

# *IBT's First International Conference* Facing the New World Order

The three years since the founding of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) in 1990 have witnessed a series of momentous historical events, which are among the most significant of the century. In early January of this year delegates to the IBT's first international conference took stock of our response to those events, discussed political questions that had arisen over the past few years and projected tasks and perspectives for the forthcoming period.

The IBT was formed through a fusion of three organizations: the North-American-based Bolshevik Tendency, the Gruppe IV Internationale (Germany) and the Permanent Revolution Group (New Zealand). All three organizations were products of, and reactions against, the political degeneration of the international Spartacist tendency (iSt—now the International Communist League [ICL]), a formerly revolutionary organization that was transformed by degrees into a highly bureaucratized and hyper-centralist obedience cult, marked by a capacity for erratic programmatic deviations.

The leadership of each of the founding components of the IBT was trained in the iSt when it was still a revolutionary organization. There was therefore an underlying unity existing prior to the 1990 fusions, not only on the level of agreement on formal programmatic and historical questions, but also in terms of a common understanding of how a Leninist organization should function. The task since the formation of the IBT has been to cohere those three small and widely dispersed groupings into a homogenous international collective. Our first international conference, and the intense period of discussion which preceded it, marks a significant step forward in this process. There were several questions on which delegates who had differences with the majority presented minority reports to the conference. This is a normal occurrence in a healthy Leninist organization. All of the debates took place within the context of a common commitment to building the IBT as the only international current which represents authentic Leninism-Trotskyism.

## Counterrevolution in the Soviet Bloc

The most important historical event since the founding of the IBT was the showdown in Moscow in 1991 between the decrepit and incompetent Stalinist "hardliners" and the forces of capitalist counterrevolution spearheaded by Boris Yeltsin. The conference discussed our response to those events, and noted that our position of blocking militarily with Yanayev against Yeltsin had been powerfully vindicated by all subsequent developments. It was noted that this position helped define us internationally as hard "orthodox" Soviet defensists.

The principal international report, endorsed by the conference, observed that in 1991 all our ostensibly Trot-

skyist opponents either sided militarily with the Yeltsinites (e.g., the United Secretariat, the British Workers Power, Labour Militant) or sought refuge in neutrality and confusionism (e.g., the ICL and the International Trotskyist Committee). The political cowardice of these various groupings (all of which claim to be Soviet defensist) prevented them from taking a defensist position when it counted. This, in turn, predisposed them to close their eyes to the obvious connection between the victory of the Yeltsinites and the destruction of the Soviet degenerated workers' state.

The chaos and irrationality of the nascent bourgeois social order in Russia has been marked by profound social and political instability. Last October squabbling among the would-be rulers led to an armed clash between Yeltsin and Rutskoï/Khasbulatov. Unlike 1991, when the fate of the degenerated workers' state hung in the balance, the 1993 dispute was essentially a power struggle between rival counterrevolutionaries in which the working class had no side (see article this issue). But, this is not how most of the world's "Trotskyists" saw it. Many of the same organizations which in 1991 had refused to defend Yanayev and the degenerated workers' state against Yeltsin/Rutskoï and the counterrevolution, had no trouble backing Rutskoï against Yeltsin in 1993 when the restorationists fell out.

The international report to the conference also noted that the collapse of the Soviet workers' state set in motion a chain of reaction internationally which has shifted the whole political spectrum to the right. This is reflected in the capitulations by erstwhile leftists and radical nationalists from Palestine to El Salvador. Imperialist pressure on the remaining bureaucratized workers' states in Cuba and East Asia has increased enormously, and the defense of these states against counterrevolution and imperialist aggression is a crucial task for the international workers' movement. The collapse of a whole series of Stalinist regimes, which only a few years ago paraded as examples of "actually existing socialism," has also underlined the centrality of the Trotskyist program of political revolution. The seizure of direct political power by the working class, and the shattering of the bureaucratic ruling castes in the remaining deformed workers' states, is the only way to preserve the gains of the anti-capitalist social overturns and break the imperialist stranglehold.

The tasks and perspectives document adopted by the conference observed that the collapse of the USSR:

"has been an unfortunate vindication of Trotskyist theory, and a tragic refutation of both Stalinism, with its pretense that socialist societies could be built in a world still dominated by capitalism, and also of Pabloism, with its illusions in an objective historical process in which the inexorable march towards socialism proceeds automatically without the intervention of a revolutionary leadership, or even the active participation of the working class.

It has never been clearer than it is today that the historical crisis of human civilization is reducible to the crisis of proletarian leadership.”

The destruction of the Soviet Union and the deformed workers’ states of Eastern Europe has given impetus to a resurgence of fascist activity, both in West European parliaments and on the streets. This poses a deadly danger, and requires an active policy of aggressive but tactically intelligent united-front mobilizations to break up the fascist formations before they can grow. Our comrades in Germany and North America have been involved in such activities in the past few years, and such work remains an urgent task wherever the fascists raise their heads.

The “death of communism” has sparked genocidal civil wars in the Balkans and the Caucasus. It has also encouraged a renewed assault on wages, living standards and working conditions, particularly in Western Europe. The rise in chauvinist sentiments and anti-immigrant hysteria, and the drift toward protectionism and trade war among the imperialist powers, are also conditioned by the disappearance of the “communist menace.”

The capitalist offensive has not gone unchallenged. In recent months there have been a string of militant mass strikes and demonstrations across West Europe. Just as the conference was beginning, news came of the Zapatista peasant uprising in Mexico. Millions of workers and oppressed people are being driven onto the road of revolt by the capitalists’ insatiable thirst for profit. Today the masses have just as much capacity to shake the world as they did in 1917. The decisive question now, as then, is one of forging a revolutionary leadership.

