

*An exchange with an apologist for the SEP leadership:*

## **On the WSWS's "curious fumble" on Iraq and other matters**

I'm posting here some comments by a reader, mdv, and my response. Judging from mdv's remarks, it is fair to characterize him as an apologist for the SEP leadership. But what is interesting is that unlike David North (or the Talbots), mdv tries to address some of the substantive criticisms we made of the SEP's political line and practice. His efforts to defend the SEP leadership on these issues lead him to make, albeit inadvertently, some revealing statements which deserve to be brought to the attention of our readers. Another reason for responding to mdv is that the views he expresses are probably shared by others in and around the SEP.

These comments by mdv are the latest installment of an exchange he was having with Andrew River over a blog River wrote for permanent-revolution.org concerning a speech by North to a Slavic studies conference.<sup>1</sup> As far as this exchange goes, I have nothing to add to what River has said, and mdv's latest remarks raise nothing new on this score. From the second paragraph on, however, mdv moves to a more broad-based defense of the SEP leadership, and it is these remarks that concern me here.

Frank Brenner

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Mdv's comments:**

I think you're grasping at straws to come up with an indictment of North that fits the narrative that Steiner, Brenner and yourself have already constructed. You, once again, harp on the grand ideological conclusions you deduce from what is frankly a less-than-questionable phrasing in North's comments (which you morph into a "schema" at odds with the ABCs of Marxism), lecturing me on how "History" doesn't automatically solve the problems of revolution, socialism and so on.

What you've glossed over in your reply is what I actually said: that these issues have been hammered on "a thousand times" in WSWS articles, speeches, lectures and conferences. Your allegations (namely North's "obvious" rejection of the fundamentals of Marxism here -- I have neither the time nor the energy to try and reply to a few dozen pages from the painfully dense MWHH) are not only out of step with a large amount of material published online by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew River, "Comments on 'Leon Trotsky, Soviet Historiography and the Fate of Classical Marxism'", permanent-revolution.org, Dec. 8, 2008: <http://permanent-revolution.org/forum/2008/12/comments-on-leon-trotsky-soviet.html>. Mdv's first comments on this blog and River's reply can also be read there.

*On the WSWS's "curious fumble" in Iraq and other matters*

WSWS, but contradicted by the bulk of forty years of documented activity and statements from the International Committee.

They also, I think, seem more misplaced now more than ever, as the SEP begins to do something about a lengthy period of organizational atrophy. Their launching of a redesigned website, writing a new party constitution, taking real steps towards building a student wing and so on -- these are hardly the signs we would expect to see from a party leadership retreating into philosophical obscurantism.

When it comes to how North's alleged philosophical failings translate into political ones, your argument doesn't become any more attractive. I won't dispute that a series of WSWS articles published on Iraq in 2004 had a questionable attitude towards events there. I personally remember an exchange I had with a long time party member on that point at the time, when he was (in Trotskyist tradition) quite critical of the Iraqi "resistance" and those who adulated it.

What I will dispute is Steiner and Brenner's contention that these articles amounted to a fundamental shift in the political line of the ICFI and the "abandonment of the permanent revolution and the embrace of bourgeois nationalism." The website, and the organization, are fallible. They can and do make mistakes. They can and do publish articles whose analysis is questionable and whose political line (though the "political line" was only implied, at times confusedly, in the aforementioned Iraq articles) requires revision. Unless you have new, concrete evidence that shows the problems of those statements (which were, as Steiner and Brenner admit, later corrected) were only the beginning of an ongoing rejection of permanent revolution and embrace of bourgeois nationalism, I'm more inclined to treat that episode as a curious fumble. I see no reason to believe that they were the massive, and yet to be resolved, ideological failing on the part of North and the International Committee that Steiner and Brenner allege.

The rest of the charges you make over the supposed results of "North's objectivism" are, and I pointed this out to you in a conversation after MWHH was first published, simply ridiculous. Anyone can hold up an organization's "failure" to do this or that as all the evidence required for a conclusion made long in advance. The SEP is a small organization on the political fringe, with limited resources and few personnel. Not even the most organized, principled party in the world can intervene in every country at every moment, produce successful strike after successful strike or wage a model electoral campaign in every election. And you're indicting the SEP for "failing" to travel to Mexico in 2006, intervene in protests there and singlehandedly establish a new section (if I remember correctly, Steiner and Brenner claimed this was all a realistic endeavor for Bill Van Auken!) of the International Committee?

