

Conclusion: The International Committee at the Crossroads

"It is necessary that every member of the Party should study calmly and with the greatest objectivity, first the substance of the differences of opinion, and then the development of the struggles within the Party. Neither the one nor the other can be done unless the documents of both sides are published. He who takes somebody's word for it is a hopeless idiot, who can be disposed of with a simple gesture of the hand."

*--Lenin (as printed over the masthead of the first issue of *The Militant*, 15 November 1928)*

In his 2004 document, Steiner examined the practice of the International Committee in a number of areas, including the anti-war movement, the 2004 election campaign, working class struggles in the unions, as well as its journalistic practice. His conclusion was a summary warning of the perils involved in a practice based on objectivism.

In themselves, these actions, or lack of action may not be very significant. But taken as a whole, they spell out a very disquieting message. The overall practice of the movement is primarily of a contemplative nature in which we are adapting ourselves to a milieu that is distant from if not alien to the working class, whether it be the radical anti-war movement or to liberals angry that they have been politically disenfranchised by the collapse of the Democratic Party. While there is nothing wrong in itself with engaging these forces in a dialogue, this has been bought at the price of abstention from the struggle to build an alternative leadership in the working class. The danger is, and I have just listed a few of the symptoms, that we will adapt our politics to the illusions congenial to these social forces.¹

But alas, we live in times, to paraphrase the *Communist Manifesto*, when all fixed, fast frozen relations are swept away. Events have overtaken North and the International Committee since we first made our assessment. While the embrace of pragmatic methods of work initially "spelled a very disquieting message", we can say that in 2007 our presentiment is unfortunately bearing fruition. What was a nascent and semi-conscious tendency is taking on flesh and blood and gaining in confidence the more it breaks openly from the working class.

Objectivism, like everything else in the universe, obeys the dialectical law of the transformation of quantity into quality. When we began our critique of the theory and practice of the WSWS in 2004 we noted a turn away from an active intervention in the class struggle, one that had been gradually maturing over the past several years. Nevertheless, the International Committee, resting on a rich historical legacy, was by and large still able to maintain a formal adherence to the principles of Trotskyism. Yet within

¹ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

a few years the turn away from the working class found its substantial expression in an adaptation to alien class forces. The International Committee, as we have demonstrated, has embraced the role of cheerleader for bourgeois nationalism in Iraq, while adapting to liberal public opinion at home. One thing it has increasingly avoided is any struggle for revolutionary leadership in the working class. It is as if the struggle against Pabloism in the 1950s and 1960s never happened, not to mention the struggle against Healy's capitulation to bourgeois nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s.

How did this happen? It is not as if the leadership of the International Committee decided at a plenary meeting one evening to abandon Marxism and embrace pragmatism. But then, neither did the Socialist Workers Party ever adopt a resolution supporting pragmatism. The lesson from the historical experience of the SWP is that without a conscious educational effort to develop Marxist theory, pragmatism inevitably fills in the gaps and creeps up on a movement. When North turned his back on this lesson he in effect turned his back on Marxism. Having ignored warnings about the dangers of adapting to pragmatism for decades, the movement found itself unable to resist, despite the best intentions of North and the leadership of the IC, the ideological influence of alien class forces.

We have not written hundreds of pages because we wish to write off the International Committee. The International Committee is ailing, but it is still alive and the possibility for a theoretical and practical renewal of the movement is still there. But time is definitely running out. North's thoroughly dishonest reply to our warnings shows that the anti-Marxist tendency he represents has crystallized and is digging in its heels and will not go quietly into the night.

This is a movement standing on the precipice. It can either return to the best traditions of the International Committee and begin to carefully examine its practice over the last two decades or it will go the way of countless others and become an obstacle to the social revolution instead of its midwife.

When we say that a leadership has degenerated, we do not mean simply that it has made mistakes. Even the greatest of revolutionary leaders made mistakes in the course of their careers. But what always distinguished a Lenin or a Trotsky, and even for that matter a leader such as James P. Cannon for many years, was their ability to critically examine and learn from their mistakes. However, once a leadership becomes entrenched and refuses to face up to its mistakes, then that is the beginning of the road to perdition.

