intervene with that program, *to provide revolutionary leadership.* Particularly in a period characterized by defensive struggles against bourgeois attacks, and by understandable skepticism in the working class about parties and Marxism, it is vital to struggle for a program of transitional demands that leads the proletariat ineluctably to one conclusion: the necessity for socialist revolution. The party is the instrumentality to win workers to this consciousness. Ceding the ground to alien class forces through economist liquidation of the party question or tailing of other currents, or conversely adopting a posture of sterile abstentionism or abstract propagandism, is to renounce our reason for existence.”

Such reaffirmations of abstract communist principles are rife throughout the ICL’s prop-

aganda. While every single sentence is formal Marxist orthodoxy, the paragraph is entirely abstract and gives no indication of the political obstacles to bringing the working class to revolutionary consciousness. The question of revolutionary leadership can only be posed concretely, in opposition to the program and ideology of the dominant forces in the workers movement. But with the ICL denying the hold of liberalism in the workers movement, no amount of “transitional demands” could lead the working class to revolutionary consciousness.

This balancing between liberal activism and maximalist jargon defined the work of the ICL throughout the last 30 years. When the party went too far on the road of open capitulation to liberalism, it generally pulled back into a sectarian reaffirmation of the goals and worldview of communism. This tendency was already present in the 1992 International Conference document:

“To revive an international communist movement, it is not enough to expose the historic crimes and betrayals of Stalinism, the global immiseration wrought by capitalist-imperialism and the danger of a nuclear world war. It is also necessary to re-emphasize the liberating goals of communism as the culmination of the rational humanism of the Enlightenment—the integration of humanity on a global scale, the attainment of social and sexual equality and the freedom of all individuals to maximize their capabilities on the basis of mankind’s collective control over the forces of nature.”

This statement very clearly encapsulates the perspective of the ICL after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We sought to “revive” the communist movement by exposing the bankruptcy of Stalinism and the horrors of capitalism and preaching the joys of the communist future. But divorced from a fight against the actual obstacles confronting the working class today, reaffirmations of even the most radical-sounding communist principles amounted to nothing more than liberal utopias.

### IG and ICL: Two Satellites in the Orbit of Liberalism

The most significant split in the ICL’s history is the one which led to the creation of the Internationalist Group (IG) in 1996. As such, it is important to evaluate whether the IG represents the revolutionary continuity of Marxism in the face of the ICL’s revisionism in the post-Soviet period. In one of the IG’s founding documents, “From a Drift



Main documents on the split. Left: July 1996 bulletin by IG founders. Right: *Workers Vanguard* No. 648 (5 July 1996).

**Unfinished business: Sahra Wagenknecht remains roadblock to building revolutionary party in Germany. Right: At 1995 PDS congress. Far right: At pacifist rally in Berlin, February 2023.**



Zöllner/Süddeutsche Zeitung



Agencja Fotograficzna Caro

Toward Abstentionism to Desertion from the Class Struggle” (printed in a July 1996 pamphlet with the same title), former *Workers Vanguard* editor Jan Norden and longtime SL/U.S. cadre Marjorie Stamberg make the following critique of the ICL:

“A short answer is that there has been an increasingly pronounced *tendency toward abstract or passive propagandism*, which divorces the party propaganda from active intervention in the class struggle.... This policy is justified with the argument that since this is a reactionary period, little can be achieved; that perceived opportunities for intervention are illusory, and thus only a reflection of opportunism; and that the job of revolutionary Marxists is defined as (limited to) keeping the flame alive against attempts to squelch it.”

This is essentially correct. The ICL did not stop intervening entirely in class struggle—something the IG itself recognized—but in the fights with Norden and later with the IG, the ICL essentially argued that communist intervention could not play a decisive role in the current course of events because of the “retrogression of consciousness” in the post-Soviet period.

An example of this and a centerpiece of the 1995-96 struggle with Norden was the ICL’s denouncing as inherently opportunist any “regroupment perspective” with the Communist Platform (KPF)—a grouping within the PDS, the remnant of the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany (DDR). In 1995 the PDS was openly embracing social democracy under the blows of a vicious anti-Communist witchhunt pushed by the German bourgeoisie. In this context it was entirely conceivable that the more left-wing elements of the PDS could have been won to Trotskyism as the only program able to fight against capitalist reaction. No matter how likely or not such a scenario was, it was the duty of revolutionaries to fight as hard as possible against the consolidation of what would become Die Linke (Left Party) a few years later, by winning its best elements to a revolutionary program and pushing the rest toward direct liquidation into the Social Democratic Party. The ICL’s rejection of any perspective toward the KPF was a sectarian betrayal. As for the fight waged against Norden on this question, it was demagogic and false.

The focal point of the fight was the speech Norden gave in January 1995 at Berlin’s Humboldt University in front of a KPF audience. In the article justifying the expulsion of Norden and his supporters, the ICL argued that in his speech, “while invoking the program of Trotskyism, Nor-

den presented a *liquidationist* view which *denied the ICL’s role as the conscious revolutionary vanguard*, repeatedly intoning that in Germany in 1989-90 “the key element was missing, the revolutionary leadership” (“A Shamefaced Defection from Trotskyism,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 648, 5 July 1996). In fact, Norden’s speech did not deny the role the ICL played in the DDR, and it was true that the element missing in 1989-90 was revolutionary leadership. The ICL fought with all its might for leadership of the working class in the short-lived opening it had, but it was defeated in this attempt and counterrevolution prevailed. Numerous other accusations were made about the speech being soft on Stalinism, all of which were based on specific formulations that were not inherently unprincipled.

That the attacks against Norden’s 1995 speech were fallacious does not, however, mean that its content was principled, nor that the orientation toward the KPF that our German section pursued under his leadership was principled. The real problem in Norden’s speech is that there is not a single argument as to why Trotskyism was necessary in 1995. It was correct to seek to win elements of the KPF to Trotskyism—the very fact that they sat through a speech by the editor of *Workers Vanguard* speaks to this. But to do this it wasn’t sufficient to simply talk about the ICL’s past accomplishments, it was necessary to link them to the fight for revolutionary leadership in reunified imperialist Germany. Trotskyism vs. Stalinism in 1989 was important to highlight only insofar as it was used to motivate Trotskyism vs. social democracy in 1995. But this was not the perspective of the speech because it was not the perspective of the ICL. The ICL had no answer as to the qualitative importance of Trotskyism in the struggles of post-Soviet Germany, and neither did Norden.

Far from being opposed to the ICL’s perspective in the first years following counterrevolution, Norden and later the IG agreed with its fundamental lines—a point they consistently and truthfully insisted on. Norden played a central role in writing the 1992 International Conference document and the IG refers to it authoritatively. The founding cadre of the IG voted for the SL/U.S. 1994 Conference document. As for the 1996 IEC Memorandum, Norden opposed only the four paragraphs related to the fight against him over Germany. He characterized the rest of the document as “very good on the description of the period coming after

the tremendous defeats for the working class represented by the counter-revolution in the Soviet Union and East Europe” (quoted in “The Post-Soviet Period: Bourgeois Offensive and Sharp Class Battles,” in July 1996 pamphlet). These are the very documents which outlined the revisionist tasks and perspectives for the ICL exposed above. Every opportunist mistake or sectarian stupidity of the ICL in the last 30 years can be traced back to these documents.

Accordingly, the article launching the IG’s publication echoed the main elements of the ICL’s totally wrong analysis of the world:

“The counterrevolution that destroyed the Soviet Union represented a historic defeat for the world working class. Yet the bourgeois triumphalism following in its wake is already beginning to dissipate. What has emerged is not a New World Order dominated by a single ‘superpower,’ but a mounting *disorder* of nationalist bloodletting, imperialist rivalries and repeated outbreaks of sharp class struggles.”

—“Introducing *The Internationalist*,” January-February 1997

While the IG claims to have upheld the fight for revolutionary leadership against the ICL, the truth is that when it came to how this was concretely posed in the post-Soviet period they were just as disoriented.

The problem is not that the IG projected sharp class struggle following the fall of the Soviet Union. Class struggle did not die in 1991, and there were major struggles around the world which provided important openings for communist intervention (South Africa 1994, Italy 1994, France 1995, Mexico 1999, etc.). The central question for communists is the political content of these interventions. Whereas the ICL tended to hunker down and reject tactics and transitional demands, the IG raised “transitional” demands that did nothing to drive a wedge between the working class and its opportunist leadership. “Active intervention in the class struggle” is not revolutionary if it does not help the working class overcome the obstacles in its way. And despite their different leanings, neither the IG nor the ICL had an answer to liberalism, the dominant ideology internationally and the main political obstacle they confronted in the workers movement. In short, neither provided revolutionary leadership.

Many of the most important disputes between the ICL and the IG have revolved around countries that suffer national oppression: Brazil, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Bolivia, Greece, Quebec. Whereas the IG was correct in denouncing

# What a Bad Split Looks Like



Left: Internationalist Group at August 12 anti-fascist protest in Washington, D.C. Right: June 20 protest against Patriot Prayer/Protest Boys fascists in Portland, Oregon.



Fascist terror in Charlottesville. Left: White supremacists march on University of Virginia campus, August 11. Right: Riot day, riot police on city center streets, Virginia Tech, August 12.



Defend China Against Imperialism, Counterrevolution! For Workers Political Revolution!



Workers Political Revolution vs. Capitalist Counterrevolution



We Demand: Full Citizenship Rights for All Immigrants!



Full Citizenship Rights for All Immigrants!

some of the ICL’s most egregious betrayals in relation to these countries (2010 Haiti betrayal, refusal to fight for independence for Puerto Rico, etc.), they uphold the ICL’s historic program, which is the source of these capitulations (see “In Defense of Permanent Revolution,” page 64). The IG—just like the ICL in the past—opposes bourgeois nationalism in oppressed nations based on sectarian class purity instead of seeking to break its hold on the masses by showing how it is an obstacle to both social and national liberation. This approach is entirely counterposed to the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution. It rejects the fight for revolutionary leadership of democratic struggles and necessarily leads to chauvinist capitulation.

The ICL and the IG have spent almost three decades engaging in polemics dominated by hair-splitting and mutual slander while pursuing fundamentally parallel courses. This has been to the detriment of political clarity in the workers movement internationally. The fight that took place against the founding cadre of the IG in 1995-96 was politically unprincipled. Regarding the organizational measures taken against these former members, the record must be set straight. A proper investigation is mandated. There must also be a reckoning on the question of the ICL unilaterally breaking fraternal relations with Luta Metalúrgica/Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil (LM/LQB). These fraternal relations were intertwined with the internal factional disputes of the ICL, and our article justifying our break with LM/LQB provides no principled grounds for our action ("A Break in Fraternal Relations with Luta Metalúrgica," *Workers Vanguard* No. 648, 5 July 1996).

The ICL is committed to breaking the status quo, to conducting serious political clarification and debate with the IG and engaging as much as possible in common action to defend the basic interests of the workers movement. Despite important programmatic differences, the ICL and the IG are relatively close on many issues. On the crucial question of China, the two are almost unique in our stated position for unconditional defense of the workers state and political revolution. As both tendencies recognize, we are entering a period of intense turmoil and conflict in the world. The course of events and struggle is sure to shake up the left, and it is the duty of both organizations to further political clarity over questions of revolutionary strategy in this new period. The fight to reforge the Fourth International is more urgent than ever. It cannot tolerate cover-ups, demagoguery, mudslinging or sectarianism. As Trotsky wrote in the Transitional Program (1938):

"To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base

one's program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives—these are the rules of the Fourth International."

### How to Explain the ICL's Degeneration?

The destruction of the Soviet Union posed a major turn for the ICL. Whereas the terminal collapse of the DDR and the Soviet Union brought to the fore the ICL's strongest qualities—staunch Soviet defensism, revolutionary determination, internationalism and tactical flexibility in action—the following period brought its weaknesses to the fore—dismissal of liberalism, revision of permanent revolution, American-centeredness and doctrinal rigidity. The ICL was a tiny International centered in imperialist countries, whose growth had already been stagnating for some years. Counterrevolution brought about a wave of demoralization and the party cracked under the pressures of this new period. The fact of the matter is that it was unable to effectuate the turn that was posed.

This was not a preordained outcome, nor was it irreversible. There were many turning points in the last 30 years that should have led to an in-depth re-evaluation of the ICL's course. It was no secret to anyone that we were increasingly disoriented. But the more the years passed, the deeper the conservatism and opportunism became entrenched. The party's historic cadre proved incapable of correcting our trajectory.

Yet the ICL was not dead. Despite decades of rejecting the task of providing revolutionary leadership, the party still managed to recruit a few handfuls of cadres internationally strongly committed to the fight for communism and attracted to the ICL by its revolutionary past. It took a global pandemic, the collapse of the organization and three years of struggle, but events have shown that there was still enough revolutionary juice in the ICL—including in some dogged old-timers—to fundamentally reorient the party and embark once more on the arduous path of revolutionary struggle. ■

**ICL REARMS**

**EL ANTIIMPERIALISTA**  
 PUBLICACIÓN DEL GRUPO ESPARTACISTA DE MÉXICO  
 NÚMERO 1 MARZO DE 2023

**¡Por la emancipación obrera y nacional!**  
 Se refunda el Grupo Espartacista de México

**Trotskyismo vs. populismo**  
 Spartacist League

**It's Time! Drive the AUKUS Supporters Out of the ALP!**

**icl-fi.org**

**WORKERS VANGUARD**  
 Liberalism: Dead End for Black Liberation  
**For Black Trotskyism**  
 For a Multiracial Vanguard Party!

**Ο ΜΠΟΛΣΕΒΙΚΟΣ**  
 ΓΙΑ ΜΙΑ ΕΡΓΑΤΙΚΗ ΚΥΒΕΡΝΗΣΗ ΚΚΕ/ΠΑΜΕ!  
 Να παλέψουμε ΤΩΡΑ για:  
 ➔ Διαγραφή του Χρέους!  
 ➔ Ανατροπή των Μνημονίων!  
 ➔ Εξόδο από την ΕΕ/ΝΑΤΟ!

**LE BOLCHEVIK**  
 Usines, gares, facs, lycées...  
 Maintenant il faut y aller!  
**Occupations partout!**

**SPARTAKIST**  
 Bilanz der Spartakist-Kampagne  
**Pazifistische Einheitsapostel kriechen vor dem deutschem Imperialismus**

# Why the ICL Collapsed & How We Reforged It

*We print below a presentation by comrade Perrault, secretary of the International Secretariat (I.S.), at the Eighth International Conference.*

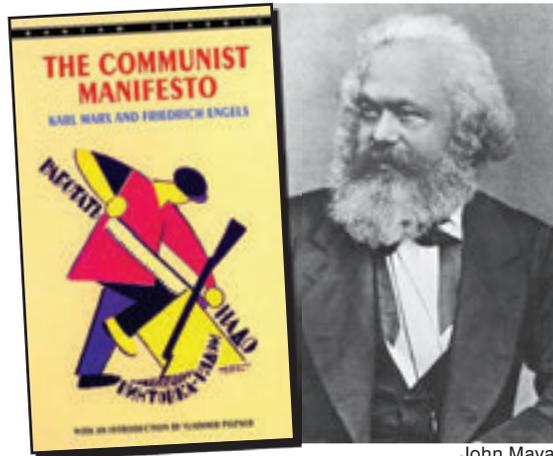
I want to start with a quote from Cannon which encapsulates the central task of this conference:

“The task of the uncorrupted revolutionists, obliged by circumstances to start the work of organizational reconstruction, has never been to proclaim a new revelation—there has been no lack of such Messiahs, and they have all been lost in the shuffle—but to reinstate the old program and bring it up to date.”

—James P. Cannon, “The Degeneration of the Communist Party and the New Beginning,” *Fourth International*, Fall 1954

In some cases, we must go back 30 years to get to the old program; in others we need to go all the way back to Trotsky. But that is what we are doing, not inventing something new but going back to basics and applying them to the current reality.

The most essential point that will run through the entire proceedings of this conference is the question of revolutionary leadership. This is the fundamental point on which we floundered, and it is by fighting to reassert it that we have been rearming over the last two years. But what is revolutionary leadership? The answer is simple to the point of sounding simplistic. To provide revolutionary leadership is to guide the struggle of the working class in a manner that will “bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat” (*Communist Manifesto*). Since the capitalist mode of production is based on the exploitation of the working class, advancing the interests of the proletariat must necessarily bring it toward the seizure of power. The difficulty, however, isn’t abstractly asserting these points but approaching every problem from the understanding that the proletariat needs *its own, independent path of action* and that *only Marxism can provide it*.



John Mayall

**“The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.”**

**—Communist Manifesto**

Another important theme in this conference will be the question of the Marxist method; that is, the need to root our program in a dialectical-materialist study of the living class forces of society. The next reporters will elaborate on this question in relation to the world situation and the question of permanent revolution. For the time being, I just want to link this question once more to revolutionary leadership and insist that the Marxist method is first and foremost partisan. We approach the world not as neutral observers but as the most consistent fighters for the class interests of the proletariat. You cannot make sense of reality if you do not approach it as an active factor seeking to influence and change it. The method and the aims cannot be divorced.

The main substance of my report will be to evaluate the work of the ICL from our intervention in the DDR (East Germany) and the Soviet Union up to today. The point is not to aimlessly ponder our past but to shape our future. I will approach the question not as a neutral observer but with the stated agenda of changing the ICL’s trajectory—to put the party on track to provide revolutionary leadership for the working class internationally. Without this starting point, any evaluation of our past is sure to get lost in the bottomless pit of confusion and sterility that characterized our party for the last 30 years. It will necessarily flip-flop between insisting on the formal correctness of certain aspects of our program and simply presenting ourselves as without any contradictions and dead as a revolutionary party. Neither of these is correct. The only way to properly evaluate the ICL and its contradictions is through measuring its work based on how it sought to advance the interests of the working class at a given time and place.

If there is one point I want comrades to assimilate from this report, it is that advancing the independent interests of the working



Spartacist



Spartacist

**ICL fight against counterrevolution. Left: Banner at 1991 Revolution Day anti-Yeltsin rally in Moscow reads: "Return to the Road of Lenin and Trotsky." Above: Spartakist speaker at ICL-initiated mass rally in Treptow Park, Berlin, January 1990.**

class is *the decisive question* for revolutionaries. The second you lose track of this you are lost. As I already said, the whole conference will insist on this point.

### The ICL's Fight Against Counterrevolution

No event since the Second World War compares in historical significance to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. Any evaluation of the ICL's recent record must start from here. Our party's action in these events tested our revolutionary mettle. We entered 1989 a tiny tendency plagued by significant deficiencies and problems. But revolutionary parties are not born from immaculate conception. Whatever problems we had, we fought with all our might to provide an alternative road for the working class in the DDR and USSR.

Despite our minuscule forces, we did not hitch ourselves to anyone's wagon but fought to chart an independent path corresponding to the objective interests of the working class. The events in 1989 and 1990-92 screamed out for opposition to counterrevolution in struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy, which was literally liquidating itself and the workers states. This is what we fought for, and we were the only tendency in the world to do so at this crucial turning point of the 20th century. This establishes our revolutionary credentials without a shadow of a doubt.

It is important to understand what made our intervention revolutionary. It wasn't only that we mobilized all our forces to fight counterrevolution. Nor is it that we had a sizeable impact far outweighing our forces. It is that, against all reactionary roads on offer, we fought for the only path that could advance the historic interests of the working class.

### The ICL After 1991: Dropping Revolutionary Leadership

Now how does this compare to the role we set for ourselves after counterrevolution? It couldn't be more different. You only need a quick read of some of the hundreds of pages written to define our tasks in the post-Soviet period to see that we did not even offer the pretense that our program could play a decisive role in the events of the period. I will not repeat the points in the document submitted on this matter [see page 7]. Comrades have read the document and

I am eager to know your opinion on the three main points it outlined. I will limit myself to repeating the following quote from the 1992 International Conference document, which really encapsulates how we set our tasks:

"To revive an international communist movement, it is not enough to expose the historic crimes and betrayals of Stalinism, the global immiseration wrought by capitalist-imperialism and the danger of a nuclear world war. It is also necessary to re-emphasize the liberating goals of communism as the culmination of the rational humanism of the Enlightenment."

—*Spartacist* (English edition) No. 47-48, Winter 1992-93

Let's pick this apart. First, the task set is not to advance the interests of the working class but to "revive the communist movement." The communists as the vanguard of the working class will grow as the position of the working class strengthens, not in isolation from its struggles.

But how did we propose to "revive the communist movement"? We outlined four points: expose the crimes of Stalinism, expose immiseration under capitalism, expose the danger of nuclear war, re-emphasize the liberating goals of communism. None of these points have anything to do with working-class struggle. This is the opposite of our intervention in the DDR, where the energies of our entire International were concentrated on leading the working class, not in the abstract but in the heat of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary upheavals.

### The IG Split

A sizeable part of the document submitted on "The ICL's Post-Soviet Revisionism" deals with the split between the ICL and the Internationalist Group (IG). This is obviously a very sensitive issue. We have spent decades throwing hostile and confusing polemics at each other, probably half of which consist of accusing the other party of lying. Most outside observers cannot see the difference between the two organizations—a fact which remains true despite the growing political gap. The only way to make sense of all this is to seize on the decisive question, revolutionary leadership. That is, to evaluate both organizations according to how they have contributed to advancing working-class struggle. When you look at it this way everything suddenly becomes much clearer. It becomes obvious that neither of us could make an argument as to why Marxism and not

# Greetings from Bolshevik-Leninist of Australia

Hello comrades,

On behalf of Bolshevik-Leninist, I would like to extend the warmest greetings to this international gathering of comrades of the International Communist League.

It is commendable that the ICL has fought to return to its communist foundation, to struggle for a Marxist organisation in the present day; not as a group hiding in a bunker holding out for better days but an organisation which is willing to struggle for those better days in the here and now. Not to act as a pressure group on liberals but to hoist a Marxist pole that directly attacks liberalism and poses the question of revolutionary leadership point blank.

We find that one of the most remarkable aspects of the ICL's recent struggles is the fact you seek to leave no stone unturned. That you investigate positions and questions that reach to the very beginning and even preceding the formation of the Spartacist League/US, from the national question to permanent revolution. This reveals a political vitality that we have not seen in other contemporary groups. We commend that you do so in a manner that does not discredit your history, but carries through to completion what your predecessors struggled for. Reaffirming, and not junking, your organisation's Marxist history is the only genuine way that you can preserve revolutionary continuity, and thus re-orientate yourselves to the present day. The fact that you have done so in such a radical way and with no significant defections shows the political seriousness of comrades here today.

We have only begun to seriously study your re-orientation, but already comrades have felt like we have jumped leaps and bounds. We have been jump-started in such a short time period with the fruits of three years of the heated struggles within the ICL. Your framework, in line with Trotsky's transitional demands, has acted like an electric shock that has motivated us immensely. Marxism is a guide to action, and we had been stuck with the contradiction between the abstract analysis in our articles and practical action here and now. We have now been given a solid foundation to answer these questions that we had previously only begun to grapple with. For that, we are extremely grateful. We hope comrades here today can feel the same electricity that we have felt.

There is a lot of work to be done. If you succeed in the task that you have sought out, to apply the Marxist framework as the guide for your organisation both internationally and on a national level, it would only be a gain for the working class, and we hope dearly that you succeed. If you do, this conference will be looked back upon with world-historic significance. Of Marxism returning with strength in the 21st century. Of, in nucleus form, the foundations atop which will be built a reformed Fourth International Trotsky would recognise. We look forward to listening to the discussions of the conference and the proposals adopted. We wish you the best.

Thank you.

liberalism—the dominant ideology of the period—was the tool to advance the interests of the working class and the oppressed. That is really the central thing. Once this is clear, it is much easier to look with clear eyes at the secondary aspects of the disputes. In engaging with the IG in the future—and really any other left organization—it is crucial to always start not from their abstract doctrine but from how their intervention seeks to impact class struggle both internationally and domestically.

## From 1992 to 2017

I could spend a lot of time going over all the different fights and party regimes between 1992 and 2017. But not only would this take forever, it would not be interesting or useful. If you look at this period through the lens of revolutionary leadership, it is easy to see that no matter the specific opportunist or sectarian bent we were on, our starting point was never to motivate *why* a Marxist leadership was crucial against the liberal leaderships of the struggles at hand. We certainly threw rocks at the leaders, from the antiwar move-

ments to the anti-globalization movement and the various movements of identity politics. But we couldn't argue why you needed to be a Marxist today.

I could produce hundreds of quotes showing this. However, this isn't necessary. Every comrade who was in the party at the time knows that this was our perspective and themselves argued with a contact or new recruit that the point was to have a program nice and warm for the future, not for today. For those who weren't in the party, I think the difference in approach from what we write now and any article written in the last 30 years jumps out clearly. Here is part of a message we recently received from a sympathizer in Britain which speaks to this:

"There's been some amazing stuff coming out in the last few papers (WH & WV) requiring a whole new mindset on any and every question. Simply put, reform v revolution. It's such a departure from before the fight in the ICL that it surprises oneself at how poor, how non-revolutionary one (myself) answered the questions of the day.... It's like a new party. It is a new party. Not centrist but revolutionary. And you get the feeling when reading the new papers that the articles are



Long march to nowhere. Hundreds of pages of ICL internal bulletins invoked fight for “revolutionary continuity” divorced from main task: revolutionary opposition to liberalism.

going on the offensive, there’s a confidence [which] exudes from them, a confidence imbued by the sheer correctness of the program they’re explaining. Stirring stuff.”

I think this external point of view is worth a hundred quotes.