If you honestly believe this is a valid and intellectually honest argument to make against North and the SEP, I think it should be applied just as equally to Steiner and Brenner. Why haven't Steiner and Brenner intervened in a local supermarket strike in my city? Why didn't Steiner and

Brenner intervene in the recent protests in Oakland, winning several thousand people to socialism in the process? Why didn't Steiner and Brenner intervene in the protests over Prop 8, establishing a several thousand-member socialist organization in California as a result? I could go on and on, but I think the absurdity of this sort of argument is pretty clear. Steiner and Brenner's "failure" to do whatever I think they should be doing -- and with the results I demand they produce -- is not proof of their "abstentionist" attitude towards political events rooted in a deep seated "objectivism."

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Frank Brenner replies:**

### **I.**

Let's start with Iraq. Mdv concedes that "a series of WSWS articles published on Iraq in 2004 had a questionable attitude towards events there." And this was not just his opinion: he recounts "an exchange I had with a long time party member on that point at the time, when he was (in Trotskyist tradition) quite critical of the Iraqi 'resistance' and those who adulated it."

This is a significant admission. One can safely assume that mdv and the "long time party member" he mentions weren't the only ones who held these views; others in and around the SEP must have had similar concerns about the WSWS's 'adulation' for the Iraqi 'resistance' (specifically the bourgeois nationalist Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr) and must have recognized that this represented a departure from "Trotskyist tradition." I say that we can safely assume this because this departure was neither subtle nor a momentary lapse so that it would have eventually become evident to any politically literate Trotskyist.

Now, you would think that a matter of this significance would call for the most careful political scrutiny. After all, the Iraq war is the greatest imperialist crime since Vietnam, and so "a questionable attitude towards event there" on the part of the revolutionary movement should be a matter of grave concern to all Marxists.

But mdv doesn't agree: so far as he is concerned, the WSWS adulation for Sadr can simply be dismissed as a "curious fumble". "The website, and the organization, are fallible," he tells us. "They can and do make mistakes." But the actual record of the WSWS on Iraq (which I'll come to shortly) tells a different story: when mistakes are persisted in for months and years at a time, then something more is involved than just mistakes.

Moreover, even if it were only a matter of mistakes, surely the principled thing to do would be to admit the "fumble" and explain why it happened. To do otherwise is to sweep the problem under the rug and thereby guarantee more such "fumbles" in the future. All the rhetoric about defending Marxism as a science rings exceedingly hollow if a mistake on such an important political issue can't be honestly confronted.

But that is precisely what North will not do. He has never admitted to any “fumble” on Iraq, let alone concede the much more serious charges we raised in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* (MWHH). In his reply to the latter (the misnamed series, “The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism”), he does not devote a single page, not even a single paragraph, to Iraq.<sup>2</sup> This silence is no mistake, and it is unquestionably a symptom of deeper problems. If to err is human, to ignore errors is the road to ruin for a revolutionary movement.

In any case, the claim that the WSWS line on Iraq is really nothing more than a “curious fumble” doesn’t stand up to analysis. Mdv can only make this claim by misrepresenting the WSWS record. First, the open adulation for Sadr was not just relegated to a few articles in 2004. It went on from April of that year to October 2005, a crucial 18-month period in the war, extending from the Fallujah massacre to the beginning of religious sectarian violence that would eventually wrack the country with an orgy of bloodletting (and in which Sadr’s movement played a key role). When a mistake keeps being repeated over 18 months, it isn’t any longer a mistake but a different orientation – i.e. one at odds with Trotskyist tradition.

It also needs to be noted that during this same period there were important struggles in the Iraqi working class which went completely unreported in the WSWS. That too is consistent with the view that more than just inadvertent errors were at issue here: in the ‘new’ perspective of “national resistance” that the WSWS embraced along with its touting of Sadr, there was no place for an independent role for the Iraqi working class.

