
Whatever Happened to the Spartacist League?

INTERNATIONAL BOLSHEVIK TENDENCY

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PO Box 332, Adelaide St. Strn., Toronto, Canada M5C 2J4
PO Box 405, Cooper Station, New York, NY, USA 10276
BCM Box 4771, London, WC1N 3XX, Britain
Box 9671, Wellington, New Zealand
Postfach 100601, 47006 Duisburg, Germany

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Whatever Happened to the Spartacist League? 1

Appendix No. 1

Debate in the ICL Over Yeltsin's Coup

1.1 On the Counterrevolution in Russia Tony R., London, 26 June 2003	20
1.2 ['Our Position on the Russian Question'] Bonnie B., New York, 27 June 2003	22
1.3 On the Counterrevolution in the USSR Ben M., London, 28 June 2003	23
1.4 The Proletariat is Key Ralf Neuer, 29 June 2003	25
1.5 Smoke and Mirrors Over August '91: Beware BT's 'Allegory of the Cave' (A Reply to Comrade Tony) Chuck, Toronto, 30 June 2003	26
1.6 On Yeltsin's Coup Ed C., Chicago, 1 July 2003	27
1.7 Dating the Counterrevolution—A Reply to Comrade Tony's document Olly, London, 3 July 2003	28
1.8 On the Capitalist Counterrevolution in the USSR—A Reply to Tony R Edward, London, 3 July 2003	29
1.9 Once Again on Counterrevolution in Russia Tony R., London, 10 July 2003	31

Appendix No. 2

ICL vs. IBT on Stalinism & Soviet Defensism.	37
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Stalinophilia, Stalinophobia, Flinches & Opportunism: Whatever Happened to the Spartacist League?

In the Spring 2004 issue of *Spartacist* (No. 58), the International Communist League (ICL) characterizes its recent political record as one of “opportunist lunges,” “sectarian moralism” and an “increasingly abstract and sterile approach to politics,” concluding that: “An inability to deal with the world created by the fall of the USSR, and the consequent retrogression in consciousness, lies at the root of the ICL’s current crisis.” This is a significant admission, given that the leaders of the Spartacist League/U.S. (SL—the ICL mothership) have always claimed a special expertise on the “Russian Question.” Capitalist restoration in the Soviet bloc represented a world-historic defeat for the international workers’ movement, demoralizing millions of leftists. It produced enormous confusion within the ICL, eroded the self-confidence of its cadre and undermined the political authority of the leadership. But it is not the root cause of the SL/ICL’s malaise.

Long-time readers of *Spartacist* may recall a similarly “candid and critical assessment” that appeared a decade earlier in the Autumn 1994 issue (No. 51) following the SL’s Ninth Conference, which reported “flare-ups of philistinism,” “impressionism,” “sectarian posturing,” “time-serving” and the “passive and propagandist (at best) or abstentionist (at worst)” appetites of the group’s “office-bound leadership.” We commented at the time:

“This unflattering self-portrait undoubtedly reflects the thinking of [SL founder/leader] James Robertson, who, from his vantage point of semi-retirement in the Bay Area, can look upon the organization he built with greater detachment. He is obviously not pleased with what he sees. But, precisely because the Spartacist League is his own creature, Robertson cannot provide a plausible explanation of what went wrong.”

—“A Dismal Symmetry,” 1917 No. 15, 1995

The 1994 *Spartacist* piece also attributed the SL’s morbid condition to the demise of the Soviet Union, and complained that the victory of counterrevolution “has ushered in a fundamentally new, turbulent and radically different period in world history” for which there are no “close historical precedents to guide our analysis and political line.” But the ICL’s admitted “inability to deal with the world created by the fall of the USSR” can hardly be explained by the absence of “historical precedents,” as the essential issues were addressed by Leon Trotsky in his brilliant analysis of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union.

Unlike the Stalinist Communist Parties constructed on the basis of loyalty to the Soviet bureaucracy, the Spartacist League identified with Trotsky’s view of the Stalinist ruling caste in the USSR as an unstable, parasitic and historically transitory formation that functioned as the “organ of the world bourgeoisie within the workers’ state.”¹ The revolutionary SL of the 1970s combined intransigent Soviet defensism with denunciations of the crimes of the bureaucracy (see, for example, “Stop Stalinist ‘Psychiatric’ Torture in the USSR!,” *Workers Vanguard* [WV] No. 96, 13 February 1976).

During the 1980s, however, the SL leadership began to depart from its Trotskyist program with a series of Stalinophilic gestures. The resulting confusion, combined with the leadership’s subsequent lurch in a symmetrically Stalinophobic direction, accounts for much of the ICL’s ideological disarray over the Soviet collapse. Yet why would the cadres of a Trotskyist organization (which the SL was in the 1960s and 70s) swallow such deviations in the first place? The explanation lies in the incremental transformation of the SL from a revolutionary, democratic-centralist organization into a group in which the fundamental organizing principle is unquestioning obedience to the leadership in general, and founder/leader James M. Robertson in particular. The poisoned internal regime of the SL was both the initial departure from Leninism and the framework within which all subsequent deviations developed.

The transformation of the SL took place over several years, during which its internal life was dominated by repeated, and increasingly apolitical, authority fights and purges. By 1982, the predecessor of the International Bolshevik Tendency estimated that:

“the central core of the leadership of the SL is today too consciously cynical to be capable of spontaneous self-reform. The fact that the organizational abusiveness of the regime has developed largely as a means of bureaucratically short-cutting the expenditure of time, energy, cadres and opportunities which is demanded by the repetitive educational process by which a Bolshevik party retains and develops its older members while politically assimilating its newer ones, (not to mention the draining effect of a faction fight) does not make it any less destructive.”

—*Declaration of an External Tendency of the iSt*
[international Spartacist tendency], October 1982

We also observed that the “hyper-centralist, paranoid and personalist characteristics” of the SL’s internal regime “have reached a point where they call into question both the possibility of significantly enlarging the organization and of reproducing Trotskyist cadres within it.” This assessment was confirmed a few years later when Ed Clarkson, leader of the SL’s Chicago branch, publicly complained that “what we tend to get in struggles in the youth are confessionals and denunciations, as opposed to clarifying fights.” Clarkson suggested to the browbeaten and demoralized youth:

“If you’re to develop in the way Lenin proposes, it requires on the level of the individual some capacity for self-assertion, which used to be the hallmark of youth, but which seems to have strangely disappeared in the past decade or so.”

—“Leninist Tactics and the Road to Workers Power,”
Young Spartacus, No. 131, November 1985

But this passivity was hardly inexplicable given that, in 1978, most of the leaders of the Spartacus Youth League (SYL) had been driven out of the group in an explicitly “sub-political” purge orchestrated by Robertson himself. A new, more obsequious, youth leadership was installed, but the SYL

never recovered and was finally mothballed in 1986. This was just the first in a series of leadership-initiated purges that swept through virtually every unit of the international Spartacist tendency (iSt) over the next few years. The result was the qualitative degeneration of the SL/iSt from an organization with a highly political cadre and a healthy internal life into a group in which the leadership openly bragged of its ability to intimidate the membership.

In our 1985 document “The Road to Jimstown” we sketched the whole process, with reference to the various formal political departures that accompanied it, noting that:

“Such erratic programmatic gyrations in response to immediately perceived interests are characteristic of political banditry—a peculiar and particularly cynical form of centrism.”

We concluded:

“The SL can no longer be viewed as some sort of errant revolutionary organization with a bureaucratic regime. Rather it is the political equivalent of the pre-Qaddafi Healyites of the late 1960s; cynical former Trotskyist political bandits held together by obedience to an authoritarian lider maximo.”

By the early 1980s, the SL was an organization with an arid internal life in which petty authority fights and witchhunts (inevitably directed from the top) took the place of substantive political discussion and debate.² Many cadres were forced out, others got tired and quit, but enough stayed to maintain the SL as a viable player on the American left. Yet pressures generated inside the group were increasingly manifest in the peculiar and frequently obnoxious behavior of its members in their public political activity. The problem persists to this day, despite periodic memos from the leadership instructing members to try to refrain from appearing as “pests.”

Loosening the Screws

In recent years the SL leadership has become seriously concerned by difficulties in recruiting and retaining new members. Youth who uncritically accept everything they are told frequently turn out to be of limited value. In an attempt to attract and integrate higher quality individuals, the reins have been loosened somewhat, and more emphasis is now being placed on education and persuasion rather than intimidation. At the same time, the leadership is trying to make the ICL’s political line more coherent by repudiating some of the particularly absurd and outlandish positions taken in the past. While the positions to be corrected, and the parameters of

permissible criticism, remain the exclusive prerogative of Robertson and his intimates, by a strange coincidence most of the errors identified happen to be ones that we and/or Jan Norden’s Internationalist Group (IG) have previously noted.

The *Spartacist* article reports that the ICL’s 2003 conference occurred after an “intense internal discussion” was triggered by our exposure of a vulgar chauvinist reference to Kurds as “Turds” by Robertson 25 years earlier.³ The attempt by the *WV* editorial board to sidestep the question resulted in a “pre-conference discussion [that] was dominated by an attempt to grapple with the political drift from our revolutionary purpose that took graphic expression in the *WV* Editorial Board’s actions.”⁴ To rectify this problem, the ICL conference elected a new, more atomized, international leadership designed to be less capable of acting independently.

‘Impatience and Impressionism’

The *Spartacist* account admits to some pretty serious mistakes in the past period. However, instead of a thorough examination of how these errors originated, and why they have been tenaciously defended for so many years, the article glibly ascribes all problems to a lack of political depth in the ICL cadre: “Impatience and impressionism, epitomized by the likes of Michel Pablo, are the characteristic weaknesses of cadre who have been schooled in only one historical period....”

True enough. But where exactly were the supreme leader and his clique when all these errors were being made? The SL is a very tightly disciplined organization in which all significant policy decisions are made, or at least reviewed, by the top leadership. And the SL’s core cadre, who are now mostly in their 50s or 60s, have been politically active for 30 or 40 years. The political weaknesses of the SL are indisputable, but they can hardly be attributed to youthful inexperience.

Lenin observed that in the socialist movement opportunism tends to originate in an underestimation of the revolutionary potential of the working class. One of the first manifestations of the SL leadership’s “impatience and impressionism” was its conscious decision in the early 1980s to liquidate the group’s trade-union work.⁵ In our 1982 declaration we observed that:

“...the central leadership of the SL/US has been running the film of fraction building in reverse. This was foreshadowed by their repeatedly expressed fears that the independent sense of social reality gained by cadre with a modest but real base in the workforce could someday provide a focus for opposition within the organization. Under the banner of

2 See: “The Robertson School of Party Building,” 1917 No. 1, Winter 1986

3 While the IG (which was driven out of the ICL in 1996) is referred to at various points in the *Spartacist* article, the IBT is essentially ignored (except for the flap over Robertson’s “Turds” comment), even though the SL implicitly accepted our criticisms of their line on both the 1999 Seattle anti-globalization demonstration and the 2001 attack on the Pentagon (discussed below). Part of the reason the SL pays more attention to Norden et al is because the IG’s tendency to exaggerate the ICL’s political errors (e.g., its bogus claim that in 2003 the SL did not take a U.S. defeatist position on Iraq) makes it an easier target for counter-punching, but the main reason is that the IG retains a much closer connection to the SL cadre. The IG’s willingness to defend all the SL’s mistakes prior to 1996 naturally inclines the ICL ranks to view them as closer politically, which they are.