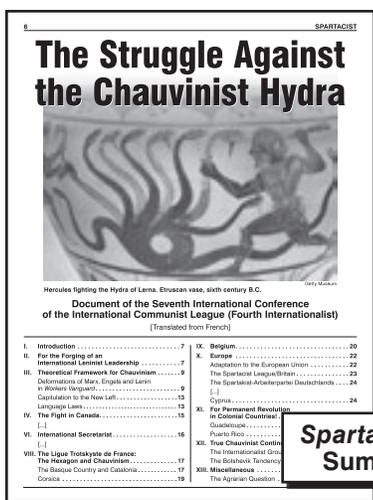
### The 2017 International Conference

Now, it’s important to be clear that not everyone is happy with the ICL’s new orientation. Here is a much less favorable evaluation of our new course from Brunoy, an ex-member and historic cadre of the Ligue trotskyste de France:

“The Québécois nationalists then took the time to ensure their ‘programmatic’ and organizational takeover of the ICL by gradually agglomerating the few remaining vibrant forces around themselves.” [our translation]

The “young revisionist Québécois nationalists” is how Brunoy refers to me and the rest of the Montreal collective throughout his document [laughter]. He goes on:

“Now firmly at the helm, they can semi-openly formalize the development of the rest of their revisionist program and the ICL’s break from the Trotskyist program, to ‘adapt’ the transitional program to a ‘new reality,’ a great classic among all ex-Trotskyists.”



Document of 2017 7th International Conference of ICL correcting key revision on national question. But, as expressed in its title, its tenor was liberal moralist and abstract.

Spartacist No. 65 Summer 2017

Interestingly, for Brunoy the turning point is the 2017 International Conference, when comrade Coelho “let the foxes into the henhouse”:

“It is clear that the programmatic break on the national question of the 2017 conference was a qualitative turning point and that the 2020 crisis was only its logical and natural outcome.”

Brunoy is right to give particular emphasis to the 2017 conference, but he is wrong in saying that it marked a qualitative turn in the ICL.

Brunoy and our other opponents hate 2017, and mostly it is for the wrong reasons. What they hate about 2017 is precisely the one point that was correct: our assertion that the struggle for national liberation is not an obstacle to be moved to the side but a motor force for revolution. The 2017 conference was different from the rest of the post-Soviet period conferences because it corrected (albeit very partially) a revision of Leninism which went back to the early years of our tendency. That said, if we go back to our fundamental criteria of revolutionary leadership, it is easy to see that the 2017 conference, like everything else we did in the post-Soviet period, was not about guiding the working class in

world events and was thus fundamentally flawed. We stated explicitly:

“This [conference] document is therefore focused on the essential conclusions of the past several months [of internal discussion], rather than on important changes in the world political situation.... The overriding question for our organization is how to rearm ourselves programmatically and forge a new leadership that will be able to take on these new developments.”

—Spartacist (English edition) No. 65, Summer 2017

Quite absurdly, we claimed that burying ourselves in internal polemics would arm us for the world. Well, unsurprisingly it didn’t. The leadership was elected based on moralistic and liberal fights, with a grain of essential programmatic truth. And sure enough, when we were hit by the pandemic, the entire organization collapsed. In this sense it is true that 2017 paved the way for the 2020 collapse, but not in the way Brunoy argues. It was the failure to fight for revolutionary leadership in 2017 that led to our collapse, not the reassertion of basic Leninist points on the national question.

### The 2020 Collapse

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic gave striking confirmation that world events are the real test for parties claiming to be revolutionary. Instead of reacting to the greatest world crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union by providing a road of struggle for the working class, we embraced the response to the pandemic pushed by the liberal bourgeoisie and very literally liquidated. This is where the evolution of the ICL becomes both more contradictory and interesting. How is it that we managed to go from total collapse to where we are today at this conference, setting the basis for a fundamentally different and revolutionary course?

There is a tendency in the party to present our reorientation as a constant and gradual process, that somehow the core of the current international leadership has been fighting the same fight since 2020 and maybe even as far back as 2017. There is an *element* of truth in this, but fundamentally it is wrong. What is true is that in 2020 there was resistance to liquidating the party into liberalism. But this is all it was. Don’t get me wrong. Without this tendency the party would be dead right

**Bengaluru, India:  
Cremation of  
Covid-19 victims,  
May 2021. Pandemic  
was catastrophe for  
working people that  
cried out for defensive  
struggle against  
capitalist rulers.**

Rajkumar/Reuters



now; in that sense it was crucial. But resistance to becoming liberals is a far cry from being communists. We limited our role to that of left critics of the Spartacist League/U.S. We were not charting an independent path but simply pushing for less liberalism. The result was a confusing mess of mostly shallow and unintelligible political fights.

This led to the infamous International Executive Committee (IEC) delegation to the SL/U.S. in the summer of 2020. During this trip the delegation pushed a polarization based on liberal moralism, accusing some comrades of being insensitive on the black question and claiming programmatic agreement with others deemed more sensitive. At bottom this represented an attempt to flip the page on the struggle shaking the party and once more just give a facelift to the ICL's liberal course—that is, to have a big fight, condemn a group of comrades, make some abstract points about revolution and continue on a fundamentally similar path.

The fight waged against the delegation was slow to get off the ground, and if you look back at the main document criticizing what it did, you'll see that it is quite rigid and abstract. But there is one essential point: the refusal to go back to business as usual. We had an understanding that liberalism had brought about the collapse of the party and that we could not conciliate it, no matter the price. Here is what I argued at the December 2020 IEC plenum:

“When the proletarian vanguard subordinates its program to bourgeois forces and is not acting as an *independent factor*, the consequences are disastrous. These lessons apply to the much smaller scale of our current party struggles. If the ICL tolerates and conciliates the SL/U.S. having abandoned Trotskyism, it will be finished as any kind of subjective revolutionary factor.”

This is the basis on which the I.S. was elected in 2020. In some ways it sounds like what I am arguing today. But it is fundamentally different.

First, it was false to claim that the problems of the ICL were all due to the SL/U.S. But more importantly, the assertion about the political independence of the working class and the need to split with reformism was posed totally abstractly, totally divorced from the gigantic crisis shaking the world at the time. So, on the one hand the refusal to conciliate was of decisive importance in getting us to where we are today. But on the other, it did not represent a fundamental break because it

was disconnected from our actual intervention into the world.

I believe most I.S. comrades can pinpoint the exact time and place when our bubble burst about the fights we had been waging “against the revisionism of the SL/U.S.” In March 2021 we finally organized a serious discussion on the Covid-19 pandemic. As we were working on the motion articulating our opposition to the lockdowns, we referred to Lenin's writings during the First World War, in particular his July 1915 article “The Defeat of One's Own Government in the Imperialist War,” where he argues:

“The only policy of actual, not verbal disruption of the ‘class truce’, of acceptance of the class struggle, is for the proletariat to *take advantage* of the *difficulties* experienced by its government and its bourgeoisie *in order to overthrow them.*”

It was in working on that motion and thinking about this point by Lenin that it hit us. While the pandemic had been raging for an entire year, causing the working class incalculable suffering, we—the so-called vanguard of the proletariat—had spent the year engulfed in internal discussion, providing no road for the working class. We certainly weren't taking advantage of the difficulties experienced by the capitalists to advance the struggle for revolution. At that moment it became clear just how bankrupt our course had been. Up to that point our direction of travel was crucial, but the content of what we were fighting for was fundamentally wrong.

The IEC statement against the lockdowns [see *Spartacist* (English edition) No. 67, August 2022] represents the qualitative turn in our International because it put forward a program corresponding to the interests of the working class in this world crisis. Although late in doing this, the ICL remains unique in putting forward such a perspective.

### “Workers' Lockdowns”

My understanding is that comrades from the Bolshevik-Leninist (B-L) group have vacated their position calling for “workers' lockdowns.” Let me nonetheless make a few remarks on this question. We can discuss the tactical question of how best to put forward an independent proletarian perspective in the pandemic, but we must be clear that to be principled this perspective must be explicitly counterposed to that of the bourgeoisie.

Who knows how a revolutionary workers state would deal with a pandemic? It would depend on the concretes. Shutting down certain segments of the economy would not be excluded on principle, but that's not the point. The main point in the pandemic as it actually happened was that to defend its own interests the working class had to *fight*, not accept simply staying locked up and following the dictates of their rulers. In popular consciousness lockdowns administered by the working class would at best be understood as lockdowns with additional social measures; at worst they would be seen as workers enforcing the draconian measures themselves. In neither case would it do anything to drive a wedge between the policy pushed by governments and the interests of the working class. Instead, it bridges the two.

I believe that the reason for wanting to raise calls such as "workers' lockdowns" comes from an inability to refute the moral propaganda during the pandemic about "saving lives." The key argument for the working class to advance its interests in the pandemic was that it needed to *oppose* the government's response *even though* it was fighting the virus. If you can't explain how government responses were detrimental to the working class, you are bound to either take the idiotic position that communists don't care about human lives or try to bridge the interests of the working class with the rulers' lockdown policy. The key to breaking through this dilemma was to show how fulfilling the interests of the working class during the pandemic—both immediate and long-term—collided with the current social and political structures. It then becomes clear that the working class shouldn't have supported government policies but needed its own independent and counterposed strategy to defend its safety and livelihood.

## Reforging the ICL

Publishing the lockdown statement was a qualitative turning point, but the struggle was far from over. Once on track to provide revolutionary leadership to the working class, we came face to face with a wall of accumulated methodological and political revisionism which blocked us at every turn. It was one thing to take our sword out of its sheath; it was another to learn how to sharpen and wield it. When you look at the ICL's record since 2021, you see that our course has been a revolutionary one: we have sought to provide leadership to the working class in the main events that have shaken the world and the countries where we have sections. Our interventions have been modest and uneven but crucial. I will now elaborate on the tortuous path and different stages we went through to make these interventions happen.

### 1) Reaffirming the Split Between Reform and Revolution

Almost immediately after publication of the lockdown statement, there were attempts by various sections and a part of the I.S. itself to present the dividing line in the workers movement as being for or against lockdowns. Against this it was necessary to reassert the fundamental lesson of Leninism—that the dividing line in the workers movement is between reform and revolution. Whereas this was abstractly done back in December 2020, this same point became concrete and directly related to our intervention in the pandemic. Now don't get me wrong. If you look back at the fights we had on this question in 2021, you'll find plenty of very theoretical and somewhat abstract points. But unlike in

2020, the question of splitting the workers movement along the lines of reform and revolution was wielded to defend a fundamentally revolutionary intervention into world events.

This same political point was crucial in the Spartacist League/Britain, where to put the section back on track we had to correct its capitulation to Labourism in the Corbyn years. In the 2021 SL/B conference document, we reasserted the following basic point:

"The reason Leninists oppose the 'broad church' (or party of the whole class) is that the *revolutionary wing* is subordinated to the *reformist wing*, not that the social-democratic left is hampered by the social-democratic right. Hence for Leninists, fighting against the Labourite 'broad church' does not mean fighting against the Blairites. It means fighting against aspirant revolutionaries (for example, the SL/B preaching unity with Corbyn.)"

—"In Defence of the Revolutionary Programme (II)," *Spartacist* (English edition) No. 67, August 2022

Put simply, we fight for a revolutionary party, not a more left-wing social democracy. The SL/B conference also extended this understanding to the trade-union question. Against decades of past practice, we argued:

"Only leaderships in the unions built on a revolutionary programme can transcend the narrow sectoral interests of a particular industry, union or country and lead fights which will advance the interests of the working class as a whole. This requires exposing the class-collaborationist programme of the current leadership of the unions *and* the more militant version of this same programme pushed by the reformist left."

Now, both points quoted above were absolutely crucial. But very quickly the tendency in the party became to simply repeat them as rote formulas. We have had to insist time and time again that asserting these truths divorced from concrete struggle is meaningless.

### 2) Tactics

This brings me to the next point: tactics. In Germany we rearmed differently than in Britain. We started by making a key intervention and then deepened our theoretical foundation. Once it is understood that revolutionary leadership is about guiding working-class struggle, the need to exploit contradictions and polarizations in society becomes obvious. This requires the proper use of tactics. The Spartakist-Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands campaign to drive the NATO/EU supporters out of Die Linke (Left Party) in the context of the Ukraine war was a concrete application of the fight for revolutionary leadership and the need to split the workers movement between reform and revolution [see "Throw the EU/NATO Supporters Out of the Left!", *Spartacist* (English edition) No. 67, August 2022]. By putting pressure on left social democracy to fight back against the social-chauvinist wave gripping Germany, we were able to show very clearly why only a revolutionary program could provide a real basis to oppose the war.

Of course, we could have stood back and abstractly called for revolution against German imperialism. But that would have done nothing to advance the interests of the workers movement. The course we fought for provided a way to fight German imperialism while strengthening the authority of the revolutionary vanguard. Our interventions exposed how the left wing of Die Linke would rather dump its pacifist anti-NATO program than break unity with warmongers.

Any semi-decent leftist who looks at the German political context today—with the right-wing Alternative for Germany becoming the strongest political force—must concede that the Spartakists were right about throwing NATO/EU sup-

**July 1967:  
Nationalist rally  
welcomes de Gaulle  
to Quebec. Banner  
reads: “Our French  
State...We’ll Get It!”  
In oppressed nations,  
it is impossible to  
break illusions in  
capitalist state without  
recognizing legitimate  
aspirations for  
national emancipation.**



porters out of the workers movement. Failure to do so has totally paralyzed and demoralized the left. Meanwhile, reaction has the wind in its sails, benefiting from the growing opposition to the Ukraine war.

### 3) Getting at the Roots of Post-Soviet Revisionism

To go back to the more internal front, at the start of 2022 we found ourselves in the infuriating situation that, almost a year since the publication of the lockdown statement, practically no section had advanced in the slightest. This pushed us to dig deeper and get to the source of this paralysis. If our problem had only been the pandemic, then we should have bounced back when the political issue was settled. But that didn't happen, and it became increasingly clear that what we were pushing for in the pandemic was totally different from the International's perspective in the last 30 years.

It is through fighting to provide revolutionary leadership in the world today that we could understand our problems in the preceding period. You could never understand the problems of the ICL simply by studying our internal discussions. Again, it's only by fighting for a revolutionary course today that you can make sense of our previous disorientation.

### 4) Permanent Revolution

In the case of our sections in nationally oppressed countries, even going back 30 years didn't do us any good. We were first confronted with the problem in Quebec. To put forward a revolutionary program in the pandemic, we had to expose the illusion that the state is the key instrument for the advancement of the Québécois nation. But to break this illusion we had to recognize that it had a legitimate basis. The development of a proto-state enabled the Québécois nation to push back against anglophone domination and brought significant social progress. It is by looking to Trotsky's writings on permanent revolution that we were able to crack this problem and understand the role of the Quebec bourgeoisie as a semi-oppressed, semi-ruling class which, while taking the lead of the national struggle, undermines it and betrays it at every turn.

As we extended this understanding to Greece and then Mexico, it became clear that our party's whole history on permanent revolution was revisionist. This realization didn't

come through poring over volumes of Trotsky—although that was certainly necessary—but by fighting to provide answers for the working class now. You cannot take a single step in this direction if you think that defending Greek borders is entirely reactionary or you denounce measures to educate the peasantry in Mexico as a reactionary ploy to transform them into...literate workers.

### 5) Stalinist Bureaucracy

The exact same process occurred in relation to China. To advance the interests of the working class there, you must confront the Stalinist bureaucracy. This is true in general just as it is in relation to the defense of China against imperialism and counterrevolution. The defense of China requires a struggle *against* the Stalinists. For any who may still have lingering doubts about our recent articles being too harsh on the Stalinists, I'll let Trotsky do the answering:

“The struggle against war, imperialism, and fascism demands a ruthless struggle against Stalinism, splotched with crimes. Whoever defends Stalinism directly or indirectly, whoever keeps silent about its betrayals or exaggerates its military strength is the worst enemy of the revolution, of socialism, of the oppressed peoples. The sooner the Kremlin gang is overthrown by the armed offensive of the workers, the greater will be the chances for a socialist regeneration of the USSR, the closer and broader will be the perspectives of the international revolution.”

—“A Fresh Lesson” (October 1938)

As this shows, there is no such thing as being “too hard on Stalinism.”

### 6) Fighting Centrism

A key lesson highlighted during the SL/U.S. conference last December is the importance of breaking with centrism. The question is whether the Marxist pole will fight to be hegemonic or if it will make concessions compromising and restricting its own activities and principles. It is one thing to take correct principled positions and another to draw the practical conclusions of these positions and fight in accordance with them. The independent action of the working class gets posed most acutely over centrism. Unity or split with opportunism—that is the question. It was crucial to elect the SL/U.S. leadership based on a sharp fight against centrism. That said, the struggles in the SL/U.S. since the conference

show that the fight against centrism isn't a one-time deal but gets posed all the time in every aspect of our work.

### 7) Guiding Working-Class Struggle Through Every Twist and Turn

At the current stage, most sections have been able to take some significant steps in reasserting our fundamental tasks and/or have made significant interventions into domestic events. But revolutionary leadership is not just planting the programmatic banner or making a few good interventions. It is a constant process which is never settled but gets tested again and again. To win the allegiance of the working class, we must build a party that can guide its struggles at every step of the way, whether it is on the offensive or on the defensive.

The most experience we have had with this is in the SL/B, where in the past year we were able to make a series of interventions at decisive points of the strike wave that shook the country. At each stage of the conflict, we fought to advance the struggle while driving a wedge between the Labourite leaders of the movement and the interests of the working class. Every single turn in the situation required fights inside the party to get the new orientation right. In seeking to guide the struggle, we were naturally driven to rely heavily on our few tendrils in the labor movement. We could not provide leadership to the struggle without knowing the mood and pressures in the working class. Our intervention was based on a constant back and forth between our members in the unions and the SL/B leadership. In fact, this process led our members in the unions to become integral parts of that leadership.

This highlights the type of party we are seeking to forge, a revolutionary workers party. A party composed overwhelmingly of workers and whose policies reflect their class interest. The role of intellectuals in such a party is to break with the methods and attitudes of the petty bourgeoisie and subordinate themselves to furthering the interests of the working class. You cannot build a working-class party in an ivory tower, cut off from the working class. For the time being, our roots in the workers movement are minuscule. But we must be crystal-clear about our perspective and we need to work

in accordance with it, right here and now. Overall, our intervention in Britain was modest, and we certainly made mistakes. But I do think it is rich in lessons and a small example of what it means to provide revolutionary leadership.

In fact, I think the same can be said of the entirety of our course in the last two years. It is important to keep in mind that the process we went through is sure to be repeated in one way or another in left groups all over the world. The current political turmoil internationally is exercising great pressure on the Marxist left, and there are sure to be polarizations and openings. The documents submitted to this conference provide answers to the most crucial questions posed today. We must intervene very aggressively with this material. But it will also be crucial to bring out the lessons of our struggles and hopefully help make it easier for others who, like us, are seeking to chart a revolutionary course. This is in part the objective of having the B-L group at our conference this weekend.

### Conclusion

To conclude: As I incessantly repeated throughout my report, we must approach every question from the point of view of providing an independent working-class perspective based on advancing the fight for socialist revolution. Then the next step is to concretely root this perspective in a Marxist understanding of the class forces and obstacles at any given time and place.

After three years of arduous struggle, we have made some gigantic strides. But this is only the starting line. Let's not downplay how precarious our situation remains. Our party is far from consolidated on the politics of the conference documents. We must further steel ourselves; world events promise to be unforgiving and will severely punish any faltering. Whoever doesn't have the stomach for a constant and grueling struggle isn't in the right party. As the conference loomed some comrades understood this and quit. So be it. We go forward determined as ever, and clearer than ever on our tasks in this new period. This conference is the first step.

*Down with centrism and sectarianism! Forward to the reformed Fourth International! ■*

**Strike Wave in Britain 2022-23**

At every stage, Spartacist League provided a program to lead workers struggles to victory against sabotage by union misleaders.

**Queen croaks, Labourites crawl**

**To hell with half measures  
Workers must run the country!**

No. 248, Autumn 2022

**Programme for NHS strikes:**

- High wages
- Quality healthcare
- Women's liberation!

**Tories on life support...  
union tops won't pull the plug**

No. 249, Spring 2023

**Strike wave faces defeat: leaders to blame**

**How to rebuild union power**

**NEVER CROSS A PICKET LINE!**

FIGHT FOR THESE DEMANDS:

- 1 - BUILD PICKET LINES-DON'T CROSS THEM!
- 2 - ENOUGH OF UNIONS SCABBING ON EACH OTHER'S STRIKES!
- 3 - DEFEND ALL WHO REFUSE TO CROSS

No. 250, Summer 2023

# Editorial Note...

(continued from page 2)

imperialism demands a communist program and leadership. However, this is obstructed by two non-revolutionary trends in the left. The first supports nationalism as progressive, chaining the toilers to the national bourgeoisie. The second, reacting to the first, “opposes” the national bourgeoisie by dismissing the struggle for national emancipation.

Since its inception, the ICL was firmly in the second trend, treating the struggle for national liberation not as a lever for revolution but as a thorn in the side. The document “In Defense of Permanent Revolution—For Communist Leadership of the Anti-Imperialist Struggle!” (page 64) adopted at the conference repudiates this course and provides a program to break with both trends. To win the masses away from the bourgeois nationalists, communists must push *forward* the struggle against imperialism, showing at every stage that breaking with nationalism is a necessary condition for victory.

The document “In Defense of the Second and Fourth Comintern Congresses” (page 53) defends Lenin, Trotsky and the early Comintern against the revisionist criticism by the ICL. In particular, it upholds the tactic of the anti-imperialist united front against our sectarian rejection of its use and its abuse by Stalinists and other opportunists.

Concerning women’s liberation in the neocolonies, our previous program was based on denouncing backward ideas and practices instead of fighting the material conditions that maintain them: centrally, imperialist plunder. This was not Marxism but liberal preaching that put us in a political bloc with “progressive” pro-imperialist NGOs. The document “Permanent Revolution & Women’s Liberation” (page 58) endorsed at the conference corrects this approach.

Our conference also adopted the positions summarized in “Puerto Rico: For Independence and Socialism!” (page 60) and “Malvinas/Falklands War: The Main Enemy Was Imperialism” (page 61), which correct key capitulations of our tendency to imperialism.

\* \* \*

It is no secret that the ICL has been politically disoriented for decades. The pandemic triggered the collapse of our party, but this was only the straw that broke the camel’s back. The opening presentation at the conference by the secretary of the International Secretariat, comrade Perrault, “Why the ICL Collapsed & How We Reforged It” (page 13), lays out how fighting to provide an independent and revolutionary path for workers and the oppressed forced us to get to the root of our disorientation and led us to this historic conference.

## Corrections

In *Spartacist* (English edition) No. 67 (August 2022), the credit for the photo on page 15 should be @Arbeiter-Innenmacht instead of Klasse gegen Klasse, and the date of the protest was 9 April, not 6 May 2022. On page 21 of the same issue, first paragraph, a German leftist organization is wrongly named “Communist Opposition.” In fact, this should be “Communist Organization.”



Spartacist

Voting session at ICL Eighth International Conference.

This presentation motivates the third main conference document, “The ICL’s Post-Soviet Revisionism” (page 7), which demonstrates how for the last 30 years the ICL rejected the need for Marxism to guide the struggles of the day. The ICL did claim to stand for communism and revolution, but this is not the fundamental criterion for revolutionary leadership. As the document “What Is Revolutionary Leadership?” (page 6) lays out, it consists in the ability to provide a path of struggle advancing the historic interests of the working class at a given time and place.

It is in this light that we reviewed the 1995-96 fight against Jan Norden and other comrades, whose expulsions led to the creation of the Internationalist Group (IG). The fight against Norden was unprincipled, and the expulsions led to two organizations, the IG and ICL, sharing the same fundamental centrist program and disorientation.

The decades-long crisis inside our organization is a reflection of the broader crisis of the left in the post-Soviet era. Those seeking to advance the struggle for socialism today are bound to confront the very same problems we ourselves confronted. In this spirit we invited to our conference the Australian Bolshevik-Leninist group, with whom we have engaged in common work and discussion based on our struggle to rearm. Their greetings can be found on page 15.

\* \* \*

The conference voted to drop the Spartacist Group of Japan as a section of the ICL as it had not functioned as such for a long time. Our comrades there remain sympathizers and we will continue to work with them in the struggle to plant the banner of Trotskyism in Japan. Our conference elected a new International Executive Committee that is half the size of the previous one (and decades younger), composed of the cadre who led the rearming of our party.

The curtain is now lifting on a changed ICL. Without a doubt, further struggle is needed throughout our party to consolidate its various sections around the politics adopted. However, we emerge from years of internal struggle more determined than ever to play a decisive role in the coming battles. We look to the future with defiance and readiness, armed with the weapon that can change history: a program for the Fourth International, world party of socialist revolution. ■

Note on sources: All quotes from Comintern Congresses in this issue are taken from the series translated and edited by John Riddell for Pathfinder Press and Haymarket Books unless otherwise indicated.

# Breakdown...

(continued from page 5)

the domination of monopoly capital leads to parasitism and long-term decay. However, far from being contradicted by the course of events, Marxist analysis alone can fully explain them and in the process show how the liberal world order leads not to gradual social and economic progress but to social calamity.

For starters, it is in no way necessary to attribute a progressive role to finance capital to explain a sustained growth in productive forces. The conditions following the collapse of the Soviet Union—reduced military threat, weakened labor movement, reduced risk in foreign investment, widespread liberalization—enabled imperialism for a time to overcome its tendency toward decline. In fact, Trotsky himself projected this possibility:

“Theoretically, to be sure, even a new chapter of a *general* capitalist progress in the most powerful, ruling, and leading countries is not excluded. But for this, capitalism would first have to overcome enormous barriers of a class as well as of an inter-state character. It would have to strangle the proletarian revolution for a long time; it would have to enslave China completely, overthrow the Soviet republic, and so forth.”

—*The Third International After Lenin* (1928)

This is precisely what happened. Following a dramatic change in the relationship of class forces at the expense of the proletariat, capitalism gained a new lease on life. But this could only be a temporary respite in imperialism’s overall tendency toward decline which is now returning to the norm.

Second, for defenders of capitalism the superiority of free markets over planned economies is proven by comparing the living standards in the deformed workers states of East Europe to those of today (Poland is the standard example). In fact, this claim can be refuted even leaving aside that by certain measures conditions have worsened—inequality, status of women, mass emigration, etc. Orthodox Marxists—i.e., Trotskyists—always argued that the planned economies of isolated workers states, despite their huge advantages, could not prevail over those of the advanced capitalist powers due to the latter’s higher productivity and international division of labor. Stalinists claimed that the Soviet Union on its own (and later with its allies) could overtake the advanced capitalist countries through means of “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism. But it is precisely the impossibility of peaceful coexistence that rules this out.

