

Report to the SEP (US) Eighth National Congress

Socialism, history and the defense of democratic rights

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We are publishing here the report to the Eighth Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US) given by Tom Mackaman. The congress was held from August 4 to August 9, 2024. It unanimously adopted two resolutions, “The 2024 US elections and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party” and “Free Bogdan Syrotiuk!”

I wish to speak also in favor of the Congress document, “The 2024 US elections and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party,” and in particular its third point, which states:

In the present world situation, the theory of permanent revolution—originally formulated by Trotsky in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution in Russia and further developed in the course of the struggle initiated in 1923-24 against the Stalinist bureaucracy and its nationalist repudiation of Marxist internationalism—remains the essential theoretical foundation of revolutionary strategy. Trotsky insisted (1) that in all countries the struggle for and defense of democracy could not be separated from the fight to establish workers’ power and the implementation of socialist policies; and (2) the struggle for socialism was conducted on the basis of an international strategy directed toward the global mobilization of the working class against the world capitalist system.

Allow me to begin by referring to two anniversaries, one very recent, the other two-and-a-half centuries old.

Five years ago this month, the *New York Times* published the 1619 Project. Future historians may well look back with curiosity that, months ahead of Donald Trump’s attempted fascist coup—which was being planned out in the open—the flagship publication of American liberalism unleashed a massive campaign of historical falsification aimed at discrediting the two American Revolutions—the Revolutionary War and the Civil War—that is, the very events that had created the American republic and democracy.

The central argument of that behemoth commercial-political venture was that 1776 was not the “true founding” of the United States. The real founding, it claimed, came in 1619, with the first recorded arrival of slaves in Colonial Virginia. The 1619 Project further argued that the Revolutionary War was nothing more than a counter-revolution launched to defend the institution of slavery against British Imperial designs for emancipation. In other words, there had never been any democratic revolution in the US—either the American Revolution or the Civil War, which, the Project claimed, was merely a struggle among racist brothers.

Here is not the place to review our work in response to the 1619 Project.

But comrades will recall that it was the WSWs that exposed and discredited the *Times*. It was, in other words, the conscious element of the working class, and really us alone—together with a handful of honest historians—that stood for the defense of the democratic gains of the first two American revolutions. I will return to this significant fact, because it forms the indispensable historical part of a still larger struggle, referred to in the document’s reference to Permanent Revolution: The defense of basic democratic rights has become inseparable from the fight for socialism, not only in the US, but everywhere.

Each of us, I am sure, understands that we are not gathered here today as individuals. We are *delegates* representing the working class. Our deliberations aim to provide a revolutionary program, perspective and leadership for the working class for the coming period, which is pregnant with revolutionary possibilities.

Which brings me to the second anniversary. On this day 250 years ago, another set of delegates were making their way across the British North American seaboard to Philadelphia for a different sort of revolutionary Congress, the First Continental Congress, which convened at Carpenters Guild Hall in Philadelphia on September 5, 1774.

The Continental Congress was called in response to the Intolerable, or Coercive Acts, as they have come to be known. Passed by Parliament over the course of the first half of 1774, the acts targeted Boston, which was then the third largest British North American city, with a mere 15,000 inhabitants. The port had been the hotbed of agitation against Parliament in the years of the Imperial Crisis, which began with opposition to the Stamp Act in 1765 and culminated in 1773 with the Boston Tea Party, in which Bostonians had lashed out against the East India Company’s exclusive royal monopoly by dumping tea into the harbor.

In retaliation, Parliament, with the assent of King George III, imposed the Boston Port Act, the Massachusetts Government Act, the Administration of Justice Act, the Quartering Act, and, though of a somewhat different origin, the Quebec Act. The first imposed a blockade on Boston Harbor. The second swept aside local representative bodies. The third gave the royal governor of Massachusetts the prerogative to relocate jury trials to Great Britain for the more efficient dispensation of the king’s justice. The Quartering Act applied to all colonies, imposing new requirements for the billeting of the hated standing army. The Quebec Act extended Quebec territory as far south as the Ohio River, and signaled that the British Empire intended to rule the vast North American interior in the manner the Absolutist French monarchy had done before its defeat to the Anglo-Americans in the Seven Years’ War: as a domain of staunch royal authority in which monarchical property and mercantilist economic relations, chiefly control of the fur trade, would be maintained.