On many disputed issues the IG occupies a position somewhere between that of the IBT and the ICL. For example, the IG has so far maintained strict radio silence on Robertson’s chauvinist “Turds” comment which so roiled the ICL. Unwilling to sign his name to *WV*’s ridiculous alibi, Norden sees no profit in unnecessarily antagonizing the SL membership just for the sake of telling the truth. So the IG says nothing. We have discussed the IG’s reluctance to address the history of the SL’s political degeneration in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 6 (see in particular our letter of 15 December 1995).

4 See our pamphlet *Kurdistan & the Struggle for National Liberation* for complete documentation.

5 In the late 1970s, SL-supported caucuses were the chief oppositional formations in both the Communications Workers of America and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. SL supporters also had a toehold in the United Auto Workers and were active in several other unions as well.

‘trade union consciousness is bourgeois consciousness’ and with many references to the spectre of Bert Cochran, Foster, Nelson and Robertson proceeded to attempt to demoralize, politically destroy and eventually drive out most of the SL’s leading working class spokesmen (particularly on the West Coast) and many of the trade union cadre....”

—*Declaration of an External Tendency of the iSt*,
October 1982

In June 1983 we produced a pamphlet (*Stop the Liquidation of the Trade Union Work!*) documenting the withdrawal from the unions that the leadership carried out under the guise of turning the SL into a “70 percent black party.” In fact, as we pointed out, abandoning hard-won toeholds in the organized working class only made it more difficult for the SL to build a base in the black proletariat.

Revisionism on the Russian Question— From Hailing Brezhnev’s Foreign Policy...

While the SL’s oft-repeated assertion that “We Are the Party of the Russian Revolution” was never taken seriously by anyone outside the group, internally the leadership’s claim to special competence on the Russian question was an important element of its political authority. The SL in the early 1980s distinguished itself from its pseudo-Trotskyist competitors by backing the Soviet Army against the imperialist-sponsored Afghan *mujahedin*, and also by its forthright opposition to the capitalist-restorationist leaders of Polish *Solidarnosc*. Yet since then, the SL’s record on the Russian question has been characterized by a continuing series of revisionist zig-zags.⁶

The recent *Spartacist* article admits to some important deviations on the Russian question, but, in the interest of preserving the prestige of the leadership, makes no serious

attempt to politically account for these failures or to trace their origin and development. The IG’s commentary on the SL’s self-criticism⁷ contains some insightful observations, but shrinks from any analysis of the roots of the problem, and is largely concerned with showing that prior to their own departure in 1996, all was well in Jimstown.⁸ But this does not square with the facts.

To our knowledge, the Robertson leadership’s first consciously cynical revision on the Russian question⁹ occurred in September 1981 at the national conference of the Troztkistische Liga Deutschlands (TLD) when the iSt’s International Executive Committee presented a motion pledging to “take responsibility in advance for whatever idiocies and atrocities [the Polish Stalinists] may commit” in the suppression of *Solidarnosc*. We commented:

“Trotskyists give unconditional *military* support to Stalinist regimes battling internal counterrevolution (i.e., *Solidarnosc*) or external capitalist forces (i.e., Finland 1940). This is quite a different matter than extending *political* support to the Stalinists. We take *no* responsibility for the crimes of the Stalinists against the working people—whether in the course of military defense of proletarian property forms or otherwise. Military support is extended *despite* such crimes.”

—“Poland: No Responsibility for Stalinist Crimes!,”
Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt No. 1,
August 1983

The ICL’s Stalinophilic motion was intended as a loyalty test, and a smokescreen for purging those TLD cadres who refused to blindly endorse this blatant revisionism as Shachtmanites.¹⁰ Meanwhile, in its public press, the iSt maintained a formally correct posture on the question.¹¹

This episode prefigured an increasingly Stalinophilic tilt

6 In one of his “conversations with Wohlforth” (*Marxist Bulletin* No. 3 pt. iv, 8 October 1965 session) James Robertson remarked: “‘Centrist’ means nothing if not flux, change, motion, heterogenous elements lumped together... [C]entrist means that in the minds of the members are all sorts of contradictory ideas.”

7 “Post-Soviet SL/ICL: New Zigzags on the Centrist Road,” *Internationalist*, No. 19, Summer 2004

8 See: “IG: Robertsonites in Denial—Willful Blindness,” 1917 No. 20, 1998

9 The first publicly anti-Trotskyist act by the SL leadership that we identified occurred a few months earlier when Spartacist League supporters marched under the flag of the military wing of the Salvadoran popular front, the FMLN, in Washington D.C. In our founding declaration we observed that, “some SL’ers in the Anti-Imperialist Contingents carried the flag of Trotsky’s Fourth International while others held high the banner of the popular front” and asked, “what was the flag of the popular front doing in a Trotskyist contingent?” We characterized this as “a disturbing indication of the organization’s willingness to blur the edges of an essential question of principle, at least episodically, in the interests of short-term popularity.”

10 *Spartacist Canada* No. 71, Summer 1988, attacked our assertion that “the key question in Nicaragua today in our view is *not* the defense of the Soviet Union, that’s not the central question that’s posed there today, but rather the defense of the *Nicaraguan* Revolution.” According to the Robertsonites this paralleled Max Shachtman’s refusal to side with Russia against Finland in 1939: “For him then, as for the BT now, defense of the USSR was never ‘the central question,’ and thus never to be fought for where it counts.” We replied:

“It’s hard to understand how any ostensible Trotskyists could disagree with this statement two weeks after the signing of the Sapoa accords, where the Sandinistas promised to ‘democratize’ in accordance to the dictates of the Central American neo-colonial rulers and Washington’s mercenary contras. But for the TL this simple observation is evidence of...Shachtmanism!....

“Perhaps to atone for the sins of founder/leader James Robertson, who left the Stalinists for the Shachtmanites just as the cold war was gathering steam in the late 1940s, the Spartacists have decided that Soviet defensism is the ‘central question’ at all times and in all places. Those who don’t agree are automatically denounced as State Department socialists. This travesty of the Trotskyist position of defense of the Soviet Union has one advantage. It is easy to teach to new recruits. But if revolutionary politics were so simple a moderately intelligent myna bird could learn the formula in a matter of weeks.”

—“Dazed and Confused,” 17 September 1988

11 This was finally abandoned in the ICL’s August 1995 pamphlet *The International Bolshevik Tendency—What Is It?* which openly embraced this Stalinophilic revisionism:

“But when the question of stopping *Solidarnosc* was most urgently posed, they [the IBT] went crazy over our statement that if the Kremlin Stalinists intervened militarily, in their necessarily stupid and brutal way, that we would support this and take responsibility in advance for whatever idiocies and atrocities they might commit.”

by the ISt leadership throughout the 1980s.¹² The SL's first consequential error on the Russian question was its decision to "hail" (i.e., uncritically salute) Leonid Brezhnev's decision to send the Soviet army into Afghanistan in late 1979. This slogan went beyond extending military support to one side in a conflict, as the Trotskyists had in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s or Vietnam in the 1960s.¹³

For years we upheld the "Hail Red Army" slogan, but eventually, when a comrade who objected to it won a majority to his view, we corrected our mistake. In doing so, we tried not to exaggerate the dimensions of the SL's error:

"In fairness, it should be pointed out that the Spartacist League did warn of the possibility of a Soviet betrayal at the time it first advanced the slogan. While the supposed Moscow-loyalists of the Communist Party were wincing and looking for places to hide, the SL advanced this deliberately angular formulation in the face of a wave of anti-Sovietism which was sweeping America. Commendable as this impulse may have been, there is no getting around the fact that taken literally and by itself, the slogan amounts to a blanket political endorsement of the Soviet role in Afghanistan."

—"On the Slogan 'Hail Red Army'," 1917 No. 5, Winter 1988-89

We also discussed the connection between this particular mistake and the SL's political trajectory:

"The degeneration of a revolutionary organization does not take place overnight. It is only under the pressure of events and in sparring with other political tendencies that revisionist appetites gradually emerge. At the outset of Reagan's anti-Soviet crusade, the Spartacist League correctly adopted a hard Soviet-defensist stance. But by this time the degeneration of the SL's internal regime was already at an advanced stage. It was only a matter of time before the SL, having lost confidence in its ability to lead the working class, began to look around for other forces to accomplish this task."

—*Ibid.*

The tendency to reduce Trotskyism to a sort of leftish Soviet patriotism, which increasingly characterized the SL's politics in the early 1980s, was, at bottom, a reflection of political demoralization:

"If an organization no longer believes in its own revolutionary capacities, why not play it safe domestically and entrust Marxism's revolutionary mission to someone else far away—like the 'Red Army' in Afghanistan."

—*Ibid.*

We reprinted the entire text of the ICL polemic, along with our response to every allegation in it, in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5.

- 12 The SL's Stalinophilic tilt was occasionally contradicted by cowardly flinches intended to deflect the wrath of the American authorities. For example, when a provocative intrusion into Soviet air space by Korean Air Lines Flight 007 was terminated by the USSR in September 1983, the SL dropped all pretense of unconditional defensism and proclaimed that if the Soviets had known that there were innocent civilian passengers on board then "despite the potential military damage of such an apparent spying mission," shooting it down would have been "worse than a barbaric atrocity" (WV No. 337, 9 September 1983). As we observed at the time, this was far closer to State Department socialism than Stalinophilia.
- 13 The political logic of the slogan was illustrated at an ICL public meeting in Toronto in 1989 as the Soviet army was retreating from Afghanistan, by Miriam McDonald, a leader of the Trotskyist League (TL—the ICL's Canadian section):

"In her summary, comrade Miriam, who gave the main presentation for the TL, took the profoundly anti-Trotskyist programmatic logic implicit in this slogan to new depths. She stated that there was always a possibility of betrayal [by the Soviets in Afghanistan] but argued that in major social struggles there is *always* a potential for betrayal and that specifically, 'the potential for betrayal was also there in the Russian Revolution!' "We were dumbfounded to hear an authoritative Spartacist spokesperson put on an equal plane the possibility of 'betrayal' by the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky in 1917 and Brezhnev's corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy sixty-odd years later. We presume that you disown responsibility for this remark—but it is an example of the confusion created even among your own cadres by blurring the bloodline between Stalinism and Trotskyism."

