

Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

Part 4-7

By David North
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Foreword | Pts 1-3 | Pts 4-7 | Pts 8-10 | Pts 11-13 | Pts 14-16 | Pts 17-19 | Pts 20-22

Mehring Books has published a new book by David North, Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness, which is now available for purchase online. It was written in reply to a critique of the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), entitled "Objectivism or Marxism.", by Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner, two former members of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party).

The WSWS has begun publishing the text of the new book. The Foreword was posted on August 17, and Parts 1-3 were posted on August 24. Below we post Parts 4-7.

4. Dialectics, pragmatism and the theoretical work of the ICFI

The manner in which you deal with the other major theoretical project of the International Committee - the lectures held August 2005 in Ann Arbor - is a travesty. Once again you make no effort to address seriously and objectively the content of the lectures. Of the nine lectures presented at the summer school, you ignore five. As for the four lectures that I delivered, you do not quote one complete sentence from any of them. The attacks that you make on my lectures generally involve distortions, gross simplifications or outright falsification of the positions I advanced. One is entitled to conclude that you assume that the audience for whom you are writing will not have read, or have any interest in reading, the actual text of the lectures.

You begin your critique of the summer school with the following statement:

Dialectics is a dead letter in the IC. The movement hasn't produced a single article on dialectical philosophy in 20 years and no lecture was devoted to it at the summer school. Predictably enough, the abandonment of dialectics has also meant the abandonment of the struggle against pragmatism. The latter didn't rate so much as a single mention in any of the lectures. A telling instance of how invisible pragmatism has become in the IC's outlook is the fact that while Richard Rorty is discussed in one lecture as a representative postmodernist, his role as a prominent philosophical pragmatist is completely ignored. This is astonishing given that the struggle against pragmatism was at one time considered the most important element in the training of a conscious revolutionary leadership within the International Committee.

What a dishonest method of argumentation! You offer as proof of the death of dialectics in the ICFI and the abandonment of the fight against pragmatism our focus on Richard Rorty as a leading postmodernist, rather than on his role as a pragmatist. What is the point of such nonsense? Do you seriously believe that no one in the audience knew that Richard Rorty, America's most celebrated philosopher, is a pragmatist? Or that

they were unaware that postmodernism is itself a major tendency within contemporary pragmatic philosophy. My discussion of Rorty, which extends for several pages, focused on the two theoretical questions that are central to the struggle against pragmatism: 1) Rorty's rejection of the possibility of objective knowledge and the concept of objective truth; and 2) his virulent rejection of the concept of history as an objective and law-governed process from which lessons can be drawn. In the course of my examination of Rorty, I stated:

He proposes to banish from discussion the product of more than 200 years of social thought. Underlying this proposal is the conception that the development of thought itself is a purely arbitrary and largely subjective process. Words, theoretical concepts, logical categories, and philosophical systems are merely verbal constructs, *pragmatically* conjured up in the interest of various subjective ends. The claim that the development of theoretical thought is an objective process, expressing man's evolving, deepening, and ever-more complex and precise understanding of nature and society is, as far as Rorty is concerned, nothing more than a Hegelian-Marxian shibboleth. (See "Lecture one: The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century")

Is this not, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, a concise and correct explanation of an essential conflict between Marxism and pragmatism?

To the extent that your indictment of my supposed failure to deal with pragmatism is not merely a factionally-motivated distortion but also an expression of your own theoretical conceptions, your casual treatment of the question of postmodernism is not without significance. You write that

The assumption that postmodernism has replaced pragmatism and empiricism as the principal ideological threat to Marxism is deeply misguided. Postmodernism is an academic fad that gained currency out of the rightward shift of the generation of Sixties radicals and the incorporation of many of them into the upper middle class. By contrast, pragmatism and empiricism are bound up with the entire historic development of Western capitalism. ... Moreover postmodernism is by now very much a fad on the wane. Many of its principal spokesmen have either passed away or gone into retirement and those who remain active often find themselves on the defensive, with condemnations of postmodernism now commonplace in radical and liberal circles. Twenty years ago it would have mattered to mount an attack on postmodernism; today it is an exercise in flogging, if not a dead horse, at least a very puny one.

This is a superficial, impressionistic and unserious approach to the examination of philosophical tendencies. First of all, I have nowhere stated or even implied that postmodernism has *replaced* pragmatism. It is, rather, a variety of pragmatic thought - indeed, one that takes the subjective idealist, voluntarist and even irrational elements that are present in classical pragmatic thought - dating all the way back to James - to their most extreme and reactionary conclusion. To suggest, as your comment does, that postmodernism represents a fundamentally different species of theoretical thought is to make a major concession to pragmatism, to shield pragmatism from the intellectual embarrassment it suffers on account of the gross excesses of its postmodernist progeny.

Similarly, to refer to postmodernism as “a fad on the wane” is to make light of a philosophical tendency that is a significant expression of both the reactionary character and deep crisis of bourgeois thought. A petty-bourgeois academic, who flits from one half-baked conception to another, may describe postmodernism as a “fad,” especially as he prepares to jump on some new intellectual bandwagon without bothering to give a proper accounting of his last philosophical escapade. But that is not how a Marxist appraises the significance of a theoretical trend. What one or another subjective-idealist philosophical tendency calls itself is secondary. The main issue is its relationship to the history of philosophy. You correctly state that pragmatism and empiricism “are bound up with the entire history of Western capitalism.” But is that not the case with postmodernism, which draws not only upon the American pragmatic traditions but also other deeply reactionary philosophical trends? Are there not deep and disturbing echoes of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger in the writings of contemporary postmodernists, including those of the pragmatist Richard Rorty?

