

SEP (Australia) holds lecture series on the history of Trotskyism

By Oscar Grenfell
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) concluded a successful series of online lectures entitled “Why study the history of Trotskyism” last week.

The events introduced an important layer of students, young people and workers—who are being radicalised by the deepening crisis of capitalism expressed most sharply by the pandemic—to the essential strategic lessons of the Trotskyist movement’s protracted fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective.

A memo outlining the purpose of the lectures had explained that they would seek to elaborate “the fight for world socialist revolution which runs as a red thread, the central component of, the struggle of the Trotskyist movement from the formation of the Left Opposition in 1923 to today.”

The lectures provided a concise overview of some of the major events of the 20th century, including the Russian Revolution, the emergence of Stalinism, the upheavals of the 1930s, the coming to power of the Nazis, the Second World War, the post-war boom of capitalism and the Cold War, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

They were not, however, an exercise in academic history. Rather, the presentations reviewed the way in which these events impacted on, and were responded to, by the revolutionary Marxists and the most conscious sections of the working class.

Each of the meetings related the historical issues under discussion to the contemporary questions confronting the working class.

They outlined the essential lessons of the complex struggles waged within the Trotskyist movement, and provided an overview of some of the fundamentals of contemporary Marxism. These included the primacy of international strategy over national tactics and the necessity for a continuous fight against national-opportunism as a central component of establishing the political independence of the working class.

Above all, the lectures emphasised the decisive importance of building a revolutionary leadership in the working class, based on the heritage of Trotskyism. This was the only way in which the developing struggles of the working class could be provided with a conscious orientation and perspective that would guide them to victory.

The first lecture was delivered by Nick Beams, who has played a leading role in the Trotskyist movement for more than four decades, and was titled “**October 1917: The Opening Shot of the World Revolution.**”

It outlined Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which provided an integrated perspective of world socialist revolution in an era of global economy and politics. Beams explained that Trotsky’s theory had established the decisive revolutionary role of the working class in carrying through the unresolved democratic tasks in countries of a belated capitalist development, including Russia.

Trotsky’s breakthrough was central to the October 1917 revolution, the first time the working class took political power. Beams stressed that the revolution was conceived of by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks as the opening shot in a global social transformation, arising out of the breakdown of capitalism expressed in World War I.

He argued that the same fundamental contradictions of the profit system were expressed today in the pandemic, and the response to it by governments around the world, including their stoking of nationalism and subordination of public health to the profit dictates of a corporate aristocracy. The perspective that had guided the Russian Revolution was therefore more relevant than ever.

The second lecture, presented by Cheryl Crisp, the assistant national-secretary of the SEP (Australia), was headlined “**The Left Opposition’s struggle against Stalinism.**”

Crisp explained that Stalinism emerged in the early 1920s, out of the isolation of the Soviet Union and its material backwardness. Revolutions in Germany and elsewhere had been defeated as a result of the betrayals of social democracy. Russia, already devastated by World War I, was further impoverished by an imperialist instigated civil war aimed at overthrowing the first workers state.

Crisp explained that Stalinism expressed the interests of a privileged bureaucratic caste, whose emergence was a product of the pressures of imperialism on the young workers state. She detailed the struggles of the Left Opposition against it, over questions of internal party democracy, economic planning and international strategy.

Crisp stressed that the nationalist perspective of Stalinism

had a devastating impact globally. The policies of the Stalinists divided the working class in Germany, creating the conditions for the coming to power of the Nazis.

The third lecture by Max Boddy, an SEP national committee member, was titled “**The founding of the Fourth International.**”

Boddy outlined the conditions of intense political repression under which the Trotskyists established the Fourth International. He reviewed the political context, including the betrayal of revolutionary struggles of the working class and the approach of World War II.

The lecture detailed Trotsky’s struggle against various centrist tendencies, which opposed the founding of the Fourth International as “premature,” a position that expressed their unwillingness to break with the national milieu. Boddy provided an analysis of the founding program of the Fourth International, the Transitional Program, and argued that its characterisation of the world situation—“The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership”—applies with even greater force today.

The fourth lecture was on “**The ICFI and the war against Pabloism**” and was delivered by SEP national committee member Zac Hambides.

It reviewed the emergence of Pabloite national-opportunism within the Fourth International, in the context of the post-World War II boom of capitalism and the apparent strengthening of Stalinism. Hambides explained that the Pabloites rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and the Fourth International, by ascribing a progressive role to the Stalinists and various bourgeois-nationalist formations.

He explained that the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was established in 1953 to prevent the Pabloites from liquidating the Trotskyist movement. Its founding document, the Open Letter by James P Cannon had restated the fundamental perspectives outlined by Trotsky and exposed the dangerous implications of the revisions advanced by Michel Pablo and his supporters.

Over the following decades, the Pabloites would function as a critical adjunct of the bureaucracies, serving to prevent the genuine Trotskyists from coming to the leadership of the working class. Hambides particularly reviewed the disastrous consequences of Pabloite politics in Latin America, which created the conditions for a series of bloody military coups.

The fifth lecture, delivered by Oscar Grenfell, an SEP national committee member and regular writer for the WSWS, was on “**The 1985-86 split with the WRP and the renaissance of Marxism.**”

It outlined the reversion to Pabloite positions by the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), the British section of the ICFI, beginning in the 1970s. This had included a turn to bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East and to the Labour and union bureaucracy within Britain.

Grenfell noted that this opportunist course provoked

opposition from within the ICFI, expressed in a series of interventions by David North and the US Workers League beginning in 1982.

The split between the ICFI and the WRP in 1985 had ensured the survival of the Trotskyist movement. It was based on the entire heritage of the Fourth International, and centred on the question of nationalism versus internationalism. The successful struggle waged by the ICFI expressed new and more favourable conditions for the socialist internationalists and was the basis for a renaissance of Marxism spearheaded by the ICFI over the following decades.

The final lecture by Nick Beams was on the subject “**A new period of socialist revolution and the tasks of the Fourth International.**”

Beams explained that the pandemic had vindicated the IC’s assessment, in a January 3 perspective document, that the world had entered a “decade of socialist revolution.”

He outlined the critical importance of the initiatives undertaken by the ICFI since 1985, including the establishment of Socialist Equality Parties and perspectives work unprecedented in the history of the Marxist movement since the founding of the Fourth International. He stressed that this heritage was the foundation for the development of mass revolutionary parties around the world, and appealed to those in attendance to join the ICFI.

The lectures were attended by an appreciative audience, including workers, students and youth across Australia. There was important participation from Sri Lanka, India, New Zealand, Britain, the US, and in countries as diverse as Spain, the Philippines and South Korea.

At each of the lectures, the speakers stressed the need for those entering socialist politics to study the history of the Fourth international, including by purchasing works from Mehring Books.

- Lecture 1 (June 2): October 1917: The Opening Shot of the World Revolution
- Lecture 2 (June 9): The Left Opposition's struggle against Stalinism
- Lecture 3 (June 16): The founding of the Fourth International
- Lecture 4 (June 23): The ICFI and the war against Pabloism
- Lecture 5 (June 30): The 1985-86 split with the WRP and the renaissance of Marxism
- Lecture 6 (July 7): A new period of socialist revolution and the tasks of the Fourth International

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