The imperialist powers always maintained extreme economic and military pressure on the USSR and other countries of the Warsaw Pact, whose economic performance was hampered by these assaults. To this was added the bureaucratic mismanagement that necessarily comes with trying to “build socialism” in conditions of isolation and poverty. The sustained economic growth in capitalist Poland is due to its full integration into global commerce—a possibility closed to the devastated postwar economy of the Polish People’s Republic. One cannot fairly compare the living standards of a castle under siege with those of one that isn’t. The superiority of planned economies is fully obvious when looking at the incredible progress achieved *despite* the hostile international environment in which they found themselves. This is true for Poland just as it is for the Soviet Union, Cuba, China and Vietnam.

Third, the defenders of the liberal world order argue that since the intensity and number of wars have decreased since

World War II and further declined since the collapse of the Soviet Union, this proves that liberalism and globalization gradually lead to peace. While some factual aspects of this claim can be disputed, it is undeniable that no conflict in the last 75 years has come close to the industrial slaughter that took place in the two world wars. To this day, “keeping peace in Europe” remains the main argument used to defend the EU. The truth of the matter is that the absence of a new world war is only a product of the U.S. towering over its rivals—a necessarily temporary relationship of forces. As Lenin explained:

“The only conceivable basis under capitalism for the division of spheres of influence, interests, colonies, etc., is a calculation of the *strength* of those participating, their general economic, financial, military strength, etc. And the strength of these participants in the division does not change to an equal degree, for the *even* development of different undertakings, trusts, branches of industry, or countries is impossible under capitalism....

“Therefore, in the realities of the capitalist system, and not in the banal philistine fantasies of English parsons, or of the German ‘Marxist’, Kautsky, ‘inter-imperialist’ or ‘ultra-imperialist’ alliances, no matter what form they may assume, whether of one imperialist coalition against another, or of a general alliance embracing *all* the imperialist powers, are *inevitably* nothing more than a ‘truce’ in periods between wars.”

—*Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916)

Accepting that the post-Soviet period has been one of relative peace in no way erases the fact that there have been numerous wars which have been plenty brutal. The U.S. military has been almost continuously engaging in low-intensity wars to assert its military might and secure its right to “peacefully” subjugate untold millions through the expansion of finance capital. Far from leading to world peace, this dynamic only prepares new wars of unimaginable brutality to redivide the world once more.

Fourth, the growth of productive forces has occurred not because of some mythical free trade but under the yoke and according to the interests of monopoly capital controlled by a few great powers. This has meant that whatever short- to medium-term progress occurred in certain regions of the world, it has come with increased dependence on the financial whims of the imperialist powers, centrally the U.S. For example, one can look at various socio-economic indicators and observe an improvement in living standards in Mexico since the 1990s. But this has come at the price of a much-deepened economic subordination to the United States and the devastation of certain layers of the population, in particular the peasantry. This situation means that in times of growth the imperialists draw huge profits from their dependencies, and when crisis strikes they can demand extortionate political and economic concessions, further deepening their national oppression. This all goes to show that short-term economic growth is not worth the price of enslavement to imperialism.

Finally, and most importantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not herald a higher phase of human progress but the triumph of U.S. imperialism, which is nothing other than the domination of U.S. financial rentiers over the world. It is the very rule of this class that limits the further development of productive forces and leads to social decline. This is true first and foremost for the U.S. itself. In *Imperialism* Lenin explained:

“The export of capital, one of the most essential economic bases of imperialism, still more completely isolates the rentiers from production and sets the seal of parasitism on the whole country that lives by exploiting the labour of several overseas countries and colonies.”



**Far left: Fall of Berlin Wall, November 1989. Left: Imperialist chief Bush Sr. announces “New World Order” of uncontested U.S. hegemony after Gulf War slaughter, March 1991.**

This perfectly describes the character of the U.S. economy. The unprecedented growth of its international financial interests has hollowed out the very source of U.S. global power, its once mighty industrial base. Offshoring, chronic underinvestment in infrastructure, astronomical housing prices, a blood-sucking health care industry, overpriced and low-quality education: these are all products of the increasingly parasitical character of American capitalism. Even U.S. military might is undermined by the hollowing out of industry.

The American ruling class has sought to compensate for the country’s economic decline through wild speculation, cheap credit and printing money. As Trotsky observed, “The poorer the society grows, the richer it appears, regarding itself in the mirror of this fictitious capital” (“The World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International,” June 1921). This heralds economic disaster. The entire social fabric of the country is rotting and more and more layers of the working class and oppressed are thrown into destitution.

This internal decay is matched by a declining economic weight in the world. Where it represented 36 percent of the world GDP in 1970, the U.S. economy now represents less than 24 percent. This trend has been followed by all the imperialist countries. Whereas in 1970 the top five powers (the U.S., Japan, Germany, France, Britain) represented together 60 percent of the world GDP, today the figure is 40 percent. On the one hand, the phenomenal increase in the international export of capital has produced decay; on the other, it has further integrated many countries into modern capitalist relations, creating a gigantic proletariat in East Asia and other parts of the world.

It is the so-called middle-income countries, and China in particular, that have seen their weight in the world economy increase. Yet despite this economic progress, these countries remain subordinate to international finance capital. When it comes to financial power, the U.S. remains unchallenged: the dollar still reigns supreme, the U.S. controls the main international institutions, and 14 of the top 20 asset management firms are American, controlling a combined capital of 45 trillion dollars, the equivalent of around half the world’s GDP. (The other six top asset management firms are either Swiss, French, German or British.

Of the top 60, none are from China, South Korea or any of the other so-called “newly industrialized countries.”) The growing contradiction between the hegemonic position the U.S. still holds and its reduced real economic power is not sustainable and is the root cause of growing economic and political instability in the world.

The growth of world trade, the industrialization of neo-colonial countries, the development of China—all these factors are undermining U.S. hegemony. To maintain its position, the U.S. must reverse the current dynamic. This means tearing apart the basis of globalization by confronting China, pressing the neocolonies, raising tariff barriers and reducing the crumbs given to its allies. Fundamentally, the most definitive argument against globalization is that the development of productive forces runs against the interests of the very class on which globalization rests, the American imperialist bourgeoisie. This alone establishes that it is nothing but a reactionary fantasy to try to maintain or “fix” the liberal world order.

This is not to say that just as in 1989 it wouldn’t be possible for the U.S. to succeed in shoring up its position. But that could only be brought about at the cost of catastrophic defeats for the international working class and would do nothing to halt the inexorable decay of imperialism. The only force that can put an end to imperialist tyranny and usher in a truly higher stage of development is the working class. Globalization has in fact reinforced the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, making it today more powerful, more international and more nationally oppressed than ever before. But this has so far not been translated into increased political strength. On this count the post-Soviet period has thrown the workers movement very far back indeed.

### III. LIBERALISM AND THE POST-SOVIET WORLD

#### Liberal Triumphalism

The collapse of the Soviet Union led not only to major changes in the economic, political and military balance of international forces but also to major ideological changes. During the Cold War, the ruling classes of the

West presented themselves as the defenders of democracy and individual rights against the tyranny of “totalitarian communism.” At bottom this was an ideological justification for hostility toward the deformed workers states and anti-colonial struggles. As the Soviet bloc collapsed, communism was proclaimed dead and liberal triumphalism became the dominant ideology, reflecting the change in the imperialists’ priorities from confronting “communism” to penetrating newly opened markets in East Europe and Asia.

Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) epitomizes the hubris and triumphalism of the early post-Soviet period. Liberal capitalism was proclaimed the pinnacle of human civilization, destined to spread around the entire world. Of course, underlying this fantastical view was the very real extension of imperialist capital around the world. Liberal triumphalism was the ideological justification for this process. The United States and its allies ruled the world in the name of economic and social progress—a modernized version of the white man’s burden.

It is behind this ideological cover that the U.S. led its various military interventions in the post-Soviet period. The first Gulf War and the intervention in Serbia were to “protect small nations.” The intervention in Somalia was to “save the starving.” This ideology was enshrined by the UN as the “responsibility to protect” (R2P). As the name of the doctrine indicates, it proclaimed that the great powers have the responsibility to intervene militarily to protect the oppressed people of the world. It is in part because Bush Jr.’s war in Iraq didn’t neatly fit into this category that there was so much opposition to it. That said, in its fundamentals it was not different from other U.S. interventions in this period. Their aim was first and foremost to assert U.S. hegemony over the world, not to secure long-term economic or strategic benefits. U.S. allies that opposed interventions such as Iraq did so because they didn’t consider it worthwhile for them to invest substantial resources to show once more that the U.S. could crush a small country. Better to reap the benefits of the U.S. order without paying the cost.

Much more significant than the armed conflicts of this period was the economic penetration of imperialist finance capital into every corner of the earth. The process of globalization was itself accompanied and aided by a whole series of ideological principles. A sort of imperialist internationalism became the consensus in most Western countries. The nation-state was said to be a thing of the past, and free trade, open capital markets and high levels of immigration were seen as the road toward progress and world peace. Once more, these high principles reflected the specific interests of the ruling class and were wielded to trample on the national rights of oppressed countries, deindustrialize the West, import cheap labor and open markets to imperialist capital and goods.

### The Workers Movement in the Post-Soviet Period

In the period following World War II, the working class did not anywhere have at its head a conscious revolutionary vanguard. It nonetheless had a number of significant conquests: the Soviet Union, the new postwar workers states (later joined by China, Cuba, Vietnam and Laos) and a powerful labor movement in the capitalist world. The latter included strong unions and mass workers parties. However,



September 1995: Tony Blair waged neoliberal crusade to remold Labour Party and Britain.

in every one of these cases the opportunist, bureaucratic leaderships constantly weakened and hollowed out these strongholds of working-class power. When the unions in the U.S. and Britain came under concerted and ardent attack in the 1980s, their leaderships proved incapable of repelling these offensives despite heroic sacrifices by workers. In East Europe the Soviet bureaucracy liquidated one position after another without a fight until finally it liquidated itself. Altogether these defeats unmoored the entire postwar position of the international proletariat.

These disasters were exploited by capitalists who pressed their advantage, wresting more and more gains from a weakened and disoriented workers movement. Almost everywhere in the world, trade-union membership declined, nationalized industries and utilities were privatized, workers parties such as the once mighty Italian Communist Party simply liquidated, and in the West more and more industries were shut down. These objective blows to the working class caused demoralization and a right-wing shift in the workers movement.

In imperialist countries the bulk of social-democratic leaders, Stalinist leftovers and trade-union tops openly embraced liberal triumphalism. Old-school reformism and trade unionism were considered too radical for this new age. Class struggle was said to be over, unions had to become respectable (i.e., impotent), and socialism was seen as utopian at best. There was opposition in the workers movement to privatization and free trade, but it was minimal and undermined by a belief that they were inevitable. Tony Blair’s New Labour project symbolized this right-wing shift. He sought to transform the British Labour Party from a trade union-based working-class party into one akin to the U.S. Democratic Party. In government, he pushed ahead with radical neoliberal reforms coated with a varnish of modernism and progressive social values. As these new “workers’ leaders,” in Britain and elsewhere, rejected the very existence of a workers movement and all the principles on which it was built, the traditional organizations were further weakened and hollowed out. The dominance of liberalism in the trade unions and workers parties basically

amounted to the workers movement sawing off its own legs, bringing it to its enfeebled state today.

### The Countries Oppressed by Imperialism

In the West and Japan, the position of the working class was driven down by the offshoring of industry. However, in many countries oppressed by imperialism industry boomed, yet the proletariat still saw its political position substantially degraded in the post-Soviet period. How to explain this weakness amid an objective strengthening of the working class? Accounting for the wide variations between countries, a general trend can be established. The international context in the '80s and '90s led to imperialism tightening its hold over “developing” and “emerging” countries. This in turn favored a strengthening of liberalism at the expense of Third World nationalism and militant working-class politics. While liberalism on social questions such as sexuality, race and religion did not generally progress much, economic liberalism (neoliberalism) and to a certain extent political liberalism (formal democracy) became dominant.

On the political level, the international convergence toward liberal democracy was partly the result of U.S. foreign policy, which increasingly saw democratic reforms as an optimal way to stem social upheaval. But the internal regimes of neo-colonial countries were also greatly affected by the weakening of the workers movement internationally. The elites were more confident in their position, allowing them room for concessions, while the oppressed had a weaker hand, increasing the pressure on them to give up on radical change. This reduced the sharpness of domestic contradictions, allowing countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil and South Africa to replace quasi-totalitarian dictatorships with a measure of bourgeois democracy. For regimes that relied more on class collaboration than repression, the changing context reduced the need for concessions to the workers movement. In Mexico, for example, the old corporatist one-party rule that had lasted 70 years was gradually destroyed, and with it much of the influence of the unions.

On the economic level, the existence of the Soviet Union had enabled neocolonial countries to balance between the two great powers. Many regimes nationalized important sectors of their economies and had some control of capital flows in their countries. These models were inefficient and corrupt but enabled a certain independence from the United States and the other imperialists. The collapse of the Soviet Union put the last nail in the coffin of such models. Neocolonial countries had little choice but to align themselves fully behind the economic dictates of the imperialists and to discard their old corporatist and statist structures.

The workers movement in the neocolonial world also capitulated to the heightened liberal pressures, albeit in different ways from the West. In certain cases such as Brazil and South Africa, the previously repressed working-class parties, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and the South African Communist Party, became executors of the new neoliberal “democratic” regimes. In Mexico, working-class resistance to neoliberalism was hitched to the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), a left-populist split-off from the ruling party. The PRD itself did not oppose more U.S. capital penetration of Mexico but only sought better terms for Mexico’s rape. In many countries the labor movement mingled with the liberal NGO world, getting behind “human



Ngwenya/Reuters

**May 1994: Newly elected president Nelson Mandela clutches hand of F.W. de Klerk, ex-apartheid president. “Power sharing” deal ended apartheid in South Africa but kept national and social oppression in place.**

rights” and “millennial development goals” rather than class struggle. Thus we had a situation in which the working class in many countries was growing in economic strength but was politically paralyzed by leaderships that were capitulating to strong national and international currents pushing toward liberalism and integration with world imperialism.

### Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics

The outlook seemed bleak for the Communist Party of China after the counterrevolutionary wave that rolled from East Germany to the USSR. The bloody crushing of the 1989 Tiananmen uprising had isolated the regime on the world stage. For the U.S. and its allies, it was only a matter of time before China followed the path of the Soviet Union and integrated into the growing liberal democratic fold. But this was not the path followed by the CPC. The lesson it drew from Tiananmen and the counterrevolutions in the Eastern bloc was that to remain in power it needed to combine high economic growth with tight political control. To achieve this, it doubled down on the path of “reform and opening up” started by Deng Xiaoping in the late '70s, which consisted of market liberalization in agriculture and industry, privatizations and attracting foreign capital. Currently the Communist Party’s grip on power appears firmer than ever. For the CPC and its advocates, China is being guided down the stream of history by the enlightened policies of its leaders. But as the choppy currents of the class struggle will make clear, this apparent success has more to do with the stagnant waters of the post-Soviet period than the steering abilities of the CPC.

With the threat of “global communism” having seemingly disappeared and Deng recommitting the party to welcoming foreign capital during his 1992 “southern tour,” imperialist investment flooded into China. The Special Economic Zones offered a deregulated environment worthy of the best neoliberal free-market practices and a huge pool of cheap labor whose submissiveness was guaranteed by the CPC, while the state-driven economy marshaled enormous resources to build infrastructure and factories. This combination produced huge profits for monopoly capitalism but also unmatched economic

and social progress in China. In the three years after 2008, China used more cement than the United States did during the entire 20th century. Since 1978 its GDP growth has averaged 9 percent annually and 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty. China's integration into the world economy has enabled huge leaps in productivity, opened a gigantic new market and served as the engine of economic growth and the increase in world trade. The rise of China is both the greatest success of the post-Soviet order and its greatest threat.

For social democrats and liberal moralists, the mercantile and repressive policies of the CPC are proof that China is now capitalist or even imperialist. But unlike what happened in the USSR and East Europe, the Stalinist regime in China never gave up control of the economy and the state. The main economic levers remain collectivized. In many ways the economic regime in China currently resembles an extreme version of what Lenin described as "state capitalism": the opening of certain economic areas to capitalist exploitation under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

For a Marxist evaluation of the policies of Deng and his successors, one cannot simply reject on principle market reforms or any compromise with capitalism. Rather, one must look at the terms and aims of the agreements and whether they strengthened the overall position of the working class. At the Third Congress of the Comintern, Lenin outlined in the following way his approach to foreign concessions in the Soviet workers state:

"We admit quite openly, and do not conceal the fact, that concessions in the system of state capitalism mean paying tribute to capitalism. But we gain time, and gaining time means gaining everything, particularly in the period of equilibrium, when our foreign comrades are preparing thoroughly for their revolution. The more thorough their preparations, the more certain will the victory be. Meanwhile, however, we shall have to pay the tribute."

—"Report on the Tactics of the R.C.P." (July 1921)

Lenin sought to attract foreign capital to Russia as a means of fostering economic development and gaining time until the revolution could extend internationally. The compromises he was ready to make did not involve the slightest hint that the struggle against capitalism was to be sidelined. On the contrary, he insisted:

"This struggle has assumed new forms, but it remains a struggle nonetheless. Every concessionaire remains a capitalist, and he will try to trip up the Soviet power, while we, for our part, must try to make use of his rapacity."

—"Report on Concessions at a Meeting of the Communist Group of the All-Russia Central Council of Trade Unions" (April 1921)



1980s

Alamy



2022

Zhuoming/VCG

**Transformation of Shanghai's Pudong district exemplifies China's economic growth: massive progress, but tied to foreign and domestic capitalists.**

In contrast, Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that "there is no fundamental contradiction between socialism and a market economy" (1985). For Deng and his successors, it was never a question of gaining time for the world revolution but of pursuing the pipe dream of developing China in essential harmony with the capitalist world.

While the last 30 years have produced astonishing results when looking at raw economic data, the picture is quite different when evaluating the strength of the Chinese workers state on a class basis. China's development has been built on a foundation of sand: "peaceful coexistence" with world imperialism. There is a fundamental contradiction in China's rise: the stronger it gets, the more it undermines the condition that made its rise possible—economic globalization under U.S. hegemony. But instead of rallying the international working class for the inevitable struggle with U.S. imperialism, the CPC has for decades built faith in "economic interdependence," "multilateralism" and "win-win cooperation" as means of averting conflict. Such pacifist illusions have weakened the People's Republic of China (PRC) by disarming the working class, the only force that can decisively defeat imperialism.

China’s position is further undermined by the powerful domestic capitalist class that has emerged on the mainland and has a direct interest in the destruction of the workers state. Far from recognizing this deadly threat to the social system, the CPC has openly encouraged the growth of this class, playing up its contributions toward building “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” One does not have to be a scholar of Marx to understand that a class whose power rests on the exploitation of the working class is a deadly enemy of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a regime based on working-class state power.

For Lenin, the only principle involved in establishing foreign capitalist concessions was to preserve the power of the proletariat and improve its conditions, even if this meant “150 percent profits” for the capitalists. He based his entire strategy on the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, both in Russia and abroad. This outlook has nothing to do with that of the CPC bureaucracy, which fears revolution like the plague and above all else seeks political stability to maintain its bureaucratic privileges. Far from building “common prosperity,” CPC policies have sought to keep working-class aspirations subdued and maintain working conditions as miserable as possible to compete with workers abroad and secure capital investment. Those who have profited are not the “people who work hard” but a small clique of bureaucrats and capitalists. The truth is that the CPC has worked with the capitalists at home and abroad against the workers in China and internationally. This treachery carried out in the name of “socialism” tarnishes the PRC in the eyes of the international working class and undermines the defense of the 1949 Revolution.

#### IV. FIGHTING LIBERALISM WITH LIBERALISM

The strong political consensus throughout the West post-1991 did not mean that there were no dissenting voices from the left and the right. However, generally speaking this dissent did not challenge the basic ideological premises of the liberal world order and even less the material basis of this order: the domination of U.S. finance capital. The various movements that emerged on the left criticized the status quo based on liberal morality, i.e., from within the basic ideological underpinnings of the status quo. Whether they were against free trade, war, racism or austerity, the movements on the left were all premised on curbing the excesses of imperialism, keeping the overall system intact but without its most brutal aspects. As Lenin explained about such criticisms of imperialism in his time, they were nothing but “pious wishes” since they did not recognize “the inseparable bond between imperialism and the trusts, and, therefore, between imperialism and the foundations of capitalism” (*Imperialism*). And so the various leftist movements in the post-Soviet period denounced, petitioned, demonstrated, sang and ate tofu, but utterly failed in building a real opposition to liberal imperialism.

#### The Anti-Globalization Movement

The anti-globalization movement hit its stride at the 1999 Seattle WTO protests. Followed by various similar movements around the world, this eventually gave birth to the World Social Forum. The movement itself was an eclectic

mix of trade unions, environmentalists, NGOs, indigenous groups, anarchists and socialists. This hodgepodge had no coherence or common goal; it was a coalition of the losers of globalization, who sought to stop the wheels of capitalism from turning, and the left wing of liberalism, which sought to make its cycles less brutal.

In the trade unions, opposition to globalization was driven by working-class resistance to job losses from offshoring. Properly channeled, this legitimate working-class anger could have changed the balance of class forces internationally and put a stop to the offensive of finance capital. This would have required strong defensive struggles that directly confronted the interests of monopoly capital: plant occupations, strikes, unionization drives. But the opposite was done by trade-union leaders.

In the U.S. they opposed offshoring and NAFTA but actively celebrated the dominance of U.S. capitalism over the world, which they had themselves helped achieve through engagement in “fighting communism.” The trade unions could not mount a fight in defense of jobs while continuing to support the very factor leading to offshoring—U.S. imperialist dominance. And support it they did, from their protectionist anti-Mexican and anti-Chinese campaigns to supporting Bill Clinton for president. In Europe even formal opposition to free trade was much weaker and many trade



Seattle Municipal Archives

1999 Seattle anti-WTO protest (above), 2003 Michigan United Steelworkers rally (below). Liberalism and protectionism: two dead ends unable to challenge U.S.-led globalization.

Pugliano/Getty



unions actively campaigned for the Maastricht Treaty and the EU. Those that did not, like their American counterparts, refused to fight against the ruling class that was behind economic liberalization, seeking instead a bloc between labor and capital on a national basis against “foreign interests.” In both cases the result was utter devastation for the working class, with massive job losses and the decay of entire regions.

The other side of the anti-globalization movement consisted of various NGOs, anarchists, ecologists and socialist groups. As most of these groups themselves insisted, they were not opposed to globalization but sought a “fairer,” “democratic” and “eco-friendly” globalization. As previously explained, globalization cannot be fair under the yoke of imperialism, and the neoliberal offensive could only be stopped by strengthening the position of the international working class. The anti-globalization movement could do nothing to further this because it embraced the same liberal triumphalism whose consequences it was supposedly fighting. The movement claimed that class struggle was over and nation-states had been supplanted by international corporations...so obviously it didn’t organize class struggle against the imperialist states backing globalization.

Since the movement saw globalization as basically unavoidable and viewed the working class as irrelevant at best, it did nothing to oppose the loss of millions of jobs. The left denounced the protectionist chauvinism spouted by certain trade-union bureaucrats and reactionary politicians but did so without providing a program to defend jobs and working conditions. This meant being a left echo of the Bushes and the Clintons who were also denouncing protectionism and nativism, for the benefit of U.S. foreign expansion. The basic truth rejected by the anti-globalization movement is that a real defense of working-class jobs in the U.S. and Europe would not be against the interests of the workers of the Third World but would strengthen their position by putting a brake on heightened imperialist plunder. To be internationalist the working class must not become “liberal” and “enlightened”; it must unite to overthrow imperialism. Any fight against the imperialist bourgeoisie will objectively bring the international working class together and break it away from its nationalist leaderships.

While the anti-globalization movement succeeded in causing a few riots, these were no threat to liberal imperialism. Paralyzed by a fundamental allegiance to the status quo, the movement was ultimately only a footnote in the crushing

offensive of finance capital in the 1990s and early 2000s. Eventually, even formal opposition to NAFTA and the EU was dropped by practically the entire labor movement and left. It is the impotence of the forces opposing globalization that pushed millions of workers in the West toward demagogues such as Trump, France’s Le Pen and Italy’s Meloni.

### Post-2008 Anti-Establishment Left in the U.S. and Europe

The 2007 credit bubble marked the high point of the liberal world order. The subsequent economic crisis represented a major turning point as the dynamic contributing to stability and economic growth—increased world trade, growth in productivity, political and geopolitical consensus—broke down and reversed. While the crisis and its aftermath did not end the post-Soviet era, it accelerated the trends undermining it. In much of the Western world, millions of job losses and evictions followed by a wave of austerity created deep political discontent. For the first time since the 1990s, major political movements emerged which attacked key pillars of the post-Soviet consensus. On the right protectionism, opposition to “multilateralism” and open chauvinism became mainstream. On the left it was opposition to austerity, calls for nationalizations and in certain quarters opposition to NATO. The characteristics of these movements vary widely, yet a conclusion imposes itself: whereas the populist right is today emerging reinvigorated after a certain decline in 2020, the anti-establishment movements of the left have mostly collapsed. What explains this failure?

The anti-establishment left was pushed to the fore by decades of neoliberal attacks that were exacerbated following 2008, and in the case of the U.S. and Britain, by opposition to military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. While these movements reacted against the status quo, they did not decisively break with it. In their own ways, each was tied to the imperialist bourgeoisie responsible for degrading social conditions. The standard-bearers for this trend were Corbyn in Britain, Sanders in the U.S., Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. In contrast to them, Mélenchon in France has not yet visibly failed. That said, his movement contains all the ingredients that led to the demise of its foreign counterparts.