5. How the ICFI has fought pragmatism

You assert that “Dialectics is a dead letter in the IC” and that we have abandoned the fight against pragmatism. You fail to explain precisely how that has manifested itself in the political line of our movement. We have not, you tell us, produced a single article on dialectical philosophy during the past 20 years. That statement, as a matter of fact, is not true. [4] But even if it were, it would still be necessary to demonstrate how the neglect of dialectics has expressed itself in the political analyses and work of the movement during this long period. Presumably, we have been working with some method. If, as you assert, the death of dialectics within the IC has been accompanied by the abandonment of the struggle against pragmatism, then the work of our movement has been dominated by the latter method. However, you make no attempt to substantiate that claim. In virtually every document that you write, you ritualistically invoke Trotsky’s statement that “dialectical training of the mind is as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist.” When Trotsky wrote these words, they carried the full force of the work of a political genius whose mastery of the dialectical method found incomparable expression in his brilliant analyses of world events. Unfortunately, when you use these words, it sounds more like a couch potato declaiming hypocritically on the importance of aerobics.

Trotsky did not simply tell Burnham and Shachtman that dialectics was important. He demonstrated how Burnham’s pragmatism and Shachtman’s agnostic attitude toward materialist dialectics were manifested in their analysis of the class nature of the Soviet state and their rejection of the defense of the U.S.S.R. against imperialist attack. In the 1939-40 struggle inside the Socialist Workers Party, the issue of dialectics was not introduced as a means of evading political questions, but in order to clarify them. As Trotsky wrote to Professor James Burnham, “it was not I but you who raised the question of the character of the U.S.S.R., thereby forcing me to pose the question of the method through which the class character of the state is determined.” [*In Defense of Marxism* (London, 1971), p. 101] And as he further explained, “Correct method not only facilitates the attainment of a correct conclusion, but, connecting

every new conclusion with the preceding conclusions in a consecutive chain, fixes the conclusions in one’s memory. If political conclusions are made empirically, if inconsistency is proclaimed as a kind of advantage, then the Marxist system of politics is invariably replaced by impressionism - in so many ways characteristic of petty-bourgeois intellectuals. Every new turn of events catches the empiricist-impressionist unawares, compelling him to forget what he himself wrote yesterday, and produces a consuming desire for new formulae before new ideas have appeared in his head.” [p. 73]

If Trotsky’s criticism of the pragmatic method retains its validity, you should have no problem in demonstrating the inconsistencies and blunders in the political line of the ICFI over the past two decades. You present no such analysis. Thus, only two conclusions are possible: either method is not important as it has no discernable effect on the formulation of a political line; or your claim that we have abandoned dialectics and succumbed to pragmatism is a rhetorical flourish without any substance. We think that the second explanation is the correct one. [5]

The source of your problem is that you do not understand, nor are you interested in, the relationship between method and revolutionary politics. It is one thing to declaim on the importance of dialectics and the fight against pragmatism. It is quite another to make this more than an abstract slogan - that is, to relate the struggle against pragmatism to the work of the party. While you somehow manage to acknowledge in your document that “North correctly defended dialectics from the distortions introduced by Healy,” there is no indication in any of your various writings that you have actually studied the documents in which I exposed Healy’s fraudulent use of Hegelian phraseology, or that you have assimilated the lessons of that crucial theoretical struggle. To no small extent this failing is to be explained by the fact that your departure from the movement preceded the development of the American section’s critique of Healy’s opportunist politics and its relationship to his falsification of the dialectical method. When you, Comrade Steiner, left the movement in 1978, you were still in the thrall of Healy’s “practice of cognition,” which was, in essence, a variety of pragmatism, masquerading in a neo-Hegelian costume.

You missed out entirely on the important theoretical development that our movement was beginning to make. On November 7, 1978, a *Draft Resolution on the Perspectives and Tasks of the Workers League* was issued by the Political Committee. It included a section entitled “The historical continuity of Trotskyism as the basis of cadre training and the struggle against pragmatism.” I will quote from the most important passage in this section:

The orientation of the Workers League to the working class and its struggle to prepare the class for its historic role has not been a matter of a so-called “proletarian orientation” as conceived by Cannon. There can be no real turn to the working class outside of the conscious struggle to preserve the lines of historical continuity between the present struggles of the working class and the party as a unity of opposites and the whole content of historical experiences of the class and the development of Bolshevism. It is only from the standpoint of the struggle to base the whole work of the Party on the historical gains of the struggle against revisionism and the immense political and theoretical capital that is the heritage left behind by Trotsky to the Fourth International that the fight against pragmatism within the ranks of the Party and, therefore, in the working class itself can be seriously mounted. As soon as the struggle against pragmatism is detached from the fight to maintain the direct historical connections between the daily experiences through which the Trotskyist movement has passed, it degenerates into the most impotent forms of verbal jousting. Or, to put it even more accurately,

it becomes simply another variety of pragmatism itself.

In place of rhetorical appeals for a “struggle against pragmatism,” this analysis invested what had become an empty phrase under Healy and Slaughter with a politically concrete content. The document explained how Marxists, in contrast to the impressionistic and adaptive practice characteristic of pragmatists, seek to locate consciously the daily development of the class struggle and the activity of the party in the broad continuum of its own history and that of the international class struggle. Rather than simply react to events in pursuit of immediate or short-term practical gains, Marxists must identify the essential questions of political principle raised by these new developments, bring to bear in the analysis of the new political phenomenon the party’s entire historically-accumulated theoretical capital, and give expression to the long-term interests of the working class as the international revolutionary force in capitalist society.