It is even harder to sustain the notion of a “fumble” when we examine who was engaging in this adulation of Sadr. We aren’t talking about novice reporters who got carried away by their own rhetoric. The new political line on Sadr was ushered in by two statements bearing the imprimatur of the WSWS editorial board: in the first, on 7 April 7, 2004, the board proclaimed its support for the line of “national resistance”; on the following day, in yet another statement, the board went out of its way to praise Sadr for his “political sophistication.” North himself reiterated this praise of Sadr a few days later, in terms that made the Shiite cleric out to be the *vox populi* of Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> To be entirely accurate, North does make a single mention of our criticisms about the WSWS line on Iraq, but it is a characteristic example of his intellectual dishonesty. He writes: “Steiner attended the national conference organized by the Socialist Equality Party on March 30, 2003 in opposition to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. At that meeting, he spoke in support of the perspective that I had presented in my opening report and gave no indication that he disagreed with the policies and activities of the SEP.” North then adds a footnote: “However, in MWHH, Steiner/Brenner denounce in the most vitriolic terms the policies and activities of the SEP and ICFI in relation to the war.” Obviously the point here is to cast Steiner as a hypocrite so that it isn’t necessary for North to address the substance of our criticisms. But this is a crude evasion: it was from April 2004 on that the WSWS line on Iraq went off the rails, and this is the period we document in great – and unvirtuolous – detail in MWHH. Steiner could hardly have been expected to voice concerns about this at a conference that took place a full year before this ever happened. (See David North, “The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism”: <http://www.wsws.org/media/FrankfurtSchool.pdf>, p. 37 and n. 61.)

<sup>3</sup> These and other references to the WSWS record on Iraq can be checked in Chapter 2 of MWHH, which contains links to all the articles mentioned: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch02.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf)

*On the WSWS's "curious fumble" in Iraq and other matters*

A few months later, Patrick Martin, a veteran WSWS writer and party member, was praising the Sadrists as the “genuine expression of popular anti-American and anti-colonial sentiment” and comparing them to the American revolutionary fighters of Concord and Lexington. Peter Schwarz, longtime leader of the German SEP and WSWS editorial board member, termed Sadr a symbol of the Iraqi resistance, and resorting to a well-worn revisionist line of argument, claimed that because the Iraqi people “have employed the political and ideological means at their disposal,” this meant that Marxists had to accept this as an accomplished fact and support the Islamists. And mention should also be made of North’s shameful performance at a public debate at Trinity College in Dublin during this same period in which he took an unabashedly liberal stand on bourgeois international justice, a position indicative of the same break from Trotskyist tradition evident in the embrace of bourgeois nationalism in Iraq.

Meanwhile in the WSWS news coverage of Iraq, this political line manifested itself as open cheerleading for Sadr. For example, when the Sadrists held some demonstrations in Baghdad, the WSWS reported the slogans on their banners (“Yes for Islam, yes for Iraq. No to occupation, no to terrorism”) and the demonstrators’ chants (“No, no to the Americans. Yes, yes to Islam”) without a word of criticism. Indeed, the only comment from the WSWS was: “A number of the Iraqi police on duty raised their fists in a sign of solidarity.” By the time this report was posted (on April 11, 2005) the so-called “fumble” on Iraq had been going on for over a year. (It deserves to be noted that a few months later the “solidarity” between the police and the Sadrists that the WSWS found so heartening would develop into the formation of Shiite death squads.)

I could add a lot more detail – we did to the tune of over 30 pages in MWHH – but this is surely enough to make the point that this was much more than just a fumble.

Mdv also claims that this ‘fumble’ was “later corrected” by the WSWS, something that Steiner and I supposedly admitted. This misrepresents both the WSWS record on Iraq as well as our critique. All that changed in October 2005 was that the WSWS abandoned its open adulation for Sadr, and this was only because Sadr’s political maneuvering had made such adulation untenable and embarrassing. What did not change was the WSWS’s continuing support for the perspective of so-called “national resistance”: in fact, as we pointed out, the crux of the WSWS critique of Sadr was that he wasn’t nationalist enough!<sup>4</sup> Equally, there was no change in the WSWS’s blackout of any reporting on the struggles of the Iraqi working class and, most tellingly, there has never been a single article spelling out a perspective for building a Trotskyist party in Iraq. To call this a ‘correction’ is nonsense, and of course we never said it was. Instead we characterized it rightly as “Sadrism without Sadr”.