—letter to the Trotskyist League, 2 April 1989, reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 8

James P. Cannon made a parallel observation regarding the degeneration of the American Communist Party in the 1920s:

"The Stalinization of the Party was rather the end result of a process of degeneration which began during the long boom of the Twenties. The protracted prosperity of that period, which came to be taken for permanence by the great mass of American people of all classes, did not fail to affect the Communist Party itself. It softened up the leading cadres of that party, and undermined their original confidence in the perspectives of a revolution in this country. This prepared them, eventually, for an easy acceptance of the Stalinist theory of 'socialism in one country.'

"For those who accepted this theory, Russia, as the 'one country' of the victorious revolution, became a substitute for the American Revolution."

"What happened to the Communist Party would happen without fail to any other party, including our own, if it should abandon its struggle for a social revolution in this country, as the realistic perspective of our epoch, and degrade itself to the role of sympathizer of revolutions in other countries."

—*First Ten Years of American Communism*

This is in fact exactly what happened to Cannon's party (the Socialist Workers Party/U.S.) in the early 1960s as it signed on as uncritical publicists for Fidel Castro and the Cuban deformed workers' state he presides over. The Revolutionary Tendency of the SWP, the forerunner of the SL, originated as a left opposition within the SWP over this issue (see: "Cuba and Marxist Theory," *Marxist Bulletin* No. 8).

Our critique of the SL's decision to "hail" the Soviet military in Afghanistan anticipated a key political error that was to characterize the ICL's subsequent intervention in the DDR (German Democratic Republic, aka "East Germany"):

"Is the SL implying that the Soviet military somehow embodies the 'progressive' side of the Stalinist bureaucracy as opposed to the civilian apparatus of the Communist Party, which represents its conservative side? On this premise alone can the slogan 'Hail Red Army!' be seen as an attempt to exploit the 'contradictions' of the Soviet ruling caste—by setting the bureaucracy's left wing (the military) against its right wing (the Politburo)."

"Could the implication of a left/right differentiation between the Soviet military and the rest of the ruling stratum suggest that the SL is giving up hope in the Soviet workers

and banking on some bureaucratic faction to redeem the USSR instead?"

—“On the Slogan ‘Hail Red Army,’” 1917 No. 5,
Winter 1988-89

...To Hailing Brezhnev’s Successor

While we were slow to identify the error on Afghanistan, we immediately recognized the crude Stalinophilia of naming an SL contingent at a November 1982 anti-fascist rally the “Yuri Andropov Battalion.” Our criticism drew a reply from Robertson himself who defended this Stalinophilic deviation as perfectly Trotskyist.¹⁴ In the course of the ensuing polemics, the SL leadership declared that our “comparison of Andropov with Stalin and Beria, the mass murderers of tens of thousands of Communists and Red Army officers, is an obscene amalgam worthy of the pages of *Commentary*.”¹⁵ The same issue featured an *in memoriam* box for the recently deceased Andropov, giving him a 75 percent approval rating.

Andropov had been the architect of the bloody suppression of the 1956 Hungarian political revolution (see *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1), but in the eyes of the SL leadership, he was a tough guy willing to stand up to the imperialists. In our polemic, we reminded the SL of Trotsky’s observation that “Stalinism and Bolshevism are mortal enemies,” and warned that Andropov and the caste he headed were ultimately unable to defend the gains of October. This was characterized by the SL leadership as virtual Third Campism. During this period the SL cadre gradually internalized the notion that defending the deformed and degenerated workers’ states meant identifying with the more intransigent elements of the bureaucracy.

By the end of the 1980s, the SL leadership was acutely aware of the growing restiveness among thousands of rank-and-file Communist Party (CP) members in West Europe due to Mikhail Gorbachev’s increasingly capitulatory course. In a bid for the “allegiance of dedicated pro-Communist workers throughout the world,” the iSt renamed itself the “International Communist League” in May 1989 (see “Cynics Who

Scorn Trotskyism,” 1917 No. 7). To make it easier for the projected CP worker recruits to feel at home in the ICL, the announcement of the name change contained a blanket absolution for Stalinists, past and present, with the exception of Stalin himself and a select few:

“The false identification of Stalinism with Bolshevism provided Stalin with dedicated political agents throughout the world; only Stalin and perhaps a half-dozen cronies (who these were changed over time) knew what it was all about.”

—“International Communist League Launched,”
WV No. 479, 9 June 1989

For emphasis the same claim was repeated at the end of the article: “No longer can a Stalin and his half-dozen conscious accomplices wield ‘monolithic’ parties as instruments of class-collaborationist treason in the name of ‘building socialism.’”

This constituted a profound revision of Trotsky’s materialist analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy as a privileged social caste that had a parasitic relationship to the collectivized economy. The suggestion that, apart from an evil half dozen, the murderous bureaucratic machine that exterminated tens of thousands of revolutionaries in the USSR was composed of “dedicated political agents” subjectively committed to Bolshevism, was a good deal closer to Khrushchev’s self-amnestying denunciation of Stalin’s “cult of the personality,” than to Trotsky’s scathing indictment of the “Soviet aristocracy.”

ICL in DDR: Bluster, Wishful Thinking & Centrist Confusion

The ICL’s Stalinophilic drift reached its zenith in the winter of 1989-90 with its solicitation of the bureaucratic rulers of the DDR. The implosion of this perspective and of the DDR itself confused and demoralized the ICL membership,¹⁶ but this campaign is apparently still viewed by Robertson as the high point of his group’s history:

14 The polemics exchanged on this issue are reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1, “Only Trotskyism Can Defend the Gains of October.” In a piece published in *Spartacist* Nos. 45-46, Joseph Seymour, the SL’s leading theorist, insightfully observed of the Soviet bureaucracy in the 1970s: “While, of course, paying lip service to the Stalinized version of ‘Marxism-Leninism,’ the actual ideology of the Brezhnevite bureaucracy might be termed ‘superpowerism.’” Following Seymour, we might then designate the SL leadership’s fondness for Yuri Andropov “vicarious superpowerism.”

15 *Workers Vanguard* No. 348, 17 February 1984. A few years later WV was making the same “obscene amalgam,” describing the succession of rulers in the Kremlin as “the heirs of Stalin” (No. 479, 9 June 1989) and referring to “Stalin and his heir Gorbachev” (No. 498, 23 March 1990). This reflected the fact that, by that point, Robertson no longer felt any special affinity for the CPSU’s leader. In 1993, in a pamphlet entitled *How the Soviet Workers State Was Strangled*, the ICL wrote:

“Khrushchev served his apprenticeship under Stalin, Gorbachev served his under Brezhnev and Yeltsin and Kravchuk were formed from the same mold. They all came out of the same Stalinist pigsty.”

Five years earlier we had criticized the Spartacists’ relatively upbeat view of Gorbachev and his circle as a “pretty competent leadership” and their tendency to downplay the fact that “perestroika is an *anti-working class* policy which threatens the gains of the October Revolution.” We were particularly critical of an assertion made in the November 1987 issue of *Spartacist Canada* that, “Gorbachev shares some political fundamentals with Stalin, but only an idiot could claim they were basically the same.” We characterized this as an “explicit departure from Trotskyism” and observed:

“Of course Gorbachev is not Stalin; he is his *successor*. In the thirty-five years since Stalin died the contradictions of the bureaucratic regime he consolidated have become more acute, and so the bureaucracy has opted for a change in policies...and a change of personnel to carry them out. Enter Gorbachev. But the political rule of the bureaucracy over the working class remains intact. Its treacherous policy of ‘socialism in one country’ remains the same. Gorbachev is every bit as much a representative of the bureaucratic caste that has usurped political power from the Russian working class as Stalin was. Just as the fundamental features of the relationship between the privileged Kremlin oligarchs and the Soviet working class remain ‘basically the same’ from Stalin to Gorbachev, so too does the program of Trotskyists for the USSR.”

—“Dazed and Confused,” 17 September 1988

16 The SL’s 1994 “Perspectives and Tasks” document (reprinted in *Spartacist* No. 51) observed:

“Individual Marxists will not necessarily live to see revolutionary proletarian opportunities in their lifetime. Nonetheless, many ICL cadre have lived through one such opportunity—the nascent political revolution in East Germany (German Democratic Republic—DDR) in 1989-90.”

—“The Fight for Revolutionary Continuity in the Post-Soviet World,” *Spartacist* No. 58, Spring 2004

The ICL’s intervention in the DDR was certainly the most significant and sustained mobilization in the group’s history. For a few weeks *Arbeiterpressekorrespondenz (Arprekorr)*, the ICL’s near-daily newsheet that was eagerly read by thousands across the DDR, was a small, but real, factor in the political life of the disintegrating deformed workers’ state. Yet the ICL’s activity, which the recent *Spartacist* article lauds as a “defining struggle for our party,” was decisively flawed by exactly the “impatience and impressionism” that it warns against.

The ICL’s political propaganda on the DDR was characterized by bluster, wishful thinking and centrist confusion. In “A Chicago College Student Sees It Firsthand—The Political Revolution in East Germany” (*WV* No. 494, 26 January 1990) an SL neophyte breathlessly reported that upon arrival in East Berlin: “I found myself in the midst of the unfolding workers political revolution against Stalinist bureaucratic rule.” The next issue of *WV* (No. 495, 9 February 1990) implored readers to send money because: “The fate of the unfolding German workers political revolution hangs in the balance.” Many ICL supporters did send money, and a large proportion of the group’s membership visited the DDR for a week or two to participate in the “revolution.”

But there was no political revolution, as one of our comrades reported after touring the DDR:

“To make such assertions the TLD/SpAD [Spartakist-Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands] simply closes its eyes to political reality. No workers councils are contending for power. No proletarian formations posing, or even aspiring to, dual power have developed in the DDR. The soldiers’ councils are either limited to simply addressing soldiers’ ‘work’ conditions, or they represent pressure groups for professional military personnel, and are dominated by officers.”

—“The Collapse of the DDR,” *1917* No.8, Summer 1990

The ICL’s intervention was profoundly skewed from the outset by two fundamental mistakes—first, the claim that a workers’ political revolution was actually underway, and second, a perspective of some sort of strategic united front with a hypothetical pro-socialist wing in the leadership of the ruling Socialist Unity Party/Party of Democratic Socialism (SED/PDS). These mutually reinforcing errors (which, in an organization where criticism flowed upwards as well as downwards, might have been corrected) disoriented the activities of ICLers on the ground. On the one hand, the ICL claimed to be in the midst of, or poised to lead, an “unfolding” workers’ political revolution against the SED/PDS bureaucracy;¹⁷ on the other, it was simultaneously angling for a bloc with the top leaders of the crumbling Stalinist ruling party. The ICL has never explained how this contradiction could have been

resolved.