Four years later, in October 1982, the theoretical and political differences between the Workers League and the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain emerged into the open. In an essay published in the *Bulletin* on October 19, 1982, the conceptions that had been originally developed in 1978 were expressed in more precise and pointed form:

The history of Trotskyism cannot be comprehended as a series of disconnected episodes. Its theoretical development has been abstracted by its cadre from the continuous unfolding of the world capitalist crisis and the struggles of the international proletariat. Its unbroken continuity of political analyses of all the fundamental experiences of the class struggle, *over an entire historical epoch*, constitutes the enormous richness of Trotskyism as the sole development of Marxism after the death of Lenin in 1924.

A leadership which does not strive collectively to assimilate the *whole* of this history cannot adequately fulfill its revolutionary responsibilities to the working class. Without a real knowledge of the historical development of the Trotskyist movement, references to dialectical materialism are not merely hollow; such empty references pave the way for real distortions of the dialectical method. The source of theory lies not in thought but in the objective world. Thus the development of Trotskyism proceeds from the fresh experiences of the class struggle which are posited on the entire historically-derived knowledge of our movement.

“Thus cognition rolls forward from content to content ... it raises to each next stage of determination the whole mass of the antecedent content, and by its dialectical progress not only loses nothing and leaves nothing behind, but carries with it all that it has acquired, enriching and concentrating itself upon itself...”

Quoting this passage from Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Lenin, in his “Philosophical Notebooks,” wrote: “This extract is not at all bad as a kind of summing up of dialectics.” (*Collected Works*, Volume 38, p. 230) Nor is this extract bad “as a kind of summing up of” the constant dialectical development of Trotskyist theory.” [David North, *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, (Detroit, 1985), pp. 18-19, emphasis in the original]

I will quote one further passage in which the relationship of dialectics to the struggle for revolutionary leadership in the working class was explained. It appeared as part of my obituary of Gerry Healy, following his death on December 14, 1989.

In the long history of the Marxist movement, the dialectical method has proven itself an irreplaceable theoretical instrument of political prognosis, orientation and analysis. However, while the dialectical method, when utilized properly, facilitates the working out of farsighted analysis and effective tactical initiatives, it provides no once-and-for-all guarantees against political degeneration. Dialectical materialism is not some sort of ideological talisman which, once it has been acquired, bestows upon those who possess it protection against the relentless pressure of class forces. The touchstone of the dialectical method is a critical-revolutionary attitude to the existing production relations of society and the forms of appearance they spontaneously generate. It is a stern science and demands an unceasing struggle to establish, in program and practice, the independent attitude of the working class to every political question raised by the development of the class struggle. A revolutionary party remains “Marxist” only to the extent that it is fighting to overcome the pervasive political and ideological influence of the bourgeoisie and its agents over the working class. The Marxist approach to every significant event entails a reworking of the historical experiences of the international working class movement. Only by relentlessly confronting the fresh problems posed by the objective development of the class struggle with all the theoretical resources at its disposal can a Marxist party replenish and add to its theoretical capital. [*Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International* (Detroit, 1991), pp. 79-80]

These passages present the intellectual foundations of a theoretical-political project that has been pursued by the SEP with extraordinary consistency for more than a quarter-century (taking the perspectives resolution of 1978 as the beginning of this project). The International Committee of the Fourth International has sought to revive and develop the socialist consciousness of the working class based on a persistent and systematic reworking of the whole historical experience and lessons of the international class struggle in the 20th century, while at the same time seeking to base the practice of the working class on a scientific understanding of the significance and implications of contemporary socio-economic, political and cultural phenomena. The product of this theoretical work is recorded in the vast body of historical, political, economic and cultural analysis and commentary produced by the ICFI since the break with the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1985-86. The work of the 2005 summer school in Ann Arbor, followed by the 2006 meeting of the International Editorial Board, represented the highest achievement of this protracted and difficult project.

Both events could be succinctly described in theoretical terms as massive anti-pragmatic exercises. If the International Committee of the Fourth International had only the lectures and reports delivered at these two events to point to, that still would be sufficient to refute your provocative claim that dialectics is a “dead letter” in our movement and that the fight against pragmatism had been abandoned. [6]

6. What is objectivism?

If you were honest in your polemics and with yourselves, you would acknowledge that your attack on our alleged abandonment of dialectics and the fight against pragmatism is a subterfuge. The real issue is that you do not agree with the International Committee’s insistence that the fight for socialism requires the development within the working class of both a profound knowledge of history - particularly that of the socialist movement itself - and as precise and concrete an understanding as possible (by means of ever-more exact conceptual approximations) of the objective movement of the world capitalist system in all its complex, contradictory and inter-connected forms. What you refer to falsely as “objectivism” is the Marxist striving to reflect accurately in subjective

thought the law-governed movement of the objective world of which social man is a part, and to make this knowledge and understanding the basis of revolutionary practice. For all your talk about “dialectics” and the “fight against pragmatism,” everything you write demonstrates indifference to the requirements of developing a working class movement whose practice is informed by Marxist theory.

Your usage of the word “objectivism” is incorrect, and reflects a basic disagreement with materialism. For Marxists, objectivism denotes a one-sided and abstract approach to the study of social phenomena that excludes all consideration of the activity of the conscious forces - that is, social classes and related political tendencies - that are critical elements in the objective process itself. As Lenin explained in his classic explanation of the difference between Marxism and objectivism:

The objectivist speaks of the necessity of a given historical process; the materialist gives an exact picture of the given social-economic formation and of the antagonistic relations to which it gives rise. When demonstrating the necessity for a given series of facts, the objectivist always runs the risk of becoming an apologist for these facts: the materialist discloses the class contradictions and in so doing defines his standpoint. The objectivist speaks of “insurmountable historical tendencies”; the materialist speaks of the class which ‘directs’ the given economic system, giving rise to such and such forms of counteraction by other classes. Thus, on the one hand, the materialist is more consistent than the objectivist, and gives profounder and fuller effect to his objectivism. He does not limit himself to speaking of the necessity of a process, but ascertains *exactly what class* determines this necessity. In the present case, for example, the materialist would not content himself with stating the “insurmountable historical tendencies,” but would point to the existence of certain classes, which determine the content of a given system and preclude the possibility of any solution except by the action of the producers themselves. On the other hand, materialism includes partisanship, so to speak, and enjoins the direct and open adoption of the standpoint of a definite social group in any assessment of events. [*Collected Works*, Volume 1 (Moscow, 1972), pp. 400-01, emphasis in the original]

