

Introduction to *The Fourth International and the Perspective of World Socialist Revolution: 1986–1995*

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19 June 2020

This book consists of lectures presented at the summer school of the Socialist Equality Party (US) held July 21–28, 2019. The lectures examine the development of the perspective and program of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in the aftermath of the split with the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in February 1986. The volume’s appendix includes several critical resolutions and documents cited in the lectures.

The split with the WRP ranks among the most significant events in the history of the Fourth International. At stake was the survival of the Trotskyist movement and the continuity of its revolutionary internationalist program.

The opening lecture in this volume, delivered by SEP National Chairman David North, places the split and the present tasks of the ICFI in the context of the history of Trotskyism, going back to the formation of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union in 1923. North identifies four distinct phases in the history of the Trotskyist movement.

The first phase, from 1923 to the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, encompassed the struggle led by Trotsky against the betrayals and crimes of the counterrevolutionary regime led by Stalin. These fifteen years were marked by world Depression, the coming to power of fascism in Germany, the eruption of civil war in Spain, Stalin’s murderous terror against the remnants of Bolshevism in the Soviet Union, and the approach of the second imperialist world war. Trotsky, living as a persecuted exile on “the planet without a visa,” defended and developed, in unrelenting opposition to the anti-Marxist Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country,” the theory of permanent revolution as the strategic foundation of the Fourth International.

The second phase, between 1938 and 1953, encompassed World War II, the assassination of Trotsky, the first years of the post-war restabilization of capitalism and the outbreak of the Cold War. These fifteen years were marked by growing divisions within the Fourth International, which tended to center on disputes over Trotsky’s definition of the Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers state,” and, in the aftermath of World War II, on the independent revolutionary role of the Fourth International in a world dominated politically by the Cold War conflict between American imperialism and the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union.

In the late 1940s, a tendency led by Michel Pablo and his close associate, Ernest Mandel, developed a political position that attributed to the Soviet bureaucracy and the Stalinist parties a revolutionary role. In opposition to Trotsky’s call for a political revolution against the Stalinist regime, Pablo and Mandel envisioned a process of bureaucratic self-reform. Not only that, the reinvigorated Stalinist organizations would, under the pressure of the working class, be compelled to carry out the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. The result of these bureaucratically led revolutions would be the establishment of “deformed” workers’ states

that would, after a period of several centuries, give way to genuine socialism. In this bizarre perspective, the Fourth International had no independent role to play.

Accordingly, Pablo and Mandel insisted that existing sections of the Fourth International dissolve themselves into the mass Stalinist parties. As they developed this essentially defeatist orientation, Pablo and Mandel adopted a similarly opportunist orientation to the Maoist regime in China and the many bourgeois nationalist movements that had acquired mass followings in the aftermath of World War II.

Outside the Fourth International, Trotsky had written in 1938, “there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name.” The Fourth International, he continued, “uncompromisingly gives battle to all political groupings tied to the apron-strings of the bourgeoisie.” [Leon Trotsky, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International, The Transitional Program* (New York: Labor Publications, 1981), p. 42]

By the early 1950s, Pablo had rejected Trotsky’s revolutionary opposition to the political agencies of the bourgeoisie. “What distinguishes us still more from the past [i.e., from Trotsky],” he wrote, “what makes for the quality of our movement today and constitutes the surest gauge of our future victories, is our growing capacity to understand, to appreciate the mass movement as it exists—often confused, often under treacherous, opportunist, centrist, bureaucratic and even bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships—and our endeavors to find our place in this movement with the aim of raising it from its present to higher levels.” [Cited in David North, *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International* (Oak Park: Mehring Books, 2018), pp. 192–93]

By 1953, it had become clear that Pablo and Mandel’s liquidationist perspective and practice threatened the Fourth International with destruction. James P. Cannon, the founder of the Trotskyist movement in the United States and still the central leader of the Socialist Workers Party, issued an Open Letter which called on Trotskyist organizations to break irrevocably with Pablo, Mandel and their supporters. Cannon and other signatories to the Open Letter, which included Gerry Healy, the leader of the Trotskyist movement in Britain, formed the International Committee of the Fourth International. This historic split brought to an end the second phase of the history of the Fourth International.

