On the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International

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Today is the 80th anniversary of the founding congress of the Fourth International, held on September 3, 1938. The establishment of the Fourth International, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, was an event of great historical significance and contemporary relevance. During the next three months, the World Socialist Web Site *will be celebrating this anniversary with a series of publications and events explaining the significance of the Fourth International.*

Today, we are republishing a report given by David North, the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party and chairman of the international editorial board of the WSWS, delivered on the 70th anniversary.

This report was given at a meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on November 1, 2008, on the eve of that year's US presidential elections, which concluded in the election of Barack Obama. A decade later, the analysis of the political situation contained within this report has been proven to be absolutely correct, both in the relation to the actions of the Obama administration and the contemporary political crisis in the United States.

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On September 3, 1938, the Fourth International held its founding congress in a suburb of Paris. The conference agenda allowed for only one day of official proceedings, owing to—according to the minutes—"the illegal circumstances under which the congress was held..." The "illegal circumstances" to which the minutes referred were those created by the relentless persecution of the Trotskyist movement by the police of the bourgeois-democratic state in France, the armed gangs of fascists acting with legal impunity in much of Europe, and above all, the ruthless assassins of the Soviet secret police, the GPU, working to carry out Stalin's instructions that Leon Trotsky and his closest collaborators be physically eliminated.

The siege conditions under which the congress was held were reflected in the remarks with which Pierre Naville, then a supporter of the Fourth International, opened the meeting:

> Owing to the tragic death of Klement there would be no formal report: Klement had had a detailed, written report in preparation which was to have been circulated, but it had disappeared with the rest of his papers. The present report would be only a summary. [1]

The deceased to whom Naville was referring was Rudolf Klement, the late secretary of the Fourth International who had been abducted and murdered by Stalinist agents in July 1938, less than two months before the conference. He was the fourth leading figure in the Trotskyist movement to have been murdered in the year immediately preceding the founding congress: (1) Erwin Wolf in July 1937 in Spain; (2) Ignace Reiss in September 1937 in Switzerland; (3) Leon Sedov, the son of Trotsky, in February 1938 in Paris; and, (4) Klement. What Naville did not, and could not, know was that a GPU agent who had played a key role in the organization of these four assassinations—Mark Zborowski—was in attendance at the congress, acting as the representative of the Russian section of the Fourth International.

These assassinations were inextricably linked to the campaign of political genocide directed against the remnants of revolutionary workers, socialist intellectuals and Bolshevik leaders who had played a decisive role in the October 1917 Revolution. Directed by Stalin, the three frame-up trials held in Moscow between August 1936 and March 1938 were the public manifestation of a massive operation aimed at the total destruction of Trotskyist, i.e., Marxist, influence in the USSR.

Contemporary bourgeois historians insist, with few exceptions, that the Stalinist terror had little to do with Trotsky and Trotskyism. Stalin, they claim, had no reason to fear Trotsky, whom he had expelled from the USSR in 1929, and whose influence was negligible. This superficial appraisal has been challenged by the late Soviet/Russian historian, General Dmitri Volkogonov, who, despite his own hostility to Trotsky, emphasized that Stalin was tormented by the "ghost" of the exiled revolutionary:

> Trotsky was no longer present, yet Stalin grew to hate him even more in his absence, and Trotsky's spectre frequently returned to haunt the usurper... He thought of Trotsky when he had to sit and listen to Molotov, Kaganovich, Khrushchev and Zhdanov. Trotsky was of a different caliber intellectually, with his grasp of organization and his talents as a speaker and writer. In every way he was far superior to this bunch of bureaucrats, but he was also superior to Stalin and Stalin knew it. "How could I have let such an enemy slip through my fingers?" he almost wailed. On one occasion he confessed to his small circle that this had been one of the biggest mistakes of his life...
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> The thought that Trotsky was speaking not only for himself, but for all his silent supporters and oppositionists inside the USSR, was particularly painful to Stalin. When he read Trotsky's works, such as *The Stalin School of Falsification*, *An Open Letter to Members of the Bolshevik Party*, or *The Stalinist Thermidor*, the Leader almost lost his self-control... Stalin read the translation of *The Revolution Betrayed* in a single night, seething with bile. It was the last straw. For some years he had been nurturing two decisions in his mind, and now he proposed to have them carried out. First, he must at all costs remove Trotsky from the political arena... Second, he was now even more convinced on the need for a determined and final liquidation of all potential enemies inside the country. [2]

