

Meetings on 50 years of the International Committee of the Fourth International

Nick Beams: “The program of the ICFI has stood the test of time”

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The Socialist Equality Party in Australia held a public meeting in Sydney on December 21 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The meeting was part of a series held internationally over the last two months to review the significance of the ICFI's protracted struggle against the opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that definitively broke with the fundamental principles of the Trotskyist movement in 1953. A broad cross-section of party supporters, WSWS readers, students, workers and pensioners attended the Sydney meeting.

Below we are publishing the report delivered by Nick Beams, SEP national secretary and member of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board.

The year 2003 will surely go down in history as one of those—like 1914, 1929 or 1939—that is associated with a great historical change. The US-led war on Iraq has marked the eruption of a new era of imperialist war and colonisation.

In commemorating the 50th anniversary of the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International we are not simply marking a chronological event. Rather, we are establishing that the principles and program on which the ICFI was founded have not only stood the test of time and of great events, but acquire the most decisive significance in the present period and in the tasks that lie ahead.

In the past few days the mass media has been filled with the sickening cries of triumphalism over the capture of Saddam Hussein, amid renewed claims that his overthrow removes all possible grounds for opposition to the war. But no amount of celebration can obscure the fact that the war against Iraq involved the overturn of all the precepts governing international relations between supposedly sovereign states in the post-World War II period. All the lies about weapons of mass destruction and the collaboration between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda have been exposed and nothing can cover up the fact that this was a “war of aggression”—the very crime for which the Nazi regime was found guilty in the Nuremberg Trials following World War II.

In the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's capture, Prime Minister John Howard, together with Labor Party leader Mark Latham, rushed forward to declare support for the death penalty. Howard called for Saddam Hussein to be given an “open trial” so that the “details of what he did [could] be spelled out detail by detail, slaughter by slaughter, death by death, so that the world understands what kind of man he was ...”

Such a trial, however, might be more revealing of the operations of the imperialist powers. If there were really an “open trial” it would have to go much further than Howard would advocate or want. It would have to expose all the relations of Saddam Hussein and his regime with the US and other imperialist powers over more than four decades—connection by

connection, arms contract by arms contract, chemical weapons supply consignment by consignment, secret deal by secret deal, going right back to the time when Saddam Hussein first attracted the attention of the CIA back in the 1960s as a right-wing killer and thug for the Baath Party.

It would have to detail the visit to Baghdad by the US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld as an emissary for the Reagan administration in 1983; the urgings of the US for Iraq to initiate the war against Iran; the information and material assistance it gave in prosecuting that war and the details of which companies—US and European—supplied the materials with which Saddam Hussein launched gas attacks on the Kurdish population. The exposure of these connections, “detail by detail”, and an examination of the historical record would destroy all the arguments of the supporters of the war that it was justified—notwithstanding the complete absence of weapons of mass destruction—because it removed a brutal dictator. Such an examination would establish that, like others who have gone before him, Saddam Hussein would not have come to power, let alone held it for so long, had it not been for the crucial support of the imperialist powers.

Of course, a trial in which the real historical record is laid bare is not what Howard, much less Bush and the US administration, has in mind. Were such an inquest conducted, it would demonstrate that rather than the imperialist powers being accomplices in the murderous activities of Saddam Hussein, it would be more accurate to say that, in the final analysis, Saddam Hussein, was an accomplice in the crimes of the imperialist powers.

The 2003 war against Iraq marks a decisive historical turning point not only because of the unbridled use of military power against a poor and, as has been demonstrated, completely defenceless nation, or even because of the unprecedented extent of the lies and falsifications which accompanied it. Its significance, above all, arises from the fact that it marked the shattering of all the mechanisms through which international political relations had been regulated in the post-war period.

It was not simply that the US set out to overturn the regime of Saddam Hussein and conquer Iraq, but that this eruption of militarism was undertaken in pursuit of a much more far-reaching goal—aimed at nothing less than global domination. The war in Iraq has signified the opening of a new era in the history of imperialism. This means not only more wars of aggression against defenceless nations but also, as the Iraq war itself revealed, clashes among the major capitalist powers themselves.

In the past, when Marxists spoke of US imperialism, their analyses were fiercely contested. Now it seems the US striving for global domination is openly recognised as a fact of political life.

In the words of well-known Harvard academic Joseph Nye, writing in the July-August edition of *Foreign Affairs*: “Not since Rome has one nation loomed so large above the others. Indeed, the word ‘empire’ has

come out of the closet. Respected analysts on both the left and the right are beginning to refer to 'American empire' approvingly as the dominant narrative of the twenty-first century. And the military victory in Iraq seems only to have confirmed this new world order."