The third phase spanned more than three decades, from the issuing of the Open Letter in 1953 to the International Committee’s break with the British Workers Revolutionary Party in 1985–86. The dominant feature of this thirty-two-year period was the protracted struggle of the Trotskyist movement against the continuing influence of Pabloism, which was the political expression of the ideological, political, and organizational pressure exerted by imperialism and Stalinism upon the Fourth

International.

Pabloism was a form of anti-Marxism that, in the final analysis, both reflected the outlook of and adapted itself to the large labor bureaucracies (both Stalinist and social democratic) and myriad forms of radical petty-bourgeois politics. The specific and peculiar conditions of the post-World War II economic boom—the apparent consolidation of the Stalinist regimes, the improved living standards of workers in North America and Western Europe, the rise to power of the Maoist regime in China and numerous bourgeois national regimes and movements, often spouting Marxist-sounding phrases, and the eruption of student radicalism in the 1960s—created a politically hostile environment for the Fourth International. The Pabloite movement, orienting itself to the petty bourgeoisie, did all it could—with both the open and covert support of the Stalinists and state agencies of imperialism—to politically isolate the orthodox Trotskyists of the Fourth International.

The influence of Pabloite revisionism was manifested not only in the form of external organizational pressure upon the International Committee. Precisely because of Pabloism's objective social basis and the unfavorable relationship of forces, political conceptions akin to those of the Pabloites tended to find an audience within sections of the leadership and cadre of the International Committee. The Socialist Workers Party, claiming that Castro's rise to power proved that a socialist revolution was possible under the leadership of petty-bourgeois guerrillas, broke with the International Committee in 1963 and formed with the Pabloites the United Secretariat. The opposition to the SWP's betrayal of Trotskyism was led by the British and French sections of the International Committee, which rejected reunification with the Pabloites. The principled struggle of the ICFI, in which Gerry Healy played the central role, led to the formation of the Workers League in the United States (1966) and the Revolutionary Communist League in Sri Lanka (1968), predecessors of the Socialist Equality Parties.

The rejection of reunification did not signify a final settling of accounts with Pabloism. By 1966, the French Trotskyists of the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) were advocating a "reconstruction" of the Fourth International, which, in practical political terms, was directed toward an alignment with the French Socialist Party led by François Mitterand. The orientation of the OCI to French social democracy and its development of thoroughly opportunist relations with various Pabloite and petty-bourgeois tendencies in Latin America led to a split with the International Committee in 1972. Notwithstanding its political criticisms of the OCI, the Socialist Labour League (SLL) in Britain began to evince similar tendencies in the 1970s. This orientation became increasingly pronounced following the transformation of the SLL into the Workers Revolutionary Party in November 1973.

Within the International Committee, there emerged a political opposition to the nationalist politics of the SLL/WRP. In 1971, Keerthi Balasuriya and the leadership of the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, the Revolutionary Communist League, expressed their opposition to the SLL's support for the Indian invasion of East Pakistan. These criticisms, however, were suppressed by the SLL leadership, which did not allow their circulation for discussion within the International Committee.

The political struggle against the nationalist politics of the WRP

A more sustained and comprehensive critique of the WRP's political divergence from Trotskyism and the theoretical conceptions employed to justify it was developed by David North, the national secretary of the Workers League, between 1982 and 1985.