Parliament and the Privy Council had hoped to make an example of Boston to intimidate all the colonists, as well as the radicals within

England. The American response was stunning. From the northern reaches of New England, in what was to soon become Vermont, down to Georgia, in the cities, the towns and the countryside, the people moved against royal authority. Everywhere royal officials watched in helpless astonishment as new forms of government sprouted up—committees of public safety, committees of correspondence, and various guild groups among the artisans and those calling themselves Sons of Liberty. A situation of dual power had emerged.

It was out of this movement that delegates were sent to the two Continental Congresses, convened in 1774 and 1775, whose names are familiar to us as “the Founding Fathers”: the cousins John and Samuel Adams of Massachusetts; Alexander Hamilton and John Jay of New York; Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania; George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, George Mason and James Madison of Virginia; among many others. Just to say such names is to reckon with the staggering decline in leadership of those “representatives” who were once referred to as American statesmen!

The *First* Continental Congress did not take the step of declaring independence. Rather, under the sway of a bloc of conservative members from the Mid-Atlantic colonies led by John Dickinson, it asserted in its Declaration and Resolves the right of the colonists to legislate themselves as Englishmen separate from the British Parliament but still under the king. And the document concluded by authorizing a petition to the king, a ritual act of subordination familiar in the history of monarchy. Comrades may recall that the event that precipitated the eruption of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was the petition delivered by Father Gapon, at the head of a peaceful march of workers in St. Petersburg on “Bloody Sunday,” Sunday, January 22, which was met by mounted saber attacks and sheets of rifle fire from the Tsar’s guard outside of the Winter Palace, killing and wounding hundreds.

King George III was in no more mood in 1774 for hearing entreaties from insubordinate subjects than Tsar Nicholas II was in 1905. The king could not tolerate any division of Parliamentary sovereignty, through which, in the British constitution of the time, his power was exercised. Instead, on February 9, 1775, Parliament declared Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion. Under the newly appointed military governor of the colony, General Sir Thomas Gage, thousands more British troops were sent to Boston, and the blockade of its port was tightened. Like the Tsar’s Cossacks, the king’s redcoats were on orders to use force against resistance.

This proved the final straw. In the contract theory of government that emerged first under Thomas Hobbes coming out of the English Civil War in the 1600s, and that was refined and developed under John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers in the 1700s, monarchs and governments existed through a sort of agreement that had emerged out of a state of nature. The considerations in this contract were allegiance and protection: The subjects surrendered to the king their allegiance; in return the king granted his protection. In the winter of 1774 and the spring of 1775, the king, in sending the army to Boston, withdrew his protection. The colonists then withdrew their allegiance. The stage was set for revolution. To draw a painfully obvious comparison to the present, can anyone still doubt that the American ruling class has withdrawn its protection from the people, under conditions in which it lets the COVID-19 pandemic rip, up to and including forbidding the counting of the sick and the dead, and as it races blindly toward nuclear Armageddon?

Here is not the place to discuss the fighting that raged between 1775 and 1781, except to note that Britain’s ferocious response to Boston and its refusal to brook any compromise provoked a far more radical outcome than what had appeared in the offing as late as 1774. One immediate result was the Declaration of Independence, issued by the Second Continental Congress, with its assertion of human equality—as revolutionary today as it was in 1776 in all of its explosive implications. Another was the eclipse of

reformist American figures, such as Dickinson, who had hoped to maintain the colonies as members of the Empire on equal footing with the mother country. Coming to the fore in their stead were the most audacious revolutionary thinkers and agitators, such as Tom Paine, who wished to declare war on the entire aristocratic world.