This raises a number of crucial questions. What is the source of this eruption of imperialism? What are its consequences? And what perspective must guide the political struggles of the masses as they confront this new situation?

We would be very poor Marxists indeed if we were to ascribe the cause of this eruption simply to George Bush or even more broadly to the so-called neo-conservatives who occupy the key posts in his administration and direct its policies. Individuals, of course, play a role, sometimes a decisive one, but only insofar as their programs are the articulation of deep social interests. In this instance, the program of global domination advanced by the cabal around Bush represents an attempt to resolve a crisis in the affairs of US and world capitalism.

The roots of this crisis are to be found in the contradictions of the world economy. The vast development of the productive forces, above all, the globalisation of the productive processes made possible by the use of computer technology over the past two decades, has come into conflict with private ownership and the nation-state system. Globalisation of production has meant the growing interdependence of economic and social life. But the political framework is still based on nation-states, with conflicting interests.

Herein lie the origins of the Bush foreign policy. It represents the attempt by the American ruling class to resolve the contradictions of world capitalism through global domination—to create in the twenty-first century a version of the British Empire of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But this project can no more bring peace, prosperity and harmonious economic development than did the earlier attempts to establish a global empire. It can only lead to the eruption, once again, of a world war, the anticipation of which can be seen in the deepening conflicts between the US and the other capitalist great powers.

The violent eruption of imperialism which has marked this year is the outcome of events not just of the recent period but reaching back more than a century.

If we cast our minds back exactly one hundred years to 1903, we find that at that time the most far-sighted leaders of the socialist and Marxist movement were pointing to the fact that there was, beneath the seeming endless expansion of capitalist economy, a series of sharpening conflicts among the major powers for colonies, markets, resources and profits. These conflicts were eventually to explode in the form of World War I.

The war was the expression of the deep-going contradictions within world economy stemming from the vast expansion of the productive forces on a global scale—and particularly over the preceding four decades—and the constrictions created by the nation-state system. Each of the capitalist great powers sought to resolve this contradiction in its own interests—to assert its predominance over its rivals—thereby leading to a bloody conflict of each against all.

"The only way in which the proletariat can meet the imperialist perplexity of capitalism," Trotsky wrote, "is by opposing to it as a practical program of the day the socialist organisation of the world economy."

If war, and the barbarism which accompanied it, was the method by which capitalism sought to solve its insoluble contradictions, then the working class had to advance its own solution—the world socialist revolution.

In the wake of the betrayal of the leading parties of the Second International, which lined up behind their own ruling classes in the war—invoking so-called national defence—the struggle of revolutionary Marxists was conducted on the basis of this perspective of socialist internationalism.

The issue in the war was not who fired the first shot, or which of the particular imperialist powers was more or less predatory than the others, but the historical meaning of the war itself. It signified that the very expansion of the productive forces, to which capitalism itself had given rise in an earlier period, was now coming into violent conflict with the system of private property and rival nation-states, threatening to destroy the whole culture of mankind.

This internationalist outlook was at the centre of the struggle waged by the Bolsheviks in Russia that culminated in 1917 in the seizure of power by the working class in the October socialist revolution. It was also at the heart of the struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition against the rising Stalinist bureaucracy in the aftermath of the revolution, and its nationalist perspective of "socialism in one country". This, Trotsky explained, was a "reactionary utopia" because the historic necessity for socialism arose from the fact that the productive forces had long since broken through the national constrictions of the bourgeois state.

Consequently, he insisted, in the epoch of imperialism, that is, of world economy and world politics, no communist party could proceed on the basis of tendencies of development in its own country, but had to base itself on an international program corresponding to the character of the epoch. "In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism."

For 10 years the Left Opposition fought to re-orient the Third (Communist) International. But in 1933, the coming to power of Hitler as a direct result of the Comintern's theory of "social fascism", which saw it refuse to form a united front with the social democratic organisations to fight the Nazis, and the lack of any discussion of this disastrous policy within the Comintern, led Trotsky to the conclusion that a new International had to be founded and built.

The Fourth International was founded in 1938. It should be called, Trotsky once wrote, the World Party of Socialist Revolution, a name which expressed both its nature and its historic task.

In the five-year political struggle he waged to found the Fourth International, Trotsky was continually confronted with the argument that it was impossible to establish a new International under conditions where the working class had suffered a series of defeats. It was necessary, his opponents insisted, to wait for a new upsurge.