In Sanders’ case, he is a representative of the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of U.S. imperialism. His speeches about “a political revolution” against the “billionaire class” meant nothing given his allegiance to a party



Douliery/Sipa



Kitwood/Getty



Messinis/AFP

**Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, Alexis Tsipras—champions of anti-establishment left—demoralized and betrayed supporters.**

representing billionaires. Moreover, as a liberal reformist politician, the major reform Sanders promised, “Medicare for All,” was always subordinated to unity with the “progressive” Democratic capitalists against the more reactionary Republican ones. In the name of “fighting the right,” Sanders betrayed the principles he claimed to stand on. The more Sanders trampled on the aspirations of the movement he represented, the more he rose in the Democratic Party establishment. Those who today want to recreate this movement outside of the Democratic Party and without Sanders fail to understand that it is the program of liberal reformism itself which leads to capitulation to the ruling class. Any program seeking to reconcile the interests of the working class with the maintenance of U.S. capitalism will necessarily seek support in one of the two wings of American capitalism. To break the reactionary cycle of U.S. politics and truly advance its interests, the working class requires its own party built in total opposition to both liberals and conservatives.

The Corbyn movement was similar to the one around Sanders but differed in two important respects. The first is that the Labour Party, unlike the Democratic Party, is a bourgeois workers party. Its working-class base explains in part why Corbyn could win the leadership of Labour whereas Sanders was stopped by the Democratic establishment. The other significant difference is that Corbyn crossed red lines when it came to questions of foreign policy. His opposition to NATO and the EU, his criticisms of the 2014 NATO-backed coup in Ukraine, his support for the Palestinians and his opposition to nuclear weapons were utterly unacceptable to the ruling class.

In the face of the rabid hostility of the British establishment and an ongoing insurgency against him in his own party, the alternatives posed for Corbyn were to confront the ruling class directly or capitulate. But Corbyn’s program of pacifism and Labourite reformism seeks to soothe the class war, not win it. So at every turn Corbyn sought to appease the ruling class and the right wing of his party instead of mobilizing the working class and youth against them. Corbyn capitulated on renewing the Trident nuclear sub program, on self-determination for Scotland, on the question of Israel-Palestine, on NATO and most decisively on Brexit. The example of Corbyn, even more than Sanders, is a classic case of the utter impotence of reformism in the conduct of class struggle.

The case of Syriza is different in that it came to power in Greece as a result of mass opposition to EU-imposed austerity. The rapidity of its rise was matched only by the depth of its betrayal. After organizing a referendum in 2015 which overwhelmingly rejected the EU austerity package, Syriza blatantly trampled on popular will by acceding to imperialist demands for even harsher attacks on Greek working people. The reason for this betrayal lies in Syriza’s class nature and program. The only force capable of standing up to imperialism in Greece is the organized working class. But Syriza is not a working-class party. It claimed it could serve the Greek capitalists as well as the workers and oppressed of Greece...all this while keeping the country in the EU. This myth exploded at first contact with reality. While most of the left cheered Syriza on until its betrayal, the Communist Party stood to the side, even denying that Greece is oppressed by imperialism. The consequences of both policies were slammed onto the Greek people. This debacle shows the urgent need in Greece for a party that



Kemp/In Pictures

**British government’s creepy Orwellian propaganda to blackmail population into accepting bourgeoisie’s reactionary measures during pandemic.**

combines the fight for national liberation with the need for class independence and workers power.

As the world enters a period of acute crisis, the workers movement in the West finds itself politically disorganized and demoralized, betrayed by the forces in which it placed its faith. While this will undoubtedly lead to gains for the right in the short term, a new upsurge of the working class and popular masses will once again pose the need for political alternatives to the representatives of the liberal status quo. It is essential that the lessons of past failures be drawn in order to avoid a new cycle of defeats and reaction.

### **Covid-19, Liberal Disaster**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the left offered not even a tepid opposition to the liberal establishment. As the bourgeoisies around the world locked their populations up for months on end while doing nothing to fix crumbling health care systems and dreadful living conditions, the left cheered and called for ever stricter lockdowns. Every attack against the working class was acceded to in the name of “following the science.” The basic understanding that science in capitalist society is not neutral but is wielded to serve the interest of the bourgeoisie was thrown out the window even by those claiming to be Marxist.

The result speaks for itself. Millions died of the virus, millions lost their jobs, families were locked up in their homes at the expense of women, children and sanity. Given that science was used to justify one reactionary policy after another, millions of people turned against “science” and refused lifesaving vaccines. Was the health care system saved? No, everywhere it is much worse than before. Were working people protected from the virus? No, they continued to work in dangerous conditions. Were the elderly protected? Many of them died in decrepit nursing homes. Those who didn’t saw their quality of life and life expectancy reduced due to social isolation and lack of exercise. The crisis in nursing homes and retirement centers is worse than ever.

In the name of “saving lives,” liberals and the left argue that there was no alternative to bowing down to governments and “science.” But there was one. The working class

**Joe Biden and Donald Trump, poster boys for sclerotic U.S. imperialism.**



needed to take matters into its own hands and ensure a response corresponding to *its* class interests. Unions needed to fight for safe workplaces against either simply shutting them down or working in deathtraps. So long as bosses and governments control safety at work instead of unions, workers will die preventable deaths. Unions in health care and schools needed to fight for better conditions, not sacrifice for illusory gains later. Those sacrifices did not save public services but did allow the ruling class to squeeze them even more. Only in struggle against the ruling class and its lockdowns could any of the social ills behind the crisis be addressed, whether it be health care, housing, working conditions, public transport or care for the elderly.

The utter subservience of the workers movement to lockdowns guaranteed that any opposition to the disastrous consequences of the pandemic would be dominated by right-wing and conspiracist forces. Many of the people attending mass anti-lockdown demonstrations or protests against mandatory vaccinations did so out of legitimate anger at the social consequences of capitalist policies during the pandemic. Instead of getting ahead of these sentiments and channeling them into a struggle to advance the conditions of the working class, the left overwhelmingly denounced them and cheered on their repression by the state.

The basis for the utter betrayal by the left and workers movement in the pandemic was laid during the entire course of the post-Soviet period. When this crisis of global proportions hit and the bourgeoisie more than ever needed national unity, the workers movement stood to attention and loyally marshaled the working class behind “science” and “shared sacrifice.” While governments and most of the left are trying to sweep the pandemic under the rug, they will not get off so easily. The consequences of this disaster have left a deep imprint on the working class and youth, impelling them to look for answers and alternatives.

## V. THE DECAYING LIBERAL ORDER

### Hubris Turns to Hysteria

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, the dynamic of world politics favored the relative strengthening of U.S. power. The more the U.S. improved its economic, military and political position, the stronger the centripetal force bolstering the liberal world order. This self-reinforcing dynamic reached

its height in the aftermath of the counterrevolution in the Soviet Union. It enabled widespread political and economic liberalization with relatively limited direct intervention by the U.S. At the time, the currents of history appeared to be pushing the interests of U.S. capitalism forward.

But in politics as in physics there is a reaction to every action. Inevitably, the consequences of U.S. hegemony impelled countervailing forces. The increasingly reckless military interventions by the U.S. were geopolitical disasters, wasting resources and hardening opposition to American foreign policy at home and abroad. Financial deregulation and deindustrialization hollowed out U.S. economic might and strengthened its competitors while also making the entire world economy much more unstable and crisis-prone. The more the U.S. ruling class used liberalism to further its reactionary interests, the more it fostered resistance to liberalism. Slowly but surely, there were growing signs that the dynamics favoring the liberal world order were growing weaker and the forces pushing against it were becoming stronger. The 2008 financial crisis, the 2014 coup and conflict in Ukraine, the election of Donald Trump and Brexit in 2016 are all important markers of this trend.

As the U.S. has felt its power weaken, its hubris has transformed into hysteria. It exerts itself ever more strongly to shore up its power, confronting China and Russia, squeezing allies, sanctioning more and more countries. But these exertions are coming at ever-growing costs and bringing diminishing returns. Far from halting its decline, the U.S. response has so far only entrenched it. Today, following the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, it is clear that the dynamic of world politics has reversed. It is now pointing toward an accelerating disintegration of the liberal world order. NATO and Russia are engaged in a proxy war. U.S.-China relations are in a permanent state of hostility. Populist nationalism is on the rise in the non-imperialist world, taking both left-wing (Mexico) and right-wing (India, Türkiye) expressions. Politics in the West are becoming increasingly polarized between those who seek to shore up imperialist dominance by breaking with traditional liberalism (Trump, Alternative for Germany, Le Pen, Meloni) and those who seek to shore it up by doubling down on the liberal crusade (Biden, Trudeau, German Green Party).

The growing instability of the world is no mystery to anyone. The controversy emerges over the nature of the conflict. For the liberals, it is a contest between Democracy and Autocracy. For libertarians and social democrats, it is the free mar-

ket vs. state intervention. For the Stalinists and Third Worldists, it is a competition between hegemony and multipolarity. All are wrong. The answer lies in the simple but penetrating words of the *Communist Manifesto*: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” And so it is that today’s unraveling liberal world order follows the laws of class struggle. The fundamental conflict shaping the world is not between the CPC and U.S. capitalists, Trump and Biden, Putin and NATO, or Mexico’s López Obrador (AMLO) and Yankee imperialism; it is between the social decay of capitalism in its imperialist stage and the interests of the world proletariat. Those not guided by this understanding will not be able to orient themselves in the turmoil ahead, much less advance the struggle for human progress.

### Global Economy: A Giant Ponzi Scheme

As previously explained, U.S. hegemony enabled a temporary improvement in the growth potential of imperialism. It was this improvement in the economic conjuncture that enabled the protracted stability of the capitalist world over the last three decades. Today, however, not only have the possibilities for expansion spent themselves but the conditions that enabled the previous expansion are going into reverse. The consequence will be a significant destruction of productive forces, with all the instability that comes with this. As Trotsky wrote in *The Third International After Lenin*, “States as well as classes fight even more fiercely for a meagre and a diminishing ration than for a lavish and growing one.” This factor underpins the current world situation and will continue to do so, barring a major change in the conjuncture.

Eight-to-ten-year cycles of boom and bust are the normal fluctuations of the capitalist economy. Wild speculation and overproduction are followed by collapse and panic. The post-Soviet period has been no different. However, as real growth possibilities declined, speculation and credit became the principal manner by which the U.S. sought to prop up its entire order. The aftermath of the 2008 “Great Recession” exposed this clearly. Facing a possible depression, the U.S. coordinated a historically unprecedented credit and monetary expansion. This created anemic real growth but a gigantic growth in asset prices. Even to most bourgeois economists, it is obvious that this simply meant setting the conditions for an even greater collapse down the road. For over ten years, the playbook has been the same at each sign of faltering growth: kick the can down the road by increasing credit. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this was pushed once more, to all-time highs. To solve the consequences of shutting down huge swaths of the economy, the capitalists simply printed money. This was too much, and finally the possibilities of this approach have reached their limit with the inevitable “return of inflation.”

The drastic increase in interest rates in the United States is sucking vast quantities of liquidity out of the world economic system. As Warren Buffett famously said, “A rising tide floats all boats.... Only when the tide goes out do you discover who’s been swimming naked.” After a decade and a half of easy money, gigantic segments of the economy are bound to have been “swimming naked.” When the buck stops, the results are bound to be catastrophic. Since the U.S. is at the top of the capitalist food chain and essentially controls international credit conditions, even if it turns out to be the epicenter of the crisis it will be able to use its dominant position to make the rest of the world pay for the consequences. This will be particularly devastating for countries of the developing world, many of which are already in deep crisis, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Lebanon. But the consequences will be global and will necessarily lead to further blows to the world order, including from powers the U.S. today considers allies.

A significant part of the economic establishment is either lying or willfully blind to the prospects of the world economy. Certain parts of the social-democratic left have argued that high government debt levels are of no great concern and that working people would benefit more from low interest rates and more debt than from the current policy of higher interest rates. This is an echo of those in the bourgeoisie who wish to kick the can one more time, hopefully past the next election. The truth is that all policy alternatives—whether high debt, high inflation or deflation—will be used to attack the living standards of the working class. The fundamental underlying problem is the huge imbalance between the capital that exists on paper and the actual productive capacities of the world economy. No financial wizardry can solve this problem. The only way out is for the working class to take control of the political and economic reins and reorganize the economy in a rational way.

For right-wing economists, the solution is to let the free market do its work: accept that there will be a devastating crisis, let the weak die and the strong emerge stronger.



Liyanawatte/Reuters

**Colombo, 9 July 2022: Masses storm presidential office during popular upsurge in response to economic devastation of Sri Lanka.**

But the times of free-market capitalism are long gone. The world economy is dominated by a small number of gigantic monopolies competing with the monopolies of other countries. No state is ready to let its monopolies collapse. If Ford and GM go bankrupt, this would not revive American free enterprise but strengthen Toyota and Volkswagen. Unbridled capitalism leads not to free markets but to monopolies. On the one hand, this reflects the tendency toward centralized planned production on a global scale. But on the other, under imperialism monopolies obstruct the growth of productive forces, leading to decay and parasitism.

For social democrats such as economist Michael Hudson, the panacea is a “mixed economy”—capitalism with state intervention and regulation. Whereas this was considered heresy in economic and government circles in recent decades, planning is becoming fashionable again. This is not out of enlightenment but because national capitalism needs propping up to stave off bankruptcy and compete with China. While the working class can wrest concessions from the capitalists through class struggle, it is not possible to regulate away the contradictions of imperialism. The irrationality and parasitism of the system are rooted in the very dynamics of capitalist accumulation. The government is itself no counterweight to the tiny clique of capitalist financiers but serves as their executive committee. When it interferes in economic matters, it is ultimately to benefit the imperialist ruling class.

### Ukraine-Russia War: Military Challenge to U.S. Hegemony

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is by far the biggest challenge to U.S. hegemony since the collapse of the Soviet Union. That a major power had the confidence to defy the U.S. so directly—and has so far gotten away with it—indicates a real sea change. This war is unlike any of the last decades. It is not a low-level anti-insurgency war but a high-intensity industrial war. The outcome will not only determine the fate of Ukraine but will have a great impact on the balance of power in Europe and internationally.



Kharkiv: Graves of Ukrainians killed in war with Russia.

The two decisive actors in the Ukraine war are Russia and the U.S. The war broke out as a result of decades of eastward NATO expansion to countries considered by Russia to be within its sphere of influence. Russia sees Ukraine as of vital strategic interest and will be ready to escalate the conflict until it either secures Ukraine in its orbit or is defeated. The American position is more complicated. Ukraine is of little strategic value to the U.S. and is viewed as a marginal backwater of Europe. For the Western liberal establishment, “defending Ukraine” is about defending the liberal world order, i.e., the right of the United States to do as it pleases wherever it wants.

The defeat of Ukraine by Russia would be a humiliating blow for the U.S. It would signal weakness, have destabilizing consequences for Europe’s political establishment and place a question mark over NATO’s future. Given these high stakes, the U.S. and its allies have continuously escalated the war, supplying ever more weapons to Ukraine. Russia has responded by calling up a partial mobilization and is destroying the Ukrainian army. While the U.S. has been driving the escalation, neither it nor its allies have yet committed themselves to decisively defeating the Russian army by going over to a war economy or intervening directly. For now, the war remains a regional conflict over control of Ukraine.

The leaders of the working class have everywhere marshaled the proletariat behind the interests of its ruling class. But the seeds of revolt are sown every day by the social consequences of the war. For Marxists it is of the utmost importance to intervene into this growing contradiction to build a new leadership which can advance the interests of the working class in this conflict. The essential starting point must be that it is the imperialist system itself—defined today as the U.S.-dominated liberal order—that is responsible for the conflict in Ukraine. The entire world proletariat has an interest in ending imperialist tyranny over the world, and only on this basis can the workers of the world unite, whether they be Russian, Ukrainian, American, Chinese or Indian. However, the application of this general perspective takes different concrete expressions according to considerations in each country.

Russian workers must understand that the victory of their own government would not deal a fundamental blow to imperialism. It would not further the independence of Russia from world imperialism but make it the oppressor of its class brothers and sisters in Ukraine for the benefit of the Russian oligarchs. Whatever short-term defeat it might inflict on U.S. foreign policy, it is not worth the price of becoming the oppressors of the Ukrainian nation. A perpetual conflict between Ukrainians and Russians would only strengthen the forces of world imperialism in the region. NATO and the EU would be dealt a much harder blow by a common revolutionary front of Russian and Ukrainian workers against their respective ruling classes, in the manner of the great October Revolution. *Turn the guns against the Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs! For revolutionary unity against U.S. imperialism!*

Hnidyj/Reuters



Boureima/Anadolu

**Niamey, 3 August 2023: Supporters of military coup in Niger oppose France, hail Russia. The real anti-imperialist force is the workers of the world, not Putin's Russia.**

Ukrainian workers must understand that the U.S., EU and NATO are not their allies but are using Ukraine as a pawn for their interests, to be bled dry and then discarded. Ukraine's national independence will not be secured by aligning with imperialism, which would mean servitude to Washington and guarantee permanent hostility from Russia. Ukrainian workers must also oppose the oppression of Russian minorities by their government. Such defense of Russian minorities would do a million times more to undercut the Kremlin's war effort than Zelensky's schemes. The question of borders and the rights of national minorities could be settled easily and democratically were it not for the reactionary intrigues of the oligarchs and imperialists. Every day it becomes clearer that Ukrainian workers are being sent to slaughter under the command of Washington and for the benefit of Wall Street. They must unite with the Russian working class to put an end to this madness; anything else will lead only to further carnage and oppression. *For the right of self-determination of Russians, Ukrainians, Chechens and every other national minority!*

In the West workers have been bombarded with propaganda about the need to sacrifice in the name of NATO's crusade for democracy in Ukraine. The best thing the proletariat in the U.S., Germany, Britain and France can do to defend its own interests and those of the workers of the world is to fight back against the financial parasites and monopolies sucking them dry at home. To do this they must sweep away the reactionary cabal of trade-union and social-democratic leaders who are loyal to those very forces. Their sellouts at home are inseparable from their calls to install "democracy" abroad with NATO tanks and bombs. These traitors would be long gone were it not for the pacifist and centrist swamp that talks of "peace," "trade union struggle" and even "socialism" but clings to the coattails of the warmongers and avowed servants of imperialism. An antiwar movement is only worth its salt if it excludes the conciliators of social-chauvinism in the workers movement. *Lift the sanctions on Russia! Down with the EU and NATO! For the Soviet United States of Europe!*

A growing number of working people in Latin America, Asia and Africa look to Russia as a force against imperialism. This misplaced faith will do nothing to liberate them from the yoke of the U.S., West Europe and Japan. Putin is no anti-imperialist and will not be an ally in the fight for the national liberation of any country. It is precisely for this reason that AMLO, South Africa's Ramaphosa, India's Modi and China's Xi are sympathetic or not overtly hostile to him. Support to Putin lulls the working class of the Global South with the illusion that it can improve its living conditions and liberate itself from imperialism *without* revolutionary struggle. At the slightest sign of upsurge from the oppressed masses of the world, the reactionary leaders of the Global South will look to the same imperialists they today denounce. The real anti-imperialist force is the workers in Ukraine, Russia and the West. They and the workers of the world can be united around a common internationalist banner only by opposing all national oppression, whether at the hands of great powers or of nations that are themselves oppressed. *Nationalize imperialist-owned assets! Workers of the world, unite!*

**China: Stalinist Belt or Proletarian Road**

As the dynamics that enabled China to grow and prosper in the last 30 years unravel ever more quickly, the CPC's faith in global free-market capitalism remains unshaken. Expressing himself at the 2022 Davos World Economic Forum, Xi Jinping argued:

"Economic globalization is the trend of the times. Though countercurrents are sure to exist in a river, none could stop it from flowing to the sea. Driving forces bolster the river's momentum, and resistance may yet enhance its flow. Despite the countercurrents and dangerous shoals along the way, economic globalization has never and will not veer off course. Countries around the world should uphold true multilateralism. We should remove barriers, not erect walls. We should open up, not close off. We should seek integration, not decoupling. This is the way to build an open world economy. We should guide reforms of the global governance system with the principle of fairness and justice, and uphold the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its center."



Bogu/Xinhua

**June 2023: Desperate to shore up investment in face of U.S. economic warfare, CPC leader Xi Jinping greets Bill Gates in Beijing.**

Unfortunately for the CPC, the future of the “multilateral trading system” is dependent first and foremost on the actions of the United States, and the U.S. cannot allow current trends to persist. It will either force concessions from the rest of the world to prop up its position on top or it will bring down the whole edifice with it as it falls.

For over a decade, tensions between the U.S. and China have been growing. The U.S. has been ratcheting up the pressure as it has become clearer that China is not marching toward liberal democracy but is becoming a real economic and military competitor. The increased pressure pushes the CPC to strengthen its internal control of the economy and political dissent (e.g., Hong Kong) and strengthen its military position. This in turn leads the U.S. to further tighten the screws. This accelerating dynamic has brought U.S.-China tensions to a multi-decade high, threatening open military conflict.

In case of such an occurrence, it would be the duty of the international proletariat to stand unconditionally for the defense of China. The imperialists are rabidly hostile to China precisely because of the economic and social progress the collectivized core of its economy has enabled. This is what the working class must defend. But it must do so according to its *own* methods and aims, *not* those of the parasitic CPC bureaucracy.

Trotsky explained in relation to the USSR that “the real method of defense of the Soviet Union is to weaken the positions of imperialism, and strengthen the position of the proletariat and the colonial peoples throughout the earth” (*The Revolution Betrayed*, 1936). This strategy, entirely applicable to China today, could not be more different than that pursued by the CPC, which seeks first and foremost to hold on to the status quo. For starters, it seeks to restore relations with the U.S. by leaning on American capitalists like Bill Gates, Elon Musk and Jamie Dimon—representatives of the same class that oppresses the world and seeks to dominate China. Such maneuvers can only increase the hostility of American workers toward China, alienating the PRC’s greatest potential ally in the struggle against U.S. imperialism. As for the oppressed people of the Global South, the CPC stands not for their liberation but for illu-

sory alliances with the elites of these countries. Those self-interested crooks are sure to abandon China at the first difficulty, or if offered a better bribe by the imperialists.

There are voices in the Chinese bureaucracy that strike a more bellicose tone, looking to the strengthening of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as the surest way to defend China. One can only welcome the increase in the technical and combat abilities of the PLA. But military matters cannot be separated from politics, and in this domain as well the conservative interests of the ruling caste undermine China. A key pillar of the PLA’s defense strategy is to deny the U.S. access to the so-called “first island chain” around China by developing long-range strike capabilities as well as seeking military control over these islands. But in any conflict, support from the proletariat of the surrounding countries would be much more decisive than possession of any number of small, uninhabited rocks.

The only way to truly throw U.S. and Japanese imperialism out of the East and South China Sea is through an anti-imperialist alliance of workers and peasants encompassing the whole region. But the CPC with its nationalist strategy has made no attempt to win workers in the Philippines, Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia to its cause. Instead, it has played into the imperialists’ anti-PRC campaign by focusing only on short-term military advantages while disregarding both the national sensibilities and internal class antagonisms of neighboring countries.

Nowhere is this truer than over the question of Taiwan. The workers of Taiwan have suffered brutal oppression under the boot of its capitalist class. But instead of encouraging them to struggle in their own class interests against the imperialists and the local bourgeoisie, the CPC’s strategy is based on convincing the latter to voluntarily submit to its rule and join the People’s Republic of China. To that end the party pledges to maintain capitalist economic relations and political administration in Taiwan under its “one country, two systems” policy. To the workers the CPC offers not liberation but support for continued capitalist exploitation and the Stalinist boot of repression. Not surprisingly, this “lose-lose” proposal has done little to win the Taiwanese masses to reunification.



Favila/AP

## How to defend China?

CPC relies on uninhabited islands instead of anti-imperialist alliance with Southeast Asian proletariat.

Above: Man-made island on Mischief Reef. Right: 2023 May Day march, Manila.



The CPC's Plan B is direct military intervention, which while potentially successful in reunifying Taiwan would come at huge costs, not least if it faces hostility from the local working class. If the CPC were to go this route, Trotskyists would stand in defense of the PLA against the Taiwan capitalists and the imperialists, but would do so fighting for a proletarian revolutionary strategy. Against the bankrupt scheme of "one country, two systems," Trotskyists fight for *revolutionary reunification*, that is, reunification through a social revolution against capitalism in Taiwan and political revolution against the bureaucracy on the mainland. This strategy would unify the workers of China around a common class and national interest. It would not only cut the ground out from under the anti-Communist alliance between the U.S. and Taiwan bourgeoisie but would transform China into a beacon for oppressed people around the world in their struggle against imperialism.

While today the CPC continues to proclaim its loyalty to both socialism and capitalism, one must not count on this remaining the case for very long. There are powerful forces linked to Chinese and foreign capitalists who wish to do away with any trace of state control and open China to imperialist pillage once again. That outcome must be fought to the death! But there are also currents within the ruling caste who, under the pressure of working-class discontent, could shift the party far to the left, cracking down on capitalists and dusting off the anti-imperialist and egalitarian rhetoric of traditional Maoism. But just as with Deng's market reforms, Mao's attempts at egalitarian autarchy based on frenzied mass mobilization could not overcome the economic stranglehold of world imperialism over China. In fact, the disasters of Mao's policies brought the PRC to the brink of collapse and directly led to the CPC's shift to "reform and opening up."

The CPC's twists and turns reflect only different means by which the parasitic bureaucratic caste seeks to maintain its privileged position within the confines of an isolated workers state. Contrary to the claims of the CPC from Mao to Xi, socialism cannot be built in one country, nor is peaceful coexistence with imperialism possible. The only way forward for the working class of China is to unite in a party built on the true Marxist-Leninist principles of class independence, internationalism and world revolution and sweep away the self-interested CPC bureaucrats. *Oust the bureaucrats! Defend China against imperialism and counterrevolution!*

## VI. THE FIGHT FOR REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

As the world enters a new historic period of crisis, the working class stands politically disarmed. Everywhere it is led by bureaucrats and traitors who have overseen one defeat after another. As gigantic challenges loom, the task of forging leaderships of the working class that will truly represent its interests is posed with the utmost urgency. How to forge such leaderships? This is the central question confronting revolutionaries today. The inevitable social and political upheavals in the years ahead will raise the masses against their current leaders and present opportunities for radical realignments in the workers movement. But these



M.S. Nappelbaum

**March 1919: V.I. Lenin (at left) on presidium of First Comintern Congress in Moscow.**

occasions will be wasted without pre-existing revolutionary cadre who have rejected the failed policies of the last 30 years and correctly pose the tasks of today.