In a special January 1990 German language *1917*, we observed that “the confused program for a non-existent ‘third way’ [between capitalism and socialism] through ‘social market economy’ of the SED/PDS reformers” would “lead sooner or later to a capitalist counterrevolution,” and warned: “Workers in the DDR cannot for long defend themselves against capitalist restorationist forces and/or Stalinism without their own Leninist internationalist party.” In contrast to the ICL’s claim that a workers’ political revolution against (or with!) the decomposing Stalinist apparatus was underway, we noted:

“At this moment there exists a political vacuum in the DDR. Unless workers councils are organized and establish their own organs of administration this vacuum will shortly be filled to the disadvantage of the working class....”

“The urgent task of this moment is to prevent the capitalist reunification through workers soviets to fill the power vacuum in the DDR.”

We also warned against illusions in the SED/PDS bureaucrats:

“Gorbachev, Modrow...and Co. are organically incapable of trusting the working class or of implementing real working class internationalism. Nowhere has even the most ‘reform’ of the Stalinists called for or supported workers’ councils as the basis of state power as Lenin did in 1917. This is no accident. The creation of such bodies can come about only through the destruction of all wings of the bureaucracy.”

None of this was particularly original—it was merely the application of the program of workers’ political revolution that Trotsky and the Left Opposition had elaborated over half a century earlier. That is why it contrasted so sharply with the approach taken by the ICL, which, in true centrist fashion, abandoned the Trotskyist program which they ostensibly upheld in an attempt to find a shortcut by nudging the Stalinists to the left.

In October 1989 when Mikhail Gorbachev pulled the rug out from under Erich Honecker, the Stalinist SED was thrown into disarray. A few weeks later, on the eve of a special emergency conference called by the SED for 8 December 1989, the ICL wrote to the Stalinists requesting to address the participants:

“We believe that a new Communist Party of Germany is urgently required, a new party that stands for socialism and is opposed to the crimes and lies of Stalinism, and is against imperialist capitalism, and which has to be forged in the spirit of the founders of the Communist Party of Germany, comrades Luxemburg and Liebknecht and comrade Lenin of the Communist International.

“We believe that many comrades of the SED share these views. Because of this, we would like to present our brief greetings to your extremely important conference.”

—quoted in *Arprekorr* No. 8, 18 December 1989

On 8 December the SED conference met briefly, apologized to the people for leading the DDR into a “crisis of existence” and suspended proceedings. On 16 December, when the conference reconvened, it decided to change the party’s

“we saw the collapse of Stalinism leading to the absorption of the DDR by German imperialism, which caused a wave of demoralization throughout our entire party internationally....”

- 17 The description of a disembodied, “unfolding,” political revolution that appeared regularly in ICL coverage of events in the DDR (see, for example, *WV* No. 492, 29 December 1989), echoed similarly “optimistic” prognostications by the Pabloite United Secretariat (USec) over the years. The teleological notion of history as a semi-automatic process with an inexorably “unfolding” dynamic is alien to Leninism, as Trotsky observed in a 26 February 1935 letter to Henricus Sneevliet: “The whole history of the struggle between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks is dotted with this little word ‘process.’”

name to SED/PDS (Socialist Unity Party/Party of Democratic Socialism), elected Gregor Gysi as its new leader, and declared that unification with West Germany would turn the DDR into “an underdeveloped *Bundesland* with an uncertain social future for its citizens.” The ICL’s 16 December greetings to the reconvened congress denounced socialism in one country as a “cruel swindle,” but couched its criticism of Stalinism in terms echoing those of the SED/PDS leadership:

“They [the workers of the DDR] are rightly outraged about the spectacle of corruption, which has been committed by those who pretended to rule in their name. Without real workers’ democracy the economy cannot survive.”

— *Arprekorr* No. 8

In a declaration to the SED conference the following day, the ICL’s International Secretariat addressed the economic situation in the DDR, and particularly the issue of workers’ strikes. The ICL’s approach to the question implicitly adopted the standpoint of the SED leadership rather than the disgruntled ranks:

“The ‘right to strike’ of the Soviet miners during the last summer was more than justified. Every strike, especially in the DDR, has to be justified on the basis of its impact on the whole population and the workers.”

— *Arprekorr* No. 9, 19 December 1989

While making it clear that they supported any workers’ strikes against fascist provocations, the ICL leadership avoided commenting on the economic strikes actually breaking out across the DDR at the time. This was at least an improvement from an earlier declaration by the TLD’s New York-appointed leader, Max Schütz, who at an 18 November 1989 public forum in West Berlin, had declared simply that DDR workers should not strike against themselves! The issue was a difficult one for the ICL to finesse—strikes were likely to be among the first symptoms of a developing workers’ political revolution, yet if the TLD were seen supporting actions that the Stalinists were desperate to squelch, they risked aborting their “unity” maneuver with the SED/PDS. So the ICL leadership, in its wisdom, opted to deal with the issue by restricting itself to ambiguous abstractions.

The thrust of the ICL’s intervention in the DDR was not aimed at splitting away dissident leftist elements from the SED’s proletarian base, but rather was designed to encourage a wing of the Stalinist apparat to move to the left. In “What the Spartacists Want” the ICL denounced “the corrupt parasitic Stalinist bureaucracies” in the abstract, and called for “forging a Leninist-egalitarian party,” but they failed to make the essential point that *all* wings of the SED/PDS leadership shared responsibility for the impasse. Instead, the ICL proclaimed:

“We stand with those members and recent ex-members of the Stalinist SED, as well as numerous others seeking to build a socialist world, who vow that the heirs of Hitler must not expropriate that which, by the workers’ toil, has arisen out of the ruins.”

—“What the Spartacists Want,” printed in every issue of *Arprekorr*, reprinted in WV No. 492, 29 December 1989

The complaint, in the same document, that “the communist program and ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution... have for decades been perverted and betrayed by Stalinism” did not prevent the ICL leadership from making flattering overtures to the commander of Soviet forces in the DDR, General B.V. Snetkov. In a 28 December 1989 letter (reprinted in WV No. 494, 26 January 1990) concerning “the peaceful devel-

opment of the political revolution unfolding in the DDR,” the ICL respectfully suggested to Snetkov that: “We internationalists must combat nationalist chauvinism....”

In the absence of the sort of pro-socialist, anti-bureaucratic mass mobilizations that could have prefigured a political revolution, the Stalinist caretaker regime shifted steadily to the right—a development accurately described *at the time* by the Gruppe IV Internationale (GIVI—which fused with the International Bolshevik Tendency in 1990):

“A new [DDR Prime Minister] Modrow regime with the bourgeois opposition exerting the dominant influence has, as a pro-capitalist regime, the task of ensuring the safety of the social counterrevolution through the politics of *Anschluss* with the BRD [West Germany]. Pushed to the wall by imperialist pressure, and threatened with the dissolution of their apparatus of power, the rightist faction of the Stalinist bureaucracy seeks a capitalist ticket to the salvation of their privileges and makes itself the direct agent of the bourgeoisie. Berghofer’s [one of the first SED leaders to join the social democrats] hasty conversion to the democratic counterrevolution exemplifies the attitude of these parasites and careerists in the state apparatus and factory management who don’t want to come away empty-handed from the formation of a new bourgeoisie and the re-establishment of old capitalist conditions. The weak bonapartist Modrow distances himself from the SED/PDS and shows his definitive capitulation with the removal of the last hurdles for West German capital.”

—*Bulletin* No. 1, January 1990

Unlike the ICL, which aspired to position itself as a junior partner/counselor to the Stalinists, our comrades did not shrink from “saying what is.” In its publication, GIVI openly declared that “a Leninist-Trotskyist faction must be formed in the SED” to combat the Gysi leadership (*Ibid.*).

Treptow Demo: High Tide for the ICL

Shortly after the wall came down in Berlin, ICL members met Gunther M., a leftist SED cadre from an East Berlin factory, in front of a West Berlin public meeting of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA), an ostensibly Trotskyist rival of the TLD. A few weeks later, by a fortuitous circumstance, Gunther (still only a contact at the time) was able to get the SED/PDS to endorse the ICL’s idea of a mass protest against the fascist desecration of a Soviet war memorial in Treptow Park. Gunther obtained the Stalinist party’s agreement on New Year’s Eve, when a lower-ranking apparatchik he happened to know was left in charge of the headquarters (the senior leaders had gone off to drown their sorrows).

The official announcement of the demonstration in *Neues Deutschlands* (the DDR’s leading daily) was enthusiastically received by the SED/PDS ranks, and on 3 January 1990 a surprisingly large crowd of 250,000 turned out. The size and leftist character of the mobilization alarmed both the imperialists and the Kremlin. While the Robertsonites subsequently exaggerated their role in mobilizing the masses—pretending that their agitation had forced the SED/PDS leadership to endorse the event, when in fact the TLD’s call for the demonstration was not issued until after the Stalinists had agreed to sponsor it—the protest would certainly never have occurred without the ICL’s initiative.

The TLD/Spartakist Gruppen announcement of the demonstration called for “Workers and soldiers councils to power,” and denounced social democracy as “the Trojan horse of counterrevolution,” proclaiming: “Throttling the hydra-headed

fascist monster now is blunt this Social Democratic penetration” (WV No. 493, 12 January 1990).¹⁸ Yet, while vigorously attacking the social democrats:

“In the TLD’s call for the demonstration there was *absolutely no criticism of the SED-PDS’s* course of capitulation, and *not one word* about Modrow bowing to BRD imperialism and German nationalism. But it was these politics that had initially emboldened the Nazis who had carried out the attacks [at the war memorial].”

—“Robertsonites in Wonderland,” 1917 No.10,
Third Quarter 1991

The presence of an ICL speaker on the platform alongside the various Stalinist officials at the huge Treptow mobilization was as close as the Robertsonites were to come to “unity” with the SED/PDS. The speech delivered at the event by TLD spokesperson Renate Dahlhaus (reprinted in WV No. 493, 12 January 1990) had been written in New York and faxed to Berlin. It was carefully formulated to avoid offending the ICL’s hoped-for partners:

“In her speech at the Treptow demonstration, TLD/SpAD comrade Dahlhaus laid out the ‘SED-Unity’ line in full: ‘Our [!] economy is suffering from waste and obsolescence. The SED party dictatorship has shown that it is incompetent [!] to fight this.’ (*Arprekorr* No. 15, 4 January 1990). This statement, along with ‘the SED’s monopoly on power has been broken’ was all that was said about the politics of the Stalinists (*Ibid.*). In Dahlhaus’ speech only Honecker’s SED, which the demonstrators wanted nothing more to do with anyway, was mentioned. But the actual illusions in the ‘reformed’ SED-PDS were not attacked.”

—“Robertsonites in Wonderland”

Instead of pointing out that the SED/PDS’s capitulatory course was encouraging the growth of rightist sentiments, Dahlhaus’ speech concentrated on attacking the social democrats for “selling out the DDR.”