Mdv has one more arrow in his quiver on this issue: in a follow-up note (which otherwise adds little of substance), he writes: “When you look beyond the pair’s [i.e. Steiner and Brenner’s] deliberate distortions and exaggerations of the WSWS’ coverage, what remains is a handful of

---

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch02.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf), p. 45-6.

problematic articles whose ideological implications – which were *never* explicitly declared in an International Committee perspectives document as you repeatedly suggest – were later revised.”

The reference to our “deliberate distortions and exaggerations” is thrown in without citing a single example; indeed everything that mdv says on Iraq is notable for its absence of detail. But this remark does make one thing evident: mdv has a surefire way of judging the political health of the IC. So long as there has been no explicit disavowal of the permanent revolution in an IC perspectives document, then there really isn’t anything to worry about. This is like a doctor who pronounces a patient to be healthy until the patient is “explicitly” dead. By mdv’s standard, the German Social Democrats remained a Marxist party for decades after August 1914 since they only “explicitly” renounced Marxism in the 1950s, and the Soviet Communist Party under Stalin was even more “explicitly” Marxist and Leninist even as it was butchering tens of thousands of communists in the purge trials. The same general pattern (though obviously not the same scale of betrayal) is evident in Trotskyist history: Cannon’s SWP and Healy’s WRP lost their revolutionary bearings long before either “explicitly” renounced their Trotskyist heritage.

The whole point about Marxist principles is that they have to function as a guide to practice. If you abandon those principles at the onset of a crisis, then they are meaningless, just empty rhetoric. The Iraq war was such a crisis, a political litmus test. Indeed, that was what the WSWS itself considered it to be. In remarks we cited in MWHH, the WSWS wrote: “Harsh times have this painful but salutary effect: organizations and individuals are tested. Whatever is false, unresolved or unprincipled inevitably reveals itself.”<sup>5</sup> The context here was a scathing critique of Noam Chomsky for backing pro-war Democrat John Kerry in the 2004 US election, but the SEP could hardly exempt itself from that same test: if there was anything “false, unresolved or unprincipled” in its political line on Iraq, that too would reveal itself.

And ironically enough, that is just what did happen a mere two days after the article on Chomsky, when the first of the editorial board statements heralding the “national resistance” of the Islamists was posted on the WSWS. In other words, the WSWS failed its own litmus test. To dismiss that failure because the SEP still formally endorses the permanent revolution is to be willfully blind, and nothing is more dangerous in Marxist politics than that.

## II.

Let me now turn to another issue mdv raises. He considers it unreasonable – or rather “simply ridiculous” – that we criticized the SEP for its abstentionism in relation to, among other things, the mass demonstrations that broke out in Mexico in the summer of 2006 after the ruling party stole the presidential election. Again one is struck by the absence of any specifics in mdv’s

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch02.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf), p. 25. The WSWS article referred to is “Professor Chomsky Comes in from the cold,” Apr. 5, 2004, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/apr2004/chom-a05.shtml>.

comments: he tells us nothing about the Mexican political situation and nothing about the WSWS record on these events. As for our critique, he does what he can to make it seem "ridiculous": supposedly we were calling on Bill Van Auken to "singlehandedly establish a new section" in Mexico.

A few facts are in order: the stealing of the election plunged Mexico into an unprecedented crisis. There were millions of workers, youth and peasants involved in mass demonstrations, including a single one of over a million people, the largest demonstration in that country's history. There was also an ongoing mass occupation of the main square in Mexico City along with dozens of other sites throughout the city. Meanwhile in the state of Oaxaca there was a virtual state of insurrection sparked by a teachers' strike. This crisis went on for months through the summer and fall: even in December the situation remained so explosive that the new president, Felipe Calderon, had to sneak in the back door of the Mexican Congress to take his oath of office.<sup>6</sup>

Six months earlier, in his report to a gathering of the WSWS International Editorial Board, North had opined that "a new period of revolutionary upheaval has begun." In the ICFI leadership there is a recurring refrain about how their various pronouncements on political perspectives are always being "confirmed" by the objective situation. Here was a confirmation with a vengeance – a "revolutionary upheaval" in the flesh. Surely it was legitimate to examine how this 'confirmation' would translate into the party's intervention in the class struggle. In other words, were the IC's perspectives a meaningful guide to practice or merely empty words?