### **Realignments on the Left and the Propaganda Perspective**

During the past period the bulk of the left and workers’ movement has shifted rightward. In many countries the mass social-democratic parties are barely distinguishable politically, and even in terms of social base, from liberal bourgeois parties. Various ostensibly revolutionary organizations—particularly Maoist and Moscow-line Stalinist formations—have simply disappeared from the scene, or are in the process of doing so. Many of the groupings claiming to be Trotskyist have proven to be seriously disoriented by the transformation of the bi-polar, post-war world into a period of renewed inter-imperialist global disorder. One reflection of this has been the tendency of most of the European so-called Trotskyist groups to align themselves with the protectionist wing of their own bourgeoisies during the recent referendum over the Maastricht agreement (see *1917* No. 13).

With the organized left profoundly shaken by the events of the last half decade, and the capitalists on the offensive, a section of the best working-class militants and left activists must inevitably begin to look for new answers. This presents considerable opportunities for revolutionaries, as well as for new varieties of mislead-ers.

The conference affirmed a perspective of seeking political regroupment with leftward-moving currents in-

ternationally around the central elements of the historical program of Trotskyism. To this end we will attempt, within the limits of our slender resources, to increase the range of materials available in languages other than English and German. To date we have been able to produce issues of *1917* in French, Spanish and Korean, and hope to do more in the future.

It is particularly important for us to seek to engage centrist and reformist tendencies that present themselves as continuators of the Trotskyist heritage. Such organizations necessarily embody a profound contradiction between their professed beliefs and their actual activity. They constitute the greatest political obstacle to the growth of the forces of authentic Trotskyism, and at the same time are the most important immediate source of cadre. It is essential to struggle politically with these organizations, both to win over subjectively revolutionary elements among their members and to expose their fundamental political inadequacy.

The conference confirmed *1917*’s role as the IBT’s main propaganda organ, and endorsed its policy of high-quality revolutionary journalism. The struggle for international political regroupment can only be advanced through dealing with the major programmatic questions of the day, while presenting a hard Leninist critique of the politics of the various pseudo-revolutionary organizations. The target readership of *1917* will therefore remain individuals who are already somewhat interested in far left politics. Where possible, IBT sections will also seek to produce topical local or national propaganda, which can address issues of more immediate interest to broader layers of working people and other militants.

### **For a Working-Class Orientation**

Our appetite to maintain an aggressively programmatic thrust in all activities was echoed in delegate reports on trade-union work. The conference affirmed the Bolshevik perspective of building communist caucuses in the unions, rather than reformist “rank-and-file” movements, on a low-common-denominator “anti-bureaucratic” platform. Only by forging programmatically based caucuses and advancing a consistent Marxist critique of the class-collaborationism of the trade-union officialdom can revolutionaries win mass support within the working class.

Where the forces do not exist to launch caucuses, individual communists can still intervene in particular union battles, and even stand for elected positions. Active participation in the struggles confronting the class can provide valuable experience in doing mass work and establishing credentials as class-struggle militants. This can help lay the basis for undertaking larger-scale activity in the future as our forces increase.

### **Family Values and Moral Panics**

One of the features of the rightward political shift internationally is the bourgeois ideological offensive pushing “traditional family values,” as the classical nuclear family is undermined by the proliferation of single-parent or other non-traditional living arrangements, as

well as the large-scale integration of women into the workforce. Conference delegates agreed that it is important for the IBT to produce more material dealing with questions related to “sexual politics.”

Among the documents submitted for discussion and approved by the conference was a historical piece on the question of homosexual oppression. The issue of pedophilia, and how it should be addressed by revolutionaries, was also a subject of discussion. As Marxists we reject age-of-consent laws because they prescribe an arbitrary threshold, decreeing that, as a matter of law, consent cannot be given by a person below a certain age. The key issue in every case is that of meaningful consent. The conference also unanimously endorsed a position of flat opposition to censorship of “pornography”—whether by the state, or by pseudo-leftist or feminist “direct action” vigilantes.

### **For Leninism!**

The conference reviewed the internal political struggles in each of our sections. Over the past three years all IBT sections have had disaffected (and usually pretty demoralized) individuals resign over various issues. In each case, the IBT accorded its dissidents ample opportunity to argue for their views, and in general conducted the internal political struggles in an exemplary fashion.

An important discussion at the conference revolved

around the final stage in the ratification of the rules and guidelines for the IBT. A series of drafts had been circulating within the organization for over two years prior to the conference and had been the subject of a good deal of discussion. The end result is based closely on the rules of the revolutionary Spartacist League of the 1960s, which were in turn derived from those of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) of the 1930s, and the early Comintern.

We are a very small group of people, with very limited resources, who are widely dispersed over the face of the globe. However, the first fully delegated conference of the IBT registered considerable progress in moving toward a more cohesive and politically homogeneous organization. Our tasks are immense, but the Bolshevik tradition that we seek to uphold is equal to them. As the tasks and perspectives document concluded:

“Our primary strategic objective at this point is to establish ourselves as a pole of regroupment internationally for those who are committed to struggle to realize the program of consistently revolutionary communism, i.e., ‘orthodox’ Trotskyism. If we misconstrue our task as any form of substitution for the working class, or as a substitution for the future vanguard party of the working class, then it is completely impossible. Our job is historically crucial, but also historically achievable so long as we face the immediate situation with a modest list of appropriate objectives.”