Lenin does not use the term “objectivism” as an epithet directed against those who study the socio-economic processes that constitute the basis of revolutionary practice. Rather, he strives to impart a richer, more profoundly materialist content to the study of the objective world by demanding that it identify the class dynamics of any given social situation, and, on that basis, define as precisely as possible the political tasks of the revolutionary party. Lenin’s vast theoretical output was characterized principally by his unrelenting determination to ground the perspective, program and activity of the Russian workers’ movement in a precise and comprehensive understanding of objective reality. As you fling about the word “objectivism” one can only wonder how you would classify such crucial works of Lenin as *The Economic Content of Narodism*, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, and various massive studies, spanning several volumes, that he produced on the agrarian question in Russia (which Lenin considered to be an area in which he had developed a particular expertise). [7]

You tell us that “Marxist science is not a science in the conventional sense: its aim is not only to understand the world but also to transform it.” But to what extent, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, is the revolutionary, i.e., historically progressive, transformation of the world dependent upon a correct understanding of it? You need to think much more carefully about the answer you give to this question. Whether you call it

“conventional” or “unconventional,” Marxism can be considered a science only to the extent that the goal of its world-transforming practice - the ending of capitalist exploitation and the establishment of a socialist society - is based on a correct understanding of the laws of social development, rather than a mere desire for change, let alone a “will to power.” In Marxism, the means by which revolutionists seek to transform the world is rooted in and inseparable from their understanding of the objective laws that govern the movement of society. This is a critical codicil of Marxist theory that cannot be violated without inviting political catastrophe and, I must add, moral shipwreck.

You write in the most haughtily abstract manner of the need for a struggle against pragmatism, but seem wholly unaware that it spawned numerous tendencies in the 20th century that sought to dissolve - through the extreme glorification of the transformative capacities of human practice - the essential ontological distinction, upon which dialectical materialism insists, between the objective world and the forms of its reflection in subjective consciousness. From the recognition that the world in which man lives is one acted upon and changed by human activity, certain pragmatic tendencies proclaimed it philosophically absurd to speak of an *objective* reality, existing independently of man, that places limits on man’s activity. Thus, from the absence of an absolute separation between object and subject, they deduced the non-existence of even a relative separation. The subjective premises of James’ pragmatism were developed in this extreme form by F.C.J. Schiller, Henri Bergson, Georges Sorel, and the Italians Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Pappini. The latter are particularly significant, inasmuch as the politically fascistic implications of the extreme forms of subjective voluntarism espoused in their pragmatism emerge most openly. Pappini wrote that pragmatism is

A philosophy of action, a philosophy of doing, of rebuilding, transforming, creating! ... No more wild goose chasing down roads leading nowhere save into the snares and traps of visionary logicians. The True is the *useful*. To *know* is to *do*. Among the many uncertain truths, choose the one best calculated to raise the tone of life and promising the most lasting rewards. If something is not true but we wish it were true, we will *make* it true: by *faith*. [Quoted in *On Pragmatism*, by Cornelis De Waal (Wadsworth Philosophical Topics, 2005), p. 73, emphasis in the original]

Mussolini, who proclaimed himself an admirer of James’ pragmatism, declared that “to fight for the establishment of that social order that *at the given moment* best corresponds to our *personal* ideal is one of the worthiest of human activities.” [ibid. p. 74]

The issue here is not that pragmatists are inclined necessarily to become political reactionaries, let alone fascists. William James, as a matter of fact, was the most decent of human beings, and a leader of the anti-imperialist movement in the United States. But theoretical conceptions have a logic of their own; and the evolution of certain strains of pragmatic thought illustrates the dangerous implications of deprecating the Marxist effort to anchor political practice in a scientific study of the objective world. Pragmatic voluntarism can have disastrous results even in the context of radical left politics. A political initiative that is based on an impressionistic appraisal of the objective situation, which assumes that subjective determination can, under all circumstances, impart to the political situation a revolutionary potential that may not be present objectively, can leave the working class exposed to a devastating counter-attack.

This danger, I should stress, is not merely a theoretical possibility. The history of 20th century revolutionary movements is littered with the

political and social wreckage created by voluntarist policies that ignored the objective logic of law-governed historical and socio-economic processes. Stalin's policies (i.e., collectivization, super-rapid industrialization) should provide sufficient proof of the disastrous consequences of policies formulated with insufficient knowledge of or indifference to the existing objective conditions and which exaggerate the transformative revolutionary potential of subjective will. Thus, the struggle for socialism requires that the tactics of the working class be based on a scientific understanding of the laws governing the world capitalist system, the international class struggle, and the forms of their reflection in mass consciousness. Herein lies the significance of perspective and the most exacting appraisal of the "objective situation," upon which the Trotskyist movement traditionally has placed such intense emphasis. [8]

As I explained last summer, "Marxism, as a method of analysis and materialist world outlook, has uncovered laws that govern socio-economic and political processes. Knowledge of these laws discloses trends and tendencies upon which substantial historical 'predictions' can be based, and which allow the possibility of intervening consciously in a manner that may produce an outcome favorable to the working class." [9]