But to mdv, holding a Marxist party to such an account is "simply ridiculous". The SEP "is a small organization on the political fringe, with limited resources and few personnel" and no party "can intervene in every country at every moment." The obvious response to the last point is that Mexico in the summer and fall of 2006 wasn't just "every country at every moment". If a party is oblivious to such a revolutionary upheaval or treats it in a routine manner, then its claim to represent the heritage of Trotskyism amounts to little more than hot air.

As for money, the expenses involved in sending a WSWS reporting team from the US to Mexico were hardly prohibitive. Such reporting teams have been sent to other countries, so it is clearly something the movement can afford.<sup>7</sup> As for personnel, we mentioned Van Auken since he speaks Spanish, has for many years been the Latin American specialist on the WSWS and also because in the summer of 2006 he happened to be the SEP candidate for the US Senate seat in New York state, running against none other than Hillary Clinton – all of which made him an

---

<sup>6</sup> Our discussion of the abstentionist record of the IC in Mexico is in the opening chapter of MWHH: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch01.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf), pp. 20-22.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth recalling, as a contrasting example here, that in the depths of the Great Depression the early American Trotskyists (with far more "limited" resources than the SEP) scraped together the price of a plane ticket – an exorbitant expense at that time – to send James Cannon to Minneapolis to spearhead the party's work in the Teamsters' strikes of 1934. That is how a revolutionary movement behaves: it starts from the objective needs of the working class, not a cost-benefit analysis.



obvious choice to lead such an intervention. The plain truth is that the decision not to intervene in Mexico had absolutely nothing to do with lack of money or manpower – it was a *political* decision that graphically illustrated the rotten abstentionism that underlies the SEP's 'orthodox' Marxist rhetoric.

This becomes even more evident if we look at how the WSWS covered the events in Mexico. Here supposed constraints of money or manpower are irrelevant: there was nothing stopping the WSWS from issuing a programmatic statement on the crisis, from doing features stories on the Mexican labor movement, the political parties involved or the important history of Trotskyism in Mexico, from drawing up a balance sheet on the crisis once it had subsided. None of this was done. Instead the events in Mexico were handled in a thoroughly routine manner – i.e. the usual rewrites from the bourgeois press with a few Marxist phrases thrown in at the end. The crowning touch to this record was the fact that of the dozen articles the WSWS ran on Mexico from July to November 2006, only one was ever posted in Spanish! Only a party shamelessly indifferent to the Mexican working class could behave in this manner.

### III.

The past of a movement is no guarantee that it can sustain a revolutionary perspective. Thus when mdv invokes "forty years of documented activity and statements from the International Committee" to prove that the movement is opposed to objectivism, this tells us very little. As I've already noted, the history of Marxism is full of examples of parties who ended up playing a reactionary role even while they continued a formal adherence to 'orthodox' positions. The truth is that a revolutionary heritage can only be preserved by creatively developing it. Whenever a movement falls back into 'orthodoxy', it is almost invariably a sign of a political and theoretical degeneration. And what eventually happens in such cases is that the 'orthodoxy' becomes ever more selective, downplaying or simply ignoring those aspects of classical Marxism that jar with the movement's increasingly conservative political orientation.

An egregious example of this in the case of the ICFI is how the Trotsky Notebooks from 1933-35 have been completely ignored by the party leadership in the more than two decades since they were first published.<sup>8</sup> But this is symptomatic of a much bigger 'blind spot': the principal lessons of *In Defense of Marxism* – the central importance of dialectics in the training of revolutionary cadres and the need for a persistent struggle against pragmatism and empiricism – have long since stopped playing any role in the life of the International Committee. We have made this point repeatedly in our polemics, and our case is irrefutable – nothing in the way of lectures or articles on Marxist philosophy in the last twenty years, party schools in which the word pragmatism literally does not receive a single mention. North has no answer to this criticism: in his first reply to us he tried to dodge the issue by claiming that we hadn't demonstrated any

---

<sup>8</sup> See "Foreshadowing *In Defense of Marxism: Trotsky's Philosophical Notebooks*", permanent-revolution.org: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/archives/trotsky\\_notebooks.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/archives/trotsky_notebooks.pdf).



negative impact on the party's political line, and when we did just that, he ignored our criticisms entirely and resorted to a smear campaign against Steiner.