### The Central Lesson of Leninism

In *The Permanent Revolution* (1929), Trotsky wrote of Lenin: "The struggle for the independent political party of the proletariat constituted the main content of his life." It is precisely this core concept of Leninism that is repudiated by each new wave of revisionism. While it takes a distinctive shape according to the dominant pressures of the epoch, revisionism always consists at bottom of the subordination of the proletariat to the interests of alien classes.

Lenin's conception of the vanguard party took its mature form after the outbreak of World War I, when the parties of the Second International, having sworn to oppose the war, overwhelmingly lined up patriotically behind their own governments. In his works during the war, Lenin showed how this historic betrayal did not come out of thin air but was prepared by and rooted in the preceding period of imperialist ascendancy. The exploitation of countless millions by a few great powers generates superprofits which are used to co-opt the upper layers of the working class. In its habits, ideology and aims, this stratum aligns itself with the bourgeoisie against the interests of the working class. The wholesale capitulation of most of Social Democracy showed that the pro-capitalist trend in the workers movement had not only become dominant but had paralyzed or co-opted the majority of what had been the revolutionary wing of the International.

From this experience Lenin drew the conclusion that unity with pro-capitalist elements of the workers movement meant political subordination to the capitalist class itself and

necessarily betrayed the fight for socialism. Most of his fire was directed against the centrists in the workers movement, who had not openly rejected the principles of socialism but sought nonetheless to maintain unity at all costs with open traitors to the working class. Lenin insisted that centrists stood as the principal obstacle to building a party capable of leading the masses on the road to revolution. Whereas this lesson was critical to the successful October Revolution in Russia, the failure to assimilate it in time in Germany led to the defeat of the 1919 Spartakist uprising. From the ashes of war and revolution, the Third International was founded on the principle that any party claiming to fight for revolution must split politically and organizationally from the pro-capitalist and centrist wing of the workers movement.

As the postwar revolutionary wave receded, a period of capitalist stabilization ensued, which left the Soviet Union isolated on the world scene. It is in this context that Stalinism emerged, rejecting the essential component of Leninism—the political independence of the working class. Rather than relying on the extension of revolution by the international working class to defend the USSR, Stalin increasingly relied on other class forces. Whether it was the kulaks, the Guomindang in China, the British trade-union bureaucracy or the imperialists themselves, Stalin struck agreements that sacrificed the long-term interests of the working class in favor of supposed short-term advantages. Far from strengthening the Soviet Union, this led to one bloody disaster after another, undermining the overall position of the international proletariat.

Trotsky's struggle for a left opposition and for a new, Fourth International was a continuation of Leninism precisely in that it fought to build an international vanguard party against the social-democratic and Stalinist trends in the workers movement. The physical extermination of its cadre, including Trotsky himself, led to political disorientation and defeat in the revolutionary openings that followed the carnage of World War II. The consequence was the strengthening of Stalinism and world imperialism. It is these

historic defeats and the failure since that time to reforge the Fourth International that led to further catastrophic setbacks up to the destruction of the Soviet Union itself.

### Post-Soviet Period: “Marxists” Liquidate into Liberalism

At the time of the counterrevolution in the Soviet Union, the forces claiming the mantle of Trotskyism overwhelmingly stood by and watched or actively cheered as the remaining gains of the October Revolution were destroyed. The ICL stood alone in fighting for Trotsky's program of defense of the Soviet Union and political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy. Despite its tiny size and political weaknesses (see document on permanent revolution, page 64), the ICL was at its post when faced with the decisive test of the epoch. But its weakness and isolation speak volumes to the miserable state of the revolutionary left at the dawn of the new historical period.

The consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union were devastating for all those claiming to be Marxist. The world's rapid shift to the right—not to bonapartism or fascism but to liberalism—created enormous pressure toward organizational and political liquidationism. With this turn in the world situation, the task was to slowly and patiently rebuild a revolutionary working-class vanguard based on the lessons of the recent proletarian defeats and in political opposition to liberalism. While the ICL was able to explain the Soviet collapse, like the rest of the “Marxist” left it rejected building a revolutionary alternative to liberalism (see document page 7).

By adapting to liberalism and not fighting to chart an independent working-class road forward, the “Marxist” left was without a compass in the face of the stability and relative prosperity of the new period. To justify its existence, it resorted to crisis-mongering and pointing to specific atrocities or reactionary policies to “prove” that imperialism retained its reactionary character. This simply dovetailed with the dominant liberalism, which had no problem with critics wanting to curb “excesses” such as war and racism in the context of the “peaceful” exploitation of the world through the expansion of finance capital.

The wars, austerity, and national and racial oppression of the post-Soviet period were of course grounds for workers and youth to revolt. But for this revolt to take on revolutionary content, it was necessary to expose how the liberal leadership dominating these various struggles was an obstacle to advancing them. It was necessary to exacerbate the contradictions between the legitimate sentiment of revolt and the liberals' loyalty to the system engendering these scourges. The task was to *break* these movements from their liberal leaderships. But none of the so-called Marxist organizations so much as identified this as the task at hand. Instead, the “revolutionaries” latched themselves to each wave of liberal opposition to the status quo that emerged, giving a slight Marxist coloration to what were bourgeois movements.

The more right-wing “Trotskyist” organizations gave up most of their Marxist pretensions



L'Anticapitaliste

France's NPA, formerly Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, exemplifies how left liquidated into liberalism in post-Soviet period.

and built the left wing of neoliberalism, whether it was Green parties, the U.S. Democratic Party, the British Labour Party or Brazilian PT. The French Mandelites—pretenders to the Fourth International—liquidated their Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, replacing it with the amorphous Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste, whose professed goal was no longer working-class revolution but merely to create a “strategic alternative to mild social-liberalism” (Daniel Bensaïd). Others retreated into the worst sort of sectarianism. The Northites (known for their World Socialist Web Site) proclaimed that in the epoch of globalization, unions were “simply incapable of seriously challenging internationally-organized corporations” and had thus become entirely reactionary. For all its radical verbiage, this anti-union position simply leaves the liberal leadership of the unions unchallenged.

The more centrist groups such as the ICL and Internationalist Group (IG) continued to proclaim the need for revolutionary leadership and to “break with reformism” in general but totally abstracted this from the need to split the left from liberalism, the main political task in cohering a revolutionary party in that new epoch. Necessarily, the polemics by the ICL and IG against the rest of the left (and each other) were based on timeless principles and abstract jargon, not on guiding class struggle along revolutionary lines.

The result of 30 years of disorientation and capitulation to liberalism speaks for itself. Today, as a new epoch begins, those organizations claiming to stand for revolution are splintered, weak and sclerotic (literally and metaphorically), with barely any influence on the course of working-class struggle. They remain stuck in the same mold in which they have worked unsuccessfully for decades.

### The Fight for the Fourth International Today

The struggle for revolution today must be founded on a correct understanding of the key characteristics of the epoch. U.S. imperialism remains the dominant power and the world order it has built continues to define global politics. It is being challenged not by the aggressive rise of rival imperialist powers but by the relative loss of economic and military weight of all imperialist countries in favor of China—a deformed workers state—and regional powers that have a degree of autonomy but remain dependent on and oppressed by world imperialism. Current dynamics point to increased economic and political instability throughout the world and regional conflicts (Ukraine, Taiwan, etc.) with potentially catastrophic global implications. The pressure on the world order is rapidly rising as are internal pressures within each country.

The clearest way for U.S. imperialism to regain the initiative is by dealing a crippling blow to China. The CPC bureaucracy has fostered enormous contradictions within China by balancing between world imperialism, a growing capitalist class and the most powerful proletariat on the planet. The breakdown of the post-Soviet equilibrium will exacerbate these contradictions. The CPC’s hold is not as solid as it outwardly appears, especially in the face of internal unrest (as seen in the small but significant protests against the CPC’s brutal lockdowns). The working class will not stay passive as its economic conditions not only stagnate but start to worsen. Nor will the Chinese capitalists passively accept being squeezed by the bureaucracy. Eventually, either China will fall to counterrevolution like the USSR or the proletar-



Quatrième Internationale

**Cover of *Quatrième Internationale* issue (September-October 1938) announcing the founding of the Fourth International.**

iat will rise up, sweep away the bureaucracy and establish proletarian democracy through a political revolution. When this will be decided is impossible to predict. Any showdown is sure to be preceded by violent zigzags by the bureaucracy, cracking down on both counterrevolutionaries and working-class discontent. The task of revolutionaries regarding China is to defend the gains of the 1949 Revolution against counterrevolution and imperialist aggression while showing how the bureaucracy undermines these gains at every turn by betraying the fight for international revolution.

The struggle by the U.S. and its imperialist allies to maintain their grip on the world order will come at ever-growing social costs for their populations at home. Already the social fabric of the imperialist powers is rotting from the inside. The balance maintained by cheap credit, monopoly profits and speculative bubbles is no longer tenable as living standards are being crushed. Numerous Western countries have shown signs of growing discontent in the working class. France has been the most explosive, but even countries such as the U.S. and Britain have seen a rise in trade-union struggle.

While the first waves of these struggles are being defeated, the pressure will only rise at the base of the unions. It will become clearer that none of the problems confronting the working class can be solved through palliative adjustments to the status quo. This will pose ever more sharply the need for a trade-union leadership that can lead the working class on the road of revolutionary struggle. The main obstacle blunting this development is the so-called “revolutionaries” who support marginally more left-wing but pro-capitalist trade-union leaders instead of building oppositions based on a revolutionary program. Only in struggle against such centrism will it be possible to break the trade unions from their current pro-capitalist leaderships.

As threats accumulate, liberalism is becoming ever more rabid and hysterical. This reflects the liberal petty bourgeoisie desperately clinging to the status quo. But it also reflects a legitimate fear among the oppressed in the face of growing right-wing reaction. Revolutionaries in the West must understand that to fight rising reaction it is necessary to break the liberalism that shackles movements in defense of immigrants, racial minorities and women and other sexually oppressed people. Marxist-sounding criticism of certain isolated elements of their programs, such as cop reform or appeals to the state, is not sufficient. Only by showing in practice how liberalism is a direct obstacle to advancing the struggles of the oppressed can its hold on the masses be broken. This cannot be done from the sidelines but only from within the struggle, by providing a class-struggle response to every manifestation of capitalist tyranny.

The shocks of the world order will hit the countries at the bottom of the pyramid the hardest. The prospect of a better life, which seemed a possibility not so far back, is now closing for hundreds of millions of people. The new working-class layers in Asia, Africa and Latin America represent the greatest danger to capitalism. The masses of the Global South have increasingly left the isolation of the villages and are urbanized, literate and connected to the world. Their growing role in world production gives them tremendous power, yet their only prospect is further immiseration. It is this groundswell of the disenfranchised that is pushing populist forces to the fore. The weak capitalist classes of these countries must balance between the pressure from below, which threatens to sweep them away, and the pressure from the imperialist paymasters who control international capital flows. Leftist demagoguery and religious obscurantism have so far proven effective in keeping the lid on social discontent. But when this fails, military dictatorship is never far behind.

In countries oppressed by imperialism, the fight for national emancipation from the grip of the great powers and the resolution of other most basic democratic tasks play a decisive role. As these struggles intensify, it will be shown at every step that the national bourgeoisies play a treacherous role, sacrificing national liberation and the emancipation of the working class and peasantry on the altar of private property. Revolutionaries must enter the fray and show

at every step how only the working class at the head of all the oppressed can lead to liberation.

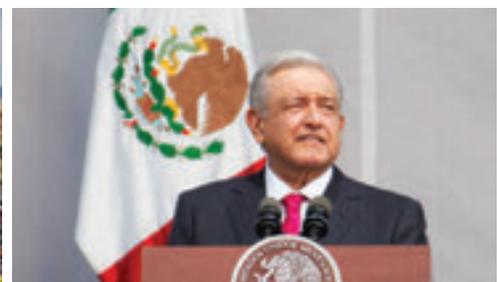
Under no circumstances can the fight against authoritarian or obscurantist governments justify the slightest concession or alliance with pro-imperialist liberal-modernizing alternatives. That would only strengthen reaction while tying the forces for democratic reform to imperialism. In countries where the bourgeoisie paints itself in left-wing “anti-imperialist” colors, it is necessary to expose their lying hypocrisies by pushing the fight against imperialism forward. Nothing can be more sterile and counterproductive than standing on the sidelines and preaching revolution. It is obligatory to defend any reforms that strike at imperialist interests. But this must in no case justify supporting bourgeois populism. The working class must defend its independence at all costs, always making clear that it fights imperialism with its own methods and aims—those of revolutionary class struggle.

The forces fighting for international revolution are today minuscule. Regroupment based on a clear program and outlook is essential. We offer the current document as a contribution to the process of rebuilding and regrouping the forces for the Fourth International. The ICL has been mired in internal controversy and political disorientation, yet it advances confident that the process of consolidation it has started will give it a crucial role in the upcoming period of social turmoil and conflict. As Trotsky explained:

“The process of crystallization, which is very difficult and full of torments during the first stages, will assume in the future an impetuous and rapid character.... Great conflicts sweep away all that is halfway and artificial and, on the other hand, give strength to all that is viable. War leaves room only for two tendencies in the ranks of the working class movement: social patriotism, which does not stop at any betrayal, and revolutionary internationalism, which is bold and capable of going to the end. It is precisely for this reason that centrists, fearful of impending events, are waging a rabid struggle against the Fourth International. They are correct in their own fashion: in the wake of great convulsions, the only organizations that will be able to survive and develop are those that have not only cleansed their ranks of sectarianism but have also systematically trained them in the spirit of despising all ideological vacillation and cowardice.”

—“Sectarianism, Centrism, and the Fourth International”  
(October 1935)

***Forward to a reformed Fourth International, world party of socialist revolution! ■***



Cruz/AFP, Flores/Anadolu (inset)

**18 March 2023: President López Obrador (above) addressing mass demonstration in Mexico City on 85th anniversary of nationalization of oil. Breaking masses from bourgeois populists is key to national and social liberation.**



Bağcı/Corbis

**Combined and uneven development: buffalo in front of nuclear power plant on the banks of river Ganga, India.**

# Permanent Revolution...

*(continued from page 64)*

political life, obstructing and preventing economic, national and cultural development. Loans, spoliation of natural resources, cheap labor, monetary policy, etc., are all means by which the financial oligarchy and imperialist monopolies strengthen their domination, levy tribute from the whole of society and maintain these countries in a state of destitution.

In these countries, modern industry is a product of foreign capital. The latest technology in industry and agriculture stands side by side with precapitalist social relations. Factories, railroads, mines and ports spring out of the ground where water buffalo and wooden tools still plow the land. The dominant role played by foreign capital gives the national bourgeoisie an extremely weak character: it is only partly able to reach the height of a ruling class and thus remains trapped in a position of a semi-ruling and semi-oppressed class. At the same time, foreign capital proletarianizes the population, creating a working class that comes to play a central role in the life of the country. The establishment of powerful trade unions and often working-class parties represents a mighty force which can push back against imperialist exploitation and confront brittle national bourgeoisies and governments.

The backwardness of the national economy, the utter corruption of local governments, the myriad ethnic and religious divisions, the survival of precapitalist relations: all these conditions, maintained and reinforced by foreign domination, create an inseparable bond between the social liberation of the toiling masses and national emancipation. It is the resistance to such destitution and national humiliation, as well as the aspirations for land, democracy and economic development, that propels the struggle of the masses of workers and peasants forward, giving their most basic demands an explosive character.

The development and modernization of the neocolonial countries requires the resolution of basic democratic tasks; the development of national industry and of an internal market requires national unification and emancipation as well as land reform. The national bourgeoisie has an objective interest in the resolution of these questions in order to fur-

ther elevate its social position as a ruling class. But every single one of them requires confronting imperialist subjugation. Given its weakness in relation to the imperialists, when the national bourgeoisie tries to resist foreign capital, it is compelled to a greater or lesser degree to lean on the proletariat and on the entire nation. At the same time, as a propertied class it is conscious that the proletariat represents a menace to its interests. In order to protect these, it is forced to lean on the imperialists, to whom it is tied by a thousand threads. Thus, incapable of playing an independent role, the



no credit



Rousseau/Getty

**Imperialist pillage then and now. Top: Satirical cartoon showing colonialists tearing up China, ca. 1900. Bottom: Imperialist G7 meeting in Japan, May 2023.**



Petróleos Mexicanos/Getty

**Mass rally in the Zócalo, Mexico City, hailing 18 March 1938 nationalization of imperialist oil companies by Lázaro Cárdenas, shown in newspaper next day.**

national bourgeoisie balances between these two more powerful forces. Trotsky explains:

“In the industrially backward countries foreign capital plays a decisive role. Hence the relative weakness of the *national* bourgeoisie in relation to the *national* proletariat. This creates special conditions of state power. The government veers between foreign and domestic capital, between the weak national bourgeoisie and the relatively powerful proletariat. This gives the government a Bonapartist character of a distinctive character. It raises itself, so to speak, above classes. Actually, it can govern either by making itself the instrument of foreign capitalism and holding the proletariat in the chains of a police dictatorship, or by maneuvering with the proletariat and even going so far as to make concessions to it, thus gaining the possibility of a certain freedom toward the foreign capitalists.”

—“Nationalized Industry and Workers’ Management”  
(May 1939)

Based on the impetus of the toilers at home and given a favorable international balance of forces, the national bourgeoisie can carry out nationalizations, land reform and other progressive measures against the imperialists aimed at defending national independence and developing the national economy. The 1938 nationalization of oil in Mexico under Lázaro Cárdenas or Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser taking over the Suez Canal in 1956 are classic examples of this process. But the bourgeoisie carries out such measures for its own aims and with its own methods. It seeks to maintain itself at the head of the national liberation struggle in order to contain and channel the social and economic aspirations of the oppressed within limits acceptable to its class rule, so as to ameliorate its own position as a semi-ruling class vis-à-vis the imperialists.

The bourgeoisies of subjugated countries are fully aware that a serious struggle against imperialism requires a revolutionary upheaval of the masses, which would be a menace to the national bourgeoisie itself. Trotsky wrote:

“A democratic or national liberation movement may offer the bourgeoisie an opportunity to deepen and broaden its possibilities for exploitation. Independent intervention of the proletariat on the revolutionary arena threatens to deprive the bourgeoisie of the possibility to exploit altogether.”

—*The Third International After Lenin* (1928)

In mobilizing the masses behind it, the bourgeoisie must thus keep strict control over them—crushing revolutionary parties; maintaining an iron grip on the trade unions through the labor bureaucracy and, sometimes, by directly integrating them with the state; sponsoring the creation of state-controlled peasant organizations, etc. Class struggle, land seizures, attempts to form independent trade unions and peasant organizations—any effort at independent anti-imperialist action by the masses is met with bloody repression. It is by suppressing the only force that can deliver genuine national emancipation and modernization—the working class allied with the peasantry—that the national bourgeoisie not only prevents social revolution but sabotages the anti-imperialist struggle at every step, betraying it and paving the way for imperialist reaction. Because of its ties to capitalist property and the need to defend its class interests against the proletarian masses, the national bourgeoisie not only is incapable of solving the tasks of national emancipation and agrarian revolution but plays a thoroughly reactionary role in this process.

Only the proletariat, rallying behind it the peasant masses and the urban petty bourgeoisie, is capable of breaking the yoke of foreign capital, finishing the agrarian revolution and establishing full democracy for the toilers in the form of a workers and peasants government. As Trotsky explained in relation to Russia in *The Permanent Revolution* (1929 Introduction to first Russian edition):

“I drew the conclusion that our bourgeois revolution could solve its tasks radically only in the event that the proletariat, with the aid of the multi-millioned peasantry, proved capable of concentrating the revolutionary dictatorship in its own hands. “What would be the social content of this dictatorship? First of all, it would have to carry through to the end the agrarian revolution and the democratic reconstruction of the State. In other words, the dictatorship of the proletariat would become the instrument for solving the tasks of the historically-belated bourgeois revolution. But the matter could not rest there. Having reached power the proletariat would be compelled to encroach even more deeply upon the relationships of private property in general, that is to take the road of socialist measures.”

The coming to power of the proletariat in one country does not complete the revolution but only initiates it. To modernize backward countries, to develop a national industry and market, to lift the masses out of misery—all of these require the highest level of technology and productivity and access to the world market—the international division of labor. Yet these are all under the control of imperialism. As long as world imperialism remains, the conquests of a single country remain subject to imperialist asphyxiation and the constant threat of reversal. The victory of the neocolonial revolution and the development of socialism require the defeat of imperialism on the world arena, that is, the extension of the revolution to the imperialist centers.

In subjugated countries the first step toward this goal is to forge revolutionary parties whose chief task is to *wrest the leadership* of the anti-imperialist struggle from the hands of the national bourgeoisie. This can only be achieved by *pushing forward* the struggle for national liberation to its final consequences, in the process exposing before the masses every vacillation, capitulation and betrayal of the bourgeoisie. Seizing the imperialists' assets, not least their banks; expropriating the landowners, national and foreign; repudiating the debt and every "free" trade treaty—any consistent action advancing the struggle against imperialist slavery pits the masses against the bourgeoisie. As Trotsky observed, this class "always has a solid rearguard behind it in imperialism, which will always help it with money, goods, and shells against the workers and peasants" ("The Chinese Revolution and the Theses of Comrade Stalin," May 1927). He explained:

"Everything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of the toilers to their feet inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, it is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict."

At the same time, insofar as the bourgeoisie seeks to obtain concessions from the imperialists, revolutionaries support such measures while maintaining total organizational and political independence and seek to mobilize the proletariat and peasantry to carry these out for their own aims and with their own methods:

*Nationalizations?*

No compensation! Occupy the plants, mines, railroads until the imperialists concede!

*Bureaucratic, limited land reform?*

Peasant committees to seize the land!

*Imperialist threat of "regime change"?*

Arm the workers and peasants!

In every instance, Trotskyists advocate the independent action of the masses in the course of the struggle in order to break the hold of the nationalist bourgeoisie.

To combat the influence of the bourgeoisie, it is crucial to combat nationalism, the main ideological tool it uses to rally the proletariat and oppressed behind its interests. Nationalism pits the proletariat against national minorities and their class brothers and sisters of other oppressed nations, and crucially against the working class of oppressor nations, preventing revolutionary unity in struggle against the common enemy, the imperialists. But in order to break the masses from nationalism, it is necessary to distinguish between



Sharma/AFP

**India, January 2021: Farmers' movement protests Modi government attacks. Alliance of working class and peasantry is key for socialist revolution.**

the nationalism of the oppressor, which is an expression of imperial chauvinism, and the nationalism of the oppressed, a reaction to oppression. To deny this distinction is to deny the masses' desire for emancipation. Nationalism cannot be defeated by preaching abstract internationalism. It can be overcome only in struggle, by demonstrating the treachery of the national bourgeoisie in the fight for emancipation.

The interests of the proletariat demand the complete solidarity of workers of *all* nations. In imperialist countries, revolutionary parties must imbue the proletariat with the understanding that the emancipation of subjugated nations is in its own objective interest: every defeat of the imperialists abroad strengthens the position of the proletariat at home. Trotskyists must fight for a break with the social-chauvinists *inside* the ranks of the workers movement—the defenders of NATO and the European Union, the union bureaucrats in North America who support the USMCA "free trade" pact—and with the centrists who maintain unity with the social-chauvinists. Only in this way can mistrust and nationalist prejudices in the neocolonies be overcome. **The main enemy is at home! Oust the pro-imperialist trade-union bureaucrats! For workers revolution in the imperialist heartlands!**

Revolutionary parties in the oppressed nations, in leading the struggle against imperialist oppression, must educate the toiling masses in the spirit of revolutionary unity with the proletariat of the oppressor nations. The unity of oppressed nations against imperialism cannot be realized under the aegis of the venal comprador bourgeoisies, for whom "patriotism" means defense of their private property. It can be achieved only under the leadership of the working class allied with the peasantry. **Seize all imperialist assets! Land to the tiller! For national and social liberation!**

Experience has shown that under exceptional circumstances, peasant-based guerrilla movements are able to defeat imperialism in a single country and expropriate the national bourgeoisie (e.g., China, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam). However, the

victory of such movements can lead to nothing more than the establishment of Stalinist-type bureaucratic regimes that maintain their rule through brutal repression of the working masses, while the country remains subject to the pressures of the world market. The hallmark of these Stalinist bureaucracies is their staunch opposition to the extension of socialist revolution beyond their national borders in the illusory hope of appeasing imperialism. To defend and extend the gains of these revolutions requires a new revolution against these bureaucrats. Therefore, the tasks of revolutionaries laid out above also apply to these societies: Trotskyists must take the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle from the hands of the bureaucrats and lead it under the banner of authentic Leninism. *Defend China, North Korea, Laos, Cuba, Vietnam against imperialism and counterrevolution! For political revolution against the Stalinist betrayers! For the communism of Lenin and Trotsky!*

Definite triumph against imperialism can be assured only by merging the struggle of the proletariat in the imperialist countries against its "own" ruling class with that of the toilers of the oppressed nations against the very same imperialists and their local agents.

*Workers of the world and oppressed peoples, unite!*

## THE ICL'S REVISION OF PERMANENT REVOLUTION

### Deformed at Birth

Since its inception, the Spartacist tendency's approach to the problem of revolution in neocolonial countries and oppressed nations was based on a revision of permanent revolution. To understand how and why this was the case, it is necessary to look at the historical and political context in which our tendency elaborated its approach.

The period following World War II was marked by an upsurge of national liberation struggles fueled by the breakup of the British and French colonial empires and the enhanced authority of the USSR after its victory over Nazi Germany. The world was divided between two superpowers represent-



Kunz/ullstein bild

**Demonstrators carry portrait of Ho Chi Minh, Berlin, 1968. Much of the left glorified nationalists and Stalinists instead of fighting for revolutionary leadership.**



CBS

**Fidel Castro with rebel army, Cuba, 1957. Cuban revolution was a defeat for U.S. imperialism, but Stalinist leadership is an obstacle to socialism.**

ing two rival social systems: the USSR and U.S. imperialism. In this situation, oppressed countries had room to maneuver, and many looked to the Soviet Union for military and political support in their struggle against imperialism. Until the late 1970s, revolts rocked the neocolonial world: China, Korea, Indochina, India, Cyprus, Algeria, Cuba, the Arab world, Chile, etc. At the head of these movements stood bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces. In most cases, the outcome was formal independence under bourgeois nationalist rule, while the yoke of imperialist subjugation remained in place.

