

Lecture six: Socialism in one country or permanent revolution

Part 2

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The following is the second part of the lecture “Socialism in one country or permanent revolution.” It was delivered by Bill Van Auken at the Socialist Equality Party/WSWS summer school held August 14 to August 20, 2005, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The lecture is being posted in three parts. Part 1 was posted September 27.

This is the sixth lecture given at the school. The first, entitled “The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century” was posted in four parts, from August 29 to September 1. The second, “Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century,” was posted in three parts on September 2, 4 and 5. The third, “The origins of Bolshevism and What Is To Be Done?” was posted in seven parts from September 6 to September 13. The fourth, “Marxism, history and the science of perspective,” was posted in six parts from September 14 to September 20. These lectures were authored by World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board Chairman David North. The fifth, “World War I: The breakdown of capitalism,” was delivered by Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia and a member of the WSWS Editorial Board. It was posted in five parts, from September 21 to September 26.

The proposition advanced by Bukharin and Stalin in 1924 that socialism could be achieved in the Soviet Union based upon its own national reserves and regardless of the fate of the socialist revolution internationally represented a fundamental revision of the perspective that had guided the Soviet leadership and the Communist International under Lenin. This divorcing of the prospects for the Soviet Union from the development of the world socialist revolution likewise constituted a frontal assault on the theory of permanent revolution, upon which the October Revolution of 1917 had been based.

Trotsky wrote in his *Results and Prospects*: “The theory of socialism in one country, which rose on the yeast of the reaction against October, is the only theory that consistently and to the very end opposes the theory of the permanent revolution.”

What did he mean by this? Permanent revolution was a theory that began from an international revolutionary perspective; socialism in one country was a utopian and reformist prescription for a national-socialist state.

Permanent revolution took socialism’s point of departure as the world economy and world revolution. Socialism in one country began from the standpoint of socialism as a means of national development.

These questions were at the center of Trotsky’s 1928 critique of the draft program of the Communist International contained in the volume *The Third International after Lenin*. I would like to quote at some length passages from this critique, which spell out the foundations of a Marxist approach to the elaboration of perspective. The imperishable brilliance of this analysis is even clearer today—given the ever-closer global integration

of capitalism, to which we have paid such close attention in the development of the IC’s perspective.

“In our epoch,” he wrote, “which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e., of world economy and world politics under the hegemony of finance capital, not a single communist party can establish its program by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country. This also holds entirely for the party that wields the state power within the boundaries of the USSR. On August 4, 1914, the death knell sounded for national programs for all time. The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism. An international communist program is in no case the sum total of national programs or an amalgam of their common features. The international program must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole in all its connections and contradictions, that is, with the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts. In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism...”

He continued: “Linking up countries and continents that stand on different levels of development into a system of mutual dependence and antagonism, leveling out the various stages of their development and at the same time immediately enhancing the differences between them, and ruthlessly counterposing one country to another, world economy has become a mighty reality which holds sway over the economic life of individual countries and continents. This basic fact alone invests the idea of a world communist party with a supreme reality.”

Before Lenin’s death in 1924, no one in the leadership of the Communist Party, either in the Soviet Union or internationally, had ever suggested the idea that a self-sufficient socialist society could be built on Soviet soil or anywhere else.

Indeed, in his “Foundations of Leninism,” written in February of that year, Stalin summed up Lenin’s views on the building of socialism with the following passage:

“The overthrow of the power of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a proletarian government in one country does not yet guarantee the complete victory of socialism. The main task of socialism—the organization of socialist production—remains ahead. Can this task be accomplished, can the final victory of socialism in one country be attained, without the joint efforts of the proletariat of several advanced countries? No, this is impossible. To overthrow the bourgeoisie the efforts of one country are sufficient—the history of our revolution bears this out.

For the final victory of Socialism, for the organization of socialist production, the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are insufficient. For this the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries are necessary.

“Such, on the whole, are the characteristic features of the Leninist theory of the proletarian revolution.”

Before the end of that year, however, Stalin’s “Foundations of Leninism” would be reissued in a revised edition. The passage I just quoted was replaced with its opposite, affirming that the “proletariat can and must build the socialist society in one country,” followed by the very same assurance that *this* constituted the “Leninist theory of proletarian revolution.”

This abrupt and gross revision of perspective reflected the growing social weight of the bureaucracy and its awakening consciousness in regards to its own specific social interests, which it saw as bound up with the steady development of the national economy.

Moreover, the call for building “socialism in one country” struck a broader chord among an exhausted Soviet working class that had seen its most advanced elements either sacrificed in the civil war or drawn into the state apparatus. The debacle suffered in Germany as a result of the German Communist Party’s capitulation during the revolutionary crisis of 1923 had further dashed hopes for early relief from the world revolution and left Soviet workers susceptible to the promise of a national solution.