A revolutionary movement that ignores these theoretical issues for decades must inevitably pay a price. Lenin coined the phrase that without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement, and one can add as a corollary that revolutionary theory cannot be developed without Marxist philosophy. There was a time when the International Committee understood this very well: crucial to the 1962-63 struggle against the American SWP was demonstrating how that party's political degeneration was connected to its dismissal of dialectics as being nothing more than "consistent empiricism."<sup>9</sup> And this was anything but an exceptional case: the ignoring of dialectics by the leading theoreticians of the Second International produced an objectivist 'orthodoxy' that downplayed the significance of socialist consciousness and helped pave the way for that movement's great betrayal of socialism. Similarly, Trotsky's landmark struggle in 1939-1940 against the petty bourgeois opposition of Max Shachtman and James Burnham was a classic demonstration of how pragmatic methods led to an evisceration of Marxism characterized by, in Trotsky's memorable phrase, "bowing down before the accomplished fact." The failure of the International Committee to heed these lessons for a very long time now – in other words, the abandoning of a crucial part of its own heritage – has led to a similar evisceration of Marxism.<sup>10</sup> In the IC's case it has taken the form of an abstentionist practice rather than an opportunist one, but in relation to a revolutionary perspective these are two sides of the same coin, since abstentionism is as much a way of "bowing down before the accomplished fact" as is opportunism.

#### **IV.**

Among the clearest and most telling manifestations of that evisceration of Marxism is the SEP's abandonment of yet another part of the heritage of Trotskyism – intervention in the everyday struggles of the working class and the fight for transitional demands as bridges to socialist consciousness. We devoted a chapter to this in MWHH, where we demonstrated that never in its history has the International Committee become so estranged from the working class as it is today. It conducts no sustained activity in the working class, no work in the unions, no attempts to rally or lead workers in struggles over important social or economic issues, no campaigns even to raise money among workers. On the rare occasions when workers write in to the WSWS seeking

---

<sup>9</sup> And, in an interesting parallel to the present, the key manifestation of this philosophical apostasy was the SWP's 'adulation' for petty bourgeois nationalism in a Third World country – in their case, Castroism in Cuba. The crucial IC document demonstrating the connection between philosophical method and political opportunism is *Opportunism and Empiricism*: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/archives/opportunism\\_empiricism.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/archives/opportunism_empiricism.pdf). It is yet a further indication of the IC leadership's selective amnesia about its own history that it never saw fit to post this document on the WSWS.

<sup>10</sup> For a full discussion of these issues, see Chapter 4 of MWHH: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch04.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch04.pdf), particularly pp. 110-113. As we wrote there, "if dialectical theorizing divorced from history is empty, then historical analysis divorced from dialectics is blind." That concisely captures the mutual dependence of history and philosophy within the Marxist movement.

advice about the struggles inside their factories, they are given lectures on the history of the labor bureaucracy but not a word of guidance about how to conduct a fight in defence of their rights. This is an utterly sterile propagandism that achieves nothing except to repel workers.<sup>11</sup> Thus in all but name the party has abandoned an essential aspect of Marxist practice – the effort to win over and train a section of militant workers as revolutionary socialists.

Mdv says nothing about this apart from recycling his argument that the SEP is “a small organization”: just as it cannot “intervene in every country at every moment” (i.e. Mexico), so it cannot “produce successful strike after successful strike”, by which he presumably means successful party interventions in strikes. But our argument with North wasn’t over ‘success’ (however that is defined), nor were we making the patently silly demand that the party should intervene in every strike. Our point was that when the party actually did intervene, its interventions amounted to nothing more than journalism.

Nothing demonstrated this more clearly than the party’s dismal intervention in the New York City transit strike of December 2005. It provided no leadership to these workers in any meaningful sense and posed no challenge to the union bureaucracy. It wasn’t until the day before the strike was set to begin that the WSWS bothered to raise any demands, the demands it did raise were unserious – nothing more than journalistic phrase mongering instead of a program around which to mobilize workers – and when the strike was over the WSWS promptly forgot about these workers.<sup>12</sup> We didn’t pick this strike out of a hat; we examined the party’s record in it because the WSWS editorial board had declared the strike to be nothing less than “a new stage in the class struggle.” And yet what our analysis demonstrated was an appalling gap between this rhetoric and the party’s practice, which didn’t rise even to a minimal level of what would be expected from Marxists, let alone meet the requirements of “a new stage in the class struggle.”