Key to a rebirth of the International Committee is a thorough overhaul of the internal party regime. This will not be an easy task. An entire generation of party members has been miseducated. They have been trained to fear internal dissent and to look upon those who criticize the party leadership as if they had a contagious disease. At the same time the party has developed an inner circle around North that is remote and distant from the average member in the field. It is worth recalling the characterization that North and others made of Healy's inner circle immediately after the split in 1986:

The Party was divided into an "Upstairs" - a coterie of exalted individuals around Healy - and a "Downstairs" occupied by hundreds of rank and file members who were denied any role in the decision-making process and simply

took orders. This created within the Party a whole series of destructive political relations. The leadership grew increasingly impervious to the real relations between the Party and the workers at the level of the class struggle. Contact between the Center and the WRP branches assumed a purely administrative character, not unlike that between a local business franchise and the head office.²

All historical analogies have only a relative value and this one is no exception. We do not mean to suggest that the degeneration of the International Committee today is comparable to the heinous betrayals committed by the Workers Revolutionary Party in the period 1973-1985. But given our extensive analysis of the history and practice of the International Committee since the split with Healy, it is impossible to deny that the direction – a movement away from the working class and the traditions of Trotskyism – is the same. Even some of the forms that characterized the degeneration of the WRP are shown to repeat themselves in today's International Committee. Today the sectarian abstentionism in relation to the struggles of the working class in the United States is accompanied by an opportunist line on bourgeois nationalism in Iraq. In a minor key, this reprises what the WRP did in the late 1970s and early 1980s, combining an ultra-left line toward the Labour Party with active collaboration with bourgeois nationalism in the Middle East. A careful reading of the *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism* - a document that has never been republished after its initial publication in 1986 – provides a salutary warning of the dangers ahead if the serious problems that we have documented are not addressed. The lessons from the 1985-86 split were eloquently summed up in the conclusion of that document:

The International Committee of the Fourth International has survived and defeated the most pernicious attack levelled against Trotskyism since 1953, and this is the most powerful vindication of the principles upon which the ICFI is based. Despite the size of the WRP apparatus and huge resources at their command, Healy, Banda and Slaughter could not stamp out Marxism inside the International Committee. The lessons of the past 15 years acquired through bitter and protracted struggle, are now being assimilated in every section of the ICFI and they will never be forgotten. They shall serve as the basis for the education of all those who enter into the Trotskyist movement.³

Yet, as this polemic has shown, those lessons have indeed been forgotten. To make those lessons live takes more than an act of will. It takes a commitment to training a revolutionary movement in dialectics and against pragmatism. This was Trotsky's central preoccupation in the months before his death. If the International Committee is to continue as a revolutionary movement, then Trotsky's preoccupation must become its preoccupation as well.

We have noted in the past few months a pragmatic series of adaptations to the charge of abstentionism in the working class on the part of the Socialist Equality Party. And whereas a turn toward the working class should certainly include talking to workers

² *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism*, in Fourth International, Volume 13, No.1, Summer 1986, p. 37.

³ *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism*, p. 120.

involved in a struggle, patching together a few last minute forays with leaflets at the gates of a factory will not make up for years of neglect and indifference toward the everyday struggles of the working class. A turn toward the working class is as much a theoretical task as it is a practical one.

Something also needs to be said about the launching of the youth movement, The International Students for Social Equality, (ISSE) which is oriented to students on college campuses. We find it troubling that this youth movement is limited to the college campus milieu. In the context of the recent political evolution of the IC, it is another sign of the crystallization of the dominance of middle class forces within the party.⁴ There is a notable contrast here with the work the party did among working class youth in the past. An important achievement of the Workers League in the early 1970s was the building of a youth movement, the Young Socialists, that gained a substantial following among

⁴ The ISSE founding statement claims to address this problem by noting that "Today, an increasing proportion of workers attend schools or colleges, and an increasing proportion of students work."