In his initial criticisms of the political line of the WRP, North drew attention to the WRP's retreat from the fundamental principles of Trotskyism. In "A Contribution to a Critique of G. Healy's 'Studies in Dialectical Materialism,'" written in October-November 1982, North exposed Healy's idealist distortion of Marxism and its relationship to the

WRP's retreat from Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Citing the WRP's adaptation to bourgeois nationalist regimes, North wrote:

The work of the IC in the Middle East, which has never been guided by a clear perspective of building the International Committee in that area of the world, has now degenerated into a series of pragmatic adaptations to shifts in the political winds. Marxist defense of national liberation movements and the struggle against imperialism has been interpreted in an opportunist fashion of uncritical support of various bourgeois nationalist regimes...

During the six years in which the IC has conducted work in the Middle East, there has not been a single statement in which class relations in that area of the world have been analyzed. There has not been a single article in which the development of the working class has been analyzed. For all intents and purposes, the Theory of Permanent Revolution has been treated as inapplicable to present circumstances. [David North, "Political Summary of Critique of G. Healy's 'Studies,'" (*Fourth International*, vol. 13 no. 2, Autumn 1986), p. 23]

In January-February 1984, North presented a comprehensive analysis of the adaptation of the WRP to positions historically associated with Pabloism.

In a January 23, 1984 letter to WRP General Secretary Michael Banda, North wrote that the IC, under the leadership of the WRP, "has for some time been working without a clear and politically-unified perspective to guide its practice. Rather than a perspective for the building of sections of the International Committee in every country, the central focus of the IC's work for several years has been the development of alliances with various bourgeois nationalist regimes and liberation movements. The content of these alliances has less and less reflected any clear orientation toward the development of our own forces as central to the fight to establish the leading role of the proletariat in the anti-imperialist struggle in the semi-colonial countries." [Letter from David North to Mike Banda, (*Fourth International*, vol. 13 no. 2, Autumn 1986), p. 35]

In a political report to the International Committee of the Fourth International on February 11, 1984, North stated: "The development of the IC has proceeded through the struggle against revisionism. ... Precisely because revisionism has material roots in the actual development of the class struggle of which we ourselves are a part, because it reflects the pressure of alien class forces upon the working class and its revolutionary vanguard, our response to revisionism finds its highest expression in the analysis of our own political development."

North continued:

It is for this reason that we feel the time has come to examine the whole development of the IC during the past decade. We are strongly of the opinion that we have steadily drifted away from positions for which we tenaciously fought for more than 20 years after the original split with Pablo. In a letter to Comrade Banda, written on January 23, 1984, I suggested that the time had come to draw a balance sheet on the entire experience of the IC in relation to the national liberation movements. I feel that such a balance sheet is necessary because there has been really no objective examination of our experience—as a World Party—with the various nationalist bourgeois regimes and liberation movements with which we have established relations. We feel that the record is one which merits a serious critique, in order to defend the continuity of the IC and to train the cadre in each of the sections. [David North, "Political report to the International

Committee of the Fourth International,” February 11, 1984, (*Fourth International*, vol. 13 no. 2, Autumn 1986), p. 42]

The leadership of the WRP refused to engage in a discussion of these differences, responding to the political criticism of the Workers League by threatening a split. Within little more than a year, however, the WRP was engulfed in an organizational crisis that was the outcome of this political retreat over the previous decade from the principles of Trotskyism. The crisis culminated in the International Committee’s suspension of the WRP from membership on December 16, 1985. The ICFI offered to restore membership rights to the WRP based on its explicit acceptance of the programmatic foundations of the Fourth International. The WRP rejected this condition and repudiated its pledge to accept the political authority of the International Committee. On February 8, 1986, the WRP leadership completed its break with the International Committee by summoning police to bar members supporting the ICFI—who comprised a substantial portion of the organization’s membership—from entering the hall where the WRP was holding its congress. Within just a few years of its break, the WRP had ceased to exist.

The 1985–86 split with the WRP brought the third phase of the history of the Fourth International to a conclusion. After more than three decades of intense political struggle, the orthodox Trotskyists had inflicted a decisive political defeat on the Pabloites and regained full political and organizational control over the Fourth International.