This is precisely what separates a Marxist practice from all forms of pragmatic activism, whether of a "left" adventurist or opportunist-adaptive character. As a matter of historical fact, the method of "objectivism" - which may lead depending on circumstances to one or the other political form - found its most developed expression in the Fourth International in the revisionist theories and politics of Pablo and his acolytes, Mandel and Hansen. Pabloite revisionism made a specialty of invoking demagogically, in an entirely abstract manner, the image of an all-powerful wave of revolutionary struggles that would - regardless of the political leaderships of those struggles and the masses' level of consciousness - sweep all obstacles before it and conquer power. As Cliff Slaughter explained so well (back in 1961 when he was still a Marxist):

The fundamental weakness of the SWP resolution is its substitution of 'objectivism,' i.e. a false objectivity, for the Marxist method ... From his analysis of imperialism as the final stage of capitalism, Lenin concluded that the conscious revolutionary role of the working class and its party was all-important. The protagonists of 'objectivism' conclude, however, that the strength of the 'objective factors' is so great that, *regardless* of the attainment of Marxist leadership of the proletariat in its struggle, the working-class revolution will be achieved, the power of the capitalists overthrown. [*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume 3 (London, 1974), p. 161]

"Objectivism" as it is defined here by Cliff Slaughter in opposition to the Pabloites has absolutely nothing to do with your use of the term as an epithet directed against those who attempt to base revolutionary politics on a correct *Marxist* analysis of socio-economic phenomena. The Pabloites refused to make a concrete analysis of the world economy in the aftermath of World War II, let alone relate those changes to developments in the international class struggle. Indeed, Slaughter repeatedly challenged the SWP to justify its "objectivist" conclusions within the framework of "the general historical perspective of class relations." He stated that "The SWP must show in what way 'objective factors' in the world situation make it *unnecessary* in some cases to prepare and construct a revolutionary leadership." [ibid. p. 162] He also noted the connection between the "objectivism" of the Pabloites and their constant invocation of action, their demagogic references to "the 'impatience' of the masses who cannot delay the revolution until the construction of a Marxist leadership." [ibid.] Another characteristic of Pabloite objectivism was

their glorification of the most elementary forms of working class militancy, which served as a justification for their own adaptation to the existing bureaucratic leaders who invariably diverted the mass movement away from its revolutionary political tasks.

And that is exactly where your deceitful denunciation of our "objectivism" ends up. In the final analysis, your criticism of our "objectivism" is a repudiation of the study and analysis of socio-economic conditions and the class character of political tendencies that exercise influence on the working class. Similarly, your denunciation of our "abstentionism" turns out to be nothing more than a veiled attack on the party's assessment of the reactionary role of the trade unions. You state that "It has been well over a decade since the party made the assessment that there was no longer any potential left for the trade unions to play a progressive role, and yet in all that time nothing has been done to propose any alternatives to the working class. Nor has anything been done to work through the implications of the degeneration of the unions with the millions of workers still left within these organizations, since apart from journalism any work inside the unions seems to have long since been abandoned."

First of all, is our analysis of the trade unions correct or incorrect? You fail to provide any analysis of the nature and role of the AFL-CIO and other official trade union organizations. Do you believe that they retain the potential to play what you call "a progressive role"? One may reasonably infer from your attack that you still do. But why do you fail to state this clearly, let alone explain on what you base your position? Nor do you attempt a critical examination of the extensive writings of the SEP and ICFI on the question of the trade unions, in which the theoretical basis of our principled position has been elaborated. In a manner that reeks of the most vulgar pragmatism, you complain that a worker who writes into the WSWS asking for advice "is typically given a lecture on the history of the labor bureaucracy but no indication whatever on how to conduct the struggle he is involved in." But tell us, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, how is it possible for a worker to know how he should conduct a struggle in which he is immediately engaged without understanding the historical role of the trade unions? What are the implications of separating any given struggle in which workers are involved from the historical experience out of which it arose? Can a perspective for practical interventions in Russia be developed without educating workers in the history of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism? Or in China? Or in Eastern Europe? Can a worker in the Middle East know "how to conduct the struggle he is involved in" without studying the historical role of bourgeois nationalism and the significance of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution? How can the advanced sections of the Israeli working class find a way out of the blind alley of Jewish nationalism without understanding the origins and nature of Zionism? *To state the issue as precisely as possible, the "nature" of any given struggle can only be understood when placed in the necessary historical context.*

Your cheap gibe against the efforts of the WSWS to educate workers in history betrays, notwithstanding your rhetorical tributes to dialectics, an indifference to theory, which is derived from a painstaking review of the objective social experiences through which the working class has passed. As Trotsky explained so well, "To be guided by theory is to be guided by generalizations based on all preceding practical experiences of humanity in order to cope as successfully as possible with one or another practical problem of the present day. Thus, through theory we discover precisely the primacy of practice-as-a-whole over particular aspects of practice." ["Philosophical Tendencies of Bureaucratism," in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1928-29*, (New York, 1981) p. 396]

Tell us, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, what political generalizations have you drawn from the tragic experiences of the working class over the last 25 years? From the unending chain of defeats suffered by the American working class as a consequence of the criminal treachery of the

bureaucratic organizations? In what way have you incorporated the experiences of the *international* working class into your understanding of the tasks confronting workers in the United States? What lessons have you drawn from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, all of which were dissolved by the ruling bureaucracies? Or from the transformation of the “People’s Republic” of China into the indispensable world center of low-wage capitalist industrial production? Or from the transformation of the British Labour Party into a vicious right-wing bourgeois party that has severed all connections with the working class? Or from the continued support of the Trades Union Congress for this party? We could continue with many more questions of this sort, but we can reasonably assume that no answer would be forthcoming. You have given no thought to the consequences, for both political perspectives and practice, of the collapse of all the traditional political and trade union organizations of the working class during the past quarter-century.