Throughout this period, the strategy of almost the entire Marxist left internationally consisted of openly or critically supporting the nationalist leaderships of these movements and their regimes. The justification was that imperialist oppression of colonies and neocolonies gave the national bourgeoisie an objectively progressive role, and that the victory of nationalist forces would amount to realizing the bourgeois-democratic revolution, thus opening the road to socialism. With the argument that the "objective process" would force bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships toward socialism, the role of revolutionaries was reduced to pushing them to the left. This was the theoretical framework of the Stalinist parties and their Maoist splinters, the New Left and the pseudo-Trotskyists. (Michel Pablo, ex-leader of the Fourth International, ended up as an adviser to the Algerian bourgeois government of Ben Bella.)

This was an utter denial of revolutionary leadership of the national liberation struggle. If the "objective process" would lead to liberation and socialism, then there was no need for revolutionary parties. In reality, this meant tying the proletariat and peasant masses to the national bourgeoisie, betraying the anti-imperialist struggle and socialist revolution. For revolutionaries, what was posed was to provide a program for the independent action of the toiling masses for their needs and aspirations as a means of advancing the anti-imperialist struggle and, in the process, emerging at their head in counterposition to the nationalists and Stalinists. Only on this basis was it possible to expose the class-collaborationist program of the left as an obstacle to victory against imperialism and initiate a process of splits and fusions to build an authentic Trotskyist current.

However, the Spartacist tendency did not follow this course. Faced with the bourgeois leadership of the national liberation struggles and the left's tailing of nationalism, we resorted to drawing a rigid and sectarian line by denouncing nationalism in the neocolonial world as reactionary through and through. Beginning with a correct impulse to oppose the liquidationism of the left, we criminally arrived at the repudiation of the core of permanent revolution: placing the struggle for national liberation at the center of revolutionary strategy for the neocolonial world. Orthodox phrases summarizing permanent revolution aside, we counterposed national liberation to class struggle and socialist revolution. In so doing, we systematically rejected the fight for communist leadership of the national liberation struggle, reinforcing the hold of the nationalists and petty-bourgeois forces on the masses. This general framework amounted, at bottom, to a capitulation to imperialism.

**National Liberation:  
Thorn in the Side or Lever for Revolution?**

Here are two classic examples of the Spartacist tendency's view of the national question:

"In general our support for the right to self-determination is negative: intransigent opposition to every manifestation of national oppression as a means toward the unity of the working class, not as the fulfillment of the 'manifest destiny' or 'heritage' of a nation, nor as support for 'progressive' nations or nationalism. We support the right of self-determination and national liberation struggles in order to remove the national question from the historic agenda, not to create another such question."

—"Theses on Ireland," *Spartacist* No. 24, Autumn 1977

And:

"In oppressed nations within multi-national states the question of whether or not to *advocate* independence depends on the depth of national antagonisms between the working people of the different nations. If relations have become so poisoned as to make genuine class unity impossible within a single state power, we support independence as the only way to remove the national question from the agenda and bring the class issue to the fore."

—"Quebec Nationalism and the Class Struggle," *Spartacist Canada* No. 12, January 1977

This approach to the national question was based on viewing it not as a lever for socialist revolution but as a thorn in the side—an irritating problem that needed to be removed to pave the way for "pure" class struggle. This has nothing to do with Marxism. The approach of revolutionaries consists in using every oppression, every crisis, every act of resistance to forge the unity of the working class in the struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie. In this respect, resistance to foreign domination in the oppressed countries constitutes a mighty hammer to shatter world imperialism. But instead of advancing the fight for socialism based on the actual social and national struggles taking place, in a sectarian and doctrinaire manner the Spartacist tendency sought to project on living reality its own idealized version of the class struggle, purged of any national "inconveniences."

Such an approach to the national question is not a novelty in the history of the communist movement. Lenin fought it all his life, in particular against those so-called socialists who looked upon the 1916 Dublin Easter Uprising with disdain and dismissed it as a mere "putsch." In "The Discussion of Self-Determination Summed Up" (July 1916), Lenin included a section on the Irish rebellion (which we reprinted,



**Spartacist press equated nationalism of oppressed and oppressor, treating national liberation struggle as an irritant to be swept aside instead of a weapon in the struggle for socialism.**

without realizing that its entire content was directed at us). He explained:

"The views of the opponents of self-determination lead to the conclusion that the vitality of small nations oppressed by imperialism has already been sapped, that they cannot play any role against imperialism, that support of their purely national aspirations will lead to nothing, etc."

While we did not reject the right of self-determination, our entire approach was shaped by the idea that nothing good would come out of the "national problem." Lenin continues:

"Whoever calls *such* a rebellion a 'putsch' is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of envisaging a social revolution as a living phenomenon.

"To imagine that social revolution is *conceivable* without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie



Robert Hunt/Getty

**Irish Citizen Army after Easter Uprising, Dublin, 1916.**

*with all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.—to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*. So one army lines up in one place and says, ‘We are for socialism’, and another, somewhere else and says, ‘We are for imperialism’, and that will be a social revolution! Only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic view could vilify the Irish rebellion by calling it a ‘putsch’.

“Whoever expects a ‘pure’ social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.”

What is the method of “removing” the national question from the “historic agenda” if not expecting a “pure” revolution, “untainted” by the national sentiments of the oppressed peoples?

The socialist revolution is not a single battle but a series of battles taking place over a multitude of democratic, economic and social questions. In countries under the yoke of foreign domination, to seek to “remove” the national question as the precondition for socialist struggle means denying that the imperialist-imposed state of underdevelopment objectively brings to the fore democratic tasks as the fundamental lever for socialist revolution. The kernel of permanent revolution—and the central lesson of the 1917 October Revolution—is summed up as the bourgeois-democratic revolution, achieved by the revolutionary proletariat at the head of the peasantry and all the oppressed, growing over into the socialist one. Trotsky explained:

“The dictatorship of the proletariat which has risen to power as the leader of the democratic revolution is inevitably and very quickly confronted with tasks, the fulfilment of which is bound up with deep inroads into the rights of bourgeois property. The democratic revolution grows over directly into the socialist revolution and thereby becomes a *permanent* revolution.”

—*The Permanent Revolution*

In contrast, our whole approach was to ponder how this or that democratic question could be “removed” from the agenda. But this proved to be more complicated to do in regions of interpenetrated peoples like Northern Ireland or Israel/Palestine, in which two national groups have competing claims of self-determination over the same territory. The Spartacist tendency thus created a “theory” for cases of interpenetrated peoples. Our seminal article on the question of Israel/Palestine postulated:

“When national populations are geographically interpenetrated, as they were in Palestine, an independent nation-state can be created only by their forcible separation (forced population transfers, etc.). Thus the democratic right of self-determination becomes abstract, as it can be exercised only by the stronger national grouping driving out or destroying the weaker one.



Scheiner/AFP



McCullough/Globe Photos

**Top: Israeli troops terrorize Palestinians in West Bank, 2002. Bottom: Cops beat Irish nationalists in Derry, Northern Ireland, 1998. The liberation of oppressed nationalities must be at the center of revolutionary strategy.**

“In such cases the only possibility of a democratic solution lies in a social transformation.”

—“Birth of the Zionist State, Part 2: The 1948 War,”  
*Workers Vanguard* No. 45, 24 May 1974

It was clearly impossible to “remove” the national question from the agenda in places like Belfast or Gaza. We thus proclaimed the need for revolution. But the whole question remains: *how* can a revolution happen there? The entire program behind the “theory” of interpenetrated peoples consisted of proclaiming the need for socialist revolution while rejecting the need to put the national liberation struggle of Palestinians and Irish Catholics at the center of our revolutionary strategy. Instead, the socialist revolution is viewed as a process in which both national groups will shed their national sentiments in favor of unity on economic demands and liberal solidarity.

Any “Marxist” who thinks that the national liberation struggle is a thorn in the side of revolution and must be put aside in order to fight for socialism is at best condemned to irrelevance or, at worst, an agent of the ruling oppressor who

demands that the oppressed abandon their national aspirations as the precondition for unity. The only way a revolution will happen in Israel/Palestine or in Northern Ireland is through an uprising for the national liberation of Palestinians and Irish Catholics, which would not impinge on the national rights of the Protestants and Israelis but emancipate the workers from their ruling class and its imperialist backers. It is precisely because Irish and Palestinian nationalists are incapable of and opposed to such a perspective that only a communist leadership can bring about a just and democratic resolution to the national problem there.

In a sign of utter impotence, the “Theses on Ireland,” a key document elaborating our view on the national problem there, states in its first thesis:

“The strong possibility remains that a just, democratic, socialist solution to the situation in Ireland will only come under the impact of proletarian revolution elsewhere and concretely may be carried on the bayonets of a Red Army against opposition of a significant section of either or both of the island’s communities.”

In regard to Palestine, our articles constantly stressed that revolution is most likely impossible until there is a revolution in a neighboring country. To declare in advance that we do not really believe in the possibility of a native revolution in Northern Ireland or Palestine and that we do not view our intervention as playing a vital, decisive role in these regions amounts to raising a banner reading: “We Are Bankrupt.”

The task of communists is not to counterpose the struggle for national liberation to the struggle for socialism but to fuse them. Such a perspective is inconceivable with the rigidity and narrow-mindedness that characterized the Spartacist tendency’s approach to the national question; it requires the method and program of permanent revolution. The application of permanent revolution is not restricted to countries with a peasantry or of belated capitalist development. Its method lies at the very heart of the modern communist program. The central lesson Marx and Engels drew from the 1848 revolutions in Europe was the need for proletarian leadership of democratic and social struggles. Concluding their March 1850 “Address of the Central Authority to the [Communist] League,” Marx and Engels stressed that workers

“must do the utmost for their final victory by making it clear to themselves what their class interests are, by taking up their position as an independent party as soon as possible and by

not allowing themselves to be misled for a single moment by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeois into refraining from the independent organisation of the party of the proletariat. Their battle cry must be: The Revolution in Permanence.”

**Leninism vs. the ICL on Nationalism: Permanent Revolution vs. Liberal Outrage**

A central question of revolution for most countries in the world is overcoming national divisions. This question is particularly complex in countries of belated development, where the dominant nation (or ethnic or religious group), while oppressed by imperialism, is also the oppressor of minority nations. This is the case in India, Iran and Türkiye, just to name a few. The following, taken from an article on the Near East, exemplified our approach to this question:

“Let it not be forgotten that the Palestinian Arabs are victims of the nationalism of the oppressed turned oppressor. In Birundi [sic], had the Hutu’s coup against the ruling minority Tutsi [sic] been successful, the tribalism of the oppressed would have translated itself into the genocidal nationalism of the oppressor. All nationalism is reactionary, for successful nationalism equals genocide.”

—“Murderous Nationalism and Stalinist Betrayal in Near East,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 12, October 1972

This obliterates any contradiction in the nationalism of the dominant nation in oppressed countries. The 1994 genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda *is* the reality of Hutu nationalism. Yet Hutu nationalism is fundamentally *not* the same as American or French nationalism—it is the product of Belgian, then French and now American imperialist rape of the region. It is in part a reactionary answer to this reality. The Hutu-Tutsi conflict can neither be properly addressed *nor resolved* outside of this understanding.

The same approach underpinned our work on the Iranian revolution of 1979, in which we equated the mullah-led opposition to the Shah with Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan!

“All the forces of opposition to the monarchy in Iranian society, including the organized proletariat and the left, had rallied behind Khomeini. But the core of Khomeini’s movement was the mullahs (the 180,000-strong Shi’ite Muslim clergy) and the *bazaaris*, the traditional merchant class being ground down by the modernization of the country. This traditional social class is doomed by economic progress, and so is naturally prone to reactionary ideology and its political expressions.



Vermont Historical Society

**Left: Iranian demonstrators during seizure of U.S. Embassy, Tehran, 1979. Right: KKK rally in Vermont, 1927. It is grotesque to equate Islamic revolution, a reactionary response to U.S. oppression, and the fascist KKK thugs of U.S. imperialism.**

“For opportunists it is unthinkable that there could be a reactionary mass mobilization against a reactionary regime. Yet history does offer examples of reactionary mass movements. Adolf Hitler organized an indubitably mass movement which toppled the Weimar Republic. In the U.S. in the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan was a dynamic growing organization capable of mobilizing tens of thousands of activists in the streets.”

—“Iran and the Left: Why They Supported Islamic Reaction,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 229, 13 April 1979

The mullahs *are* reactionary: the Islamic regime in Iran is anti-woman, anti-Sunni and against the national rights of all non-Persian peoples within the borders of Iran. Yet the mullahs were a reactionary answer to the imperialist pillage of Iran that the Pahlavi monarchy facilitated. It was impossible to undercut the popular appeal of the mullahs without recognizing this reality. The implication of our propaganda was to intervene among the participants of the 1979 upheaval by telling those who had illusions in the Islamist leadership that they were following a Hitler-esque movement!

Our entire framework denied the fact that the struggle of the Persian masses to free themselves from the imperialist chokehold was a progressive struggle. Our task was to explain that as long as it remained in the grip of the mullahs, it would necessarily be directed against national and other minorities, leading to their persecution and at the same time undermining the liberation of the Persian majority itself. The only way to break the hold of the mullahs was to show concretely how their leadership was an obstacle to the legitimate and progressive aspirations of the masses to be free from the Shah and imperialism.

The following by Engels, although addressing Poland’s oppression by Germany, applies fully to countries such as Iran, which are both oppressed and oppressor:

“For we German democrats have a special interest in the liberation of Poland. It was German princes who derived great advantages from the division of Poland and it is German soldiers who are still holding down Galicia and Posen. The responsibility for removing this disgrace from our nation rests on us Germans, on us German democrats above all. *A nation cannot become free and at the same time continue to oppress other nations.* The liberation of Germany cannot therefore take place without the liberation of Poland from German oppression. And because of this, Poland and Germany have a common interest, and because of this, Polish and German democrats can work together for the liberation of both nations.” [emphasis added]

—“On Poland” (November 1847)

In countries such as Iran or India, their liberation from imperialist subjugation *cannot* come about as long as minority nationalities and peoples within those states continue to be subject to oppression by the dominant nation. The latter has “a special interest” in the liberation of the oppressed minorities and must become their most consistent champions, for without this their own liberation cannot advance one step. Why? Since it is imperialism that is responsible for the masses’ state of destitution, and since it is imperialism that engineered the myriad divisions, forcing nations and peoples inside arbitrary borders, the toilers must unite *in opposition* to imperialism itself. It is in the objective interest of Persian workers and peasants who toil in a country choked by imperialist sanctions to champion the liberation of their Kurdish, Baluchi and Azeri brothers and sisters as part of their own fight for liberation. This includes advocating their right to self-determination, i.e., to secede.

The more aggressively revolutionaries from the dominant people (e.g., Turks in Türkiye or Persians in Iran) champion the national rights of the oppressed peoples in their respective



Guyot/AFP

**French soldiers with Hutu militia, 1994. Hutu nationalism, which led to genocide of Tutsis, is fueled by the imperialist rape of Africa.**

countries, the more will they be able to scuttle the imperialists’ divide-and-conquer machinations. That would throw a monkey wrench into U.S. moves to turn the oppressed into a cat’s paw for imperialism, as in the case of the Syrian Kurds.

This was completely alien to our perspective, which disappeared the fact that imperialist oppression is fuel for nationalism. For instance, in our work on Sri Lanka, we dismissed every measure taken by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party Bandaranaike regime as motivated by anti-Tamil chauvinism or as insignificant, denying that they included assertions of national sovereignty against imperialism. In a polemic against the Chinese bureaucracy’s support to the Bandaranaike regime, we wrote:

“The Chinese are reduced to describing the declaration of the Republic of Sri Lanka, *itself an explicit and demagogic appeal to Sinhalese chauvinism*, as ‘a significant victory won by her people in their protracted struggle against imperialism and for safeguarding national independence.’” [emphasis added]

—“The ‘Anti-Imperialist United Front’ in Ceylon,”  
*Young Spartacus* No. 19, September-October 1973

That the Bandaranaike regime whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism is beyond any doubt. Yet from this correct recognition, we proceeded to combat Sinhalese nationalism by denying that it was, in its own bloody and reactionary way, an answer to British domination of the island. This led us to dismiss the very proclamation of the Republic of Sri Lanka, which cut ties with the British monarchy!

In the case of Sri Lanka, any defense of the Tamils that does not begin from opposition to imperialism is going to reflect a liberal imperialist outlook. This is the playbook the imperialists use everywhere: they exploit the plight of minorities to advance their interests, sweeping under the rug the fact that the entire state of affairs exists due to their domination. Sri Lanka is no different. With the perspective we had, a small nucleus seeking to become a revolutionary party cannot even begin to find a toehold among the workers of the dominant nation and can only strengthen the hold of the nationalists on them. And to the extent that it appeals to the oppressed Tamils, it would not be in their interest since it would not aid in overcoming national antagonisms or advancing a common struggle against the oppressor of both Tamil and Sinhalese: imperialism. In other words, it would

be—and indeed it was—a liberal-imperialist program for the Tamils (outcry over their oppression) and a liberal-imperialist program for the Sinhalese (treat the Tamils better!).

In oppressed countries, the chauvinism of the dominant nation imposed on minorities is partly a result of enfeeblement in the face of imperialist plunder. The more the fight against imperialism is held down, the more the dominant nation turns against minorities within, whether national, religious or otherwise. At bottom this is due to the reality of countries under the boot of imperialism: if material development does not occur at the expense of the imperialists, it must occur at the expense of workers and oppressed minorities within the neocolony. The national bourgeoisie is able to deflect anger against the miserable state of affairs and underdevelopment by playing on national and religious sentiments, keeping the country divided. Contrariwise, the stronger the peoples within an oppressed country stand in opposition to imperialism, their common oppressor, the closer the unity among them and the weaker the chauvinism of the dominant grouping.

**The Main Enemy Is Imperialism**

The Spartacist tendency sought to combat bourgeois nationalism by arguing that in neocolonies and oppressed nations, the main enemy of workers and the oppressed was the national bourgeoisie. In regard to Mexico, which is directly under the boot of U.S. imperialism and whose internal life is defined in every way by this oppression, we wrote: “We Spartacists insist that in Mexico the main enemy is at home: it is the Mexican bourgeoisie, lackey of imperialism” (“Mexico: NAFTA’s Man Targets Labor,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 748, 15 December 2000). In an article on Northern Ireland with the blockheaded headline “Not Green Against Orange, but Class Against Class!” (*Workers Vanguard* No. 7, April 1972), we lecture:

“All the capitalists are enemies of all workers everywhere, but the main battle of workers in one nation must always be against their own bourgeoisie—only thus do they offer to their class brothers abroad a serious promise of their internationalism, that they do not stand with their own capitalists, masking their stand with class-struggle phrases, against the workers of other countries.”

Taking as its starting point “class independence,” this philistine argument denies that in neocolonial countries, the main enemy is imperialism, not the weak national bourgeoisie which, as we ourselves noted, is reduced to the role of a mere lackey. The nationalists and various left groups use this truth to justify their support to the national bourgeoisie. But to put a minus where the nationalists put a plus does not advance the struggle to break the masses from nationalism. On the contrary, such an approach can only discredit communists in the eyes of workers and peasants and build up the nationalists as the only representative of the national aspirations of the masses against foreign domination. It simply capitulates to imperialism.

In recent decades, the ICL refrained from using “the main enemy is at home” for Mexico. Comrade Jim Robertson argued in the early 2000s that we should stop raising that call given the naked plunder of Mexico at the hands of the U.S. However, the content of this slogan remained the guiding principle of our work there. For instance, shortly after this intervention, comrade Ed C. argued that in Mexico our task consisted in “leading the nation in struggle against imperialist domination.” He was strongly denounced

in a motion by the leadership of our American section:

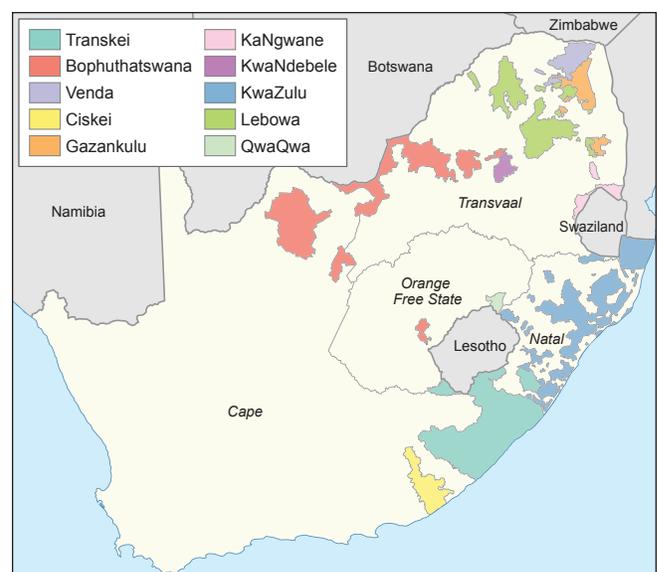
“Regarding Mexico, a workers party that is not guided by a revolutionary, internationalist, proletarian perspective but instead embraces as its main task ‘leading the nation in struggle against imperialist domination’ would be a party that shrinks from fulfilling its proletarian program—i.e., it would be at least tacitly Menshevik. There would be no reason for such a party to maintain its class independence.”

This is not only a total repudiation of the permanent revolution but is in fact an inversion of Stalinism, which, in the name of fighting imperialism, subordinates the proletariat to an alliance with the bourgeoisie. The above motion, in the name of class independence, abandons the struggle against imperialism altogether. Whether it is Stalinism or the Spartacist League/U.S. Political Bureau, the result is the same: the struggle against imperialism stays in the hands of bourgeois nationalists. This conference affirms that “leading the nation in the struggle against imperialist domination” is the task of communists in the neocolonies.

**The National Development of Oppressed Nations Is Historically Progressive**

The development of the nation-state in Europe during the 17th-19th centuries played a progressive role in sweeping away feudal structures and consolidating capitalism. But in the era of imperialism, capital has outgrown the boundaries of the nation-state. Imperialism means the extension and deepening of national oppression on a new historical foundation. Therefore, while the progressive nature of national movements in the imperialist powers is a thing of the past, in oppressed nations, national movements as well as the development and consolidation of the nation-state still play a progressive historical role insofar as they are directed against imperialist subjugation.

Contrary to this basic Marxist truth, the Spartacist tendency argued that national consolidation and unification are now reactionary everywhere. This was one of the political pillars of our South African section and one of the central



Htonl/Africa Open Data

**South Africa: Apartheid regime imposed tribal divisions on black African majority, creating artificial black “republics” (bantustans) to shore up white minority rule and superexploitation.**

points of *Polemics on the South African Left*, one of its founding documents. In polemicizing against black nationalists, we argued that whereas national assimilation was a progressive development in Europe during the 17th-19th centuries:

“However, in Africa and Asia today, the weak native bourgeoisies, dependent on and shackled by imperialism, *cannot* transform these neocolonial states into modern industrial societies. Hence ‘nation-building’ becomes synonymous with oppression of national and ethnic groups by the dominant people.”

—“Letter to the New Unity Movement”  
(28 February 1994)

South Africa is a country brutally oppressed by imperialism where a tiny clique of white capitalists lords it over the black masses who were forcibly divided into bantustans—territories set up by the apartheid rulers to segregate black Africans based on their ethnicity. Like the rest of the continent, South Africa’s borders were artificially drawn by colonial oppressors, who went on to devise a system of rigid segregation in order to control superexploited black labor. To oppose the black African peoples’ aspirations for nation-building and unity against their enforced division was simply reactionary, aligning us with the *actually* “dominant people”: the white South African ruling class backed by the imperialists. The key to forging a revolutionary party in South Africa is precisely the fight for communist leadership of the nation-building struggle against imperialist oppression, exposing how the black nationalists stand as an obstacle on this path.

In Mexico, to counter widespread illusions in Cárdenas and populism, the ICL’s section, the Grupo Espartaquista de México, resorted to simply denouncing Cárdenas. We attacked him because “his intention was to modernize the country for the benefit of the Mexican bourgeoisie” and because his legacy “was the consolidation of the Mexican bourgeois regime” (“Mexico: NAFTA’s Man Targets Labor”). The national development of Mexico against imperialist subjugation, even under bourgeois rule, is in fact highly progressive. The bankruptcy of denying this is in fact self-evident from our own article. We wrote:

“The famous ‘socialist education,’ institutionalized in the constitution two months before Cárdenas took power, had no other objective than to raise the level of education of the poor and workers to make them more suitable for wage labor and more productive for the bourgeoisie.”

Millions of workers and peasants learned to read and write thanks to this reform. The idea that they would shed their illusions in Cárdenas because we pointed out that the reform was only a ploy to make them “suitable for wage labor” is simply grotesque. The only reform under Cárdenas we could not denounce was the nationalization of oil and the railroads because Trotsky hailed it. We also argued that the Mexican Revolution was merely an orgy of reaction and that even Mexico’s independence from Spain “had a distinctive smell of counterrevolution” (see the GEM conference motion elaborating on this question in *El Antiimperialista* No. 1, May 2023).

Marxists support and fight for the national development of subjugated nations. This includes the consolidation of national unity insofar as it is directed against imperialism. To deny the progressive nature of the national development of an oppressed country under the pretext that the bourgeoisie is a reactionary class is simply a capitulation to imperialism. To counter the nationalists, communists, while maintaining total class independence, must support progressive measures



Archivo Histórico de la UNAM

**Emiliano Zapata (seated second from right, 1911) fought to give land to the peasants in Mexican Revolution. We Trotskyists say: Finish Zapata’s work!**

advancing the sovereignty and development of oppressed countries and seek to mobilize the masses independently to carry them forward. The rising of workers and peasants is bound to show in plain sight that nationalists such as Cárdenas, or López Obrador today, are in fact enemies of the liberation of neocolonies and that the masses’ aspirations cry out for communist leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle.