The fourth phase in the history of the Trotskyist movement: The reforging and development of the international Marxist perspective

The lectures in this volume are principally concerned with the fourth phase in the history of the Trotskyist movement, which began in 1986. In the aftermath of the split, the ICFI confronted a whole set of complex problems under conditions of a rapidly changing world political situation. These included the deepening crisis and ultimate dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe, the acceleration of the restoration of capitalist relations in China that followed the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, the rightward evolution of the bourgeois nationalist regimes and the proliferation of separatist movements aligned with imperialism, the full integration of the trade unions into the apparatus of corporate management and the state, and the eruption of American imperialism and unending war that began with the first invasion of Iraq in 1990–1991.

Confronting these challenges required the reestablishment and development of an international Marxist perspective. The political foundation for this perspective emerged in the course of the split with the WRP.

The first task of the ICFI after the split was to work through systematically the causes and significance of the split itself. This was done in the May 1986 statement of the ICFI, written by North and Keerthi Balasuriya, *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism: 1973–1985* [*Fourth International*, vol. 13 no. 1, Summer 1986]. In response to WRP General Secretary Michael Banda’s open attack on the entire history of the Trotskyist movement, the ICFI responded with the publication of *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, by David North.

This was followed by a theoretical examination of the objective processes that underlay the degeneration of the WRP, which was part of a profound crisis gripping all the nationalist-based organizations and parties.

The principal challenge that confronted the International Committee in the aftermath of the split with the WRP was to renew the work of the Fourth International on political perspective. The International Committee

was conditioned by the historical experience of the Trotskyist movement to examine the objective socioeconomic conditions that underlay the political crisis that had led to the split of 1985–86. Since its founding in 1923, the Trotskyist movement had demonstrated an acute sensitivity to major shifts in the world situation. Significant conflicts within its leadership and ranks tended to arise *in response to* or *in anticipation of* critical inflection points in world politics. As was soon to become clear, the struggle within the International Committee that unfolded between 1982 and 1986 anticipated the explosive changes in world politics between 1989 and 1991.

The urgency of a renewal of renewed theoretical work was accentuated by the fact that years of political downsliding and adaptation by the WRP had been most sharply expressed in its abandonment of sustained work on international perspectives. While declaiming demagogically on “the undefeated nature of the working class”—an empty phrase that conveniently ignored defeats suffered by the working class in the real world—the WRP paid less and less attention to critical changes in the structure of the world capitalist economy and their impact on imperialist geopolitics and the international class struggle. No attempt was made to analyze the objective motivations underlying the global capitalist offensive against the working class that began in the mid-1970s, or to explain why the existing mass labor and trade union organizations were unable to mount any effective resistance to this offensive.

The International Committee initiated the development of a new world perspective in July 1987. In a report delivered at the summer school of the Workers League on September 1, 1987, North called attention to the WRP’s failure to take any notice of “the new economic forms assumed by the growth of the productive forces within the imperialist epoch: that is, the internationalization of production on a scale unequaled in history and the emergence of truly global production, in which the manufacture of a single commodity is the outcome of integrated transnational production.” [David North, “Political Report on the Perspectives of the International Committee of the Fourth International,” (*Fourth International*, vol. 15 no. 1, January-March 1988), p. 69]

North stressed that the process of globalization was the objective source of the universal crisis of existing working class organizations. He stated:

Trade unions are not equipped to confront this new situation. They cannot defend the working class insofar as they conduct the class struggle exclusively on the national soil. In fact, the development of transnational organizations requires the international organization of the working class. American, Japanese, Korean or German workers find it increasingly impossible to conduct nationally isolated struggles. And just as the bourgeoisie seeks to organize production on a world scale, the working class will be compelled to organize its own struggles on a world scale, and therefore create new and more advanced forms of organization. [Ibid, p. 73]

“The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” adopted by the Seventh Plenum of the ICFI in July 1988, examines the revolutionary significance of changes in the process of capitalist production associated with transnational corporations and globalization, which undermined the viability of all social and political organizations embedded in the nation-state system. The resolution, which is included in this volume, states:

It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist

development, even the *form* of the class struggle must have international character. ... Thus, the unprecedented international mobility of capital has rendered all nationalist programs for the labor movement of different countries obsolete and reactionary. [“The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” (Fourth International, vol. 15 nos. 3–4, July–December 1988), p. 4]

The resolution continues:

The global character of capitalist production has tremendously sharpened the economic and political antagonisms between the principal imperialist powers, and has once again brought to the forefront the irreconcilable contradiction between the objective development of the world economy and the nation-state form in which the whole system of capitalist property is historically rooted. Precisely the international character of the proletariat, a class which owes no allegiance to any capitalist “fatherland,” makes it the sole social force that can liberate civilization from the strangulating fetters of the nation-state system.

For these fundamental reasons, no struggle against the ruling class in any country can produce enduring advances for the working class, let alone prepare its final emancipation, unless it is based on an international strategy aimed at the worldwide mobilization of the proletariat against the capitalist system. This necessary unification of the working class can only be achieved through the construction of a genuine international proletarian, i.e., revolutionary party. Only one such party, the product of decades of unrelenting ideological and political struggle, exists. It is the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938, and led today by the International Committee. [Ibid.]

The renaissance of Trotskyism and the decade of world socialist revolution

The world perspective of the ICFI established the theoretical and political foundation for its analysis of and response to the momentous upheavals of the following decade. In the opening lecture to the 2019 summer school, North noted that the work of the IC during the period following the split with the WRP was a monumental achievement for the Marxist movement.

The decisive defeat and ejection of Pabloite opportunism created the conditions for an immense theoretical, political, and organizational development of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The work of theoretical and political clarification made possible by the expulsion of the national opportunists signified nothing less than a renaissance of Trotskyism.

The lectures included in this volume provide an insight into the discussions within the International Committee in the aftermath of the split. Making use of internal party documents, including transcripts of discussions and correspondence, the lectures show *how* political perspective and program are developed in a Marxist-Trotskyist party. The lectures concentrate on the most complex issues that confronted the International Committee. The world Trotskyist movement was compelled to analyze and define its attitude to the trade unions, to the bourgeois national movements and the “demand” for self-determination, to the much ballyhooed policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* initiated by Mikhail

Gorbachev after he became the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985, and to the explosive events in post-Maoist China. In each case, there were no ready-made answers to the problems posed by the rapidly changing objective situation.

The Trotskyist movement is intensely conscious of the historical experience out of which it emerged, and which shaped its political evolution. However, its respect for history does not consist of rummaging through the past to find a quotable precedent. Trotsky bitterly opposed this sort of formalistic orthodoxy. “The weapon of Marxist investigation,” he wrote, “must be constantly sharpened and applied. It is precisely in this that tradition consists, and not in the substitution of a formal reference or an accidental quotation.” [“The New Course,” in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923–25)*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2017), p. 123]

The reader must keep in mind that the discussions within the International Committee unfolded in “real time.” In the lecture “The ICFI and the Crisis of Stalinism,” Comrade Barry Grey traces the ICFI’s analysis of the development of the Soviet Union between 1986 and 1992. He cites a major document published by the ICFI in 1987, “What Is Happening in the USSR.” That document warned that Gorbachev’s “reforms” would lead, unless disrupted by a revolutionary movement of the working class, to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Within five years, this analysis was vindicated by events. This volume includes that record of the response to the dissolution of the USSR.

The perspectives work was not limited to questions of economics and politics. The lecture by Comrade David Walsh examines the attention paid by the International Committee to the challenge of renewing and developing socialist consciousness within the working class. The attention given to this issue arose from the ICFI’s concept of “socialist culture,” which Walsh defined as “all that has been organized, built, written, assimilated and achieved with the conscious aim of assisting workers to grasp their objective position in capitalist society and their collective role as a force for socialist revolution, and to transform themselves from mere fodder for exploitation to the makers of history and the liberators of humanity.”