From SED-Unity Fantasies to Fake Mass Posturing

The success of the Treptow demonstration led Robertson to imagine that he had a direct pipeline to the top of the SED/PDS. He demanded that Gunther arrange meetings for him with three top Stalinists: DDR masterspy Markus Wolf, Soviet General Snetkov and SED/PDS leader Gregor Gysi. When all of these bureaucrats passed up their chance to be brain trusted by a small-fry American megalomaniac, and Gorbachev gave the green light for the absorption of the DDR by German imperialism, the ICL was finally compelled to abandon the fantasy of “unity” with the Stalinists.¹⁹ Instead of frankly acknowledging that a fundamental strategic mistake had been made, the whole unity gambit was blamed on incompetent underlings who had supposedly misinterpreted “Jim’s” instructions. In the ICL, as in Pyongyang, nothing can be permitted to put Dear

Leader in a bad light.

Without wasting any time, the ICL leadership decreed an abrupt, 180 degree course correction, and announced that the moment was ripe for the direct conquest of the masses. The handful of ICL supporters of the TLD/Spartakist Gruppen were declared to be a new, independent workers’ “party”—the Spartakist-Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (SpAD). When the DDR news agency picked up the SpAD’s press release announcing its creation, the ICL leadership was so pleased that it reprinted the entire dispatch in *Workers Vanguard* No. 495, 9 February 1990. And, just for good measure, they quoted the following particularly juicy bit on the front page of the same issue: “The party, founded on January 21 in the DDR, considers itself a vanguard party that will represent the interests of the working class....”

The hope was that the SpAD could somehow galvanize the masses through running a few candidates in the March 1990 elections. In its new guise as a revolutionary mass workers’ party competing directly with the Stalinists, the SpAD’s propaganda was naturally less conciliatory to the SED/PDS than it had been when the watchword was “unity.” For fundraising purposes, WV ludicrously exaggerated the SpAD’s role in the situation:

“...our comrades of the Spartakist Workers Party stand out uniquely as the conscious Leninist vanguard, the one party defending the workers of East Germany against this [capitalist restorationist] onslaught....

“The fate of the German political revolution hangs in the balance, and there is little time.”

—WV No. 497, 9 March 1990

While the ICL’s publications were widely disseminated and eagerly read by thousands of workers in the DDR, and its members worked as hard as humanly possible, the SpAD never had more than a couple of dozen active supporters. The pretense that it was capable of defending the workers’ interests, and even of shaping the outcome of a non-existent “political revolution,” was, as we remarked in a 15 December 1996 letter to the Internationalist Group, “a notion worthy of a Posadas or a Healy.”²⁰

The Bubble Bursts

In our March 1990 election statement giving critical support to the SpAD we reaffirmed our desire to see the DDR workers take the road of proletarian political revolution, but warned:

“While the SED-PDS is in disarray, it is unfortunately not the case that, as yet, the working class is actively engaged in a revolutionary struggle to wrest political power from the discredited Stalinist bureaucrats and the parties promoting capitalist reunification which are already filling the power vacuum. A workers political revolution can open the road toward genuine socialism through instituting proletarian

18 The ICL indignantly rejected our suggestion that inviting the social democrats to participate in the anti-fascist united front would have provided an opportunity to expose their real character to those layers of the working class in the DDR who had illusions in them.

19 The article in *Spartacist* No. 58 casually observes that a political revolution would have meant the “overthrow” of the Stalinists, and attacks Norden for being soft on the SED/PDS bureaucrats:

“At a public talk at Berlin’s Humboldt University in January 1995, Norden amnestied these class traitors [the SED/PDS leaders] by claiming they had been ‘paralyzed’ at the time of the counterrevolution and could not ‘conceive’ of a political revolution—which would have been aimed at their overthrow.”

But what about Robertson’s January 1990 attempt to parley with “these class traitors,” or the ICL’s chummy 28 December 1989 missive to its fellow “internationalist” General Snetkov, on the supposed “political revolution unfolding in the DDR”?

20 See: *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 6, p. 13

democracy and the rule of workers councils. We urgently hope that the workers of the DDR take the road of proletarian political revolution—but it does no good to mistake our subjective desires for reality.”

—“Critical Support to the SpAD,” 1917 No. 8, Summer 1990

The ICL’s exaggerated claims to have directly mobilized many of the workers who turned up at the Treptow protest led to fantastic projections that hundreds of thousands might vote for the SpAD in the election. But any such illusions were dashed on 6 March 1990, twelve days before the vote was held, when a demonstration called by the SpAD to protest privatization legislation drew no one outside their own ranks. *Workers Vanguard* (No. 497, 9 March 1990) had devoted most of a page to reprinting their German “party’s” call for mass protest, suitably illustrated with a photo of a section of the vast crowd at Treptow. The next issue did not bother with a story on the non-event, but did run a photo documenting the fact that fewer than 20 people had participated.²¹

In the same issue, WV reported the results of the 18 March election as an overwhelming mandate for *Anschluss*: “We ran candidates in four districts (Berlin, Halle, Leipzig and Rostock), receiving 0.06% of the vote in those districts” (WV, No. 498, 23 March 1990). With its bubble burst, the ICL leadership sagely intoned: “Responsibility for the fateful results must be laid squarely at the door of Stalin and his heir Gorbachev.”

DDR ‘Political Revolution’ Down the Memory Hole

Even after the landslide for counterrevolution, the ICL was still refusing to admit that no workers’ political revolution had in fact been “unfolding.” Instead, WV puzzled over why the working class had sat out their “political revolution”: “The DDR political revolution was marked from the beginning by the absence of any organized participation by the working class as such. Why?”

—*Ibid.*

Try Occam’s razor: *there was no political revolution*. The SED’s proletarian base had not revolted against their leaders, and no section of the working class had participated in anything approximating a struggle for political power. But to admit the obvious would mean that the ICL leadership’s whole orientation had been wrong. So the issue was just shoved down the memory hole where it could be retrospectively rejigged.

The SL leadership’s new “recovered memory” of its DDR policy was unveiled in its 1995 pamphlet *The International Bolshevik Tendency—What Is It?*, where the previously “unfolding” political revolution was downgraded to merely a “nascent,” or “incipient” possibility. To avoid having to admit that events had proved us right, we were simply assigned a new position—we had supposedly “declared that [in the DDR] there was no possibility of a proletarian political revolution.”²²

The article in *Spartacist* No. 58 alleges that Jan Norden

“denigrated and denied the ICL’s role as the conscious revolutionary vanguard [in the DDR], repeatedly intoning that ‘the key element was missing, the revolutionary leadership.’” This comment by Norden in his January 1995 Berlin speech provided one of the central pretexts for his purge the next year.²³ Today the ICL dismisses its boast to having been “the revolutionary leadership” of a non-existent political revolution as a polemical exaggeration invented mainly for the purpose of attacking Norden.

In its 1994 “Perspectives and Tasks” document the SL brazenly congratulated itself for its political flip-flops:

“Programmatically this party kept on track through the Reagan years.... The party’s capacity to internally correct political deviations and problems through exhaustive internal discussion and fights is also clear. The extensive discussion and critical examination of our intervention into the DDR events stands out in this regard and politically prepared our tendency for the Soviet debacle.”

—“The Post-Soviet World,” *Spartacist* No. 51, Autumn 1994

The spectacular collapse of the ICL’s Stalinophilic fantasies in the DDR did indeed “prepare” the group for its subsequent Stalinophobic lurch expressed by a refusal to take sides in the decisive August 1991 showdown in Moscow. It also laid the groundwork for the now-repudiated, Third-Campist claim made in the same document, that: “The Chinese Stalinists... are moving to attempt a cold restoration of capitalism from above” (*Ibid.*).

A decade later, the ICL is once again re-examining the 1989-90 events in the DDR—this time unanimously repudiating the unanimous conclusions reached after the previous “extensive discussion and critical examination”:

“It is not correct to say ‘the PDS led the counterrevolution in the DDR’ and ‘we were the revolutionary leadership’ in the incipient political revolution in the DDR in 1989-90. These formulations are better: ‘We were the only contender for revolutionary leadership of the working class in the revolutionary situation in the DDR in 1989-90. We can be proud of our fight for revolutionary leadership.’ And ‘When the Kremlin sold out the DDR to West German capitalism, the SED-PDS tops adapted to the betrayal and became the PDS.’”

—“The Fight for Revolutionary Continuity in the Post-Soviet World,” *Spartacist* No. 58, Spring 2004

It would be even “better” if the ICL leadership could come clean and tell the whole truth. In that case, their motion might read more like this:

“We attempted to suck up to the Stalinist bureaucracy, but were rebuffed. We claimed to have been in the midst of an unfolding workers’ political revolution, but there was no such political revolution. We claimed to ‘stand out uniquely as the conscious Leninist vanguard, the one party defending the workers of East Germany,’ but we were not such a party—we were only a tiny propaganda group without significant influence in any section of the working class, and one, moreover, that was seriously politically mistaken on many of the most crucial issues. On all disputed political

21 This should not have come as a complete surprise, because the ICL’s two previous public events—a social after the huge Treptow demonstration and a public meeting held after the equally large demonstration organized by the SED/PDS on 14 January 1990 to honor Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht—had been attended by fewer than 100 people.

22 See: *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5, pts 26-28

23 In fact Norden was only stating the obvious. The ICL’s pamphlet *The International Bolshevik Tendency—What Is It?*, published in August 1995, i.e., eight months after Norden’s talk, observed that capitalist restoration in the DDR was “above all conditioned by the lack of an active, authoritative proletarian pole fighting to defend collectivized property.”

questions at the time, the comrades who subsequently formed the German section of the IBT were essentially correct against us.”

We will not, however, see such a statement. Like Robertson’s notion that the top layers of the SED/PDS could somehow be induced to assist in the “unfolding” of a workers’ political revolution, the spontaneous self-reform of the ICL leadership lies outside the realm of the possible. It would indeed have been “better” had the ICL’s leadership approximated our position (which they furiously denounced as “Stalinophobic” at the time).²⁴ The really important question, which neither the SL nor the IG can address, is how such an elementary mistake could have been made in the first place. The character of the Stalinist bureaucracy of a deformed workers’ state is a long established element of the Trotskyist program. The fact that this position could be tossed aside without generating any internal opposition demonstrates that, in the ICL, formal program and “principle” count for little when they conflict with the whims of the founder/leader.

ICL’s 1990 Postmortem on the DDR

The ICL’s venture in the DDR was by far the most ambitious undertaking in its history—the leadership promised a great deal and the membership made many sacrifices, so the colossal failure of the entire perspective, as well as the inability to realize any appreciable gains, required some explanation. Accordingly, an internal discussion was immediately announced to digest the historical lessons of the collapse of Stalinism. The issues appear to have been posed on a high enough level of historical abstraction to avoid the question of how the ICL leadership’s projections in the DDR could have been so wildly unrealistic. The two contributions deemed most valuable were reprinted in *Spartacist* Nos. 45-46, Winter 1990-91.