In this process, the American Revolution assumed the character of a struggle not so much over home rule, but over who would rule at home, to borrow a phrase coined long ago by historian Carl Becker. The upper echelons of colonial society were, generally speaking, those most connected to the royal authority. They secured their positions through monarchical dispensations, and were therefore *literally* dependent on the king. Their various offices were treated as a form of property—an aristocratic principle that has now reemerged in the US with a vengeance! Unsurprisingly, these colonial aristocrats, plus those they were able to hold to their side through bonds of personal obligation, formed the Loyalists in the Revolutionary War. Probably 20 percent of the population, the Loyalists were defeated after vicious fighting.

Most fled to Canada, the British West Indies and the mother country. Not a few families were shattered. Benjamin Franklin’s only surviving son, William, the royal governor of New Jersey at the war’s start, remained a Loyalist, was imprisoned in a Patriot jail—receiving there no help from the illustrious father he had betrayed—and ultimately fled to England. The two never reconciled. The revolution chased off the monarchists and liquidated feudal-aristocratic forms of property in the colonies—royal and aristocratic land ownership (Pennsylvania, for example, had been a proprietary colony of the Penn family), primogeniture and entail, and ownership of public office.

It is true that monarchy was weak in America, the very outer fringe of what was thought of in Europe as “the civilized world.” But it was nonetheless a monarchical society extending from the king downward through a long train of dependencies and subservience all the way to the indentured servants and slaves. Weak, yes, but no less real for its weakness. To paraphrase something Lenin said of Russia in 1917, we might say that in 1776, the chain of the world-feudal order snapped at its weakest link, America. But it nonetheless snapped, and soon the chain’s released tension whipsawed back across the Atlantic—and, 13 years and 10 days later to be precise—over the very heart of the *Ancient Regime* when the Bastille fell in Paris on July 14, 1789.

And in this sense—their progressive role in world history—the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution overcome the limitations imposed upon them by their time and speak to the progressive elements of society down to the present, the reason why Marx, in a letter to Lincoln, could assert that the fate of the Union in the Civil War “carried the destiny” of the working class; and why Lenin could, in a 1918 letter to American workers, call the American Revolution “one of those great, really liberating, really revolutionary wars of which there have been so few compared to the vast number of wars of conquest.”

And it is why David North, in motivating the founding of the Socialist Equality Party in 1995, could root a major new development of the ICFI, in part, in America’s revolutionary history:

The demand for social equality not only sums up the basic aim of the socialist movement; it also evokes the egalitarian traditions that are so deeply rooted in the genuinely democratic and revolutionary traditions of the American workers. All the great social struggles of American history have inscribed on their banners the demand for social equality. It is no accident that today, in the prevailing environment of political reaction, this ideal is under relentless attack.

To be sure, the American Revolution was no socialist revolution, nor could it have been, bound as it was by the conditions of its own time.

Yet, in its most radical thought it took on certain socialistic rhetoric that aimed at entrenched wealth and the ideology that buttressed it. Jefferson, writing to Madison from France in the heady days of September 1789, two months after having helped to draft the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, wrote:

I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self evident, “that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living”: that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it. The portion occupied by an individual ceases to be his when himself ceases to be, and reverts to the society.

It was not yet possible at that point to discern the origins of private property, the state, or social classes—discoveries that awaited the further development of capitalism and the work of Marx and Engels a half-century later. Yet the anti-aristocratic politics and philosophy of the Revolution led in the US to a democratic celebration of labor and work, which had since time immemorial been viewed as the curse of the fallen. The most fundamental and basic separation in society had long been between those who labored—the great unwashed mass—and those who did not, the aristocracy. “This social cleavage, this ‘most ancient and universal of all Divisions of People,’ overwhelmed all others in the culture, even the one between free and enslaved that we find so horribly conspicuous,” notes the historian Gordon Wood.