*Resolution adopted by the ISSE/SEP Emergency Conference Against War
End the occupation of Iraq! No to war against Iran! For an international socialist movement
against war!*

4 April 2007 <http://wsws.org/articles/2007/apr2007/res-a04.shtml>

But while an increasing number of students are working today, it is simply false to suggest that working class youth are found in increasing numbers on college campuses. The truth is quite the opposite. The astronomical costs of higher education now put it out of reach for most working class youth and even many middle class youth. An article in the online journal Znet convincingly argued that a smaller percentage of working class youth are now able to attend college than in previous generations.

The gates to public colleges and universities across the U.S. are slamming shut for low-income students as steady tuition hikes and decreasing aid awards make higher education increasingly out of reach. During the academic year 2003 to 2004, public school tuition at four-year colleges jumped 14.1%, marking the sharpest increase in at least a quarter century. For the 2003-2004 academic year, the average tuition and fees for a four-year public college is \$4,694. This does not include housing costs, books and other school-related expenses and it does not account for students attending out of state colleges and universities (those fees usually add on another \$10,000 or so).

Commonly held definitions need not apply any more. "Public" no longer means public if the majority of people can't afford or have access to institutions of higher education. Community colleges also increased tuition by 14%, the second largest increase since 1976. What "community" will attend these schools? Certainly not the 12.4% of the U.S. population who live on less than \$18,400 yearly - a community of 34.6 million in the U.S. who see a college education well out of their reach. (Education Out of Reach, by C.P, Pandya <http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2003-11/09pandya.cfm>)

Spin it however they can, it is impossible to avoid acknowledging the fact that in directing their efforts toward building a youth movement confined to the campuses, the leadership of the Socialist Equality Party have decided to forego building a movement among working class youth.

working class and minority youth. The Young Socialists actively fought against the pernicious influence of Black Nationalism and other reactionary ideologies on the home base of its adherents and more than held its own. It organized rallies and demonstrations against unemployment, imperialist war, and fought to unite the struggles of the youth with those of the working class as a whole. It also educated a layer of youth in the principles of Marxism. Yet today the successor organization of the Workers League, the Socialist Equality Party, proposes nothing for the most oppressed sections of the working class, the unemployed youth, African American and Hispanic youth. This is another unmistakable sign of the party's growing estrangement from the working class.

The leadership of the International Committee has been in place for over three decades now. In *The Heritage We Defend*, North quotes Lenin as once humorously suggesting that revolutionaries should be shot once they reach the age of 50. Most of the IC leadership, including North, are now well beyond that age and no doubt in some cases are preparing for retirement. Every jest, of course, has a grain of truth: there is often a degree of conservatism that sets in as one gets older, a reluctance to rock the boat, a desire for peaceful relations. It is noteworthy that no one else in the leadership of the IC has spoken out in this polemic. To be sure, we were not expecting leading comrades to openly disagree with North, but the complete silence of the older comrades is striking. Don't they also have a responsibility to address a serious challenge to the theoretical and political line of the movement? And leaving aside the substantive issues, weren't any of the leading comrades troubled by the fact that our documents weren't responded to for 3 years? This silence is telling. It isn't just a matter of growing old (Marx and Trotsky made it past 50 with their revolutionary combativeness still intact), it is also a matter of opportunist relations within the leadership. This too was one of the key lessons of the WRP split – that the 'unanimity' of Healy's leadership group masked all kinds of opportunist relationships based on personal and financial arrangements. We have no doubt that the silence of the rest of the IC leadership is also based, at least in part, on opportunist considerations of a financial and personal nature.

In any case, a perusal of the bylines on the WSWS makes it clear that a new generation is being groomed to take over the reins of leadership. But while it is usually considered a positive achievement for new cadre to replace an aging leadership, one must also ask a question as to the class composition of this emerging new leadership and their political and theoretical training. Under conditions where the International Committee has not had any substantial involvement with the struggles of the working class for almost two decades, and where little theoretical training has occurred, an infusion of new forces into the leadership must inevitably strengthen the influence of middle class tendencies within the party. While we are not indicting any particular comrade for something beyond their control, i.e. their class background, it is fair to warn of the dangers to a movement that is suddenly infused with recruits from the middle class, particularly where a proletarian counterweight to their influence no longer exists. (It should also be added that it is not the fault of the new comrades coming into the movement that they are being trained to be little more than journalists.)

