

The “first regular National Congress” of the SEP:

Distorting the history of the International Committee

On Aug 30, 2010 the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) published a resolution from what it called the “first regular National Congress” of the Socialist Equality Party, held in Ann Arbor, Michigan in August of this year. The bizarre quality of this resolution is only punctuated by the incongruity of describing a movement that has been functioning as the Socialist Equality Party for 15 years as having its “first regular National Congress”. Presumably this designation is meant to distinguish this convocation from the “Founding Congress” of the SEP which took place either in 2008 or in 1995 depending on which pronouncements from the WSWS you read last.¹

The resolution reported out of this Conference, *Twenty-Five Years Since the Split with the Workers Revolutionary Party*,² was, as usual, adopted “unanimously”, following a pattern that we have come to expect from Congresses of the SEP. I commented on this phenomenon earlier in the conclusion of my series *The Downward Spiral of the International Committee of the Fourth International*, where I noted that,

The WSWS routinely reports that resolutions are adopted by “acclamation”. There has been no internal opposition in many years within the sections of the IC. This is not because the perspective of the leadership is so clearly correct and beyond criticism. It is because an atmosphere of extreme hostility to any questioning of the leadership has been cultivated for many years.

I also noted in the same piece that the tradition of reporting unanimous vote after unanimous vote from a party congress is one that has more in common with Stalinism than with Trotskyism,

... [T]he journalists of the WSWS take it as a matter of pride instead of shame to report unanimous vote after unanimous vote on their various resolutions.³

Of course I did not expect such a deeply ingrained practice to change merely because I pointed at the elephant in the living room. Nevertheless it is sad to see what was once a Trotskyist organization blithely continuing along its merry way completely oblivious to its ever deepening alienation from the traditions of Trotskyism. But then again one could have said the same thing about the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party in the 1970s and 1980s.

And this brings us to the substance of the statement on the split with Healy adopted by this Congress. After providing a brief summary of the evolution of the International Committee since its founding in 1953, the resolution characterizes the period leading up to the split with Healy in the following words:

¹ For our comments on the 2008 “Founding Congress” of the SEP see, “*A Comment on the Founding Congress of the SEP*”, http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/search/label/founding_congress

² <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/aug2010/res2-a30.shtml>

³ Alex Steiner, *The Downward Spiral of the International Committee of the Fourth International: Conclusion*, http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/downward_spiral_ch08.pdf, p. 213.

As it pursued this path, the Workers Revolutionary Party encountered determined resistance from the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, in the United States. The American Trotskyists had been developing along an opposite trajectory. Throughout the 1970s, the Workers League had placed the assimilation of the historical experiences of the Trotskyist movement, especially the struggle against the revisionism of Pablo-Mandel, at the center of its work as it carried out a determined turn to the working class.

To maintain that the “Workers Revolutionary Party encountered determined resistance from the Workers League” and that the latter “had been developing along an opposite direction than the Workers Revolutionary Party” throughout the 1970s is patent nonsense. This is not history but mythology. For a good part of the 1970s I was a member of the National Committee of the Workers League and its Political Committee as well as a participant in the International Congresses of the International Committee and I can vouch for the fact that there was no opposition to Healy from within the leadership of the organization up until the time I left the in 1978.⁴ Anyone who was a member of the movement during this period knows this as well, especially David North, who had been the National Secretary of the Workers League since 1975. What actually happened was that the International Committee, taking its cues from Healy and the leadership of the WRP became increasingly disoriented throughout this period, leading in the end to a great betrayal of the fundamental principles of Marxism. The Workers League shared in that disorientation. I have already commented on this subject previously in the *Downward Spiral* series. In chapter three of that series I reviewed North’s earlier claims to have been consistently battling Healy. I noted that whereas North does deserve credit for coming out against Healy in 1982 he has over the years exaggerated his own role and provided a false narrative of the history of the Workers League in this period, absolving the latter of any responsibility for the degeneration of the International Committee - as if the Workers League had some special exemption from the crisis facing the international movement. I wrote,

North has constructed a pseudo-history of the Workers League in the period from 1975-1982 whereby the degeneration of the International Committee did not affect the Workers League, and that in fact the Workers League, and North specifically was battling against Healy’s “practice of cognition”. But that was not the case. Even by North’s own admission, he did not challenge Healy’s perversion of the dialectic until 1982, but it had already been well entrenched by the period 1975-1982.