The American Revolution mounted a defense of property against imperial predations that is oftentimes simplistically summed up in the phrase, “no taxation without representation.” In time this defense grew over into a defense of all forms of property—for southern slaveowners up to and including property in man. And yet the common conception in the days of the Revolution was that private property itself must have originated from a still more ancient and original right, that of self-ownership. It could only have been through application of labor in a state of nature that wealth emerged, according to this early labor theory of value—coincidentally most famously elaborated in 1776, the same year as the Declaration, by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*. Chattel slavery stood in conspicuous opposition to this new thought.

And in the northern states, both slavery and indentured servitude soon vanished. So complete was the cultural aspect of the democratic revolution in the North that the word “master,” ubiquitous in 1770, vanished from usage in describing the social relationship of employment, replaced by the Dutch-derived “boss.” Virtually banished too was the word “servant,” a fact that stunned English traveler Frances Trollope, as she reported in 1832 in her *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Searching to hire domestic labor by using the term “servant,” Trollope wrote, “is more than petty treason to the Republic.” To be sure, the flip side to this was the growing naturalization of the exploitation inherent in wage labor, obscured by its seemingly voluntary nature. In reality, wage workers were, and are, scarcely more free to choose not to work than slaves, which is why early labor militants, in attempting to rouse their fellow workers, referred to their condition as “wage slavery.” But that is for another discussion.

Altogether different was the development of the South. In the time of the Revolution and its immediate aftermath, one can find numerous examples of slaveholding Founding Fathers condemning slavery, and even taking certain steps to place what they shamefacedly called “the peculiar institution” on the road to extinction. But paced by British industrialization, the demand for cotton surged, and with it, the value of slaves. In view of this bloody history we are reminded of Balzac’s

observation that behind every great fortune there is a crime. A new, vile American aristocracy arose on cotton and chattel slavery in the antebellum, an aristocracy that came to rue the Declaration of Independence’s proclamation of human equality.

In the year 1848, with Europe ablaze in a massive revolutionary conflagration in which the working class first began to emerge as a distinct social force—the same year that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote and published *The Communist Manifesto*—in that year Sen. John C. Calhoun, the foremost defender of slavery in the United States, issued a speech attacking Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence. Calhoun indicted what he called the Declaration’s “most false and dangerous of all political errors.”

He went on:

The proposition to which I allude has become an axiom in the minds of a vast majority on both sides of the Atlantic, and is repeated daily from tongue to tongue, as an established and incontrovertible truth; it is, that “all men are born free and equal.”

In 1857, George Fitzhugh, another southern propagandist for slavery, also took aim at the Declaration. In his tract *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters*, Fitzhugh wrote:

We conclude that about nineteen out of every twenty individuals have “a natural and inalienable right” to be taken care of and protected; to have guardians, trustees, husbands, or masters; in other words, they have a natural and inalienable right to be slaves ... Liberty for the few—Slavery, in every form, for the mass!”

Let me turn to a very similar attack on the Declaration, of more recent vintage. In 1996, Robert H. Bork, a failed far-right nominee for the Supreme Court, published *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, in which he echoed Calhoun’s venomous hatred of equality. The Declaration’s “ringing phrases are hardly useful, indeed may be pernicious, if taken, as they commonly are, as a guide to action, governmental or private,” Bork said. “The words press eventually towards extremes of liberty and the pursuit of happiness that court personal license and social disorder.”

Of Jefferson, Bork complained that he “was a man of the Enlightenment, and the Declaration of Independence is an Enlightenment document.” Bork’s attack on Enlightenment and the Declaration are notable for at least two reasons. One, because Bork is commonly viewed as the intellectual godfather of the sitting conspiracy against democracy commonly called “the Supreme Court majority.” And second, and more importantly, because David North took up a lengthy reply to Bork’s attack in a pamphlet that signaled, already in 1996, that the working class was preparing to take leadership in the defense of democratic rights: *Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism*.