Trotsky understood very well the physical power of his enemies and the scale of the dangers that confronted him and his supporters. But he conducted his work with extraordinary confidence in the ultimate victory: the Fourth International as the instrument of world socialist revolution. Celebrating the founding of the Fourth International, he declared on October 18, 1938:

> The hangmen think in their obtuseness and cynicism that it is possible to frighten us. They err! Under blows we become stronger. The bestial politics of Stalin are only politics of despair. It is possible to kill individual soldiers of our army, but not to frighten them. Friends, we will repeat again in this day of celebration... *it is not possible to frighten us*. [3]

The origins of the Fourth International lay in the struggle initiated by Trotsky and the Left Opposition in October 1923 against the increasing bureaucratization of the Soviet state and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This political struggle began even before Stalin emerged as Trotsky's principal opponent and the leader of the Communist Party. For Trotsky, Stalin's rise to power was not the cause of the degeneration of the Soviet state and the Communist Party, but rather, a political manifestation of the strengthening of political reaction within the USSR as a result of the defeats suffered by the working class in Western Europe in the aftermath of the October Revolution. For Lenin and Trotsky, the fate of socialism within the Soviet Union depended upon the victory of the world socialist revolution. The idea that socialism could develop within Russia alone, an isolated and economically backward state, was incompatible with the most basic premises of Marxist theory.

Stalin's claim, in late 1924, that socialism could be built in one country—that is, that the Soviet Union could achieve socialism apart from the outcome of the struggles of the international working class beyond the borders of the USSR, especially in Western Europe and North America—revealed the essentially nationalist orientation, perspective and program of the ruling bureaucracy. By "socialism" the bureaucracy—led by Joseph Stalin—meant a system of national economic autarchy which safeguarded the income and privileges it enjoyed on the basis of state ownership of the means of production.

The bureaucracy's persecution of Trotsky and the Left Opposition entailed the falsification and repudiation of the Marxist and internationalist foundations of the Bolshevik Party. Ever more openly and crassly, the Stalinist regime subordinated the interests of the international revolutionary movement to the needs of the bureaucracy. The result of its betrayal of the program of world socialist revolution was a series of political defeats for the international working class—in Britain in 1926, in China in 1927, and, most disastrously, in Germany in 1933. Stalin's catastrophic misdirection of the German Communist Party made possible Hitler's rise to power in January 1933. This event, in turn, set into motion the chain of events which led to World War II and the deaths of tens of millions of people.

In the aftermath of Hitler's victory, Trotsky and the International Left Opposition altered their previous policy, which had been oriented toward the reform of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Third (Communist) International. Trotsky now called for the construction of a new International and for a *political revolution* in the USSR. He defined the Stalinist bureaucracy within the USSR as an agency of imperialism within the workers' movement.

The years between 1933 and 1938 were devoted primarily to the theoretical and political preparation of the founding congress of the Fourth International. Writing in 1935, Trotsky evaluated this work as the most important of his life—even more important than his role in the organization of the October Revolution and the founding and leadership of the Red Army. In justifying this assessment, Trotsky argued that if he had been absent in 1917, Lenin's leadership would have been sufficient to overcome the political opposition in the Bolshevik Party and carry through the decision to take power. But now (in the 1930s) there was no one else capable of educating a new cadre of revolutionaries and preserving the continuity of the Marxist movement. Trotsky acknowledged that he was, at this point in time, indispensable—and that he would need five years to ensure the continuity of the heritage of Marxism. Trotsky, when he made that assessment, had exactly five years to live—and he succeeded in realizing this goal.

It is necessary to understand why Trotsky's work was indispensable. Reference to his genius is insufficient. Three elements of his intellectual and political personality must be stressed.