Was this just another “curious fumble”? North certainly doesn’t think so: he is quite proud of the party’s record in this strike, and in his first polemic he made it clear that he intends to carry on with these same type of interventions in the future. And indeed very little seems to have changed in the last year or two, apart from a journalistic upgrade in the coverage of strikes through the use of digital video. There is still no indication that the SEP plays any role in mobilizing workers in defense of their rights. If you take, for example, the case of the American Axle strike in 2008, while this generated a lot of coverage, there is no sense that this led to any lasting political relationship with these workers; quite the contrary, as soon as the strike was over, the American Axle workers disappeared from the WSWS, much as the NYC transit workers had.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 5 of MWHH: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch05.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch05.pdf), pp. 118-9.

<sup>12</sup> The WSWS record on the NYC transit strike is examined in Chapter 5 of MWHH: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch05.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch05.pdf), pp. 120-123.

<sup>13</sup> From the time the strike ended in May, the only other mention of American Axle was when the SEP presidential candidate, Jerry White, did a campaign stop in front of the factory in October. The WSWS report (Oct. 3, 2008: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/axle-o03.shtml>) noted that several workers told White that “conditions had seriously worsened since the end of the strike,” with one worker quoted as saying, “There has been a non-stop war against” workers in the plant. And yet not a single report on this “war” ever appeared on the WSWS. Clearly the party hadn’t maintained any relationship with these workers after the strike, and so White’s appearance there five

It needs to be said in the clearest possible terms: a party that cannot establish a political relationship with working class militants is a party that can on no account be considered a vanguard of the working class. Being a vanguard isn't something a party can take for granted simply by virtue of its history: unless that heritage is lived up to and developed through a constantly renewed engagement with sections of workers in struggle, then the claim to be a vanguard becomes devoid of any meaning. The truth of this should be self-evident to anyone familiar with the history of Bolshevism, Trotsky's work to build the Fourth International and the lessons embodied in *The Transitional Program*.

But it is anything but self-evident in the SEP today. Here is how a recent WSWS article presents the development of class consciousness:

As a revolutionary mood begins to develop among workers, intellectuals, and youth, they will utilize internet and communication technologies to organize their struggle; they will become increasingly aware of the presence and interventions of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the ICFI; and they will determine on their own if the ICFI is the party and leadership that defends and serves their class interests.<sup>14</sup>

The writer of these remarks clearly has no conception of transitional demands, of how they need to be used to mobilize workers in struggle and to build bridges to socialist consciousness, of the persistent work that Marxists have to conduct to establish ties and trust among the most militant sections of the working class. Why should one bother with all that when objective conditions and modern technology can take care of everything? It's all quite simple and neat: objective conditions will create the requisite "revolutionary mood" among workers, and once they start using the internet to organize their struggle they will find their way to the WSWS. Forget about Lenin's point that the spontaneous consciousness of workers is bourgeois consciousness; forget about the countless cases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century where workers in a "revolutionary mood" didn't manage to find their way to the revolutionary party: presumably none of that applies any longer because we now have the internet! What this is, in other words, is a cyberspace version of a very old idea – objectivism: it is the masses who will find their way to the party, not the party that has to find a road to the masses. These remarks, it should be noted, come from the end of a 17-page polemic against Steiner and myself. One can therefore safely assume that everything in this article was carefully reviewed by the WSWS editorial board, and so the fact that no board member raised an objection to these particular remarks only indicates how much this kind of 'internet objectivism' constitutes prevailing opinion inside the movement.

---

months later constituted little more than a 'photo op'.

<sup>14</sup> "Steiner, Brenner and Neo-Marxism: The Marcusean Component", WSWS, Jan. 2, 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/bren-j02.shtml>.

**V.**

One further point on abstentionism: though mdv dismisses our criticisms as being “simply ridiculous”, he nonetheless offers an inadvertent confirmation of our analysis when he states that the SEP has gone through “a lengthy period of organizational atrophy”, which it is only now beginning to come out of. An obvious question comes to mind here: how can mdv square that admission with his view that the SEP is basically a healthy movement (apart, of course, from the occasional “curious fumble”)? Surely in a Marxist party there is a connection between organization and politics: atrophy in the former must be a manifestation of atrophy in the latter, especially when “a lengthy period” is involved.