### **Trotskyists Are the Best Fighters for Democracy**

One of the most glaring examples of counterposing the struggle for socialism to the struggle for democracy is the line adopted by our tendency in 2011 rejecting the call for a constituent assembly as wrong under any circumstances (see “Why We Reject the ‘Constituent Assembly’ Demand,” *Spartacist* [English edition] No. 63, Winter 2012-13). This position was taken in the wake of the Arab Spring, when millions revolted against decades-long dictatorial rule and multiple left groups demanded the convening of constituent assemblies on an opportunist basis. In a rigid and sectarian manner, compensating for our lack of perspective for the Arab masses, we resorted to denouncing *in toto* the call for a constituent assembly, counterposing...socialist revolution.

To understand the deep-going revisionism of this line, it is necessary to understand what the call for a constituent assembly is. It is a call for a body whose aim is to set up a new constitution. As our article noted, it dates back to the French Revolution, when the National Assembly resolved the central democratic tasks—abolition of monarchy, abolition of feudalism, redistribution of land and expansion of male suffrage. It is therefore a democratic demand. In countries of belated capitalist development without formal democracy, where the masses are disenfranchised and suffer under prolonged dictatorial or bonapartist rule, such as vast swaths of the Near East, Africa and Latin America, this demand animates millions.

Nevertheless, we dismissed it using this argument:

“Unlike such demands as national self-determination, women’s equality, land to the tiller, universal suffrage or opposition to

the monarchy—any or all of which can be crucial in rallying the masses behind the struggles of the proletariat—the constituent assembly is not a democratic demand but a call for a new capitalist government. Given the reactionary character of the bourgeoisie, in the semicolonial world as well as the advanced capitalist states, there can be no revolutionary bourgeois parliament. Thus the call for a constituent assembly runs counter to the perspective of permanent revolution.” [emphasis added]

This is a species of bourgeois rationalism. From the correct premise that the bourgeoisie is a reactionary class from the point of view of world history, we deduced the counterrevolutionary character of the constituent assembly at all times. It is precisely because of the reactionary character of the bourgeoisie that it is incumbent upon communists to take the lead in fighting for the democratic aspirations of the masses in order to bring them to fruition. As long as the masses look to bourgeois parliamentarism and see in a constituent assembly the possibility to advance their aspirations, the duty of revolutionaries is to enter this fray and establish themselves as the most consistent fighters for democracy while exposing to the masses the bankruptcy of bourgeois parliamentarism and motivating the need for soviet rule. To reject the call for a constituent assembly is to leave the democratic revolution in the hands of the bourgeoisie, which will use the democratic sentiments of the masses to subordinate them to its own class interests. As the 1938 Transitional Program, the program of the Fourth International, explains:

“It is impossible merely to reject the democratic program; it is imperative that in the struggle the masses outgrow it. The slogan for a national (or constituent) assembly preserves its full force for such countries as China or India. This slogan must be indissolubly tied up with the problem of national liberation and agrarian reform. As a primary step, the workers must be armed with this democratic program. Only they will be able to summon and unite the farmers. On the basis of the revolutionary democratic program, it is necessary to oppose the workers to the ‘national’ bourgeoisie.

“Then, at a certain stage in the mobilization of the masses under the slogans of revolutionary democracy, soviets can and should arise.”

But the Spartacists wanted to go directly to the soviets, forgetting in the process the need to unite workers and peasants and oppose them to the national bourgeoisie!

The strongest argument against our rejection of the call for a constituent assembly is the 1917 October Revolution itself. The logic of our argument means that the Bolsheviks led the first successful workers revolution in history *in spite of* calling for the creation of “a new capitalist government.” We took the Bolsheviks’ dissolution of the constituent assembly *after* the establishment of soviet power as “proof” that they should have never called for it. In fact, the call for a constituent assembly played a central role in the Bolsheviks’ rise to power. They used the call to mobilize the peasantry and expose the Provisional Government, which always sought to postpone its convening. It is sufficient to quote point number



Vasquez/Anadolu

**Lima, Peru, 12 January 2023: Protesters demand constituent assembly and resignation of President Boluarte. Communists must place themselves at the head of democratic struggles against national bourgeoisie.**

one of the “Theses on the Constituent Assembly” written by Lenin in December 1917:

“The demand for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly was a perfectly legitimate part of the programme of revolutionary Social-Democracy, because in a bourgeois republic the Constituent Assembly represents the highest form of democracy and because, in setting up a Pre-parliament, the imperialist republic headed by Kerensky was preparing to rig the elections and violate democracy in a number of ways.”

Only a formalist could view the call for a constituent assembly as counterposed to soviets for all times and places. Rather, the call for a constituent assembly is a wedge to be driven between the masses and their misleaders in order to win the former to the perspective of soviet power. The Bolsheviks dissolved the constituent assembly only after soviet power was established, i.e., only at the time when the masses had outgrown the democratic program in struggle and when the assembly had become a counterrevolutionary tool.

The central argument of the *Spartacist* article concerning the experience of China and the call for a constituent assembly is a compilation of slanders of various degrees. We argue that Trotsky’s writings between 1928 and 1932—when he raised the slogan for a constituent assembly again—are “confused and contradictory,” that he “misguidedly” raised this slogan, engaged in “speculation” and “ignore[d] the many historical instances where the bourgeoisie and its reformist agents wielded an elected assembly as a tool against an insurgent proletariat.” Trotsky raised this call in China after the defeat of the 1925-27 Revolution, against the sectarian course pursued by Stalin and the Comintern. This call was a crucial means of re-establishing the authority of the Communist Party of China (CPC) among the working masses in the period of the Guomindang’s counterrevolutionary military dictatorship. Trotsky was not “confused.” His writings on the question are crystal-clear. In fact, our line echoed Stalin’s Comintern of 1928, which called this demand opportunist and refused to raise it.

This conference reasserts that the call for a constituent assembly is principled. Of course, many reformists abuse this call, using it to build illusions in bourgeois democracy. This

call alone is not revolutionary. Its raising must be tied to a revolutionary program which addresses national emancipation and the agrarian question in a way that unites the masses and counterposes them to the bourgeoisie.

### The National Question and Stalinist Oppression

The Spartacist tendency was confronted head-on with the national question in the fight against capitalist counterrevolution in the Soviet bloc, as the imperialists seized on the Moscow bureaucracy's oppression of non-Russian nations to foment a range of capitalist-restorationist forces. The ICL stood out for its unconditional defense of the degenerated and deformed workers states. However, its own program undermined this battle by rejecting the struggle against national oppression as a motor force for proletarian political revolution, handing this weapon to the imperialists and their agents on the ground. The earliest and clearest example of this was the fight in the 1980s against the counterrevolutionary *Solidarność* movement in Poland, which rose up and consolidated support in the working class largely on the basis of the masses' deeply felt national oppression under the Kremlin's domination.

Poland had suffered centuries of national oppression before the Soviet Army moved in and created a workers state from above through expropriating the bourgeoisie following World War II. That social overturn was a major victory for Polish and Soviet workers that needed to be defended unconditionally against imperialism and counterrevolution. However, as in East Germany and throughout East Europe, the Polish workers state was born bureaucratically deformed under the domination of the Russian Stalinist bureaucracy, which carried on Poland's national oppression under new social conditions. The reason for this goes straight to the heart of the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country." Proletarian revolution in one country, or even several countries, opens the road to genuine national equality and the assimilation of nations. But this outcome will only be achieved through building and developing a world socialist economic system that finally conquers the problem of scarcity. Opposed to the struggle for world revolution, which is the only way to reach that stage, Stalinist regimes from Moscow to Beijing defend the privileged position of the dominant nation in their societies.

With the postwar extension of Stalinist rule to East Europe, it was now the "Communists" who were trampling on the Poles, Hungarians and others. From the beginning, Trotskyists needed to put the struggle for national rights and proletarian democracy at the center of their program for working-class political power to defend the gains of social revolution and extend them internationally. But this is precisely what the ICL rejected. Instead of using the felt sense of national oppression to motivate the need for political revolution, we dismissed such sentiments as counterrevolutionary through and through, painting expressions of nationalism by the oppressed as anti-Semitic, clerical, anti-woman, Nazi-



AP  
Budapest, 2 November 1956. Hungarian political revolution—crushed by Soviet troops—was partly against Moscow's oppression of Hungary.

loving, etc. This was in flat contradiction to the lessons of Hungary in 1956, when a developing workers political revolution took the form of a national uprising against Stalinism.

Summarizing the ICL's perspective in light of the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1992 International Conference document stated: "The breakdown of the Stalinist order could lead toward *either* proletarian political revolution or capitalist counterrevolution, depending on the conjunctural political consciousness of the working class—the relative strength of socialist aspirations as against bourgeois-democratic illusions and anti-Soviet nationalism" (*Spartacist* [English edition] No. 47-48, Winter 1992-93). This statement took an essential truth only to then present a complete counterposition between socialist consciousness and national-democratic aspirations. When the Polish counterrevolutionaries launched a bid for power in 1981, it was correct for the Spartacist tendency to demand: Stop *Solidarność* counterrevolution! The question was how to do this.

What was necessary was to fuse workers' socialist aspirations and defense of their national rights, against the counterrevolutionary nationalists and the Stalinists. To break workers from *Solidarność*, Trotskyists needed to explain that its program would deliver them straight into imperialist bondage, deepening their national oppression, destroying the social gains resulting from the overthrow of capitalism and destroying as well the prospect of uniting Polish and Russian workers in common struggle against Stalinist misrule. Trotskyists needed to counterpose a revolutionary-internationalist program linking the call for an independent Polish workers republic with demands to oust Jaruzelski and the Kremlin bureaucrats and unite Polish and Soviet workers in struggle against imperialism.

By refusing to take up the fight against national oppression, the Spartacist tendency could not put forward anything like this revolutionary defensist perspective. All it could offer instead to the masses who resented domination by Moscow were empty appeals to the "historic unity" of Polish and Russian workers combined with reliance on the ossified Kremlin bureaucratic caste to defend the workers state. As the Polish and Soviet Stalinist regimes moved to

stop Solidarność, the Spartacist tendency capsized Trotskyist defensism by declaring:

*“If the Kremlin Stalinists, in their necessarily brutal, stupid way, intervene militarily to stop it, we will support this. And we take responsibility in advance for this; whatever the idiocies and atrocities they will commit, we do not flinch from defending the crushing of Solidarity’s counterrevolution.”*

—“Stop Solidarity’s Counterrevolution,”  
*Workers Vanguard* No. 289, 25 September 1981

That was a statement of political support to the Stalinist bureaucracy, utterly counterposed to mobilizing workers in the USSR and Poland to wrest political power from the Stalinists whose entire program undermined defense of both workers states.

As a “theoretical” justification for its capitulation to Stalinism on the national question, the ICL repeatedly declared that self-determination and other democratic questions were subordinated to defense of the workers states, a “class question.” To be sure, there are many historical examples of imperialist-backed forces raising the national-democratic banner as a rallying point for counterrevolution, as the Mensheviks did in Georgia during the Russian Civil War. In such cases, defense of the workers state is the primary need of the moment, although that does not erase the reality of national oppression and the need to combat it. Yet the ICL abused such history to reject the struggle for democratic and national rights in the workers states *in toto*. This flew in the face of Lenin’s fight to remove any trace of Great Russian chauvinism in the Soviet workers state. It was in Georgia shortly after the defeat of the Mensheviks that Lenin waged his “last struggle,” against Stalin and his cohorts who were viciously stomping on deep-seated Georgian grievances against Russian oppression. In what could have been a polemic against the ICL, Lenin wrote:

“A distinction must necessarily be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a big nation and that of a small nation....

“The Georgian [referring to Stalin and Ordzhonikidze] who is neglectful of this aspect of the question, or who carelessly flings about accusations of ‘nationalist-socialism’ (whereas he himself is a real and true ‘nationalist-socialist’, and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully), violates, in substance, the interests of proletarian class solidarity, for nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice; ‘offended’ nationals are not sensitive to anything so much as to the feeling of equality and

the violation of this equality, if only through negligence or jest—to the violation of that equality by their proletarian comrades. That is why in this case it is better to overdo rather than underdo the concessions and leniency towards the national minorities. That is why, in this case, the fundamental interest of proletarian solidarity, and consequently of the proletarian class struggle, requires that we never adopt a formal attitude to the national question, but always take into account the specific attitude of the proletariat of the oppressed (or small) nation towards the oppressor (or great) nation.”

—“The Question of Nationalities or ‘Autonomisation’”  
 (December 1922)

In opposition to Lenin’s struggle, the lesson the ICL drew from counterrevolution was to double down on condemning all expressions of national sentiment in the workers states as counterrevolutionary. This was the context for the document adopted by the International Executive Committee (IEC) in October 1993 repudiating Trotsky’s call for the independence of Soviet Ukraine (see “On Trotsky’s Advocacy of an Independent Soviet Ukraine,” *Spartacist* [English edition] No. 49-50, Winter 1993-94). Trotsky raised this as an urgent call as World War II was approaching, aiming to channel the just national sentiments of the Ukrainian masses who suffered brutal oppression under Stalin’s boot toward both political revolution in the Soviet Union and socialist revolution in the western reaches of Ukraine, then under capitalist rule. He explicitly urged Bolshevik-Leninists (Trotskyists) to champion this cause as necessary to defend and extend the gains of October against the Hitlerites and other counterrevolutionary proponents of Ukrainian nationalism.

The ICL would have none of this. The IEC document coyly couched its rejection of Trotsky’s call in terms of an empirical assessment of the situation in 1939—e.g., Trotsky “overestimated anti-Soviet attitudes among the Ukrainian masses,” while pro-Nazi Ukrainian nationalists “were never able to gain a mass following.” It also flagrantly falsified Trotsky’s position, implying that he advocated a political revolution “nationally limited to the Ukraine” whereas, we wrote, it would “need *from the very outset* to extend itself, leading to a decisive struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy throughout the USSR.” But it was precisely to promote political revolution in the USSR and socialist revolution in the West that Trotsky demanded an independent Soviet Ukraine!

The concluding section of the document makes clear that

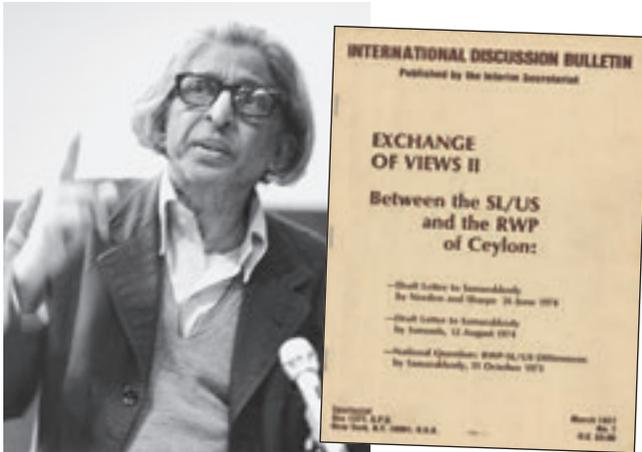


Ng Han Guan/AP



Elias/Reuters

**July 2009: Chinese police (left) confront Uighur protesters (right) in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Struggle against CPC Han chauvinism will either be lever for political revolution or used by imperialists for counterrevolution.**



Spartacist

**Edmund Samarakkody at our first international conference, 1979. Inset: His 1975 letter in bulletin made key criticisms of our program on the national question and imperialism.**

the purpose of its tendentious arguments was to oppose *all* demands for self-determination directed against Stalinist oppression. It notes that the national movements that broke out in the final years of the Soviet Union were “from the outset organized, promoted and led by openly pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist forces” and were “*universally* regarded as a means to achieve the restoration of capitalism and integration into the Western imperialist order.” But it is *for that reason* that Trotskyists were duty-bound to wage a communist struggle for the national rights of the peoples of East Europe and of the Soviet Union’s constituent republics, seeking to break the masses from all pro-imperialist forces and win them to a proletarian-internationalist program.

It is crucial that the ICL reverse its repudiation of Trotsky’s call for an independent Soviet Ukraine. This is not just a matter of the historical record. In China, the imperialists have long seized on the CPC’s Han-chauvinist oppression of the Tibetans, Uighurs and others to promote the overthrow of that workers state. Trotsky’s programmatic approach is urgently needed to intervene to channel Tibetan and Uighur national grievances away from the reactionaries and into the powerful current of proletarian opposition to Stalinist rule, championing the right of self-determination as a lever for political revolution to defend and extend the gains of the 1949 Revolution.

On the other hand, it is not sufficient to simply denounce the Stalinists as “nationalist” as our old propaganda often did; what is necessary is to point out that only a Trotskyist leadership can unite majority and minority populations in a common struggle against national oppression, Stalinism, counterrevolution and imperialism. The Chinese masses, like those of the other deformed workers states still in existence, are economically subjugated by and under the gun of imperialism, and their nationalism is a reaction against this oppression. In these societies, the Stalinists present themselves as defenders of the nation against imperialism. But while the creation of workers states constituted qualitative steps to lay the basis for genuine national liberation, this liberation has been hampered at every turn by the Stalinist bureaucracies and their reliance on “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism. In short, Stalinism is no program for national liberation.

\* \* \*

In the mid 1970s the Spartacist tendency was challenged on its program on the national question and imperialism by Edmund Samarakkody of the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP) of Sri Lanka. In substantial letters, Samarakkody correctly identified key deficiencies in our program, pointing to our failure to distinguish between oppressed and oppressor nations, our “*one-sided identity of interests between the imperialists and the native bourgeoisie*” and our denying that imperialism is the “main enemy of the world working class.” His 1975 letter explained:

*“From the correct Leninist-Trotskyist position that the national bourgeoisie are agents of imperialism, SL [Spartacist League] draws the wrong conclusion that there is no contradiction between the national bourgeoisie or such feudo-capitalist rulers and the imperialists. Thus, SL concludes that the agent of imperialism—the national bourgeoisie—in an oppressed country is imperialism itself, and that the only struggle in the colonial and semi-colonial countries is the anti-capitalist struggle, that there is no anti-imperialist struggle.”*

—“National Question: RWP-SL/U.S. Differences,”

31 October 1975, *International Discussion Bulletin* No. 7 (March 1977)

The political conclusions Samarakkody drew on Ireland, Israel, Cyprus and Quebec were wrong, and we had other disagreements with the RWP. Nevertheless, he was essentially correct in his criticism of our method on this question. His challenge was an opportunity for the Spartacist tendency to fundamentally reorient, but instead we doubled down on our revisionist course, shutting ourselves off from a potential fusion with this group and from the neocolonial world itself.

Only with the struggle on the national question in 2017 was this framework given its first blow (see *Spartacist* [English edition] No. 65, Summer 2017). It overturned decades of chauvinist propaganda on Quebec and elsewhere and put forward, for the first time, the crucial understanding that the struggle for national liberation is a motor force for revolution. But the political content of the 2017 fight was fundamentally flawed. First, it was shaped by the delusion that the historic leader of our tendency, Jim Robertson, had a correct approach to the national question, and therefore it upheld many positions counterposed to permanent revolution. Second, there can be no talk of “Leninism on the national question” without putting forward the need for communist leadership of the struggle for national liberation. Since this question played no part in the 2017 fight, the old program was simply replaced by a variant of liberalism more favorable to oppressed nations. Finally, and most importantly, the discussions that shook the party for over six months were totally divorced from everything happening in the world at the time. Thus, the ICL’s Seventh International Conference did nothing to guide the party in its interventions into the world.

The Spartacist tendency’s revision of permanent revolution has hamstrung our entire work toward oppressed countries. If we have reviewed and corrected so much of our history, it is because it is a necessary precondition to fighting for revolutionary leadership in most of the world. We are throwing away our dull sectarian blade and replacing it with the razor-sharp program of Leninism. The task is now to wield it. As Trotsky warned:

*“It may be regarded as a law that the ‘revolutionary’ organization which in our imperialist epoch is incapable of sinking its roots into the colonies is doomed to vegetate miserably.”*

—“A Fresh Lesson” (October 1938) ■



V.K. Bulla, no credit

Left: Delegates to Second CI Congress, July 1920.

Right: Members of Eastern Bureau at Fourth Congress, 1922.

# In Defense of the Second and Fourth Comintern Congresses

*The following is the concluding section of the document on permanent revolution adopted by the International Conference.*

The central objective of the 1920 Second Congress of the Communist International (Comintern, or CI) was to deepen and codify the split with Social Democracy, cleansing the CI's ranks of political adherents to the Second International while also combating ultraleftist tendencies in the Communist movement. One of the means of advancing this aim was the national and colonial question. The "Conditions of Admission" to the Comintern, drafted by Lenin, demanded:

"Every party wishing to belong to the Communist International is obligated to expose the tricks of 'its own' imperialists in the colonies, *to support every liberation movement in the colonies not only in words but in deeds*, to demand that the imperialists of its country be driven out of these colonies, to instill in the hearts of the workers of its country a truly fraternal attitude toward the laboring people in the colonies and toward the oppressed nations, and to conduct systematic agitation among its country's troops against all oppression of colonial peoples." [emphasis added]

The "cardinal idea" laid out in the Second Congress "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions," also drafted by Lenin, was, as he explained in presenting them, "the distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations. Unlike the Second International and bourgeois democracy, we emphasize this distinction." The Comintern saw in the colonial and semi-colonial world, which comprised the overwhelming majority of the human race, an immense reservoir of revolutionary energy for the struggle against imperialist subjugation.

The second basic idea of the Theses, Lenin explained, was that the mutual relations between states in the world political system were determined by the struggle between the handful of imperialist powers and the soviet movement propelled by revolutionary Russia. Thus, the international political situation put the dictatorship of the proletariat on the order of the

day *in the subjugated, economically backward East* as much as in the advanced West. Referring to the most underdeveloped of the Eastern countries, Lenin emphatically stated:

"The preponderance of pre-capitalist relationships is still the main determining feature in these countries, so that there can be no question of a purely proletarian movement in them. There is practically no industrial proletariat in these countries. *Nevertheless, we have assumed, we must assume, the role of leader even there.*" [emphasis added]

Indeed, the Congress established as the central task of Communists in subjugated nations the *fight for leadership* of the national liberation movement against the native bourgeoisie and pro-imperialist Social Democracy. The Theses stated that the Communist parties must directly support the revolutionary movement in dependent nations and colonies, or else the struggle against oppression would remain "a dishonest facade, such as we see in the parties of the Second International." The document stressed the need to struggle against the reactionary and medieval influence of the clergy and the Christian missions, as well as against the Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian movements that sought to tie the struggle for national liberation to the strengthening of the local nobles, landowners and clergy and the interests of competing imperialists. It was necessary to organize the peasants and all the exploited into soviets where feasible, "thereby establishing the closest connection between the western European Communist proletariat and the revolutionary peasant movement in the East, in the colonies, and in the backward countries in general."

Communists in the subjugated countries needed to educate the masses to be conscious of their particular task of struggling for leadership of the bourgeois-democratic movement in their own nation. The Theses posited:

"The Communist International should arrive at temporary agreements and, yes, even establish an alliance with

the revolutionary movement in the colonies and backward countries. But it cannot merge with this movement. Instead it absolutely must maintain the independent character of the proletarian movement, even in its embryonic stage.”

Lenin’s Second Congress “Report on the International Situation and the Fundamental Tasks of the Communist International” proclaimed:

“World imperialism shall fall when the revolutionary onslaught of the exploited and oppressed workers in each country, overcoming resistance from petty-bourgeois elements and the influence of the small upper crust of labour aristocrats [the social basis of reformism], merges with the revolutionary onslaught of hundreds of millions of people who have hitherto stood beyond the pale of history, and have been regarded merely as the object of history.” [brackets in original]

The “Theses on the Eastern Question” of the Fourth Congress, held in 1922, expanded and further concretized the general guidelines established at the Second Congress. The Theses expose the role of the native ruling classes as the main obstacle to national liberation. These forces aim to utilize the aspirations of the toiling masses only to advance their own interests as a proprietor class while also seeking to conciliate imperialism. To the degree struggle takes the form of a revolutionary mass movement, the native rulers will turn against it and seek protection from their imperialist masters.

The Theses explain that in the search for superprofits, imperialism arrests the development of the countries it subjugates, sustaining as long as possible the feudal and usurious forms of exploiting labor power. The struggle to free the land from feudal relations therefore takes on the character of a battle for national liberation. But bourgeois nationalists, given their dependence on imperialism and their links with the landowners, will do their utmost to water down agrarian slogans and prevent the revolutionary, mass eruption of the peasants—i.e., agrarian revolution. The Theses pose the task: “All revolutionary forces must subject this vacillation to systematic critique and reveal the irresolution of the bourgeois leaders of the nationalist movements” [our translation from German].

Drawing from the experience of the October Revolution, and in particular from the work of the Third CI Congress, which advanced the slogan of the united front, the Fourth Congress extended this tactic to all oppressed nations: the anti-imperialist united front. The “Theses on the Eastern Question” explained:

“The *suitability* of this slogan flows from the perspective of an extended, lengthy struggle against world imperialism, demanding the mobilisation of all revolutionary forces. This mobilisation is all the more necessary, since the native ruling classes tend to make compromises with foreign capitalism that are directed against the interests of the popular masses. And just as the slogan of proletarian united front in the West contributes to exposing Social-Democratic betrayal of proletarian interests, so too the slogan of anti-imperialist united front serves to expose the vacillation of different bourgeois-nationalist currents. This slogan will also promote the development of a revolutionary will and of class consciousness among the working masses, placing them in the front ranks of fighters not only against imperialism but also against survivals of feudalism.”