Trotsky replied that the defeats themselves demonstrated precisely the need for the Fourth International. They were the result neither of the strength of imperialism nor some incapacity of the working class. Rather, they were the product of the betrayals of the existing leadership of the working class. The historical crisis of mankind could be reduced, in the final analysis, to the crisis of leadership of the working class.

The significance of Trotsky's decision was demonstrated in the events that followed. In the lead-up to World War II there were many centrist parties claiming adherence to socialism, revolution and even to Marxism, which were far larger than the Fourth International. Not one of them was to survive the war. Only the Fourth International was able to maintain an independent course—opposing the forces of Nazi imperialism on the one hand, without capitulating to their own "democratic" imperialists on the other.

The post-war period presented new problems and challenges. In the face of unexpected turns in the situation there were those within the Fourth International who claimed that Trotsky's perspective was no longer viable—that it belonged to a past era. The world revolution had not materialised, capitalism had not collapsed as a result of the war, and economic revival was taking place. At the same time, the Stalinist bureaucracy appeared to have strengthened itself with its conquests in Eastern Europe, where capitalist property relations were overturned.

Moreover, the victory of the Chinese and Yugoslav revolutions seemed to disprove the thesis that socialism could only be realised through the construction of the Fourth International as the new international revolutionary leadership of the working class.

The tremendous political pressures which came to bear on the Fourth International were reflected in a new perspective that began to be developed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, two central leaders of the movement in Europe. In a document entitled “Where are we going?” issued in 1951, Pablo wrote:

“For our movement objective social reality consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world. Furthermore, whether we like it or not, these two elements by and large constitute objective social reality, for the overwhelming majority of the forces opposing capitalism are right now to be found under the leadership or influence of the Soviet bureaucracy.”

At the heart of Pablo’s perspective lay the abandonment of the internationalist outlook of Marxism. Marxism rests on the scientific conception that objective social reality is grounded on the predominance of world economy within which the world working class, brought into being by the global development of capitalist production, is the decisive social force. Pabloism rejected this conception and in so doing repudiated the independent revolutionary role of the international working class. Instead it began with an impressionistic division of objective social reality into the capitalist world and the Stalinist world.

From this perspective followed inexorably the fragmentation of the Fourth International. It was no longer the world party of socialist revolution, guided by a single program, but rather a collection of national-based parties guided by a series of opportunist tactics, all derived from national considerations.

The implications for the future of the Fourth International were quickly spelled out. In a report delivered to the Third World Congress of the Fourth International, Pablo insisted that it was necessary to integrate “more deeply into the real movement of the masses.” This meant “the necessity of subordinating all organizational considerations, of formal independence or otherwise, to real integration into the mass movement wherever it expressed itself in each country, to an integration in an important current of this movement which can be influenced.”

The Pabloite perspective meant nothing less than the liquidation of the Fourth International into organisations dominated by the social democratic and Stalinist apparatuses or the bourgeois nationalists. This is what led to the issuing of the Open Letter by James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party, the American Trotskyist party, in November 1953, and the founding of the ICFI.

In the 50 years since, all manner of tendencies have claimed to be opposed to the perspectives of Pabloism, while seeking to deny the significance of the Open Letter. Cannon, it is said, only issued it belatedly, when his own position was threatened; there never was a real break with Pabloism; Cannon pursued the wrong tactics; his was just an opportunist manoeuvre and so on. But none of their objections—all of which are aimed at trying to deny that the ICFI represents the historic continuity of Trotskyism—addresses the content of the Open Letter itself.

The six key principles on which the Fourth International had been founded, outlined by Cannon in the Open Letter, have lost none of their validity. He emphasised the historic crisis of the capitalist mode of production which threatened the destruction of civilisation, the necessity for a planned world socialist economy, and insisted on the construction of an independent revolutionary party, capable of articulating and fighting for the independent political interests of the working class.

The publication of the Open Letter and the reassertion of the programmatic foundations of the Fourth International did not signify the end of the fight against opportunism. Rather, it marked the beginning of what has turned out to be a protracted political struggle. This is because

opportunism—the betrayal of the independent historical interests of the working class for short-term gains—is not a product of bad individuals, but the political expression of the pressures generated by objective conditions. The restabilisation of capitalism after the war, the apparent strengthening of the Stalinist apparatuses and the rise of the petty-bourgeois nationalist movements in the former colonial countries had their impact.

Less than 10 years after the issuing of the Open Letter all the issues which had arisen in 1953 were to re-emerge as the Socialist Workers Party in the United States moved to reunify with the Pabloites on the basis of a common position regarding Cuba—that Castro’s petty bourgeois movement had established a workers’ state and even that Castro himself had become an “unconscious Marxist.”

