

# Former SYC Member Joins IBT Getting Russia Right

The following letter was distributed at a Partisan Defense Committee event in New York in December 1994.

December 9, 1994

To the *Workers Vanguard* Editorial Board:

Dear Comrades,

The Spartacist League makes the point in a recent bulletin they published (*Yugoslavia, East Europe, and the Fourth International: The Evolution of Pabloist Liquidationism* by Jan Norden) that one of the historical precedents that led to the rise of Ernest Mandel's revisionism was the inability of the Fourth International to understand the social transformations in post-war Eastern Europe. Yet, more than three years since August 1991, the SL still can't say when the USSR ceased to exist as a workers' state.

The SL writes that Yeltsin carried out a "piecemeal consolidation of a capitalist state" (WV No. 564). In practice that could mean that Russia was 80% a workers' state and 20% a capitalist state, then 40% a workers' state, 60% a capitalist state, etc. This is ridiculous! Revolution and counterrevolution are not piecemeal processes. To say they are goes against the Marxist teachings on the state. Only one class can hold state power at any one time, the working class or the capitalist class. The SL once understood all this: in "The Genesis of Pabloism" it wrote of Ernest Mandel's theory of revolution that "the 'revolution' was implicitly redefined as a metaphysical process enduring continuously and progressing inevitably toward victory, rather than a sharp and necessarily time-limited confrontation over the question of state power, the outcome of which will shape the entire subsequent period" (*Spartacist*, No. 21, Fall 1972).

In the 1960s, Joseph Hansen and the Pabloites said that countries like Algeria had "Workers' and Farmers'" governments presiding over bourgeois states, which would, they implied, gradually be transformed into proletarian dictatorships. In the 1980s the Socialist Workers Party used this phrase to describe Nicaragua. Years earlier, Jim Robertson correctly observed: "we should be clear what is meant by a workers government. It is nothing other than the dictatorship of the proletariat" ("On the United Front," *Young Communist Bulletin* No. 3, 1976). Is the SL now implying that, in a similar fashion, the USSR under Yeltsin was initially a workers' state with a bourgeois government, which was gradually transformed into a bourgeois state at some unknown later point?

If, as the SL says, program generates theory, what program could have generated the theory of "piecemeal" counterrevolution in the USSR? Trotsky would have denounced this as "reformism in reverse." The answer is in August 1991, when counterrevolution really triumphed, the SL abstained from the showdown between Yeltsin and the Stalinist coup makers, i.e., did not support either side militarily. Their theory tries to cover this up by denying the significance of Yeltsin's victory, but they themselves wrote in their recent international conference document, "The August 1991 events ('coup' and 'countercoup') appear to have been decisive in the direction of developments in the SU," adding, "but only those who are under the sway of capitalist ideology would have been hasty to draw this

conclusion" (*Spartacist* No. 47-48, Winter 1992-93). That means that the SL knows it's wrong but refuses to admit it. What makes it so difficult for the SL to admit to being wrong is the fact that one of their main competitors in the workers' movement, the International Bolshevik Tendency, was right in siding with the Stalinist coup in defense of the gains of October, and recognizing its defeat as the death of the Soviet workers' state. Trotsky called the SL's position "prestige politics." Any organization that puts the prestige of its leadership above telling the working class the truth has lost its revolutionary purpose.

What was the basis for this mistake? In the above-cited pamphlet on Yugoslavia and the Fourth International, Jan Norden makes the correct point that, while it was a strategic task for the Trotskyist movement to defend the USSR, its strategic line was world socialist revolution. The idea that the strategic line of the workers' movement should be the defense of the USSR is a Pabloist or Stalinist conception. Yet this implicit two-worldist conception tended to color the SL's view for much of the 1980s. From this they drew the conclusion, as was written in a recent issue of *Spartacist Canada* (No. 100) that what you had was a "bipolar world—polarized between the imperialist powers and the Soviet bloc." That polarization, though, was only a reflection of the general class struggle between workers and capitalists, and did not replace it. The SL, though, started seeking revolutionary virtue in the Stalinist bureaucracy. This was shown when, for example, they proclaimed themselves the "Yuri Andropov Brigade" and then later wrote a eulogy for Yuri Andropov, butcher of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, claiming, among other flattering things, that he made "no overt betrayals on behalf of imperialism" (WV No. 348, 17 February 1984).

While correctly recognizing the dual character of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and rejecting the view that it was counterrevolutionary through and through, the SL also in practice rejected Trotsky's analysis that the Stalinist bureaucratic caste was "in essence representative of the tendency toward capitalist restoration" ("Against Pabloist Revisionism," as quoted in Norden's "Yugoslavia and the Fourth International"). The SL's conception of the Stalinist bureaucracy was evolving toward seeing them as subjective communists with an insufficient program. In truth, they were for the most part a bunch of cynical careerists who defended the Soviet Union only to defend their privileges, not out of principled belief in an egalitarian, classless society. The SL's strategy was oriented not so much to the working class, but to the "Reiss faction" within the Stalinist bureaucracy, which they thought would emerge spontaneously. Thus in the DDR (East Germany) they looked to a section of the Stalinist bureaucracy to lead a non-existent "political revolution," raising the slogan of "unity with the SED." When, rather than being a bulwark of Soviet defensism, the Stalinists all over Eastern Europe either participated in, or capitulated without a fight to, capitalist restoration, the SL felt burned. The Stalinists' actions shouldn't have come as a surprise to genuine Marxists; after all, Trotsky himself wrote that "a bourgeois restoration would

probably have to clean out fewer people (from the state apparatus) than a revolutionary party” (quoted in *How the Soviet Workers State Was Strangled*). When, in August 1991, a section of the Stalinist bureaucracy finally did rise up in defense of their privileges, the SL abstained.

While I was in the Spartacus Youth Club, I was told by SL members, in response to some of my arguments, that “piecemeal consolidation” of state power was not meant to be a historical prognosis, but merely described what happened. One is reminded of those Trotskyists in the 1950s who had a theoretically incorrect description of Stalinism as being counterrevolutionary through and through. Under changed historical circumstances, they came down on the wrong side of the Cold War. Likewise, under changed

historical circumstances, the SL’s theoretical error could lead them to start talking about “structural reforms,” just like Ernest Mandel. If uncorrected in the long run, bad theory leads to bad program.

Despite what Michel Pablo, Joseph Hansen and Ernest Mandel said, there are no unconscious Marxists. The crisis of mankind is the crisis of revolutionary leadership, but the ICL cannot be the basis for that leadership. As a former member of the Spartacus Youth Club, I now support the Bolshevik Tendency.

For the Rebirth of the Fourth International,  
Semeon G.