Hopes that compromise could be had with such a ruling class as the slaveowning oligarchy were, if anything, more fanciful than those of the reform-minded founding fathers who in 1774 imagined a deal could be worked out with King George III, an enlightened despot by the standards of his time. Still more fantastical are the prayers for mercy raised up today by the likes of Bernie Sanders to America’s financial aristocracy, truly a power to be approached on bended knee.

But no devil has ever been known to voluntarily surrender his claws. To destroy slavery a great Second American Revolution was required, led by a new generation of leaders, figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, U.S. Grant and Thaddeus Stevens. At the cost of what

historians now estimate to be 750,000 dead, slavery was destroyed. Domination of the southern economy was wrested from British capitalism to emergent American capitalism. The world's largest single capitalist market was created. The democratic revolution in the US was completed with the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments during Radical Reconstruction under Stevens, and with the crushing of the Ku Klux Klan by Grant during Military Reconstruction, the subject of a new history by Fergus Bordewich.

The most radical of the Republicans, led by Stevens, sought to forge a coalition in the South consisting of the freed slaves and poor whites, many of whom had remained loyal to the Union in the Civil War. Stevens, condemned as a "leveler" by his opponents, was convinced that the means to achieve this was through the confiscation of the land from the treacherous southern plantation owners and its re-division among the poor, black and white alike. There had even been a precedent for such a measure during the war, in Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's Special Field Order 15, issued early in 1865 and the origin of the slogan of giving out "40 acres and a mule" to freed slaves—an entirely justified demand after "two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil," in Lincoln's words.

Lincoln's Republicans had overseen the largest seizure of private property in history prior to Lenin's Bolsheviks, in the form of the uncompensated freeing of the slaves. In this, its destruction of slavery, the Republican Party was a revolutionary party. Yet the Republican Party was also a bourgeois party. This part of its nature had been nurtured by the stunning development of capitalist industry and finance during the war.

Moreover, as Marx had anticipated, the Civil War had given a mighty impulse to the development of the working class. He wrote in *Capital*:

In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.

In this context of rising labor struggles in the North, the dominant factions of the Republican Party began to fear Stevens and his redistribution plans—including the *New York Times*, whose present defense of private property is hardly new. In 1867, in response to Stevens' call for the confiscation and re-division of the southern oligarchy's lands, the *Times* wrote:

If Congress is to take cognizance of the claims of labor against capital ... there can be no decent pretense for confining the task to the slave-holder of the South. It is a question not of humanity, not of loyalty, but of the fundamental relation of industry to capital; and sooner or later, if begun in the South, it will find its way into the cities of the North. ... An attempt to justify the confiscation of Southern land under the pretense of bringing justice to the freedmen strikes at the root of all property rights in both sections. It concerns Massachusetts quite as much as Mississippi.

Whatever remained that had been radical in the Republican Party did not survive the 1870s. Stevens died in 1868—"an emancipation of the Republican party," said the conservative James G. Blaine. Then came the Paris Commune of 1871, which terrified an American capitalist class that

was rapidly enriching itself at the expense of a growing working class. The *Times* admitted that the Commune revealed the explosive force that lay

beneath every large city—not so easily exploded in America as in Europe—but existing with all its terrible elements even here ... the toiling, ignorant and impoverished multitude, demanding an equal share in the wealth of the rich.

These fears were warranted. One year after Americans celebrated the country's centennial in 1876, the class struggle hit the US itself with tremendous force in "the Great Uprising," a massive strike of railroad workers, sympathy walkouts and general strikes that stretched across the country—and which came, not coincidentally, the very year Reconstruction in the South came to a final end. At the same time, American capitalism had unleashed a three-decade long war to displace the Plains Indians, who could not be reconciled to the private property notion that the land, unlike the air and the water, is alienable. "My reason teaches me that land cannot be sold," Chief Black Hawk said. "Nothing can be sold but such things as can be carried away."

