

Revolutionary Continuity & the Split in the Fourth International

The following letter, which deals with the historic split of the Trotskyist movement in the early 1950s, was addressed to the German Gruppe IV. Internationale [GIVI]. Like the Bolshevik Tendency, GIVI was founded by former cadres of the international Spartacist tendency. The letter is a response to GIVI's equation of the revisionist International Secretariat of the Fourth International (IS), headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, with the forces organized as the International Committee of the Fourth International (IC), initiated by the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The 1963 "reunification" between the SWP and Pablo's International Secretariat, which produced the United Secretariat (USec), was sealed by the expulsion of the SWP's Revolutionary Tendency (forerunner of the Spartacist League—SL). The RT opposed the reunification and defended the original split with the Pablo current as "essential to the preservation of a principled revolutionary movement."

14 March 1989

Comrades:

We have discussed your document, *Continuity or New Program—A False Alternative*, and we find ourselves in sharp disagreement with your conclusion that the 1951-53 split was essentially politically inconsequential. In our view this represents a step away from the tradition from which both of our organizations derive.

Let us say at the outset that our knowledge of the political activity of the IC sections outside North America in the 1950s is limited. What we do know about their activity is not impressive, to say the least. We are somewhat more familiar with the record of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in this period which shows consistent rightward motion, including the call on the U.S. imperialist army to act as an instrument of struggle against racism.

We consider "Genesis of Pabloism," [*Spartacist* No. 21, Fall 1972], the Spartacist League's major study of the crisis of postwar Trotskyism, to be a fine document. As you point out, it stops at 1954—and while it refers to the activity of the Healy grouping within the Labour Party as "arch-Pabloist...opportunism," it omits mention of the IC's craven political adaptation to Messali Hadj in Algeria, or Peron in Argentina. "Genesis of Pabloism" also ignores the Bolivian disaster in 1952 and the role of the Cannon leadership in covering up for the Menshevism of the POR's [Partido Obrero Revolucionario] "critical support" to the bourgeois-nationalist MNR [Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario] government. This is a particularly significant omission because of the existence of a tendency within the SWP's Los Angeles branch (the Vern-Ryan grouping) which explicitly criticized this policy *at the time*.

The SL's observation that a key to forging an authentic Trotskyist current internationally is "an under-

standing of the characteristics and causes of Pabloist revisionism and the flawed response of the anti-Pabloists who fought, too little and too late, on national terrain while in practice abandoning the world movement" is one with which we heartily agree. We make no excuses for the national parochialism of the Cannon leadership, nor its conception of a federated "international," nor its abstention from criticism of the opportunism of its bloc partners. Nor do we agree with the Proletarian Military Policy, nor the positions taken on Yugoslavia and China.

At the same time, it is necessary to judge political currents in their totality, taking into account their history and the social reality which they confronted. The world after World War II was a very different place than Trotsky had projected. The SWP was socially isolated with an aging cadre under tremendous pressure from the domestic witchhunt. It was clearly badly disoriented by the postwar events and poorly equipped to understand or deal with them theoretically. The Cannon leadership largely shared, or at least acquiesced to, the "new world reality" impressionism of Pablo which led inexorably to the conclusion that many of the lessons of the "old Trotskyism" no longer applied. This is evidenced by the SWP's support for the decisions of the 1951 Third World Congress.

But, as the fight with Cochran revealed, it would be a mistake to simply *equate* Cannon and Pablo. The SWP leadership, while it was slipping badly, was not definitively *hardened* around this revisionism. When confronted with the implications of the liquidationist course of the Pabloites on their own domestic terrain, the Cannon leadership resisted. In this fight we take a side, without endorsing the way the fight was conducted or even many of the arguments used by the majority—for example, Hansen's defense of the proposition that Stalinism is always and everywhere "counterrevolutionary through and through."

While the direction of evolution of the Cochranites was sufficiently clear at the time of their suspension from the SWP, it became even more blatant when they set up shop for themselves. Six months after leaving the SWP they brazenly declared that in the postwar period: "...there has been a clear test of the ability of Trotskyism to create an independent movement on a program broadly confirmed by the new revolutionary developments...the old Trotskyist perspective has become outmoded. As before the war, the vanguard seeks to realize its revolutionary aspirations within the old parties, leaving no room for a new revolutionary mass organization. Thus the Trotskyist movement...was doomed to remain isolated. The test was made for a whole historic era, both in periods of reaction and revolution, and is therefore a decisive one."