But mdv just tosses this remark out in passing: he isn't any more curious about understanding the cause of this atrophy than he is about understanding the party's “fumble” in Iraq. Instead he is pleased that the mysterious atrophy has come to an end as evidenced by a “redesigned website ... new party constitution ... building of a student wing” etc. These are, he assures us, “hardly the signs we would expect to see from a party leadership retreating into philosophical obscurantism.” But we never said anything about “philosophical obscurantism”: it was pragmatism and empiricism that we saw as underlying the problems of the IC, and these philosophies are eminently ‘realistic’ and ‘practical’, which is to say, well suited for overcoming organizational atrophy. The only problem is, overcoming it for what purpose? So long as the root causes of these problems are left unexamined, then a burst of organizational activity might just as well be a sign of disease rather than of health, a transition from a more passive to a more active “bowing down before the accomplished fact.” After the American SWP split from the IC in 1963 and joined the ranks of the revisionists, it too showed many signs of organizational vigor and grew substantially, but this turned out to be a cancerous growth that was a prelude to that party's open renunciation of Trotskyism. All kinds of revisionist outfits (e.g. the British SWP, the French LCR) have achieved a good deal of organizational success, to say nothing of the Stalinist parties who were never more popular than during the period of the Popular Front. Organizational activity and success prove nothing in revolutionary politics – it all depends on the political content of what's being organized.

A word on the SEP's student wing, the ISSE. In his latest note, mdv writes: “The idea that the SEP consciously designed its youth movement to exclude students from lower income backgrounds is a complete fantasy.” This fantasy, however, is mdv's, not ours. We never denied that there were working class students in colleges, though we did point out the undeniable truth that colleges and universities are increasingly inaccessible to working class families and even to a good many middle class families, a trend that cannot fail to be greatly exacerbated by the current global financial meltdown. We have nothing against recruiting college students, including middle class ones; quite the contrary. But our concern was that the SEP was building a youth movement *solely* among such students. Even granting that there are some working class students on campus, there are countless more working class youth who aren't on campus – why isn't the SEP conducting any political activity among them? What about unemployed youth,

minority youth, young workers inside unions or among the unorganized? The SEP has not done any work among these layers of youth in decades, just as it is increasingly estranged from the working class as a whole. And yet, after what mdv himself admits was “a lengthy period of organizational atrophy,” the SEP launches into building a student movement in a milieu that, while it may not be exclusively middle class, is certainly predominantly so. Given all that, we pointed to the ISSE as a sign “of the crystallization of the dominance of middle class forces within the party,”<sup>15</sup> and I see no evidence to contradict that assessment. This criticism wasn't aimed at ISSE members, who aren't to blame for the increasingly conservative orientation of the movement; the blame lies entirely with the SEP leadership.

Near the end of his letter, mdv tries to turn the tables on us: the SEP is no guiltier of abstentionism than Steiner and I are for not intervening in various strikes. This is a specious argument that ignores the obvious difference between us and the SEP: we are two individuals, not a global Marxist party with a long history and considerable resources, including a website with a large readership. Other SEP supporters have tried to turn the tables on us in a somewhat different way, arguing that we should stop criticizing the SEP and go off and build our own movement. This kind of argument has a familiar ring: it is often resorted to by labor bureaucrats trying to shut down criticism they can't answer. It is, in any case, especially inappropriate in the context of a polemic within the Marxist movement. If Marxism is a science, then a dispute of this seriousness is far more than a falling out of individuals. At stake are issues of fundamental importance to Marxism and to the whole project of building a mass revolutionary party of the working class. When a dispute happens within a science, it would be absurd for one side to argue that the other side should stop their criticisms and go off and 'build their own science'. The clashes need to continue until the burden of evidence finally establishes the validity of one position or another. Even if it eventually proves to be the case that the IC's present trajectory away from Trotskyism cannot be reversed (and one should not underestimate what a blow that would be to the cause of revolutionary socialism), a new movement could only be established on the basis of the kind of thorough-going critique of the IC's political and theoretical development that Steiner and I have been attempting to carry out.

---

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 11 of MWHH: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch11.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch11.pdf), p. 285.