Although it is a topic that ought to be by rights the subject of a separate essay, it is important to note that a new generation is being trained on the basis of this pseudo-history. North’s version of this history has been enshrined into one of the major documents emanating from the SEP’s founding Congress, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*. This official chronicle of the history of the SEP and the International Committee includes gaps

⁴ To be sure there were a few individuals and one or two small groups that expressed some differences with the leadership in this period. For the most part those individuals were going off in a centrist direction as they prepared to leave the movement. But some of them at least were expressing, in however confused a manner, opposition to the growing disorientation of the International Committee. All these expressions of dissent were met with overt hostility by the leadership of the Workers League. Among those who broke from the movement in this period was a small group from the West Coast that aligned themselves with the Thornett tendency in the UK. Without exception all of these individuals and groups either resigned or were expelled from the organization shortly after expressing their differences. And none of them produced a sustained and comprehensive critique of the direction of the IC in this period.

large enough to drive a truck through, especially concerning the period from 1975-1982. For instance there is not even a single reference to any of the World Congresses of the International Committee other than its Third Congress in 1966...There is not one word of analysis of any of the perspectives documents produced by these Congresses. This is a curious omission coming from a movement that prides itself on its “science of perspectives”.⁵

Later on, I provided a shocking example of the culpability of the Workers League in some of the worst atrocities committed by Healy in this period, in this case becoming cheerleaders for the Iranian government, then led by Ayatollah Khomeini, in their persecution of socialists. Noting the disorientation of the Workers League in this period, I wrote,

But that disorientation was very real and very far along as witnessed by the following panegyric to the reactionary mullahs of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that one could find in the pages of the newspaper of the Workers League, *The Bulletin*. In an article titled, *Carter’s Revisionist Agents: Enemies of the Iranian Revolution*, published on Nov. 16, 1979 and written by Barry Grey – then as now a leading comrade - the piece attacks the US Socialist Workers Party and other revisionist outfits from the right, accusing them of not being obsequious enough toward the leadership of the Iranian Revolution.

...The author goes on to hail the imprisonment, on charges of treason, of 14 people affiliated to a sister organization of the Socialist Workers Party in Iran:

“It was precisely for supporting and participating in such counterrevolutionary intrigues that 14 members of the SWP’s organization in Iran, the HKS, have been imprisoned under treason charges.”

The author uncritically accepts the frame-up of left wing opponents of the mullahs by the Khomeini regime and not only fails to call for their release, but enthusiastically echoes the frame up charges of “participating in counterrevolutionary intrigues”. It is hardly necessary to look much further to make the point that the period in question, 1975-1982, was one of deep political and theoretical disorientation within the International Committee and that political disorientation did not leave the Workers League unscarred.

Perhaps the author of that piece now regrets his role in serving up propaganda for a reactionary bourgeois nationalist regime.⁶ But the younger members of the Socialist Equality Party will never know it since the leadership of the SEP has decided to whitewash this ignoble period of their own history rather than face up to it honestly.

The recent resolution from the SEP Congress continues this exercise in rewriting the history of the movement and even goes so far as to give it a new twist by enshrining the unique role played by David North. The document states,

⁵ Alex Steiner, *The Downward Spiral of the International Committee of the Fourth International: Chapter 3 Concocting a smear campaign: North distorts the history of the Workers League/SEP*, http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/downward_spiral_ch03.pdf, p. 68.

⁶ In the *Downward Spiral* series I also noted that there has been a return, in milder form to be sure, of some of the cheerleading for the bourgeois regime in Iran that we saw 30 years ago. *Downward Spiral: Conclusion*, http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/downward_spiral_ch08.pdf, n.11, p210-212.

Beginning in 1982, this opposition found explicit expression in a thorough-going critique developed by Comrade David North, then the Workers League national secretary, of the theoretical and political deviations of the WRP. North exposed the WRP's abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution and its adaptation to bourgeois nationalism along lines that paralleled the degeneration of the Pabloite movement. He also analyzed the relationship between the WRP's political opportunism and Healy's subjective idealist distortion of the materialist philosophy developed by Marx and Engels. This theoretical degeneration was of a piece with a broader attack on Marxism, and especially historical materialism, carried out under the influence of the Frankfurt School and so-called "Western Marxism."