—"Our Orientation," reprinted in *International Secretariat Documents 1951-54*, Vol. 4

We think that the PCI [Parti Communiste Internationaliste] leadership was correct in voting against the main document of the IS leadership at the 1951 Congress. The fact that the SWP did not support them in this, or that the PCI leadership did not carry out this struggle to the end, does not negate the fact that there was a significant political differentiation which clearly had a left/right axis. You admit that, “in the document *Where Is Comrade Pablo Going?* written by Favre/Bleibtreu in June 1951, they tried to defend Trotskyism” but conclude that because they “capitulated to the bureaucratic maneuvers of the Pabloites within the PCI” and unfortunately retreated from their earlier opposition to the line adopted by the Third World Congress, they “sealed their fate.” While this maneuver obviously significantly weakened their political opposition to the new revisionism, the fact is that they did continue to oppose the Pablo leadership and their French adherents. The next year Bleibtreu agreed with Healy and a representative of the Swiss section to “undertake together the defense of Trotskyism against Pablist revisionism and the struggle against the liquidation of the Fourth International” at the upcoming Fourth World Congress (*International Committee Documents 1951-54*, Vol. 2). Cannon and the SWP leadership apparently aborted this with their “Open Letter,” issued the next month.

It is quite correct to point to the inconsistencies and inadequacies of the PCI and SWP, and the passive and inadequate fashion in which they carried out the fight against the Pabloist leadership. “Genesis of Pabloism” is certainly not uncritical on this count:

“Despite a considerable body of mythology to the contrary, both the PCI and SWP vacillated when revisionism manifested itself at the head of the Fourth International, balking only at applying it to their own sections. Both groups compromised themselves by uneasy acquiescence (combined in the case of the PCI with sporadic resistance) to Pablo’s policies until the suicidal organizational consequences to their sections necessitated sharp fights. Both abdicated the responsibility to take the fight against revisionism into every body and every section of the Fourth International....The IC from its inception was only a paper international tendency consisting of those groups which had already had splits between pro-Pabloist and orthodox wings.”

You observe that: “The sound political impulse to fight Pabloism, which had been developed by some IC components, was half-hearted in a programmatic sense and a disaster concerning its political practice.” True enough, but though the fight against Pabloism was profoundly flawed, it was not without political substance. The issues posed in the SWP’s Open Letter (the East German uprising and the French general strike) were not inconsequential. It is therefore a mistake to equate the positions adopted by the IC sections on these events with those of the Pabloites. As in the Cochran fight, *despite* our criticisms of Cannon et al, we cannot accept the position that this was a case of two “complementary” revisionist positions which were qualitatively similar. That is why the course toward “reunification” with the Pabloists over a shared capitulation to Castroism was a significant development, which signalled the irreversible consolidation of the SWP leadership around

revisionism, while simultaneously initiating the Revolutionary Tendency (RT).

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We find your notion of “continuity” to be rather one-sided. You suggest that “the exponents of ‘continuity’” see it as “an uninterrupted development of Trotskyism.” This is an easy position to argue against, but it is a simplification which ignores the crucial distinction between “developing” Trotskyism and defending it—even if partially and inadequately. We do not view “continuity” as a kind of metaphysical laying on of hands which can guarantee the apostolic succession of authentic Trotskyism. Nor does it consist in simply repeating the answers to yesterday’s problems in response to the new questions which arise today.

The fight against Pabloism in the SWP meant that, unlike the Cochranite formation, it possessed the capacity for its own political regeneration. This is borne out by the fact that the political demarcation of 1951-53 was a starting point for the RT within the SWP eight years later, when the latter finally converged with the IS leadership. In some important ways the RT/SL represented a positive *development* of Trotskyism after Trotsky—something that is not true of any other international current. But it did so on the basis of the prior struggles upon which it was based, including the fight against Pabloism in the early 1950s, imperfect as the latter was.

It is at least abstractly possible that a genuinely revolutionary proletarian current could arise somewhere in the world which would be capable of developing autonomously the essential programmatic positions of Trotskyism and applying them to such difficult problems as interpenetrated peoples in Israel/Palestine, the popular front, special oppression, the genesis of Cuba and the other deformed workers states, without ever learning of the existence of the Spartacist tendency or the RT or the IC or even Trotsky.