7. The New York City transit strike

While you prefer to conduct your polemical battles in the realm of abstract generalities, on the one occasion when you descend to the world of actual events, the political content of your denunciation of our “objectivism” becomes clear. You are opposed to the struggle waged by the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS against the trade union bureaucracy. Your lengthy attack on the party’s role in the New York City transit strike aims to discredit our effort to arm transit workers with a political perspective. However, before answering your attack in detail, it is worth noting that the transit strike is the only event to which you actually refer in your entire document. Could you not at least have referred to one event that occurred outside the city in which you live? Why not an examination of the party’s campaign against the war in Iraq? Or the intervention of the ICFI in the crisis in France? Or the struggle conducted by our comrades in Sri Lanka against the government’s efforts to renew the war against the Tamils? None of this interests you. Given the fact that no other events are referred to - not even the war in Iraq - the attention that you lavish on the transit strike is entirely out of balance. At the very least, it expresses a provincial outlook.

Your portrayal of the SEP’s intervention as a mixture of confusion and inaction reeks of factionally-motivated dishonesty. Your review of events lacks all concreteness. You refer to “the three-day strike in December [2005],” but do not even specify the actual dates during which it took place. This is not a minor omission. No one who depended on your account would be able to relate objective developments to the intervention of the SEP. You write that “Though there was a long buildup to this strike and though this was a union where the party had a long history, there were no demands raised until the day before the strike began.” Along with the absence of a specific time frame, your critique does not quote a single sentence from anything written by the SEP on the transit strike. No one who read your document would have any way of forming a precise conception of the scale of the party’s intervention or the program for which it fought.

As your attack on the party’s intervention in the transit strike is intended to demonstrate the “objectivism” and “abstentionism” of the party, it is necessary to reply in considerable detail. The strike began on Tuesday, December 20, and ended on Thursday, December 22. Your document gives readers the impression that the SEP was taken unawares by developments, and only managed to issue a statement on the very eve of the strike.

Let us now reconstruct the actual response of the party to the transit struggle.

On December 10, 2005, ten days before the strike began, the WSWS published a lengthy statement, written by Alan Whyte, which analyzed the central issues raised in the conflict between Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority

(MTA). After a careful factual review of the contractual dispute, Whyte wrote:

It has been 25 years since the last transit strike, when workers shut down the system for 11 days. In that quarter of a century, workers in New York City and across the US have seen their incomes steadily eroding along with the loss of millions of decent-paying jobs, the destruction of social benefits and an assault on basic democratic rights. These attacks have created the conditions for the staggering growth of social inequality as vast wealth has been transferred into the bank accounts of the top 1 percent.

The unions have proven incapable of combating these attacks. Rather, under the control of an opportunist bureaucracy subservient to the Democratic Party and the profit system, they have collaborated in the imposition of an unending series of concessions.

There is no question that a transit workers’ strike, demonstrating the power of the working class to defy the dictates of Wall Street, would win powerful support in New York City and across the country. A serious struggle to defend living standards and reverse the attacks of the past 25 years, however, means more than militant strike action.

It above all requires a political struggle to mobilize working people as a whole in opposition to the profit system. This means a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent political party of the working class fighting to reorganize society to meet human needs, rather than the accumulation of wealth by a financial elite.

Only such a party will fight to provide full funding for mass transit by repudiating the bond debts and bringing the immense resources of the finance houses and banks that have profited off these debts under public ownership. (See “Strikebreaking threats as contract deadline nears: Transit dispute exposes New York City’s class divide”)

This statement was published as a leaflet and circulated among transit workers. Thus, 10 days before the strike actually began (after a postponement by the TWU leadership), the WSWS issued a clear political-programmatic statement. Two days later, on December 12, the WSWS published another article by Whyte reporting the authorization vote for a strike that was originally set for midnight, December 16. The article warned of the duplicity of the union officials, and noted that the presence of the political charlatan Jesse Jackson at the strike-vote rally was a clear sign that the TWU leadership was committed to its politically-bankrupt alliance with the Democratic Party. (See “New York City transit workers vote to authorize strike”)

On December 16, the WSWS published an analysis by Bill Van Auken, entitled “The political issues confronting New York City transit workers.” It alerted transit workers to Mayor Bloomberg’s preparations for a massive legal assault against the union. It stressed that the union could not conduct a successful strike without fighting to mobilize the broadest sections of the working class. But the statement warned that “There is no indication that the leadership of TWU Local 100 is preparing to mount such a struggle. The union bureaucracy, headed by Local 100 President Roger Toussaint, appeals strictly to the lowest common denominator of trade union militancy. At the same time, it is promoting Democratic politicians as friends of workers.”

On December 17, Van Auken reported on the TWU’s decision to delay a full-scale walkout and call selective strikes. (See “After rejecting MTA’s ‘final offer’: New York City transit union calls selective strikes”)

On December 19, a statement entitled “New York City transit workers on brink of class confrontation,” by Peter Daniels, was posted on the

WSWS (and printed and circulated as a leaflet). It reviewed the lessons of the major experiences through which the American working class had passed since the betrayal of the New York transit strike in April 1980 and the destruction of PATCO in 1981. The statement stressed the need for a political strategy: "The truth about this struggle must be stated from the outset. Either the transit workers' struggle enlists the active support of other sections of workers in a political counteroffensive against all the attacks on jobs and public services, or it will be isolated and defeated." It also warned that "Any reliance upon Toussaint to conduct this struggle would be a grievous mistake. The Local 100 president combines the occasional demagogic threat with support for the big business Democratic Party and opposition to the independent struggle of the working class." The statement called upon workers to "organize independent strike committees to bring the message of unity and struggle to all sections of working people - to other trade unionists, to the unorganized and unemployed, the immigrants, the students, youth, professionals and small business."