As Trotsky spelled out in his critique of the draft program for the Sixth Congress of the Communist International and other writings, the theory of socialism in one country represented a direct attack on the program of world socialist revolution.

Trotsky explained that, if it was indeed the case that socialism could be achieved in Russia regardless of what happened to the socialist revolution elsewhere in the world, the Soviet Union would turn from a revolutionary internationalist policy to a purely defensist one.

The inevitable logic of this shift was the transformation of the sections of the Communist International into border guards—instruments of a Soviet foreign policy aimed at securing the USSR by diplomatic means that would avoid imperialist attack while preserving the global status quo. In the end, the policy represented a subordination of the interests of the international working class to the Stalinist bureaucracy’s own interests and privileges.

As Trotsky warned prophetically in 1928, the thesis that socialism could be built in Russia alone given the absence of foreign aggression led inevitably to “a collaborationist policy toward the foreign bourgeoisie with the object of averting intervention.”

This fundamental shift in the strategic axis of the party’s program was accompanied by a wholesale replacement of the old leaderships within both the Comintern and the national sections. Through a series of purges, expulsions and political coups, the Moscow bureaucracy obtained a staff that was trained to see the defense of the Soviet state, rather than the world socialist revolution, as its strategic axis.

The differences over the relation between the Russian and the world revolutions were inseparable from the conflict that had developed earlier within the party over economic policies within the Soviet Union itself.

The Stalin leadership, pragmatically adapting itself to the immediate growth produced by the New Economic Policy, supported the preservation of the status quo within the Soviet borders as well, continuing and expanding concessions to the peasantry and private traders.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition had put forward a detailed proposal for developing heavy industry, warning that without a growth of the industrial sector, there was a serious danger that the growth of capitalist relations in the countryside would undermine the foundations of socialism.

Above all, Trotsky rejected the argument advanced in conjunction with “socialism in one country” that the economic development of the Soviet

Union somehow could take place separately from the world economy and the worldwide struggle between capitalism and socialism.

Bukharin had declared, “We will construct socialism if it be only at a snail’s pace,” while Stalin insisted that there was “no need to inject the international factor into our socialist development.”

The false Stalinist conception that the only threat to socialist construction in the USSR was that of military intervention ignored the immense pressure placed upon it by the world capitalist market.

To counter this pressure, the Soviet state established a monopoly of foreign trade. While an indispensable instrument of defense, the monopoly itself expressed Soviet dependence on the world market and its relative weakness in terms of productivity of labor in relation to the major capitalist powers. While it regulated the pressure of cheaper goods from the capitalist West, this monopoly by no means eliminated it.

Trotsky fought for a faster tempo of industrial growth in order to counter this pressure, while at the same time he rejected the conception of an economic autarky. The development of purely national planning that failed to take into account the relationship between the Soviet economy and the world market was doomed to failure. He insisted that the USSR take advantage of the world division of labor, gaining access to the technology and economic resources of the advanced capitalist countries in order to develop its economy.

The attempt to develop a self-sufficient “socialist” economy based on the resources of backward Russia was doomed, not merely by Russia’s backwardness, but because it represented a retrogression from the world economy already created by capitalism. In his 1930 introduction to the German edition of *The Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky wrote as follows:

“Marxism takes its point of departure from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labor and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets. The productive forces of capitalist society have long ago outgrown the national boundaries. The imperialist war (of 1914-1918) was one of the expressions of this fact. In respect of the technique of production, socialist society must represent a stage higher than capitalism. To aim at building a nationally isolated socialist society means, in spite of all passing successes, to pull the productive forces backward even as compared with capitalism. To attempt, regardless of the geographical, cultural and historical conditions of the country’s development, which constitutes a part of the world unity, to realize a shut-off proportionality of all branches of economy within a national framework, means to pursue a reactionary utopia.”

The Stalinist leadership’s struggle to impose the ideology of “socialism in one country” inevitably took the form of a vicious struggle against “Trotskyism” and in particular the theory of permanent revolution.

In his autobiography, *My Life*, Trotsky explained the political psychology of what he described as “the out-and-out philistine, ignorant, and simply stupid baiting of the theory of permanent revolution”:

“Gossiping over a bottle of wine or returning from the ballet,” he wrote, “one smug official would say to another: ‘He can think of nothing but permanent revolution.’ The accusations of unsociability, of individualism, of aristocratism, were closely connected with this particular mood. The sentiment of ‘Not all and always for the revolution, but some thing for oneself as well,’ was translated as ‘Down with permanent revolution.’ The revolt against the exacting theoretical demands of Marxism and the exacting political demands of the revolution gradually assumed, in the eyes of these people, the form of a struggle against ‘Trotskyism.’ Under this banner, the liberation of the philistine in the Bolshevik was proceeding.”

To be continued

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