But the fact is that the RT was not replicated, to our knowledge, in any other ostensibly Trotskyist grouping internationally. Nor have any of the myriad currents spawned from the New Left/Maoist movement, in its various national permutations, spontaneously approximated the program of revolutionary Marxism defended and developed by the RT/SL.

It is in this sense that the question of continuity has meaning. It has a great deal to do with answering questions about how revolutionaries should have responded to various difficult problems posed by the international class struggle. The fact that the RT developed in the SWP and not, for example, in Livio Maitan’s Italian organization in the early 1960s, is not entirely fortuitous. In its 1962 founding document “In Defense of a Revolutionary Perspective,” the RT posed itself as the continuator of the struggle against Pabloism begun in 1953.

“In 1953, our party, in the ‘Open Letter’ (*Militant*, 11/11/53), declared that ‘*The lines of cleavage between Pablo’s revisionism and Orthodox Trotskyism are so deep that no compromise is possible either politically or organizationally.*’ The political evaluation of Pabloism as revisionism is as correct now as it was then and must be the basis for any Trotskyist approach to this tendency.”

The RT’s founding document charged that, “the SWP

leadership has accepted the central theoretical position of Pabloite revisionism.” The RT was critical from the outset of the conduct of the IC’s struggle against the Pabloists, as well as the SWP’s temporizing and American exceptionalism. Yet it stood on the SWP’s eventual declaration of intent to “carry through a political struggle against Pabloism on a world scale in order to maintain its domestic revolutionary perspective.”

While standing on the fight against Pabloism in the SWP in 1953, the RT did not take the position that the IC was the simple lineal continuity of the Fourth International. Indeed, the Spartacist grouping had to struggle to successfully *reestablish* revolutionary political continuity. In its resolution on the world movement presented at the 1963 SWP Convention in counterposition to the majority’s document motivating “reunification” with the IS, the RT noted, “the disappearance of the Fourth International as a meaningful structure” while correctly arguing that reunification with the Pabloists was “a step away from, not toward, the genuine rebirth of the Fourth International.”

At the London Conference in 1966 the Spartacist group stated forthrightly that “Pabloism has been opposed within the movement by a bad ‘orthodoxy’ represented until the last few years by the example of Cannon.” Robertson noted further that:

“After 1950, Pabloism dominated the F.I.; only when the fruits of Pabloism were clear did a section of the F.I. pull back. In our opinion, the ‘orthodox’ movement has still to face up to the *new* theoretical problems which rendered it susceptible to Pabloism in 1943-50 and gave rise to a ragged, partial split in 1952-54.”

We see our struggle, in the first instance, as one to ensure that the precious political legacy of the RT and the revolutionary SL is not lost with the irreversible slide of its leadership into political banditry. Of course we do not contend that *only* groupings emerging from the RT/SL can be revolutionary, but we do think that would-be revolutionaries who study the history of the

Trotskyist movement must come to see that in a vital programmatic sense the RT/SL tradition, and it alone, represents the authentic continuity of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International under Trotsky. And this continuity itself has a history, one which runs through the “ragged” and “partial” split that produced the “paper international tendency” that was the IC.

Your attitude to the tradition of the RT/SL seems, to us, ambiguous. On the one hand it seems that you find our declaration in the first issue of the *Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt* that we proposed to act as a “beacon of orthodox Spartacism” objectionable, and view our position on the 1951-53 split as a “hereditary vice.” On the other hand you “take into consideration the revolutionary heritage of...the iSt” without necessarily identifying yourselves too closely with it. Indeed you consider that the iSt *remains* revolutionary, and yet even though it is perhaps fifty times larger than yourselves, you do not propose unification. It seems to us that this is a peculiar kind of indifferentism on the question of revolutionary continuity. This impression is reinforced with your assertion that your assessment of:

“the points of break in the development of Trotskyism in no way expresses neutrality or agnosticism, it only evades the time-machine-effect: How would we have acted, if...? This method is inoperational.”

We fail to see any merit in “evading” the issues posed in the organizational breakup of the Trotskyist movement. What seems “inoperational” in this is your claim not to be agnostic or neutral, at least as regards the IC/IS split. If indeed the two sides in the 1951-53 fight were complementary forms of revisionism (or “centrist equivalent[s]”), you *must* be neutral in the falling out; as we are, for instance, in the breakup of the Lambertiste/Morenoite bloc several years ago.

Fraternally,
Bolshevik Tendency