In a 6 September 1990 document, Albert St. John (aka “Al”) Robertson’s longest-serving supporter who seems to have recently slipped into the category of *persona non grata*, suggested that workers in Eastern Europe had acquiesced to capitalist restoration because they had been atomized and politically disarmed by Stalinism. He denounced the “petty-bourgeois” left in the DDR which had “obscured or avoided any programmatic or social analysis of Stalinism,” and indignantly declared:

“...it wasn’t the case that the workers of the DDR had no leadership. Rather the program of the [DDR workers’] traditional party, in the new colors of the ‘reformed’ PDS, as well as the parallel programs of the other ‘leftist’ DDR groupings, ran at an angle of 180 degrees to the objective interests and periodic impulses of the working class.”

—“For Marxist Clarity and a Forward Perspective,”
Spartacist Nos. 45-46, Winter 1990-91

- 24 The ICL leadership rarely applauds our activities, and certainly did not welcome our criticism and suggestions in the DDR. They particularly resented our warnings to prospective new recruits about the nature of the group they were signing up for. The tactic of the ICL leadership was to attempt to seal off their members with hysterical lies, denouncing us as “highly dubious provocateurs” who:

“appear to dislike American blacks, are solicitous of Zionism and praise the indiscriminate mass killings of Americans. Of the state agencies in the world only the Mossad, the Israeli secret police, has similar appetites.”

—*Spartacist* (German edition) No. 14, Winter 1989-90 (reprinted in English as “Trotskyism: What It Isn’t and What It Is!”)

The SL, when it was a revolutionary organization, was subjected to similar malicious labels from Gerry Healy and his toady, Tim Wohlforth. Stalinists, social democrats and pseudo-revolutionary charlatans often resort to slandering their leftist opponents when they are unable to deal with them politically.

- 25 “Letter to the Kremlin—Rescind Arms Embargo on Iraq,” in *WV* No. 590, 7 September 1990. For our comment on this see “Desperately Seeking Snetkov,” *1917* No. 9, First Quarter 1991.

This would have been worth something had the ICL raised it when it mattered. But by September 1990, criticism of the PDS was pretty cheap. It is also worth noting that at this point Al was no longer clinging to the pretense that the tiny SpAD had been leading the working class (although he did cynically revive it a few years later as a factional stick with which to beat Norden). Today the claim has once again been designated “not correct.”

Anschluss for the DDR & the Destruction of the USSR

A second contribution, by SL theoretician Joseph Seymour, was a sensible and well-informed essay explaining why the destruction of the East European deformed workers’ states without civil war did not invalidate the Marxist theory of the state. In his article, dated 10 October 1990, Seymour anticipated that the Soviet Union would soon see a confrontation between Stalinist conservatives and pro-imperialist democrats:

“Faced with the disintegration of Soviet society, the Kremlin bureaucracy splintered, signaled by the splitting up of the original Gorbachev team into mutually hostile figures. Yegor Ligachev became the spokesman for the conservative Stalinist apparatchiks, who desired to maintain the status quo with minimal changes. Boris Yeltsin—Moscow party boss in the early Gorbachev regime—became a pseudo-populist demagogue allied with the pro-Western ‘democratic’ opposition.”

—“On the Collapse of Stalinist Rule in East Europe,”
Spartacist No. 45-46, Winter 1990-91

A couple of months earlier, in August 1990, the ICL had sent a final “Letter to the Kremlin” (with a copy to General Snetkov) “demanding” that Gorbachev stop conciliating imperialism.²⁵ Seymour suggested that, unlike in East Europe, capitalist-restorationists in the USSR would not come to power without a struggle:

“Russian society today is polarized (prefiguring a possible civil war) between the forces of the ‘bourgeois-democratic’ counterrevolution...and an amalgam of conservative Stalinist and Slavophile elements, with the working class divided between the two camps.”

Seymour did not discuss the ICL’s position on the impending showdown in the USSR. However, he did propose that in any future clash in either Romania or Bulgaria between the “leftist” governments comprised of former Stalinists and more aggressively right-wing restorationist elements:

“Our perspective should be to combine united-front military defense against the right with a political struggle to discredit and destroy the workers’ illusions in the present erstwhile-Stalinist-cum-social-democratic regimes.”

This was clearly written prior to Robertson’s Stalinophobic

pronouncement that the SED/PDS bureaucrats he had previously been so eager to meet were in fact the leaders of the counterrevolution in the DDR—a position that was soon extended to the Soviet Union and, somewhat later, to China. By March 1991, *Workers Vanguard* was floating the new line, suggesting that there was little to choose between the Yeltsinite “democrats” and the conservative Stalinist “patriots” who were still clinging to the CPSU:

“Soviet working people must cut through the false division between ‘democrats’ and ‘patriots,’ both products of the terminal degeneration of the reactionary and parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy. Both are enemies and oppressors of the working class in the interests of world capitalism.”

—“Where Is the Soviet Union Going?,” WV No. 522, 15 March 1991

In May 1991, at the Lutte Ouvrière fete, where we debated Workers Power on the Russian question, one of their leaders, Keith Harvey, predicted that in any showdown between the Yeltsinites and the CPSU “hards,” we would find ourselves alone among all the world’s ostensible Trotskyists in backing the Stalinists.²⁶ Harvey predicted that “even the Sparts” would not be backing the Stalinists this time. We thought it possible that when push came to shove the ICL would come down on the right side, but Harvey’s estimate proved correct. In the final confrontation in August 1991, the erstwhile “Yuri Andropov Brigade” refused to militarily support the Stalinists against the counterrevolution, thus ignominiously abandoning the last-ditch defense of the Soviet degenerated workers’ state. The ICL’s shameful neutrality in this confrontation, a mistake it compounded with the stubborn refusal to admit that Yeltsin’s victory represented the triumph of counterrevolution, has continued to pose awkward political problems for the Robertsonites.²⁷

The *Spartacist* No. 58 article blusters: “At the crucial hour, in sharp contrast to much of the left, the ICL stood at our post in defense of the gains of the October Revolution of 1917.” Paper will take anything written on it, as Stalin observed, but nothing can change the fact that “at the crucial hour” in August 1991, the ICL declined to take a side.

The fundamental incoherence of the ICL’s 1991 position has been a source of continuing confusion, and the conflicting rationalizations and interpretations of the position that have appeared over the years simply don’t add up. While indignantly denying that they were in any way neutral in the August 1991 confrontation, the ICL leaders also claim that neither side warranted military support because both were equally pro-capitalist:

“The IBT attempts to dress up its defeatism in August 1991 by declaring military support for the Stalinist coup plotters—a ludicrous position since the coup plotters, who were just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin, were not about to undertake the kind of political and military

mobilization required to mount a serious opposition.”

—*The International Bolshevik Tendency—What Is It?*

We replied:

“If in fact the Yanayevites were ‘just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin,’ then why should Trotskyists care about whether or not they undertook a political and military mobilization? If the Stalinist bureaucrats (including the heads of the KGB and the military) had been ‘just as committed’ to capitalist restoration as the CIA’s friends gathered around Yeltsin in the Russian White House, then there would indeed have been nothing of great importance at stake in August 1991. Yet, if one asserts that Yanayev et al. were ‘just as committed to capitalist restoration’ as Yeltsin, then it follows that at some point prior to 19 August 1991 the CPSU bureaucracy had been transformed into a formation that was counterrevolutionary through and through and to the core.”

—*Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5, 1996

The ICL cannot answer these questions. While admitting that Yeltsin’s victory had opened the “floodgates of counterrevolution,” they adamantly deny that state power (however weak and disjointed initially) from that moment on was wielded by forces committed to restoring capitalism. The Soviet degenerated workers’ state had been smashed, and the whole world knew it. But in the interest of preserving the prestige of their leadership, the SL refused to admit it and spent a year in the company of Jack Barnes of the American Socialist Workers Party, Ernest Mandel of the United Secretariat (USec), Workers Power and an assortment of other revisionists, ludicrously claiming that the Soviet degenerated workers’ state survived under Czar Boris. As time passed and Yeltsin’s grip on power became increasingly assured, this posture became just too ridiculous to maintain, and so by November 1992 *Workers Vanguard* was referring to the Soviet workers’ state in the past tense. But to this day, the ICL cannot explain when or how this transformation occurred.

Everyone knows what took place in 1991; the only thing that changed in 1992 was Robertson’s mind. The catalyst for this, so we have been told, was a written exchange in August 1992 between two Toronto Robertsonites and Marc D., a former USec cadre and prospective ICL recruit who refused to swallow the notion that “the Soviet Union still exists as a degenerated workers’ state.” Upon reading this correspondence,²⁸ Robertson is reported to have commented that Marc was right, the Soviet workers’ state was no more.

The ICL’s new position solved one problem, but created another. The destruction of the Soviet workers’ state could not be backdated to Yeltsin’s August 1991 victory without admitting that the “renegades” of the IBT had been right all along. Having refused to militarily bloc with Yanayev, Pugo et al, the SL leadership could hardly admit that Yeltsin’s victory represented the end of the workers’ state. So the ICL (and the IG, which also clings to this particular stupidity) embraced the profoundly anti-Marxist notion that in “1991-92”

26 We had clearly spelled out our policy months before the “hardliners” launched their abortive August 1991 coup:

“It is possible that leading sections of the bureaucracy may attempt at some future point to arrest the process of capitalist restoration. If that happened it would be our duty to side militarily with the ‘conservatives’ against the Yeltsinites. The Stalinist caste is incapable of *solving* the problems which gave rise to the ‘reforms’ in the first place, but slamming on the brakes could at least buy some time.”

—“Soviet Stalinism In Extremis,” 1917 No. 10, Third Quarter 1991

27 The *Spartacist* No. 58 article acknowledges as much with its announcement that the ICL conference mandated “an international educational project and discussion on this topic.”

28 Reprinted in 1917 No. 12, 1993

the degenerated workers' state, under Boris Yeltsin, was gradually and incrementally transformed into a bourgeois state.²⁹ Trotsky aptly dismissed this sort of nonsense as "reformism in reverse."