As I said, North deserves credit for coming out against Healy in 1982. However the record does not back up the claim that North's opposition to Healy was either consistent or "thorough-going". What we do know is that North withdrew his criticism of Healy shortly after it was introduced after Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter, who had initially sided with North, did an about face and denounced North's piece. From what we know, North continued his criticisms of Healy and the political direction of the International Committee exclusively in private thereafter, with other leading members of the Workers League. The published record indicates only four documents penned by North between 1982 and 1985 that were critical of Healy, two of which consist of North's private correspondence with Banda and Slaughter.⁷ Besides North's initial critique of Healy in 1982, *A Contribution to a Critique of G. Healy's "Studies in Dialectical Materialism"*, the only other significant document North wrote in this period that addressed the degeneration of the IC was the political report he delivered to the International Committee on Feb. 11, 1984. The latter document contains a withering critique of the WRP's capitulation to the bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East. But that document too was withdrawn after Healy threatened to break relations with the Workers League. After that there were no further documents from North until the split with Healy in the latter part of 1985. And there is no indication at all of any opposition prior to 1982.

It would be a mistake to be overly critical of this record in which the fight against Healy was taken up very late and not very consistently given the difficult conditions that North or anyone else faced in raising any opposition within the International Committee. But it is equally a mistake to paint the picture of North's role in the struggle against Healy as being more consistent than it actually was. We also know that North's critique of Healy was not the only one to emerge from within the International Committee.⁸ And whereas North deserves credit for trying to connect Healy's opportunism to his butchery of dialectics, North's efforts in this direction were of a very preliminary nature though they remain important historically. Unfortunately North never returned to the topic of dialectics (something I repeatedly urged him to do) once the split with Healy was consummated. Since then North has over the years cultivated an image of himself as having successfully carried out the fight with Healy as a result of his mastery of materialist dialectics. This is a distortion of the historical record as well which has been

⁷ All these documents were subsequently published after the split with Healy. They are available online. **The ICFI Defends Trotskyism: 1982 -1986, Documents of the Struggle against the WRP Renegades, *Fourth International: A Journal of International Marxism*. Volume 13. Number 2. Autumn 1986, http://www.wsws.org/IML/fi_vol13_no2/fi_vol13_no2_full.shtml**

⁸ There was a major critique written by the leaders of the Sri Lankan section of the IC. There were also critiques of Healy penned by individuals in the WRP although their criticisms were invariably stifled by Healy's bureaucratic control of the organization. In addition a philosophical critique of Healy was authored by WRP member David Bruce in 1985 completely independently of North's as Bruce had never seen North's earlier critique at that time.

employed to mask over the fact that North abandoned any study of dialectics following the split with Healy. Although it requires the highest development of Marxist theory to build a revolutionary movement, it did not take any great theoretical insight to recognize the prostration of the WRP to the reactionary regimes of Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini and Muamar Gaddafi in the 1970s and 1980s. This was very obvious to anyone who looked at a copy of the WRP or Worker League press in the years between 1975 and 1985.⁹

The SEP document ends with an explanation of the positive accomplishments achieved by the International Committee as a result of the 1985/1986 split. At this point the language of political analysis gives way to the idiom of a football match. We are told that,

Healy's refusal to discuss the serious theoretical and political criticisms of this drift back to Pabloism raised by the Workers League between October 1982 and February 1984 foreclosed the possibility of overcoming the mounting political problems inside the WRP. This set the stage for the organizational crisis that erupted inside the British section in the summer of 1985. In this situation, the critique that had been developed by North over the previous three years rapidly gained support in the International Committee and became the basis of a crystallization of a new Trotskyist majority in the International Committee, which placed the opportunists in the leadership of the WRP on the defensive.