Your principal criticism of this statement, from which you fail to quote a single sentence, is that the WSWS "gave no indication of how these committees should be set up, how they should function and above all what they should fight for." No, we did not attempt to write a manual on how to form strike committees. To the extent that workers understood the need for an alternative to the TWU Local 100 leadership and its policies, they would be more than capable of working out the details of creating and running rank-and-file strike committees. But we most certainly did explain what such committees should fight for: the statement outlined the political strategy upon which the fate of the strike depended. One can only assume from this criticism that you did not agree with the emphasis placed by the WSWS on the need for transit workers to conduct a political fight - which was the only way that support could be rallied among masses of New York workers, for whom the strike created additional daily hardships.

On December 21, the WSWS posted a new statement (also printed and mass distributed throughout the city): "The New York transit strike: A new stage in the class struggle." It examined the implications of the struggle within the context of the social polarization within the United States, and exposed the financial interests underlying the brutal legal assault directed by Mayor Bloomberg against the transit workers. The statement attacked the insidious role played by the TWU International leadership, which had denounced the strike as illegal and called for an immediate return to work. It concluded with a summation of the political issues:

More starkly than any event in the past twenty years, the present strike by New York City transit workers poses before the entire working class the need to develop a new leadership and a new political strategy to carry forward their struggle, founded on a program that upholds the interests and needs of working people against the profit drive of the financial elite. ...

If this strike is to be successful, transit workers must be guided by a perspective that rejects the social, economic and political assumptions of the financial oligarchy and its political parties. The unending demands for a reduction in the living standards of workers clearly demonstrate that their interests are incompatible with the requirements of the capitalist profit system.

In addition to this statement, the WSWS posted on December 21 numerous interviews with striking workers. (See "New York transit workers set up picket lines: 'Today's strike is for all working people'")

On December 22, the WSWS posted another major statement (also

printed and mass distributed) titled "New distributed and mass distributed: 'New distributed and mass distributed'." It reviewed the political strategy of Mayor Bloomberg and Governor Pataki, and the reasons for the vicious response to the strike. The statement explained why the ruling elite viewed the strike as a major challenge that had to be defeated. The WSWS contrasted the solidarity within the ruling class to the efforts of the labor bureaucracy to isolate and sabotage the strike. It warned that a major betrayal was being prepared, and repeated its call for workers to "organize their own independent strike committees and turn out to the broadest sections of the working class to mobilize support."

The WSWS also published more interviews with striking workers. (See "New York City transit workers defiant: 'Bloomberg and his friends are the thugs, not us'")

On December 23, the WSWS published a statement that offered a "preliminary assessment" of the sudden end of the strike. (See "The sudden end of the New York transit strike: A preliminary assessment") It offered a blunt and sober assessment of the outcome of the strike, which was isolated by the union bureaucracy. The WSWS stated that Toussaint "conducted the strike as a pure-and-simple trade union struggle under conditions in which the transit workers were confronting the full power of the state mobilized through the Taylor Law and the courts." Drawing the broader lessons of this experience, the WSWS stressed that the strike had refuted all those who claimed that the working class had disappeared as a social force. In shutting down the entire transit system, the working class had demonstrated its immense social weight and combativity. However, the struggle "also exposed the existing trade unions as hopelessly inadequate instruments of social struggle. To the extent that these organizations are not actively engaged in the suppression of the working class - as in the case of the TWU International and the AFL-CIO as a whole - their lack of an alternative political, social and economic perspective and program leaves them defenseless against the attacks of the state. Dominated by a politically reactionary bureaucracy allied with the Democratic Party, they are inevitably transformed into a means of imposing the demands of the ruling elite on the working class." The WSWS called for "a new socialist movement capable of uniting the working class on the basis of an uncompromising anti-capitalist line."

On December 24, another major statement (also printed and mass distributed) was published by the WSWS, providing further details on the way the unions sabotaged the Local 100 strike. (See "New York City transit strike was quashed by the unions")

Your attack on the intervention of the party in the transit strike is without substance. You take it for granted that your readers will not have access to the written record. However, if we review the response of the WSWS to the struggle of the transit workers, we find that during the two week period between December 10 and December 24, it published six major policy statements and another eight articles that were either extensive news reports, interviews with transit workers, or commentary on various social issues related to the class divide in New York City. Of these 14 items, eight were printed and mass distributed. [10] This is the record that supposedly epitomizes the "abstentionism" of the SEP! The response to the transit strike demonstrated the critical role played by the WSWS in the fight to develop a new political strategy in the struggles of the working class. It should also be noted that during this entire period, the union itself did not publish or distribute a single statement for mass distribution, let alone provide daily analysis of the ongoing struggle. The WSWS was not able single-handedly to overcome the sabotage of the bureaucracy. However, it contributed significantly toward raising the class consciousness of the workers, and laying the foundations for future victories.

I will not be so impolite as to ask for a detailed account of Comrade Steiner's practical contributions to the struggle, but it is rather noticeable that you fail to tell us what your activities consisted of during the strike.

What, if anything, did you do? What did you write? Did you draft a statement, perhaps with the title “The Transit Strike and Utopia”? Perhaps difficulties of one sort or another compelled you to forgo direct involvement in the strike. If so, there is no need to offer apologies. However, it is disappointing that you have not taken the opportunity afforded by your critique to explain, at least theoretically, how utopianism would have looked in action. We are entitled to conclude that your utopian schemes are largely intended for discussions within petty-bourgeois radical circles. When it comes to the workers, you have nothing for them except the thin gruel of trade unionism.