In the summer of 2003 in London, a bright, but unassimilated, secondary school student recruited to the Spartacist League's youth group in Britain from Workers Power had the temerity to propose adjusting the ICL's line on this major historical issue to something more closely approximating reality. He was apparently considered promising enough to try to salvage, so instead of receiving the usual treatment dished out to ICL newbies unwise enough to pose awkward questions, an attempt was made to persuade him of the senior party comrades' profound wisdom on the question. To this end he received a flurry of leadership-patriotic correspondence that is chiefly of interest for what it reveals about the current political incoherence of the ICL cadre on the question. Instead of being overwhelmed by the intellectual force of the arguments arrayed against him, the errant youth replied with a lengthier document reiterating his original argument while taking a few well-aimed shots at his would-be mentors. At this point, further pedagogy was abandoned and a campaign of hysterical denunciation commenced which apparently succeeded, in short order, in driving him out and restoring unanimity to the ICL's London branch.³⁰

The SL's position on the August 1991 confrontation has occasionally been at odds with its polemics with other groups. For example, WV recently denounced Peter Taaffe's Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) for dispatching its Moscow supporters to Soviet factories during the coup to discourage workers from backing the Stalinist "hardliners":

"The adherents to Taaffe's Militant tendency did not just climb on Yeltsin's barricades—where they were, in any case, not needed. They went to the factories, where these social-democratic traitors tried to *head off* workers mobilizations against Yeltsin and Bush's 'democrats':

"From the declarations of the [putschist State Emergency Committee] it followed that they were acting

against the so-called "democrats," and that posed the danger of support to the putschists by workers organizations that did not share the principles of the "democrats"—the rule of private property and capitalist power. And that is exactly what happened. Some of the workers organizations were getting ready to send greetings of welcome, and at several factories the workers even tried to organize defense detachments in support of the putschists.

"From the morning on, all of our members explained to workers at their workplaces that the position of the Emergency Committee did not coincide with their interests. In addition to this, they connected up with worker activists of other organizations, in order to prevent hasty actions."

—"Where We Were" [CWI statement]"

"The impulse of these workers was far better than that of the Militant tendency, whose support to Yeltsin put it in the same camp as every imperialist power on the face of the globe."

—"Taaffeite CWI: From Yeltsin's Barricades to the Augean Stables," WV No. 828, 11 June 2004

True enough, but the "impulse of these workers" was also "far better" than the hypocritical ICL leadership, whose refusal to take sides between the two camps put it in a third one. In October 1993, when the Yeltsinites fell out among themselves, we took the view that workers had no side in the victory of either gang of counterrevolutionaries. The ICL initially took the same position, aptly characterizing the whole affair as "a squabble between corrupt and cynical factions" (WV No. 585, 8 October 1993). A month later they published "A Correction to Our View" (WV No. 587, 5 November 1993) denouncing their original position as "abstentionist," and declared that "it was necessary to call on the working class to actively resist" Yeltsin.

If there was no logical reason why, in 1991, a supposedly Soviet fascist group would refuse to back Stalinist apparatchiks against capitalist restorationists, there was also no rea-

29 In the early years of the International Left Opposition, Trotsky wrestled with the problem of determining the point at which the political counterrevolution triumphed in the USSR. In a February 1935 article, "The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism," he concluded: "The year 1924—that was the beginning of the Soviet Thermidor." In "When Was the Soviet Thermidor?" (*Spartacist* Nos. 43-44, Summer 1989) the SL correctly identified the decisive event as the rigging of the election of delegates to the 13th Party Conference in January 1924. ICL literature has periodically reiterated this position:

"The triumvirate's victory at this conference [January 1924] marked the decisive point at which the bureaucratic caste seized political power from the Soviet working class. From this point on, the people who ruled the USSR, the way the USSR was ruled and the purposes for which it was ruled all changed."

—*Spartacist* No. 56, Spring 2001

Yeltsin's victory over the Stalinist Emergency Committee marked the triumph of the *social* (as opposed to the earlier *political*) counterrevolution. In August 1991, "the people who ruled the USSR, the way the USSR was ruled and the purposes for which it was ruled all changed." Yet, out of concern for the prestige of its founder/leader, the SL/ICL stubbornly denies this simple historical fact and insists that the transition from a degenerated workers' state to a bourgeois state took place in a series of small, incremental steps during 1991-92. The notion that it is possible for a state to gradually change its class character was correctly branded "a cornerstone of Pabloism" by the SL in 1973 when it was still a revolutionary organization:

"Also in this connection we note the OCI's [Organisation Communiste Internationaliste] analysis of Cuba in *La Verité* No. 557, July 1972. The OCI's refusal to draw the conclusion from its analysis—which until that point parallels our own—that Cuba, qualitatively, is a deformed workers state indicates the potential departure from the Leninist theory of the state in favor of a linear, bourgeois conception as of a thermometer which simply and gradually passes from 'bourgeois state' to 'workers state' by small increments without a qualitative change. Such a methodology is a cornerstone of Pabloism. According to this conception, presumably the reverse process from 'workers' to 'bourgeois' state by small incremental shifts could be comparably possible. Trotsky correctly denounced this latter idea as 'unwinding the film of reformism in reverse.'"

—"Letter to the OCRFI and the OCI," *Spartacist* No. 22, Winter 1973-74

30 The depths of the ICL's political disarray on this world-historic event is evident in their inability to effectively counter the arguments of one bright teenager. We have reprinted the entire exchange as an appendix to this document.

son, two years later, for it to bloc with “lackeys for the corporatist wing of the fledgling bourgeoisie” in “a squabble between corrupt and cynical factions.”

ICL’s Stalinophobic Deviation on China

In 1994 we addressed the popular misconception that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was attempting to slowly transform the Chinese deformed workers’ state into a capitalist one:

“Recent Chinese economic evolution, when carefully examined, shows that the country is not heading in the direction of ‘market socialism.’ Nor is the bureaucracy consciously embarked on an attempt to turn China into a capitalist country, with the 20 million-odd members of the CCP as a new capitalist class....the highest echelons of the ruling party remain tied to state property.”

—“China: The Gathering Storm,” 1917 No. 14, 1994

In the same article we reasserted our position of unconditional defense of the gains of the Chinese Revolution:

“In any future confrontation we will bloc militarily with those elements of the bureaucracy that attempt to defend collectivized property against the forces of capitalist counterrevolution, just as we sided with the Soviet Stalinists in their last pathetic attempt to cling to power in August 1991.”

—*Ibid.*

The ICL was headed down a different path. Generalizing from its bitter disappointment with the SED/PDS in the DDR, and its equation of the CPSU conservatives with Yelstin’s open capitalist-restorationists, the ICL claimed that the CCP was carrying out a “cold” restoration of capitalism from above. This position was challenged by the IG, and a flurry of polemics ensued:

“The leaders of the Internationalist Group (IG—a 1996 split from the SL), who uphold the Spartacists’ 1991 position on the coup [i.e., that the Stalinist coupsters ‘were just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yelstin’] for reasons of personal prestige, criticized the SL for taking an essentially identical approach toward China. The SL responded by claiming that the IG were Stalinophiles who ascribed a revolutionary capacity to the bureaucracy. IG leader, Jan Norden, was denounced for having ‘endowed the geriatric Stalinist has-beens [in East Germany] with some kind of instinctive revolutionary appetites’ and for promoting, ‘the illusion that a wing of the Beijing bureaucracy will itself take up the fight against capitalist counterrevolution’ (WV, 11 June 1999). In fact, it is entirely possible that elements of the Stalinist apparatus would side with the workers against capitalist restoration. And revolutionaries would certainly seek to exploit contradictions within the bureaucracy to strengthen the position of workers mobilized for independent political action.”

—“China: Towards the Brink,” 1917 No. 26, 2004

The ICL’s error on China, like its assertion that the Stalinists “led the counterrevolution” in the DDR, imputed to the ruling bureaucracy the characteristics of a social class, rather than a brittle and unstable parasitic caste. The ICL began to edge away from its claim that the CCP intended to restore capitalism some time ago, but the recent *Spartacist* article finally made it explicit:

“In this regard, our 1994 formulation [regarding the CCP’s supposed attempt at a ‘cold restoration of capitalism from above’] was wrong in implying that a restoration of capitalism could take place while the Stalinist regime remained intact. Correcting this, the current conference document noted:

“The Stalinist bureaucracy is incapable of a cold, gradual

restoration of capitalism from above. A capitalist counter-revolution in China would be accompanied by the collapse of Stalinist bonapartism and the political fracturing of the ruling Communist Party.”

—“The Fight for Revolutionary Continuity in the Post-Soviet World,” *Spartacist* No. 58, Spring 2004

This is a description of what happened in the Soviet Union in 1991—the bureaucracy fractured and the capitalist-restorationist elements (headed by Yeltsin) deposed the demoralized “conservative” Stalinist remnants. If the ICL were in fact the “Party of the Russian Revolution,” it would not shrink from telling the simple truth about the fate of the October Revolution. But in Jimstown, programmatic rectitude has long taken second place to the preservation of the leader’s prestige, so we do not expect to soon see the ICL (or, for that matter, the IG) correcting their position on the final chapter in the destruction of the Soviet workers’ state.

Sectarianism Ad Absurdum: ICL Denounces Seattle 1999

In addition to correcting some of the deviations on China and the DDR, the *Spartacist* article repudiates some of the more outrageous examples of ICL sectarianism over the past decade or so. The most dramatic is the reversal on the 1999 Seattle protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) that energized “anti-globalization” protesters around the world. Weeks prior to the event, the SL leadership had already decided that it would not:

“participate in, or sell at, the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle on November 30 which are a circus...dominated by national chauvinism, racist protectionism and counterrevolutionary attacks on the Chinese deformed workers state.”

—“AFL-CIO Tops Push Anti-Communism, Protectionist Poison,” WV No. 725, 10 December 1999

Even after the dust settled and it was clear that, instead of “national chauvinism, racist protectionism and counterrevolution,” most of the youthful protesters were motivated by outrage at the ravages of the WTO, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the SL remained stubbornly in denial.

In a 3 January 2000 internet posting on our website we labeled the WV statement “sectarian idiocy,” and quoted an eyewitness report from an IBTer:

“Seattle was an opportunity for revolutionaries to intersect many people who correctly identify the corporations as enemies, and extend that consciousness to understanding the role of the capitalist state in protecting corporate greed and exploitation. The tragedy is that this elementary socialist consciousness was largely absent in Seattle. The unusual vehemence and brutality of the suppression of the anti-WTO protests had quite a shock effect on thousands of the protesters, many of who are relatively new to confrontation with the state on this level. Most appear to have understood that it was the Clinton administration which probably gave the orders on Wednesday for the reign of terror that did drive protesters off the streets.”

We made the obvious point that Seattle was “an opportunity for Marxists to intervene to win some of these people to a socialist program” and observed:

“If socialists were to follow the Robertsonians’ injunctions, and boycott such protests, the only result would be to ensure the political dominance of the Greens, clerics and purveyors of other brands of petty-bourgeois ideology among broad sections of young militants outraged by the workings of the irrational capitalist world order.”

The SL “explained” that the Seattle protest only resonated

internationally “because an array of opportunist ‘socialists’ sold radical activists around the world a bill of goods by painting the chauvinist, anti-Communist frenzy in Seattle as a display of ‘internationalism’.” In a virtual parody of sectarianism, WV proclaimed:

“Our opposition to the chauvinist mobilization in Seattle was an expression of our revolutionary, internationalist and proletarian program. Upholding the class interests of the proletariat requires drawing a sharp line between Marxism and social-chauvinism....”