First, Trotsky was the last great representative of "classical Marxism"—that is, the representative of a theoretical and political school and tradition that traced itself directly back to Marx and Engels, and which trained and inspired the mass revolutionary workers' movement that emerged in the last decades of the 19th century. As explained in *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*, Trotsky embodied "a conception of revolutionary theory, rooted philosophically in materialism, directed outward toward the cognition of objective reality, oriented to the education and political mobilization of the working class, and strategically preoccupied with the revolutionary struggle against capitalism." [4]

Second, Trotsky grasped more profoundly than any other political thinker of the 20th century the global dimensions and dynamics of the socialist revolution, the dialectical interaction of international socioeconomic processes and historically-determined national conditions. This understanding found expression in the theory of permanent revolution, first formulated by Trotsky in response to the problems raised by the 1905 Revolution in Russia—in which the relation between traditional bourgeois-democratic tasks and the implicitly socialist strivings of the working class, in a backward country, emerged in a manner that contradicted existing conceptions and required a new theoretical paradigm.

Third, Trotsky assimilated the essential political lessons of Lenin's struggle against Menshevik opportunism and centrism in the years between the split of 1903 and the revolutionary denouement of 1917. Having crossed swords with Lenin over questions of political principle in that crucial formative period, Trotsky came to understand and appreciate Lenin's extraordinary foresight in opposing all forms of opportunism in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and, later, after the outbreak of the imperialist war in 1914, within the Second International. The lessons that Trotsky drew from this historical experience formed an essential political foundation for the struggle to build the Fourth International.

Each of these elements of Trotsky's intellectual and political itinerary are deserving of detailed elaboration. But time demands a more concentrated approach. Let us, therefore, focus on the question of "classical" Marxism. Even among those who are familiar with and place high value on Trotsky's powers as a revolutionary strategist, it is all too rare that one finds sufficient appreciation of the theoretical foundations of his political thought. Notwithstanding Trotsky's insistence on dialectical materialism as the mainspring of revolutionary thought, even sympathetic commentators view such professions of philosophical commitment to be arcane and insubstantial. For example, a noted scholar and specialist on Trotsky's social and political thought, after citing a passage in which Trotsky expounds the basic elements of dialectical materialism, asks with evident exasperation: "What, however, did all this have to do with the study of society and the formulation of Marxist revolutionary policy and strategy?" [5] The question betrays inadequate understanding of the relationship between philosophical outlook and method, on the one hand,

and political thought and practice on the other. It also indicates a limited appreciation of the content and implications of the confrontation, with which Trotsky was extremely familiar, between Marxian materialism and various schools of philosophical idealism.

While a great deal has been written about the political struggles within the many conflicting tendencies of the European (and especially Russian) socialist movement prior to World War I, far less attention has been paid to the theoretical conflicts. Even the conflict against the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein has been examined largely from the standpoint of political program and perspective. The differences in these spheres were, of course, of immense and enduring significance. But another aspect of this crucial conflict between Marxism and revisionism needs to be stressed—that is, the philosophical dimensions of the struggle. Examined from this standpoint, Bernstein—a neo-Kantian—was part of a broader intellectual tendency whose opposition to Marxism was rooted philosophically in various currents of subjective idealism.

Briefly stated, these tendencies rejected philosophical and historical materialism, which asserts the primacy of matter over consciousness. On this basis, they rejected the conception that the development of human society, including its intellectual development, proceeded in accordance with laws related to the economic structure of society.

There was no more determined advocate of the materialist conception of history than Trotsky, whose theoretical education—beginning in the late 1890s—proceeded in constant conflict with the increasingly influential schools of subjective idealist and irrationalist thought. Near the end of his long revolutionary career, Trotsky offered the following explanation of Marx's materialist outlook:

> Having established science as cognition of the objective recurrences of nature, man has tried stubbornly and persistently to exclude himself from science, reserving for himself special privileges in the shape of alleged intercourse with supersensory forces (religion), or with timeless moral precepts (idealism). Marx deprived man of these odious privileges definitely and forever, looking upon him as a natural link in the evolutionary process of material nature; upon human society as the organization of production and distribution; upon capitalism as a stage in the development of human society...
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> It is utterly impossible to seek the causes for the recurrences in capitalist society in the subjective consciousness—in the intentions or plans—of its members. The objective recurrences of capitalism were formulated before science began to think about them seriously. To this day the preponderant majority of men know nothing about the laws that govern capitalist economy. The whole strength of Marx's method was in his approach to economic phenomena, not from the subjective point of view of certain persons, but from the objective point of view of the development of society as a whole, just as an experimental natural scientist approaches a beehive or an ant-hill.
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> For economic science the decisive significance is how people act, not what they themselves think about their actions. At the base of society is not religion and morality, but nature and labor. Marx's method is *materialistic*, because it proceeds from existence to consciousness, not the other way around. Marx's method is *dialectic*, because it regards both nature and society as they evolve, and evolution itself as the constant struggle of conflicting forces. [6]