The theoretical work reviewed in this volume made possible the development of the International Committee of the Fourth International during the fourth phase of the history of the Trotskyist movement, which spanned a period of three decades, from 1986 until 2019. In the opening lecture, North summarized the accomplishments of this period:

The critical preparatory work of removing the Pabloites, rebuilding the world party on an internationalist foundation, elaborating the international strategy of the ICFI, defending the historical heritage of the Fourth International, converting the leagues of the International Committee into parties, and establishing the *World Socialist Web Site* were the main achievements of the fourth phase. These achievements made possible a vast expansion in the political influence of the International Committee and a significant growth of its membership. This stage is concluded.

Thus, the fifth stage in the history of the Fourth International has begun. North explained:

The objective processes of economic globalization, identified by the International Committee more than thirty years ago, have undergone a further colossal development. Combined with the emergence of new technologies that have revolutionized communications, these processes have internationalized the class struggle to a degree that would have been hard to imagine even

twenty-five years ago. The revolutionary struggle of the working class will develop as an interconnected and unified world movement. The International Committee of the Fourth International will be built as the conscious political leadership of this objective socioeconomic process. It will counterpose to the capitalist politics of imperialist war the class-based strategy of world socialist revolution. This is the essential historical task of the new phase in the history of the Fourth International.

At the beginning of 2020, in reviewing the significance of mass protests and demonstrations that erupted throughout the world over the course of the previous year, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, in “The decade of socialist revolution begins,” that “the arrival of the New Year marks the beginning of a decade of intensifying class struggle and world socialist revolution.”

In the future, when learned historians write about the upheavals of the twenty-first century, they will enumerate all the “obvious” signs that existed, as the 2020s began, of the revolutionary storm that was soon to sweep across the globe. The scholars—with a vast array of facts, documents, charts, web site and social media postings, and other forms of valuable digitalized information at their disposal—will describe the 2010s as a period characterized by an intractable economic, social, and political crisis of the world capitalist system. [*World Socialist Web Site*, January 3, 2020, available at: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2020/01/03/pers-j03.html>]

It did not take long before this prognosis was confirmed. The first half of 2020 has been characterized by the deepening crisis of the global capitalist system sparked by the coronavirus pandemic.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has characterized the pandemic as a “trigger event.” The response of the ruling class to the pandemic, in the United States and throughout the world, was conditioned by the whole evolution of capitalism in the preceding period. The corporate and financial oligarchy has used the pandemic to continue and intensify the parasitic policies it had employed during previous decades to counteract the systemic crisis of capitalism.

Epidemiologists and scientists have warned about the danger of a pandemic for more than two decades. The destruction of social and health care infrastructure, and the massive growth of social inequality have left the masses of workers vulnerable to the health and economic impacts of the pandemic.

The ruling elites, led by the Trump administration in the United States, utilized the pandemic to hand trillions of dollars to Wall Street in a bailout of the corporations and financial institutions that far exceeds what was done after the 2008–09 economic crash. The wealth of billionaires is soaring, and the stock markets are reaching new highs, even as tens of millions have been thrown out of work with no hope of returning to their jobs.

The efforts of the ruling elites in the United States and internationally to engineer a “return to work” under unsafe conditions will produce social upheavals. The opposition of workers and youth to the indifference and contempt of the ruling class for their lives is intersecting with the growing opposition to inequality, war, environmental degradation, and the capitalist profit system.

The pandemic is igniting a new stage of class struggle. The wellspring of social anger in the United States and throughout the world found initial expression following the May 25 police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The massive multi-racial and multi-ethnic

demonstrations in every major US city and on every continent have been motivated by opposition to police violence. However, underlying this social eruption is growing outrage over inequality, exploitation, and the capitalist system.

The theoretical and political work reviewed in this volume will prove to be of immense importance in the education of the new generation of revolutionary socialists who are joining the ranks of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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