

An aging liar peddles his wares

By David North
17 May 2018

In the comment section below the latest posting by Alex Steiner on his permanent-revolution blog site, he has placed yet another hysterical denunciation of the International Committee, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party. [1] There is not a trace of serious political and theoretical argument. It may all be music to the ears of every anti-Trotskyist and ICFI-hater, but it will only further discredit Steiner among the very many readers of the WSWs who study and are familiar with the political positions of the International Committee.

Steiner begins his rant with the assertion, “The so-called ICFI has nothing to do with the heritage of Trotsky other than appropriating the name.” And he concludes: “In truth, they turned their back on those traditions decades ago to become the sterile sect they are today.”

“Decades ago?” Steiner should be more precise. Was it three decades ago (in 1985) when the Workers League led the fight by the ICFI against Healy and his lackey, Savas Michael? Was it four decades ago (in 1974) when the Workers League removed Tim Wohlforth from the position of National Secretary? Was it five decades ago, in 1963, when the ICFI rejected Joseph Hansen’s orchestration of the unprincipled reunification with the Pabloites; or was it six decades ago, in 1953, when James P. Cannon issued the Open Letter against Pablo and announced the formation of the International Committee?

There is no sign that Steiner has given any thought to the implications of his claim that the ICFI abandoned Trotskyism “decades ago.” He has no idea, nor does he really care, where his rabid subjectivism will take him. Like all pragmatists, Steiner falsifies history, including his own, to suit what he perceives to be his immediate subjective and factional needs.

Steiner first joined the Workers League in 1971. He was won to the movement on the basis of the

International Committee’s fight against the opportunist revision of Trotskyism by the Pabloite International Secretariat. Affected by the rightward shift among broad sections of the middle class in the aftermath of the anti-war movement, Steiner dropped out of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) in 1979. But he re-established contact with the Workers League in 1985. Steiner declared his full agreement with the Workers League’s critique of Gerry Healy’s falsification of Marxism and his capitulation to Pabloite opportunism. Though Steiner decided not to rejoin the Workers League, he maintained close contact with the Workers League/SEP in the years that followed.

When he finally reapplied for membership in 1999, Steiner’s detailed appeal for readmission explained why he had not rejoined in 1985:

“I had by the mid 80’s established myself in a new professional career in which I was quite successful. I had entered the ranks of the comfortable middle class, and despite all my attempts at self-evasion, I knew that I did not want to rock the boat.

“Although I was politically in solidarity with the movement, my day to day life was far removed from the concerns of revolutionary socialism. I was part of a middle class New York culture.”

Notwithstanding this frank acknowledgment of his satisfaction with a middle class life, Steiner declared that the work of the SEP, and especially the founding of the *World Socialist Web Site*, had inspired him both politically and intellectually. And he concluded his statement with a stirring declaration:

“I have now come to the realization that the role I wish to play is that of a participant in the struggle for socialism. Nothing less will offer me the satisfaction of implementing theory into practice. That is the real essence of freedom.”

Notwithstanding the effusive praise, the SEP—based

on many years of experience with his political instability—thought it best to restrain Steiner’s premature leap into the kingdom of freedom. It rejected his application for membership but maintained political relations with him. One further point must be made about Steiner’s 1999 application: All the political positions that he now denounces were already part of the program of the SEP.

Despite the rejection of his application, Steiner continued to contribute articles to the *World Socialist Web Site*. In March 2003 he attended a conference called by the Socialist Equality Party to oppose the US invasion of Iraq. It was only in the aftermath of the conference that Steiner began to indicate political disagreement with the SEP.

For all Steiner’s thunderous invocations of dialectics, he is incapable of providing a coherent account of his own political evolution. He is bewildered by his own contradictions. Steiner cannot explain why, having originally joined the Workers League in 1971 to oppose the anti-Marxist politics of the Pabloites and Shachtmanites, he now embraces their positions. He denounces the “quasi-religious belief” of ICFI members “that they are the only ones” who “speak in the name of Trotsky.” This conviction, he declares, is another example of the IC’s “sectarian” abandonment of the *Transitional Program* written by Trotsky in 1938. Steiner seems to have forgotten, along with so many other things, Trotsky’s declaration in the concluding section of the *Transitional Program*: “Outside of these cadres [of the Fourth International] there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name.” Thus wrote the “sectarian” Leon Trotsky.

The political evolution of Steiner recalls that of Tim Wohlforth. Shortly after being removed in August 1974 from the post of Workers League national secretary, for having severely compromised the political security of the party and its members, Wohlforth deserted the organization. Within just a few months, he rejoined the Pabloite Socialist Workers Party and launched a campaign of subjectively-motivated slanders against the International Committee and the Workers League.

In 1976 Steiner coauthored with me *The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth*, which refuted the wild attacks of Tim Wohlforth on the International Committee. One of the chapters in that

document was titled “An Aging Liar Peddles His Wares.” For Steiner, the history in which he himself participated is so much water under the bridge. Steiner now hurls against the ICFI and SEP the same slanders to which Wohlforth resorted more than 40 years ago. Steiner himself has become an aging liar.

Steiner cannot explain how and why he has wound up repudiating and denouncing all that he once claimed to believe in. But the explanation for his political degeneration is to be found in Steiner’s candid admission of 1999: “I had entered the ranks of the comfortable middle class, and despite all my attempts at self-evasion, I knew that I did not want to rock the boat. ... I was part of a middle class New York culture.”

So Steiner was. And so he is today.

[1] See the comments section at “Karl Marx at 200” (<http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2018/05/karl-marx-200-years-later.html>)

For a detailed examination the theoretical and philosophical issues involved in Steiner’s political evolution and his attack on the ICFI, see, The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Political of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique.

To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wswp.org>