In the world of political struggle, the application of Marx's materialist outlook required that revolutionary policy be based, first and foremost, upon an analysis of objective socio-economic conditions. The revolutionary party had to base its actions not on the prevailing moods and illusions of the masses, but on the really existing level of the socio-economic contradictions of capitalism. The moods of the masses were themselves a distorted reflection of objective conditions. The revolutionary party could overcome these moods only to the extent that it fought within the working class for a correct understanding of the capitalist crisis and its political implications.

In discussions between Trotsky and his American supporters, held in May 1938 on the eve of the founding congress of the Fourth International, Trotsky stressed this objective starting point of the revolutionary program:

> ...The political backwardness of the American working class is very great. This signifies that the danger of a fascist catastrophe is very great. This is the point of departure for all our activity. The program must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers. It must reflect society as it is, and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to overcome and vanquish the backwardness. That is why we must express in our program the whole acuteness of the social crises of the capitalist society, including in the first line the United States. We cannot postpone or modify objective conditions which don't depend on us. We cannot guarantee that the masses will solve the crisis; but we must express the situation as it is, and that is the task of the program. [7]

These words are invested with acute relevance in the present situation. What should be the starting point of revolutionary politics today—the objective nature and implications of the unfolding crisis of American and world capitalism, whose depth and severity are without equal since the Great Depression of the 1930s—or the prevailing and confused state of political consciousness that exists among masses of workers? Should we adapt our program to the present-day illusions among workers in the electoral rhetoric of Barack Obama? Or should we expose the poison hidden within the honeyed phrases, and prepare the masses for the great social conflicts that will inevitably be generated by the intensification of the economic crisis?

The election will be concluded in three days. Whichever of the two bourgeois parties wins the presidential and congressional elections will then confront the consequences of the spiraling economic disaster. If, as now seems likely, Obama emerges as president-elect, he will assume central responsibility for pursuing the national and international interests of the American ruling class. How long, do you imagine, will he be able to preserve the illusion that the crisis affects all classes of the population in the same way, that the "American people are in this together," that "sacrifices" can and will be "shared," and that the interests of the poor are the same as the interests of the rich? How long will it be before the irrepressible determination of the financial aristocracy to exploit the opportunities created by the crisis for its own maximum enrichment becomes painfully obvious to the masses of workers? Or, for that matter, the powerlessness of a President Obama to control these strivings, even if he wanted to?

It is worth recalling Trotsky's comments in 1939 on the Roosevelt administration's New Deal, which is generally portrayed by historians as the apex of governmental radicalism. Trotsky noted rather sardonically the generally ineffectual character of Roosevelt's confrontations with the American bourgeoisie:

> Today, monopolists are the strongest section of the ruling class.

> The government is in no position to fight against monopoly in general, i.e., against the class by whose will it rules. While attacking one phase of monopoly, it is obliged to seek an ally in other phases of monopoly. In union with banks and light industry it can deliver occasional blows against the trusts of heavy industry, which, by the way, do not stop earning fantastic profits because of that. [8]

Will the same fate befall President Obama? Will the walls of American capitalism tumble before the rhetorical trumpets of Mr. "Yes We Can"? No they won't. As a matter of fact, his performance, not to mention that of Senator McCain, during the infamous bank bailout crisis provided an indication of how an Obama administration will react when confronted with the demands of the ruling aristocracy.

In the final analysis, the policies of an Obama administration will be determined by the objective conditions confronting American capitalism. And it is at this point that a clear distinction must be made between the United States in the era of Roosevelt and the United States in the era of Obama. Three quarters of a century have passed since Franklin Roosevelt first took the oath of office and proclaimed that the United States had nothing to fear but fear itself. He spoke as the leader of a capitalist nation which, for all its economic problems, still retained at its disposal colossal resources. In comparison to the industrial might of the United States, all other nations were dwarfs. Those days have long passed. The United States has been for decades in economic decline. It has accumulated massive debts as its industries have decayed. Indeed, the essential source of the economic crisis can be located in the separation of the process of wealth accumulation from the material processes of production. On the eve of the explosion of the economic crisis, the US financial industry accounted for 40 percent of all profits!