The Socialist Workers Party grew substantially after its split with the International Committee in 1963, recruiting thousands of middle class students during the anti-war movement in the 1970s. But that growth turned out to be a symptom of that party's

degeneration – it was not the growth of a healthy movement but of a cancerous one. Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party experienced a similar episode in the course of its degeneration. As Healy recruited more and more middle class and even upper class elements from the ranks of journalists and actors such as the Redgraves, he moved to destroy the trade union cadre within the party. Here is how this period was characterized by North and other leaders of the International Committee in 1986:

The class basis of this shift [toward opportunism] had been prefigured in the reaction of the trade union cadre of the Party in basic industry in 1974-75, which created the conditions for the dangerous growth of middle class influence - represented especially by such forces as the Redgraves and Alex Mitchell, upon whom Healy increasingly relied, as well as the dozens of declassed and uprooted individuals who worked in center - in the leadership of the Party. This social layer within the Party became the principal transmission belt for the penetration of alien class interests into the Workers Revolutionary Party. The 1975-79 "struggle" against the Social Democrats reflected the impatience of these petty-bourgeois radical elements toward the working class and their inability to conduct a systematic fight against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Moreover, elements among the journalists, actors and actresses who passed from Fleet Street and the West End into the Political Committee of the WRP, without any apprenticeship in the class struggle, provided a physical link to material resources such as the Party had never known.⁵

The lessons from this history are clear. An infusion of new recruits may indicate the health of a political movement under conditions where the theoretical life of the movement is rich and its proletarian core unshakeable; under other conditions, however, where the ties to the proletariat are hanging on by a thread, it can be a prelude to disaster. By themselves, new recruits or hits on a website are no guarantee of anything, and comrades who use 'numbers' to allay their doubts about the party's evolution are burying their heads in the sand. As we said at the end of *Objectivism or Marxism*:

Revolutionary politics come with no guarantees. A great political tradition is not enough to prevent a movement that has lost its way from being shipwrecked, as happened to Cannon's SWP and Healy's SLL. And there are many ways to bow before the accomplished fact: abstentionism can ultimately be just as 'accommodating' as opportunism. We believe the IC cannot sustain its present orientation without sooner or later betraying its revolutionary heritage. We believe that only a thorough discussion of the issues we have raised can help the movement find its proletarian revolutionary bearings again.⁶

In drawing this polemic to a close, let us say that we know that there are comrades in the movement who know that at least some of our criticisms are right and that North's response is a thoroughly dishonest one. We say to those comrades that you have an obligation to speak out before it is too late and insist that the movement confront and take steps to reverse the accelerating drift toward a theory and practice alien to Trotskyism. If

⁵ *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism*, p. 37.

⁶ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism_marxism.pdf

you fail to do so, your legacy will be remembered as being accomplices in the destruction of the movement you have devoted your life to building.

If this movement is to be renewed and thrive once more we propose that the following steps be carried out:

- Restore the principles of democratic centralism: Hold regular Party conferences and international conferences. Publish perspectives documents and resolutions. Elect delegates to a Political Committee and a Central Committee on a regular basis. Encourage open discussion of differences within the party.
- Restore the International Committee to a functioning collective leadership of the world movement.
- Turn the movement toward a serious training in dialectics.
- Return to the Transitional Program.
- Reaffirm the theory of Permanent Revolution by orienting the movement to building a section of the International Committee in every country.
- Turn toward the working class and the youth. Participate in and provide leadership to the everyday struggles of the working class in defense of its basic rights.
- Develop our own program and our own slogans for ending imperialist war and occupation within the anti-war movement.
- Launch a youth movement that includes working class youth as well as college students
- Launch an intensive educational program in the ABC's of Marxism. Provide regular pedagogical articles on Marxist theory and history in the pages of the World Socialist Web Site.
- Launch a theoretical journal linked to the World Socialist Web Site that would examine all areas of philosophy, history, psychology and culture from a Marxist perspective.

We are confident that if these steps are carried out, they will lead to a revival of Marxism and a revival of the ICFI as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

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