The ICL has always claimed adherence to the first four Congresses of the Comintern as representing the continuity of Leninism, but we took exception to the Second and Fourth Congresses in regard to the colonial revolution. The basis of our rejection of those Theses is our revision of Trotsky’s permanent revolution. The basic criticism of the



no credit

**Zinoviev speaks during first Congress of the Peoples of the East, Baku, 1920. Bolsheviks fought to win anti-colonial fighters to communism, away from social-democratic and nationalist forces.**

Second Congress was laid out in comrade Robertson’s 1998 “Remarks on the National and Colonial Questions” (published in *Marxist Studies* No. 9, August 2003). He argued:

“At the Second Congress, the comrades did not view the colonial question as having a working-class component, and the Communist International was based upon a *proletarian centrality*, so it seemed like a big contradiction. The position that they adopted, pretty much—and again, rather vaguely, because of the lack of correlation—was to cheer on colonial insurrections on the grounds that they would weaken the major imperialist powers and therefore, to that extent, help the proletarian revolution.... *But there was no extension of the experience of the Tsarist Empire into the colonial world* for pretty good reasons: Until the First World War, you will find hardly anywhere, outside that weak link [both imperialist and semi-colonial] of the Tsarist Empire, industry in the colonial countries.” [emphasis added; brackets in original]

This is a *social-democratic* critique of the Second Congress. Dismissing the Theses for “cheering on colonial insurrections” is not only a distortion of the program of the early Comintern, it is also a rejection of the role of national liberation as the fundamental lever for proletarian revolution. It is therefore an abdication of the fight for leadership of that struggle. The “experience of the Tsarist Empire,” i.e., the experience of 1917, speaks to the *fundamental core* of permanent revolution, which is nothing other than the need for *communist leadership of the democratic struggle*, first and foremost national liberation. This is *precisely* what the Theses of both the Second and Fourth Congresses posed as the chief task of Communist parties in subjugated nations. As we showed above, Lenin posed the need to fight for leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle even in countries with no proletariat whatsoever. Indeed, the Comintern was based not upon an objective “proletarian centrality” (the existence of “a viable proletarian concentration,” as so many ICL articles put it) but on the fight for proletarian *leadership*.

It is not accidental that at the Second Congress the inveterate centrist Giacinto Serrati enunciated, one can say to

the letter, the Spartacist criticism of the Second Congress Theses (and, in fact, of those of the Fourth as well):

“In general, campaigns by bourgeois-democratic groups for national liberation are not revolutionary, even when they resort to insurrectionary methods. They are undertaken either to benefit a nascent national imperialism or to serve the interests of a competitor of the country’s former imperialist ruler.... “True liberation of the oppressed peoples can be accomplished only by the proletarian revolution and the soviet order, not by assistance lent by Communists even indirectly, through temporary alliances, with the bourgeois parties termed revolutionary nationalist.”

As a matter of fact, Serrati’s condemnation faithfully enunciates the Spartacist caricature of permanent revolution: an orthodox-sounding formula that actually *counterposes* the dictatorship of the proletariat to national liberation and to all democratic struggle—the very opposite of Trotskyism.

### For the Anti-Imperialist United Front!

It is because the Spartacist tendency turned permanent revolution into its opposite that we have thus far maintained that only on the basis of the experience of the 1925–27 Chinese Revolution did Trotsky “extend” his theory outside the boundaries of the former tsarist empire. Comrade Robertson, in his remarks quoted above, contrasts Trotsky’s book *The Permanent Revolution*, whose various sections were written between 1928 and 1930, to the Theses of the Second Congress: “I believe,” he stated, “in fact that it was not possible in 1920 to arrive at the position that Trotsky was able to put forward only after the defeat of the Chinese Revolution and writing around 1930.”

In fact, the article “The Origins of Chinese Trotskyism” (*Spartacist* [English edition] No. 53, Summer 1997) traces a continuity—albeit a partial one—between Stalinism and the “Theses on the Eastern Question”: “It was of course a sharp descent from these opportunist impulses expressed at the Fourth Congress of the revolutionary Comintern to the full-blown catastrophic betrayal subsequently carried out in China by Stalin and Bukharin.” The historic position of Spartacism turned the world upside down: Trotsky’s permanent revolution was absent from the early Comintern whereas Stalin’s betrayal was there in embryo at the Fourth Congress!

Against the Fourth Congress Theses, our article argued:

“The Theses were mooted a call for a *political* bloc with bourgeois nationalism around a minimum program of democratic demands. Implicitly they posed a Menshevik, two-stage program for the colonial revolution, with the first stage being a democratic struggle against imperialism (the ‘anti-imperialist united front’).”

The “proof” of this “Menshevik deviation” was, according to *Spartacist*, the following sentence of the Theses:

“The proletariat supports and advances such partial demands as an independent democratic republic, the abolition of all feudal rights and privileges, the introduction of women’s rights, etc., in so far as it cannot, with the relation of forces as it exists at present, make the implementation of its soviet programme the immediate task of the day.” [as quoted by *Spartacist*]

However, this passage from the Theses was

directly preceded by these two sentences insisting on the need for class independence:

“The workers’ movement in the colonial and semi-colonial countries must strive above all to achieve the role of *an independent revolutionary force* in the overall anti-imperialist front. Only when its autonomous weight is acknowledged and *its political independence is thus safeguarded* is it permissible and necessary to conclude temporary agreements with bourgeois democracy.” [emphasis added]

No matter how many times the Theses of the Second and Fourth Congresses insist on the need for proletarian class independence, the very notion of Communists engaging in democratic struggle—in temporary alliances with nationalist forces in order to vie for leadership of the toiling masses—represented in the Spartacist view a deflection from “the class question,” in other words, a mere Menshevik scheme.

The “Theses on the Eastern Question” make clear that insofar as the national bourgeoisies maintain hegemony over the national liberation struggle, it is necessary for communists to seek to conclude temporary agreements with them—anti-imperialist united fronts—in order to expose, in struggle, their vacillations and capitulations. This is the only way to drive a wedge between the working class and the peasant masses on the one hand and the neocolonial bourgeoisie on the other and show that the Trotskyists are not only the best but the *only* consistent fighters for national liberation.

In contrast to the Comintern, whose program challenged the bourgeois and reformist leaderships of democratic struggles in order to rally the masses behind the Communist banner, the ICL’s program has been to denounce bourgeois nationalism in oppressed countries as simply reactionary. Undoubtedly, left groups of all denominations have betrayed the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship in the name of the anti-imperialist united front by subordinating the toiling masses to the bourgeoisie. But the ICL’s sectarian rejection of this tactic does nothing to expose the bourgeoisie in front of the workers and peasants. In fact, it further consolidates the masses’ subordination to the bourgeoisie by showing that



Russian Embassy in Türkiye

**March 1922: Soviet ambassador to Türkiye and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (center) during war of independence. Soviet Union supported Türkiye’s struggle for independence against imperialists and their Greek lackeys.**



**Athens, June 2015: Thousands protest in lead-up to referendum on EU starvation plan. Anti-imperialist united front was necessary to expose Syriza, which sold out to imperialists despite massive “no” vote.**

“communists” are totally insensitive to national emancipation, land reform and other democratic questions.

The 1922 Theses polemicize directly against the program and methodology of the ICL:

“Any refusal of Communists in the colonies to take part in the struggle against imperialist tyranny, on the excuse of supposed ‘defence’ of independent class interests, is opportunism of the worst sort that can only discredit the proletarian revolution in the East.”

That was the justification we used to denigrate struggles for national liberation in Quebec, Greece, Mexico, etc. The main difference with the above quote is that we were, in most cases, lecturing *from the imperialist countries* to the oppressed masses of the neocolonial world.

The anti-imperialist united front was essential then and still is today in all countries where the national liberation struggle is in the hands of the bourgeoisie. For communists to be able to break the bourgeoisie’s hold on the struggle, it is necessary to gain decisive influence among the proletariat, the peasantry and the lower strata of the urban petty bourgeoisie. And to do this, communists must not remain suspended in the air as immaculate critics on the margins of the struggle, but place themselves in the midst of the melee. We must win influence and prestige in the national and democratic struggle against foreign domination, and this can only be done by revealing to the masses the weaknesses, deficiencies and betrayals of the national bourgeoisie. That is the purpose of the anti-imperialist united front: to win the masses, to prepare the ground for the inevitable open conflict with the national bourgeoisie in the struggle against world imperialism.

### **Trotsky vs. the ICL on Lenin’s “Democratic Dictatorship”**

From 1905 to 1917, there was an *essential identity* between Trotsky’s permanent revolution and Lenin’s strategic line expressed in the formula of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” in that they both saw the unresolved democratic tasks, primarily agrarian revolu-

tion, as the motor force of the coming Russian revolution. Against the Mensheviks, they both acknowledged the utterly reactionary character of the liberal bourgeoisie, which stood ready to make a compromise with tsarism. And they both arrived at the same revolutionary conclusion: the need for proletarian leadership of the democratic struggle, at the head of the peasantry, in opposition to the liberal bourgeoisie. Furthermore, they both held that a dictatorship of workers and peasants was the necessary agent of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. For these reasons, their strategic lines converged.

The difference consisted in that Trotsky, analyzing the class position of the peasantry as a component of the heterogeneous petty bourgeoisie, held that it was incapable of playing an independent revolutionary role; it could but follow either the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. Lenin, while

always explaining the unique revolutionary role of the proletariat, left the door open to the *possibility* of the development of a peasant party independent both of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. He therefore refused to establish a priori the concrete forms that the necessary alliance of workers and peasants would take, the concrete forms of the government institutions issuing from the revolution carried out by these two classes. That is the only distinction between Trotsky’s formula, the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry, and Lenin’s *algebraic* formula.

As Trotsky himself retrospectively explained in *The Permanent Revolution*, these two formulas were *prognoses* that required historical verification. It was a difference of nuance in the revolutionary trend of Russian Marxism. The eruption of the revolutionary process in February 1917 solved the equation *once and for all*, revealing to Lenin the actual class dynamics. The algebraic formula was outlived. In order to advance the interests of workers and peasants, it was necessary to substitute arithmetic for algebra. “No support to the Provisional Government!” “All power to the soviets!” “Down with the ten capitalist ministers!” These became the slogans of the fight for the dictatorship of the proletariat, supported by the peasantry.

Lenin’s formula was not a dogma but a call to action: the revolutionary alliance of workers and peasants for all-out struggle not only against the autocracy and the landed nobility but against the liberal bourgeoisie—the need for a dictatorship of the revolutionary classes issuing from victorious insurrection. Lenin’s strategic line cannot be separated from his fight to build the Bolshevik Party, the most revolutionary party in history. The *real* programmatic difference between Lenin and Trotsky was not over the prospects of the Russian revolution but precisely over the party question, over unity with opportunism. While Trotsky’s prognosis was certainly brilliant, he spent years trying to reunite the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Once he understood this problem, as Lenin put it, there was no better Bolshevik than Trotsky.

Lenin's struggle within the Bolshevik Party, codified in his 1917 April Theses and "Letters on Tactics," to rearm the party by abandoning the algebraic formula as *outlived* flowed from Lenin's *own* strategic line, *not* from repudiating it. The Stalinists' revival of the "democratic dictatorship" slogan, digging it out from "the archive of 'Bolshevik' pre-revolutionary antiques" to which Lenin had consigned it in 1917, was designed to cover up their subordination of the Communist Party of China to the bourgeois Guomindang. The Stalinist betrayal of the 1925-27 Chinese Revolution was the *exact opposite* of Lenin's strategic line; it was chemically pure Menshevism.

In explicit contradiction to everything that Lenin and Trotsky wrote on the subject, our International Declaration of Principles states that Lenin's "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" was "a flawed slogan projecting a state defending the interests of two different classes" which the Bolsheviks failed to "explicitly repudiate" (*Spartacist* [English edition] No. 54, Spring 1998). This is again a social-democratic denunciation of Lenin that renounces the alliance between workers and peasants, and in fact renounces the early Soviet government that embodied it. As such, it amounts to transforming *October itself* into a caricature.

Our counterposing of Lenin to Trotsky prior to 1917 could *only* stand on a perversion of permanent revolution that transforms Trotskyism into the social-democratic ramblings of a Serrati or a Levi by renouncing the centrality of democratic struggle. Such are the reactionary implications of our line. The fundamental lever of October was first and foremost the *agrarian question*. The early Soviet government *did*, in fact, defend the interests of workers and peasants by unleashing the peasant war under the leadership of the proletariat. Without defending the interests of the peasantry, the dictatorship would not have lasted a single day. As Trotsky warned in *The Permanent Revolution*, "Lenin



L.Y. Leonidov

Lenin and Trotsky, architects of the October Revolution, on its second anniversary in Red Square.

must be considered in a Leninist way, and not in that of the epigones." Referring to the "democratic dictatorship," he stressed:

"The Bolshevik slogan was realized in fact—not as a morphological trait but as a very great historical reality. Only, it was realized *not before, but after October*. The peasant war, in the words of Marx, supported the dictatorship of the proletariat. The collaboration of the two classes was realized through October on a gigantic scale. At that time every ignorant peasant grasped and felt, even without Lenin's commentaries, that the Bolshevik slogan had been given life. And Lenin himself estimated the October Revolution—its first stage—as the *true* realization of the democratic revolution, and by that also as the true, even if changed, embodiment of the strategic slogan of the Bolsheviks." ■

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# Permanent Revolution & Women's Liberation

*The following is based on a document by comrade Kaur adopted at the International Conference.*

The acuteness of women's oppression in the neocolonies is a result of belated capitalist development caused by imperialist subjugation. This leads to the persistence of socially backward, precapitalist practices and their integration into modern life—for example: the *burqa* in Islam, dowry in many South Asian cultures, *lobola* [bride price] in southern Africa and female genital mutilation. Since imperialism arrests social development, it is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of these practices. Women's and national oppression therefore have a common material basis. As such, the fight for women's liberation in neocolonial countries is inseparable from the fight for national liberation; the two must be wielded together to fight for social revolution.

There are many “anti-imperialist” forces in the neocolonies that claim to fight for national liberation but in fact undermine it at every step. Marxists must oppose these forces and show that what they have to offer women is entirely reactionary. We fight to link the struggle against women's oppression to the class struggle against imperialism and the national bourgeoisie. In line with the 1922 Comintern “Theses on the Eastern Question,” we fight for communist leadership:

“The oppressed masses can be led to victory only by a consistent revolutionary line aimed at drawing the broadest masses into active struggle and an unconditional break with all those who seek conciliation with imperialism in order to maintain their own class-rule.”

This perspective is completely counterposed to the ICL's International Declaration of Principles (IDOP), which states:

“In countries of belated capitalist development, the acute oppression and degradation of women is deeply rooted in pre-



L.G. Brodaty

1918 Soviet poster: “Women Workers Take Up Your Rifles!”

capitalist ‘tradition’ and religious obscurantism. In these countries the fight against women's oppression is *therefore* a motor force of revolutionary struggle.” [emphasis added]

This is liberal for two reasons. First, it revises Marxism in saying that it is due to the acuteness of oppression in the neocolonial countries that the fight against women's oppression is a motor force for revolutionary struggle. This is wrong. Women's oppression is fundamentally rooted in private property and is a motor force for revolution *everywhere*.

In saying that it is a motor force only in dependent countries, the ICL made a fundamental distinction between women's oppression in the East and the West. We prettified women's oppression in the West, disappearing the role of religion therein, and capitulated to western liberal feminists who balk at the

backwardness of the East and for whom the pinnacle of women's liberation is bourgeois democracy in advanced capitalist societies. Our position defined the tasks of communists as fighting for the equalization of conditions of women in the East with those in the West and objectively aligned us with “progressive” forces that preach enlightenment throughout the Third World to save “poor women”—the line of CIA feminists to justify imperialist interventions in Afghanistan! This framework replaced class struggle as the source

of social progress with non-proletarian means, in line with the civilizing missions of NGOs that are

directly financed by imperialist governments and politically aligned with their priorities.

Second, it is *true* that women's oppression in neocolonial countries is more acute and finds justification in religion and tradition. However, as stated earlier, imperialist pillage of dependent countries is the central reason for their underdevelopment and for the persistence of “backwardness.” By insisting on it being “deeply rooted in pre-capitalist ‘tradition,’” the IDOP disappears the material basis of women's oppression in the East, turning the fight for women's liberation into a struggle over ideas, *not* a struggle over social

## Women and Revolution







## Puerto Rico:

# For Independence and Socialism!

*The following is based on a motion by comrade Maxine adopted at the International Conference.*

From mass protests against the U.S. imperialists' implementation of PROMESA [colonialist financial oversight board] to the fight against privatization of electricity and water, devastating hurricanes, the pandemic and the resurgence of the *independentista* movement, the Puerto Rican masses are in desperate need of a communist leadership armed with an anti-imperialist program and committed to the fight for independence and socialism.

However, the ICL's program since 1993 has rejected the very fight for Puerto Rican independence. The justification for this was laid out in a 1998 presentation by comrade Jim Robertson:

"Because we want to fight racial chauvinism in the mainland and nationalism in the island, we strongly advocate independence, but we advocate it aware that the population is profoundly ambivalent. Therefore, our central thrust is the *right* of self-determination. While we do indeed have a position of self-determination, from here [the U.S.]; from within

**San Juan: Puerto Ricans celebrate U.S. tool Rossello's 25 July 2019 resignation as governor and demand he take PROMESA overseers with him.**

Photo: Garcia/Bloomberg

Puerto Rico, it should be the struggle for workers power. The decision should be made by the victorious workers, depending on the circumstances in the world and the Caribbean at that time, as to how they will exercise their working-class self-determination."

—Quoted in "The Struggle Against the Chauvinist Hydra," *Spartacist* (English edition) No. 65, Summer 2017

Let's get one thing straight. The Puerto Rican working class and oppressed masses want independence, but they do *not* want to be impoverished. This is why the Boricua masses do not vote in favor of independence—not because they're "ambivalent" about independence but because they rightly see the nationalist call for independence under capitalism as further economic immiseration under the same

*continued on page 62*

# Malvinas/Falklands War: The Main Enemy Was Imperialism



Sinking of the British *HMS Sheffield* by Argentine aircraft on 28 May 1982. Insets: (above) British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, (below) U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

Cleaver/AP; Insets: PA, Bettmann

*The following motion, edited for publication, was adopted by the ICL's Eighth International Conference.*

The 1982 Malvinas/Falklands War occurred in the context of a U.S. imperialist offensive throughout Latin America. Back in the 1960s, the Argentine working class had exploded in struggle in response to the intensification of imperialist exploitation. The Argentine bourgeoisie, seeking various ways to control the working class, even returned Juan Perón to power (which did not work out for them). Finally, in 1976 it resorted to a military junta under Lieutenant General Galtieri, which, as an integral part of the U.S.-led anti-Communist alliance, repressed the militant workers movement and implemented neoliberal reforms with the support of the imperialists.

In 1982, at a time of growing discontent and workers' protests, the junta invaded the British-controlled Falkland Islands, effectively diverting the struggle against Galtieri's rule. The junta was able to place itself at the head of the anti-imperialist sentiment motivating the protests. At the same time, the invasion coincided with the Argentine bourgeoisie's interest in reducing British presence in the region.

Margaret Thatcher's government sought to prop up British imperialism's declining position by tightening its alliance with the U.S. and crushing the labor movement. Thatcher's regime became the spearhead for neoliberal reforms in Britain and around the world, destroying British industry and thoroughly subordinating the economy to the City of London based on the export of finance capital. For the

British imperialists, the war was intended to defend their colonial possession as part of maintaining their role as a plundering power.

Argentina's victory would have been in the interests of the working class. In Argentina, it would have been a step in the direction of national emancipation and would have weakened the world imperialist yoke. Moreover, a blow against the imperialists, who were pushing neoliberal austerity, would have encouraged working-class and social struggle, including against the junta that had implemented such attacks. Britain's defeat would have opened the possibility for the working class and the oppressed to overthrow Thatcher and British imperialism. The defeat of Argentina, as it happened, intensified the looting of the country and in Britain strengthened the Thatcher government in its offensive against the working class.

This conference rejects our reactionary position, which was for the defeat of both sides. Regarding Argentina, we argued:

"A victory for the Argentine junta in this war would have been *contrary* to the interests of the Argentine working masses, heightening the chauvinist sentiments Galtieri had excited and manipulated in order to defuse a burgeoning class struggle."

—"Britain and Argentina: Between Some Rocks and Losing Face," *Workers Hammer* No. 220, Autumn 2012

By denying that the anti-imperialist struggle was central, our line could only reinforce the influence of the nationalists

*continued on page 62*

## Puerto Rico...

(continued from page 60)

masters. Instead of providing an answer to this real fear, we seized on it as an excuse to drop the fight for independence.

Communists champion independence for Puerto Rico because it is an oppressed colony and we are against national oppression, not because our starting point is “to fight racial chauvinism in the mainland and nationalism in the island.” Condition eight of the “Conditions of Admission Into the Communist International” states:

“In countries whose bourgeoisies possess colonies and oppress other nations, it is necessary that the parties have an especially clear and well-defined position on the question of colonies and oppressed nations. Every party wishing to belong to the Communist International is obligated to expose the tricks of ‘its own’ imperialists in the colonies, to support every liberation movement in the colonies not only in words but in deeds, to demand that the imperialists of its country be driven out of these colonies, to instill in the hearts of the workers of its country a truly fraternal attitude toward the laboring people in the colonies and toward the oppressed nations, and to conduct systematic agitation among its country’s troops against all oppression of colonial peoples.”

The ICL’s 2017 International Conference document corrected the rejection of Puerto Rican independence in our press and claimed that the fight for independence was a motor force for revolution. At the same time, it claimed that the formulation by comrade Robertson quoted above “codifies our anti-colonial stance from the U.S....and our perspective for permanent revolution as applied to Puerto Rico.”

This was both a centrist obfuscation and a deformation of permanent revolution. While Robertson’s presentation states that we “advocate independence,” it doesn’t advocate *fighting* for independence. A key argument of ours has been that “as Leninists we do not seek to impose our point of view on them [Puerto Ricans] and insist that they separate,” and thus “we emphasize the right of self-determination.” This falsely establishes the “sentiment of the population” as the basis on which to intervene into the Puerto Rican workers movement instead of principled opposition to imperialist oppression.

Robertson’s 1998 report is not an application of permanent revolution. It argues that as opposed to the U.S., where we insist on self-determination for Puerto Rico, on the island itself we should insist on “workers power.” This

counterposes the democratic task to the need for socialist revolution when both struggles are intertwined. Combining the struggle for national emancipation and the struggle for socialism is the only way to put forward permanent revolution for Puerto Rico. It is also the only way to break through the imperialist blackmail that threatens even greater devastation if Puerto Rico were to achieve independence. In contrast, separating the two struggles betrays the national aspirations of the masses, renounces the anti-imperialist struggle and cedes leadership of the independence movement to the nationalists.

The fight for independence is a motor force for revolution in Puerto Rico and is a potential spark for revolution in the whole region. The revolutionary overthrow of U.S. imperialism requires joint struggle between the American proletariat and the Puerto Rican masses that extends to the rest of the Caribbean. Does this mean that we should call on the island’s proletariat to passively wait for the revolution in the U.S. to take place? No. The struggle for national emancipation can and must grow over into a socialist revolution and continue without interruption. It’s on this basis that we fight for permanent revolution in Boriquen and for a socialist federation of the Caribbean.

Instead of arguing for revolutionary unity based on the struggle to overthrow U.S. imperialism, the ICL advocated unity based on liberal internationalism, establishing that the main task for American workers was to “fight racial chauvinism in the mainland.” The vanguard of the proletariat will unite the working class not by moral preaching but by leading the working class in common struggle against imperialism. It must show how the American proletariat fighting in its own defense is one side of the struggle, and the Puerto Rican masses along with the rest of the people of Latin America struggling for their emancipation is another side. As both struggles persist, they will show these workers that an objective alliance exists between them based on ending U.S. imperialist tyranny. As Trotsky wrote:

“The sooner the American proletarian *vanguard* in North, Central, and South America understands the necessity for a closer revolutionary collaboration in the struggle against the common enemy, the more tangible and fruitful that alliance will be. To clarify, illustrate, and organize that struggle—herein lies one of the most important tasks of the Fourth International.”

—“Ignorance Is Not a Revolutionary Instrument”  
(January 1939)■

## Malvinas...

(continued from page 61)

instead of breaking illusions in them. By rejecting the need to give revolutionary leadership to the anti-imperialist struggle, we left it in the hands of the nationalists, who were bound to betray it. The way to win the masses away from nationalism is to compete for the leadership of the national struggle.

Successful struggle against imperialism requires communist leadership. The only way to overthrow British imperialism in that war was through an alliance of Argentine and British workers in struggle against their common enemy, imperialism. Nationalism is an obstacle to that struggle

because it divides the international working class. The national bourgeoisie limits the struggle against imperialism to its own aims and methods, which do not fundamentally threaten private property, rejecting measures that would deal the greatest blows against imperialism. Argentina’s liberation was not going to be achieved by expelling Britain from the islands. Its liberation requires canceling the imperialist debt, rolling back privatizations, ending austerity, etc.

Everything that raises the proletariat in struggle drives the national bourgeoisie toward the imperialists, since the proletariat represents a threat to the bourgeoisie’s class rule. The struggles for national and social liberation can only go forward together. The decisive question in the war was to use the anti-imperialist struggle as a lever to advance socialist revolution internationally.■

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# In Defense of Permanent Revolution



**For Communist Leadership of  
the Anti-Imperialist Struggle!**

## WHAT IS THE PERMANENT REVOLUTION?

*The following document was adopted by the ICL's Eighth International Conference.*

The epoch of imperialism is characterized by the division of the world between a large number of oppressed countries and a handful of oppressor countries that are economically and militarily dominant. The current world situation is characterized

by the hegemony of U.S. imperialism which, in alliance with the other imperialist powers (Germany, Britain, France, Japan), subjugates the enormous mass of the world population through the export of

finance capital. The old days of colonial empires, with their naked and open plunder of colonies, have ceded their place to the pillage of countries which are formally independent but are in fact neocolonies or dependent states held in bondage by the economic and military blackmail of the "great" powers.

In most countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and East Europe, it is not the national bourgeoisie but the imperialists who control and dictate every aspect of economic and

*continued on page 39*



Photos: Joe/AFP; Inset: Basil Blackwall, Inc.

**South African miners strike, Marikana, 2014.**  
**Inset: Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky, who developed program of permanent revolution, addressing Red Army soldiers in 1920.**