The British Trotskyists sought to deepen the struggle against Pabloism and defended the continuity of the Fourth International. Against great odds and under conditions of relative isolation, they defended the programmatic foundations of the movement, insisting that the positions advanced by the SWP leadership on Cuba meant nothing less than the liquidation of the Fourth International. The struggle of the British Trotskyists was vindicated in 1964, when the LSSP, the Sri Lankan section of the Pabloite International, carried out the Great Betrayal, joining the bourgeois coalition government of Mrs Bandaranaike.

The opportunists maintained that the intransigent struggle for principle led only to sectarian isolation. In fact, the fight waged by the British Trotskyists against Pabloite opportunism became a pole of attraction for revolutionary forces around the world. It is therefore something of a tragedy that the political degeneration of what was to become the Workers Revolutionary Party began under conditions where its long struggle for principled politics began to intersect with a radicalisation of workers and youth from the mid-1960s onwards.

Under conditions where the party was beginning to grow and win important materialist resources, the SLL-WRP leadership began increasingly to define its role in nationalist terms. In contrast to an earlier period, the building of the Fourth International was not understood as arising from the international struggle against opportunism, aimed at clarifying the working class, but from organisational successes within Britain which would serve to inspire others around the world to join it. Consequently, everything depended on maintaining the organisation in Britain. This meant that when opportunist tendencies emerged within the SLL-WRP, as they inevitably did—the revolutionary party does not exist in a vacuum—the issues were not fought out. Instead of clarifying the movement, these tendencies were compromised with, for the sake of organisational unity.

Among the three principal leaders of the SLL-WRP—Healy, Banda and Slaughter—significant differences were developing by the late 1960s. Banda was becoming increasingly infatuated with the radical nationalist movements—Maoism in China and the NLF in Vietnam—while Slaughter was tending to the view that Pabloism had destroyed the Fourth International and that a regroupment of centrist forces was needed for its reconstruction. Rather than fighting out these differences, Healy sought to maintain party unity through organisational and practical advances. There was a bitter price to pay.

By the beginning of the 1980s, if not before, the leadership of the WRP had become deeply hostile to the struggle for Trotskyist program and principles, which it denounced as “propagandism.”

In the split of 1985-86, Gerry Healy spoke for all the factions that had emerged from the explosion within the WRP to oppose the ICFI when he denounced it for pursuing “whiter than white socialism”. In doing so, Healy was summing up the outlook of all the opportunist tendencies in the post-war period—that adherence to principle, to the program of Trotskyism, only leads to isolation. In fact, the relative isolation of the Trotskyist movement was bound up with the domination of Stalinism and the ability of the various national liberation movements to rest on the

Stalinist bureaucracy as they manoeuvred with imperialism. But this situation was now about to dramatically change.

At the most fundamental level, the split in the ICFI in 1985-86 was bound up with far-reaching changes in the world political situation, changes which were to decisively shift relations between Trotskyism and the various opportunist tendencies. All the factions of the WRP leadership, either directly or indirectly, based themselves on the Stalinist bureaucracy right at the very point where it was about to disintegrate. By 1991 the Soviet Union, and the Stalinist bureaucracy which headed it, had collapsed.

In reviewing this past 50 years we are in a position to draw certain conclusions and lessons. To the short-sighted observer, or to someone who is impatient with the protracted struggle to construct the revolutionary party, the history of the Fourth International constitutes a series of confusing splits and conflicts. Of course to the pragmatist, eager for immediate “success”, these conflicts have no interest or significance. But for those who are concerned with finding the way forward they are of the most decisive importance.

The history of the Fourth International, and above all the history of the struggle waged by the International Committee over the past 50 years, constitutes a great testing out of opposed political perspectives.

Consider the initial perspective of Pabloism: that the socialist transformation would not take place through the independent struggle of the working class, under the leadership of the revolutionary party, constructed on the lines developed by Lenin and Trotsky, but would somehow emerge under the aegis of the Stalinist bureaucracy, leading to the formation of “deformed workers’ states” like those in Eastern Europe—a process that would possibly last for centuries. Or what of the Pabloite conception that the Stalinist bureaucracy could undergo a process of “self-reform” and that the Stalinist parties could, under mass pressure, “project a revolutionary orientation.”

How has history dealt with the Pabloite conception that a revolutionary wing would emerge from the Stalinist bureaucracy that would fight tendencies aiming for capitalist restoration, and that it was wrong to characterise the Stalinist apparatuses as “counter-revolutionary through and through?”