A President Obama will not have a "New Deal" to offer the American working class—though one should recall that Roosevelt's New Deal proved incapable of ending the Depression. The economic crisis was "solved" by World War II. Moreover, whatever gains were achieved during the 1930s were the product not of government reforms and handouts, but of immense social struggles by the working class—such as the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, the Minneapolis and San Francisco general strikes, the Flint sit-down strike and other powerful and bloody battles.

What, then, are the prospects for socialism in the United States? This was a question about which Trotsky, a keen observer of American society and its economic and political structures, thought a great deal. He understood very well the power and influence of capitalist ideology in the so-called "Land of Unlimited Opportunity." He wrote in 1939:

> In the United States, where a man who owns a million is referred to as being "worth" a million, market concepts have sunk in deeper than anywhere else. Until quite recently Americans gave very little thought to the nature of economic relations. In the land of the most powerful economic system, economic theory continued to be exceedingly barren. Only the present deep-going crisis of American economy has bluntly confronted public opinion with the fundamental problems of capitalist society. [9]

The process of economic, social and political enlightenment was preempted by the Second World War, from which the United States emerged victorious—not only militarily and politically, but also economically. What need was there to continue questioning the legitimacy of capitalism when 75 percent of industrial production was located in the United States and where the dollar was "as good as gold." Moreover, the post-war anti-communist witch-hunts were aimed at constricting intellectual life in the United States and delegitimizing, if not completely criminalizing, the Marxist critique of American capitalism. More recently, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, were hailed as definite proof of the irrevocable triumph of capitalism, and even of the "End of History."

But what remains of capitalist triumphalism today, in the aftermath of the catastrophic failure of the economic system? Little more than a month ago, pleading for public support for a bailout of the banks, President Bush declared before a nationwide audience that the capitalist system in the United States stood on the brink of collapse. Two days later, he told members of his cabinet and congressional leaders that "This sucker is going down!" The entire ideology of American capitalism—of the infallibility of the market, of the absolute independence of the market from the state—lost all credibility. The high prophet of the cult of the market, Alan Greenspan—hailed as the "Maestro" of the Federal Reserve—appeared before a congressional committee as a shuffling and bewildered old man, on the verge of senility, confessing amazement that markets had failed to behave as he believed they would.

And against the backdrop of this crisis, the dreaded "S" word has made its reappearance in American political life. An unguarded reference by Obama to sharing the wealth, by which he meant absolutely no harm, has been seized upon by McCain and Palin as proof that Obama is planning to introduce socialism into America. Senator Biden was asked on television whether Obama was, in fact, a closet-Marxist! These episodes reveal the fears lurking within the ruling class. Obama and Biden are taunted by their desperate Republican opponents for planning to "share the wealth." The Democratic candidates indignantly deny the accusation. But will masses of American workers, under conditions of mounting unemployment and mass foreclosures, agree that "sharing the wealth" is really such a bad idea?

Social being determines social consciousness. Conditions of crisis not only discredit old ideologies. They give rise to conceptions that are in alignment with objective reality. It will not be possible to maintain the semi-official ban on Marxism in discussions of the crisis of American and world capitalism. As Trotsky foresaw, objective events will force a profound shift in political life. What he wrote in 1939 acquires in the present situation extraordinary relevance:

> Partial reforms and patchwork will do no good. Historical development has come to one of those decisive stages when only the direct intervention of the masses is able to sweep away the reactionary obstructions and lay the foundations of a new regime. Abolition of private ownership of the means of production is the first prerequisite to planned economy, i.e., the introduction of reason into the sphere of human relations, first on a national and eventually on a world scale... Liberated humanity will draw itself up to its full height. [10]

Notes:

1. *Documents of the Fourth International* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), p. 284. [return]

2. *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988), pp. 254–60. [return]

3. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938 – 39* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974), p. 94. [return]

4. *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party* (Mehring Books, 2008), p. 59. [return]

5. Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 487–88. [return]

6. Leon Trotsky, *Marxism in Our Time*. [return]

7. *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001), pp. 189–90. [return]

8. Leon Trotsky, *Marxism in Our Time*. [return]

9. Ibid. [return]

10. Ibid. [return]