Here let me point to a fundamental disagreement with much of the historical writing on this period, that, I believe it could be shown, traces back to Stalinist conceptions of American history promoted in the early 1930s. Eric Foner, the leading scholar of Reconstruction, calls the period "America's unfinished revolution." A more recent book, presently being heavily promoted, is Manish Sinha's *The Rise and Fall of the Second American Republic: Reconstruction, 1860-1920*, in which the author contends that Reconstruction lasted until the Wilson administration, at which point it came down along with the Republic. Still another version of this thesis comes from Yale University's Heather Cox Richardson, who has recently conducted a fawning interview with Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Richardson is an early progenitor of the now common idea that the South actually won the Civil War. Nonsense. The southern slaveowning class, as a class, was liquidated. It was the American ruling class as a whole that turned sharply to the right after Reconstruction, a turn that entailed deputizing in the South the remnants of the old Bourbon aristocracy.

To paraphrase Trotsky, behind such vague historical categorizations as "uncompleted revolution" there lurks a political prognosis. If the United States did not even *complete* its democratic revolution, then how can we speak of a socialist revolution? The best that can be hoped for is to apply pressure to the part of the ruling class viewed to be more progressive ... or less fascist, as it were. This of course is the basic position of the American pseudo-left, which explains the thoroughly degraded spectacle—in fact little different than a petition to the Tsar—of the pseudo-left calling on the youth to appeal to the Heiress to the Throne, Kamala Harris, to stop the genocide in Gaza. Alas, the pseudo-left's self-abasing supplications to the Lords and Ladies of the Democratic Party fall on deaf ears.

The Theory of the Permanent Revolution does not pretend that there was never a bourgeois-democratic revolution in the US or France. And it does not insinuate, as the Retrogressionists of World War II did, that the rise of fascism rendered socialism a panacea, and the most that could be hoped for was a new struggle for the "national liberation" involving "all classes and strata," "basically equivalent to a democratic revolution," a subject that Comrade North deals with in *The Heritage We Defend*, and that Comrade Joe Kishore addressed in his important lecture to the SEP summer school last year.

Returning to the subject of Reconstruction, it was in those years that socialism, too, first emerged as a distinct political outlook among American workers. The struggle to build socialism in the heart of

capitalism over the intervening 150 years has not been easy—it is a fight filled with its share of heroes and martyrs, victories, defeats, and a great deal of learning. The peculiar conditions of the development of American capitalism resulted, as we know, in the emergence of the world’s richest bourgeoisie and most powerful imperialist state—and the most ruthless opponent of the working class. These same conditions also created a vast middle class, once rooted among the small farmers, shopkeepers and tradesmen, and later the white-collar professionals, that maintained the appearance of a certain independence from bourgeois politics. Pressured by the capitalists from above and proximate to the working class in its lower layers, this middle class provided the social bedrock of American radicalism in its many guises—abolitionism, Populism, progressivism, the various civil rights and antiwar movements—and, as Comrade North explained in a series of articles in the 1970s, the distinctly American variant of the philosophy of pragmatism. A great portion of the struggle for socialism in America has been to break the working class free of the tutelage of this middle class.

But the world’s richest bourgeoisie is now bankrupt, financially and one hastens to add, morally. And there is nothing left to the talk of an independent middle class. Those below the level of the very rich, in the top 5 or 10 percent of wealthiest households—of which critical components are formed by the better-off tenured academics and the labor bureaucracy—it is that layer that provides the actual political “base” of both major capitalist parties and their bogus “third-party” satellites. Jealous of the top 1 percent, and of each other, they nonetheless exist in a state of dependence on their Lords, as did their Loyalist forebears 250 years ago. In these social layers and their various ideological formations there exists not a single tendency that can honestly claim to defend democratic rights, much less speak for the working class. In the 2024 elections, only the SEP campaign of Joe Kishore and Jerry White can make such a claim.

Within the longer span of American history, this past year we have reached a certain inflection point. Or put in dialectical terms, the quantitative erosion of democratic norms over the last decades—necessary to wage imperialist war and defend levels of wealth accumulation that put in the shade the old aristocrats and slavemasters—has now resulted in a qualitative shift, a process that Tom Carter will be discussing in his report.



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