Whereas the split with Healy and subsequently the WRP was historically necessary, this triumphalist depiction of North's critique "rapidly gaining support" and leading to a "new Trotskyist majority" which placed the leadership of the WRP "on the defensive" misses an important element of the split, namely the disintegration of the largest and most significant organization within the International Committee. To be sure Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter played a despicable role in the events of 1985, but there were hundreds of rank and file members of the Workers Revolutionary Party who had devoted their lives to the cause of socialism and were still hoping to build the revolutionary movement in Britain. North's critique never reached them. That of course was not North's fault. The isolation of the rank and file of the WRP from the International Committee made it impossible to reach more than a tiny handful of its members. But it seems a bit unseemly to celebrate the triumph of the "new Trotskyist majority" without at least acknowledging the serious setback represented by the loss of the largest and most experienced section of the IC.

Finally, in concluding my comments on this document, I cannot help but notice the gratuitous attempt to link Healy's butchery of dialectics to the influence of the Frankfurt School in the following statement,

This theoretical degeneration [of Healy] was of a piece with a broader attack on Marxism, and especially historical materialism, carried out under the influence of the Frankfurt School and so-called "Western Marxism."

The employment of the weasel words "of a piece" cannot hide the fact that the document is claiming a link between Healy's theoretical degeneration and the Frankfurt School. Otherwise why bother throwing in the reference to the Frankfurt School in the first place? Lots of other

⁹ For the evidence I refer once again to Chapter 3 of *Downward Spiral*, http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/downward_spiral_ch03.pdf, p. 70.

things were “of a piece” with Healy’s degeneration, including the birth of the personal computer and the occasional solar eclipse. This is not the place to discuss Healy’s so-called “practice of cognition”, his own unique bastardization of the dialectic, except to say that it had absolutely nothing to do with “Western Marxism” or the Frankfurt School. Nor has this connection ever previously been discovered, either by North or in any of the documents of the International Committee. In previous years North was able to provide a far more accurate assessment of Healy’s “practice of cognition”. For instance, he wrote in 1984,

This [Healy’s version of dialectics] does have definite theoretical roots — an empiricist method dressed up with Hegelian phraseology — but one which has absolutely nothing to do with Marxism. The glorification of sense perception and the rejection of historical materialism. ¹⁰

But all this was written before North and other leaders of the International Committee discovered that “Western Marxism” and the Frankfurt School are the ultimate cause of all the ideological problems confronting the Marxist movement. (David Walsh has extended this to the realm of art, claiming that the influence of Marcuse has seriously hampered contemporary art.) I have commented previously on the polemical use of “Western Marxism” and the Frankfurt School as a kind of all-purpose punching bag in the various writings of the International Committee. ¹¹ What such a vacuous approach to a discussion of ideology has to do with historical materialism is anyone’s guess. But if we recall that the polemical writings of the International Committee cannot just be read in a straightforward manner, but must be interpreted in the context of their other polemics, the reason for the introduction of “Western Marxism” and the Frankfurt School becomes clear. For several years now North and the leaders of the International Committee have tried to brand Frank Brenner and myself as champions of “Western Marxism” and the Frankfurt School. I was in fact the subject of a three part smear campaign launched by David North in 2008 entitled, *The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism: The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner*. ¹² My extensive reply to this series and other related material was published several months ago in the series *Downward Spiral*. ¹³ Instead of a reply to *Downward Spiral* all that we have seen emanating from the pages of the WSWS are thinly veiled innuendoes. This one, attempting to surreptitiously connect the critique of the IC written by Frank Brenner and me to Healy’s butchery of dialectics is another indication that the leadership of the International Committee is incapable of real debate. That such a document was unanimously accepted by the “first regular National Congress” of the Socialist Equality Party speaks volumes not only about the leadership of the IC but highlights the fact that an entire generation of new cadre are being trained in methods very much at odds with the traditions of Marxism and the Trotskyist movement.

Alex Steiner, Sept. 11, 2010

¹⁰ **How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism: 1973 – 1985, Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, *Fourth International: A Journal of International Marxism*. Volume 13. Number 1. Summer 1986**
http://www.wsws.org/IML/fi_vol13_no1/fi_vol13_no1_full.shtml

¹¹ The most recent occasion is Chapter 1 of the *Downward Spiral* series. http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/downward_spiral_ch01.pdf

¹² <http://www.wsws.org/media/FrankfurtSchool.pdf>

¹³ See <http://permanent-revolution.org/> main page for links to all the chapters of *Downward Spiral*.