And what of the theories that radical national liberation movements, based on the peasantry and the petty-bourgeoisie, could carry out the socialist transformation?

The collapse of the Stalinist regimes and the role played by the bureaucracy in organising the restoration of capitalism has put paid to all the theories about the two-sided nature of the Stalinist apparatus and its capacity to play a progressive role. Likewise, it has set the seal on the so-called national liberation movements, all of which, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, have subordinated themselves to imperialism.

An objective examination of the history of the past 50 years demonstrates the complete bankruptcy of the Pabloite search for alternatives to the Fourth International. The organisations which were supposedly to provide this alternative have collapsed, or have entered a process of irreversible decay.

This has meant that the form of the political pressure on the working class movement has changed. Now it takes the following form: that the demise of the old organisations means that socialism itself is unviable. But this is just as false as the earlier assertion that the parties and organisations which once dominated the workers’ movement could advance a program leading to the overthrow of capitalism.

What, then, does their demise really signify? That the material conditions which provided the basis for their policies, and which enabled them to command considerable support—and, in that sense, isolate the Fourth International—have been completely transformed.

The vast changes in production processes, in communications, in the

development of computerisation, in short the growth of the productive forces over the past 20 years, have rendered the programs of the old parties and leaderships completely unreal.

This is an historical fact of immense political significance. It means that far from the social revolution beginning at some point in the future, vast, revolutionary changes have already begun. In fact they are very far advanced. They are already transforming the entire political superstructure.

As I raised earlier, the eruption of imperialist war and the mad drive by the US for global domination signifies the re-emergence, in an even more explosive form, of the central contradiction of world capitalism—between the global development of the productive forces and the outmoded nation-state system.

History has now posed the question: how is this contradiction to be overcome? Will the drive by US imperialism to reorganise the world in its interests plunge mankind into new forms of barbarism, or will this contradiction be resolved through the overturn of the outmoded capitalist system and the reorganisation of the world in accord with human reason and human needs?

History, Marx explained, never poses a problem without at the same time creating the conditions for its resolution. This is the significance of the mass global demonstrations and protests which erupted in February this year against the US war on Iraq. As the *New York Times* commented at the time, there were now two superpowers on the planet: “the United States and world public opinion.”

The most important task today is to provide conscious leadership to this developing mass movement against imperialism. This requires the political education and training of those forces who will comprise the cadres of the world party of socialist revolution. Herein lies the significance of the *World Socialist Web Site*. It is the means developed by the ICFI for carrying through this task.

There is a profound connection between the struggles we confront today and the principles hammered out in the Open Letter and the establishment of the ICFI. In fact the issues go back 100 years to the split in 1903 between the Bolshevik and Menshevik tendencies in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

This split took place over Lenin’s insistence that the socialist revolution could only be undertaken consciously. No matter how deep the crisis of capitalism, no matter how severe its depredations and no matter how extensive the mass movement, the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism could not come about spontaneously. There had to be, Lenin maintained, an organised struggle against opportunism, against the continuous pressure generated by capitalism itself which, in the final analysis, constitutes the most essential prop for its rule.

The split with the Pabloites in 1953 was grounded on this understanding. Summing up the issues in March 1954, Cannon explained that the differences with Pablo and Mandel centred on the role of the revolutionary party.

“We alone are unconditional adherents of the Lenin-Trotsky theory of the party of the conscious vanguard and its role as leader of the revolutionary struggle,” he wrote. “This theory acquires burning actuality and dominates all others in the present epoch. The problem of leadership now is not limited to the spontaneous manifestations of the class struggle in a long drawn-out process, nor even to the conquest of power in this or that country where capitalism is especially weak. It is a question of the development of the international revolution and the socialist transformation of society. To admit that this can happen automatically is, in effect, to abandon Marxism altogether. No, it can only be a conscious operation, and it imperatively requires the leadership of the Marxist party which represents the conscious element in the historic process. No other party will do.”

The struggle which was initiated in 1953 took place at the outset of a

process of restabilisation of world capitalism. Today, however, all the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production have reached a new peak of intensity and the mechanisms by which they were regulated and ameliorated in the past have either completely broken down or are in an advanced stage of decay.

This is the significance of the split of 1953 and the founding of the ICFI. The principles and program which have been fought for and defended over the past five decades, often under conditions of great difficulty, must now become the basis on which the world socialist revolution is prepared and organised. We urge all of you to take part in this struggle by becoming members of the world party of the socialist revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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