To be continued

Notes:

[4] The most recent essay on dialectical philosophy is my own detailed critique of *Marx After Marxism*, by Professor Tom Rockmore. (See “Hegel, Marx, Engels and the Origins of Marxism”) This piece was published in the May 2-3, 2006 editions of the *World Socialist Web Site*, nearly two weeks before you sent us your document. For reasons best known to yourselves, you chose to ignore it. [return]

[5] The ICFI doesn’t simply talk about the dialectical method. It seeks to apply it as an instrument of political analysis. For example, in a lecture on the nature of trade unionism given in Australia in 1998, I sought to demonstrate how dialectical logic sheds light on the nature of this complex social form:

It must be kept in mind that when we set out to study trade unionism, we are dealing with a definite social form. By this, we mean not some sort of casual, accidental and amorphous collection of individuals, but rather a historically-evolved connection between people organized in classes and rooted in certain specific relations of production. It is also important to reflect upon the nature of form itself. We all know that a relation exists between form and content, but this relationship is generally conceived as if the form were merely the expression of content. From this standpoint, the social form might be conceptualized as merely an outward, plastic and infinitely malleable expression of the relations upon which it is based. But social forms are more profoundly understood as dynamic elements in the historical process. To say that “content is formed” means that form imparts to the content of which it is the expression definite qualities and characteristics. It is through form that content exists and develops.

Perhaps it will be possible to clarify the purpose of this detour into the realm of philosophical categories and abstractions by referring to the famous section in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, in which Marx asks: “Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labor, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from the form itself.” That is, when a product of labor assumes the form of a commodity - a transformation that occurs only at a certain stage of society - it acquires a peculiar, fetishistic quality that it did not previously possess. Once products are exchanged on the market, real social relations between people, of which commodities are themselves the outcome, necessarily assume the appearance of a relation between things. A product of labor is a product of labor; and yet, once it assumes, within the framework of new productive relations, the form of a commodity, it acquires new and extraordinary social properties.

Similarly, a group of workers is a group of workers. And yet, when that group assumes the form of a trade union, it acquires, through that form, new and quite distinct social properties to which the workers are inevitably subordinated. What, precisely, is meant by this? The trade unions represent the working class in a very distinct socio-economic role: as the seller of a commodity, labor power. Arising on the basis of the productive relations and property forms of capitalism, the essential purpose of the trade union is to secure for this commodity the best price that can be obtained under prevailing market conditions.

Of course, there is a world of difference between what I have described

in theoretical terms as the “essential purpose” of trade unions and their real-life activities. The practical reality - the everyday sell-out of the most immediate interests of the working class - corresponds very little to the theoretically conceived “norm.” This divergence does not contradict the theoretical conception, but is itself the outcome of the objective socio-economic function of the trade union. Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt an essentially hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labor power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obligated to guarantee that their members supply their labor-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. As Gramsci noted, “The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.”

The defense of legality means the suppression of the class struggle, which, in the very nature of things, means that the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated. Herein lies the contradiction upon which trade unionism flounders. [*Marxism and the Trade Unions*, accessible on the *World Socialist Web Site* at <http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/unions/unions.htm>] [return]

[6] The agenda of the school was as follows: Lecture I: The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century (David North); Lecture II: Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century (David North); Lecture III: The origins of Bolshevism and *What Is To Be Done?* (David North); Lecture IV: Marxism, history and the science of perspective (David North); Lecture V: World War I: The breakdown of capitalism (Nick Beams); Lecture VI: Socialism in one country or permanent revolution (Bill Van Auken); Lecture VII: Marxism, art and the Soviet debate over “proletarian culture” (David Walsh); Lecture VIII: The 1920s: the road to depression and fascism (Nick Beams); Lecture IX: The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International (Peter Schwarz). [return]

[7] The immense importance that Lenin attributed to the cognition of objective social reality is clearly expressed in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*:

The fact that you live and conduct your business, beget children, produce products and exchange them, gives rise to an objectively necessary chain of development, which is independent of your *social* consciousness, and is never grasped by the latter completely. The highest task of humanity is to comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (the evolution of social life) in its general and fundamental features, so that it may be possible to adapt *to it* one’s social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as definite, clear and critical fashion as possible. [*Collected Works*, Volume 14 (Moscow, 1977), p. 325, emphasis in the original.] [return]

[8] One especially unpleasant expression of your indifference to political analysis is the manner in which you are willing to excuse even the grossest blunders of your utopian heroes. When comrade Steve Long pointed out to you, Comrade Steiner, that Jacoby (the author of your beloved *The End of Utopia*) is writing as a proponent of a liberal revival, you merely shrugged your shoulders and replied: “Does that mean that we as Marxists are therefore entitled to ignore everything he writes beyond page 8 where he announces his intentions of reviving a form of radical liberalism?” Or in response to comrade Long’s reference to the unsavory political history of Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, you replied: “Yes, both Adorno and Marcuse were political opportunists who went along with the Moscow trials in the name of a ‘united front’ against fascism in the 1930s. Does that mean they had nothing relevant to say to us afterward?” Has it not occurred to you that the political swinishness of

these individuals (and let us not forget to include Ernst Bloch, who greeted with rapture the murder of the Old Bolsheviks), had something to do with their utopianism? Why should confidence be placed in the utopian conceptions of individuals who were incapable of making a correct appraisal of objective reality, or even distinguishing truth from the noxious lies of the Stalinist regime? Would it be impolite to ask what method they employed when they considered political issues? Or perhaps their genius was of such a rarified and special character that it worked only in the future tense! [return]

[9] This is a passage from the fourth lecture, which included a substantial section devoted to the refutation of Sir Karl Popper's attack on Marxism. Your document contains not a single reference to this lecture and its attack on Popper's empiricism. [return]

[10] During this period, the WSWS maintained its rigorous coverage of other major national and international events. [return]

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>