—“Imperialists Push ‘Open Door’ for Counterrevolution in China,” WV No. 729, 11 February 2000

The same article complained: “the IBT denounces our principled opposition to joining the chauvinist, anti-Communist mobilization in Seattle” and lambasted the IG for going “out of its way to avoid criticizing the Seattle mobilization.” WV did, however, grudgingly admit that a 21 December 1999 statement on the IG website had denounced the Seattle mobilizations as “built on a chauvinist program of protectionism and proletarian internationalists would not participate in them.”³¹

The *Spartacist* article offers no serious explanation as to how the SL could have been so profoundly mistaken about such an important political event, lamely attempting to excuse its “principled” abstention as a consequence of a “failure to take into account the changes in the terrain on the left in the post-Soviet period, which includes the proliferation of anarchist groups....” The real reason for the ICL’s hysterical denunciation of the Seattle protesters is clear enough:

“The SL leadership’s abstention in Seattle was not motivated by political principle, but rather by a desire to avoid exposing their youthful members to the political universe that exists outside their ‘party.’ Yet the ripples from Seattle impacted politicized American youth so powerfully that the SL controllers decided to drop their lofty ‘principles,’ and turn up in Washington for the April demonstrations against the International Monetary Fund.”

—“Seattle & the Left,” 1917 No. 22, 2000

The ICL now implicitly acknowledges its political cowardice in refusing to publicly repudiate its error earlier, and admits that its absurd posture on Seattle was indeed “reversed in practice” by its appearance at the subsequent protest in Washington D.C. While admitting “our abstention on principle from the Seattle protests was damaging and disorienting both for our cadre and for those who follow our work” (i.e., it made the SL a laughing stock) the *Spartacist* article ducks the question of how it managed to confuse idiot abstentionism with Marxist principle in the first place. Presumably the reason the ICL is not interested in probing too deeply into the origin of this particular instance of “principled” stupidity is because the same omniscient geriatric who dictated the correction of this error was its original author.

SL/ICL: Twenty Years of Sectarianism

The root of the SL/ICL’s descent into sectarianism is its leadership’s political demoralization. As the Robertson clique lost confidence in the possibility of revolutionary break-

throughs, the priority shifted toward preserving their own unchallengeable position within the group and maintaining a dues base. This new, conservative, shift was reflected both in the profile of prospective SL recruits and their political training. In the ICL today, questions of political line are generally treated as the exclusive province of the wise leadership. The periodic “fights” rarely have much to do with real political differences and are usually aimed at enforcing “political authority” and making adjustments to the pecking order.

It is hardly surprising that the list of sectarian errors that the SL is now prepared to renounce does not include its attempt to wreck the 1984 boycott of South African cargo by longshoremen in the port of San Francisco. For 11 days, as several hundred members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) refused to unload apartheid cargo from the *Nedlloyd Kimberley* in solidarity with black workers in South Africa, the SL worked to sabotage the action for the sole reason that it had been initiated by political opponents in the union, particularly supporters of the External Tendency (forerunner of the IBT). In their desperation to derail this important action, the Spartacist leadership had its supporters set up a fake “picket line” in front of the ship the night the boycott began, and provocatively denounced the longshore workers who carried out this valuable labor action as “scabs.”

In the end, the SL-supported *Longshore Militant* shamefully provided the information used as “Exhibit No. 1” in the federal injunction that ultimately broke the strike. Then, when it was all over, the SL had the *chutzpah* to turn around and praise the hot-cargoing action it had tried so hard to wreck. This criminal sectarianism (a record the IG uneasily upholds) is discussed at length in the *Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt*, No.4.

SL and ‘Anti-War Movements’

In 1990 the Spartacist League advanced a novel justification for its refusal to participate in organizing opposition to the January 1991 “Desert Storm” assault on Iraq. A meeting of the Bay Area “Committee Against a Vietnam War in the Middle East” (CAVWME) on 22 September 1990, as the imperialist propaganda offensive got underway, attracted 100 people, at least half of whom had no organizational affiliation. The reformists of Socialist Action (SA—affiliated with the USec), who had called the meeting, were alarmed when IBTers put forward a proposal to turn CAVWME from a reformist propaganda bloc into a genuine united front in which all participants, including Marxists, could put forward their point of view. Had the dozen SLers present at the meeting backed our motion to amend the committee’s basis of unity the Pabloites would have been outnumbered.³² But instead of supporting our proposal, or putting forward an alternative of their own, to the great relief of SA, the SL members restricted their comments to simply denouncing the committee and its initiators.

The SL held a public meeting in the Bay Area that night at

31 If the IG has now also reconsidered its policy of boycotting the Seattle protest we suggest they follow the SL’s example and have the courage to say so publicly.

32 In February 1988 our Toronto comrades cooperated with leftist USec members and others in building a successful united front that drew 300 participants to a demonstration against funding for the CIA’s Nicaraguan contras. The Trotskyist League, who had been invited to participate and offered the possibility of speaking at the event if they helped build it, refused, claiming that the demo was a cover for “counterrevolutionary machinations.” The whole episode is documented in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 4.

which an IBT comrade raised the issue of the SL's sectarian abstention:

"If the antiwar movement is *a priori* left to the leadership of the Marcyites and Socialist Action, then it's simply a self-fulfilling prophecy to say in advance that it will be dominated by the reformists."

—quoted in "Communist Tactics and the Antiwar Movement," 1917 No. 9, 1991

In a classic example of "program generating theory," Joseph Seymour, the SL's leading theorist, defended its abstentionism on the grounds that: "There is no antiwar movement independently of an anti-capitalist movement" (quoted in "BT: Pimple on the Popular Front," WV No. 511, 5 October 1990). In 1917 No. 9 we characterized this as "sectarian drivel" and quoted a declaration from the SL's 1966 founding conference that stated: "Our role is not to sit on the sidelines and lecture the anti-war movement while refusing to 'dirty our hands' in the day-to-day work of the movement...." We asked: "Does the SL now consider that there was no 'antiwar movement' in the U.S. in the late 1960s?" The SL has declined to answer, but we were amused to note another article in the very issue that reported Seymour's sagacious pronouncement referred to the Vietnam "anti-war movement" of the 1960s and 70s.³³ The motivation for the SL's behavior was hardly mysterious:

"The SL leadership has so little confidence in its members' ability to function in a broader arena that even the most minor tactical moves or utterances must be dictated from the top. Sustained interaction with members of other leftist groups threatens the leadership's organizational control of the rank-and-file. Thus the SL 'intervention' amounted to a series of criticisms designed to cover its abdication from any serious fight for influence within the emerging antiwar movement."

—"Communist Tactics and the Antiwar Movement," 1917 No. 9, First Quarter 1991

ICL Sectarianism Mars PDC's Record on Mumia Defense

In our recent pamphlet, *The Case of Mumia Abu-Jamal*, we characterized the role of the SL and the Partisan Defense Committee (PDC—the SL's legal defense arm) in uncovering the police conspiracy that stands behind the frame-up of America's foremost political prisoner as "an immensely valuable service to Mumia and the whole workers' movement."

Yet even this exemplary work has, on occasion, been marred by sectarianism. In August 1995, with Mumia facing imminent execution, our British comrades proposed an emergency united-front action to the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B):

"Time is short, but it is still not too late to initiate a sizeable national demonstration before 17th August. Other groups are planning various events, but these will be fragmentary and isolated in the absence of a co-ordinated campaign. There has been considerable coverage of Mumia's case in the bourgeois press and most of the left groups would probably come on board for united action. The SL/B, of all the groups on the British far left, is probably best positioned to initiate such a united front because of the years of work by your American comrades in Mumia's defence. We pledge our fullest support in building any such action...."

—letter to the SL/B, 6 August 1995

The SL/B rejected our proposal for reasons spelled out in the subsequent issue of *Workers Vanguard* (No. 627, 25 August 1995):

"[A] letter from the International Bolshevik Tendency to our comrades of the Spartacist League/Britain argues that we have undermined Mumia's defense by not setting up a 'united front committee.' We don't know what world the BT lives in, but we have a lot more grasp of social reality and our own social weight than to believe that a 'Free Mumia Committee' of ourselves, the BT and a bunch of other small leftist organizations would be able to rally the social forces necessary to win Mumia's freedom."

We responded:

"We don't know what world the SL/U.S. lives in, but it is precisely the fact that 'a bunch of other small leftist [and other] organizations' all began to mobilize around the same issue at the same time, that made the demonstrations for Jamal successful. In order to build the mass support necessary for winning his freedom, it makes sense to organize this cooperation. In New York in July, there were a series of separate demonstrations—some of which the SL initiated and controlled, and some where other organizations played the central role. This is not a good model. True, the combined forces of the left are less than massive. But is the SL suggesting that *it alone* is capable of mobilizing greater numbers than small groups working in concert?"

—"For United Front Defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal!," 1917 No. 17, 1996

The ICL has, on occasion, participated in successful common actions for Mumia. In Toronto, in the late 1990s, several united-front demonstrations were organized. In 2002 a large public meeting was held on the basis of the slogans: "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! Abolish the Racist Death Penalty!" The Trotskyist League (TL—Canadian affiliate of the ICL) sometimes participated in these actions and sometimes refused to. This peculiar behavior, which puzzled various anarchists and other participants at the time, was apparently determined by the internal gyrations of the ICL. When it was on an "anti-sectarian" zig, it would participate. If it was on an "anti-opportunist" zag, it would not (see "Labor: Fight to Free Mumia!," 1917 No. 21, 1999).

On 24 April 1999, when the ILWU shut down every port on the U.S. West Coast in solidarity with Mumia, WV treated it as a non-event because the action was initiated and supported by former SLers who the Robertsonites regard with special enmity. The SL ostentatiously refused to participate in the mass demonstrations held for Mumia that day in both San Francisco and Philadelphia. The rationalization for this grotesque sectarianism was that the reformist organizers of the events were pushing a call for a "new trial" rather than freedom for Mumia. In a letter to WV, we wrote:

"You prefer the call to 'Free Mumia!' So do we. Nonetheless we do not see this as a reason to abstain from participating in national events that are many times larger than any rallies the SL/PDC has been able to organize. Of course we participate in these demonstrations with our own slogans, including the call to 'Free Mumia!'"

"We recall that during the Vietnam War the SL marched in many demonstrations organized around clearly social-pacifist slogans, but carried its own placards calling for victory to the Indochinese Revolution."

—"Disagreeable Sectarians," 1917 No. 21, 1999

33 "The antiwar movement—for all its decisive shortcomings—was not so stupid as to 'spit on' returning soldiers" (WV No. 511, 5 October 1990, p 7).

We further observed that as a result of this kind of sectarian behavior:

“Most political activists regard the SL as a slightly ridiculous, frequently hysterical and generally disagreeable sect. The only purpose of the SL leadership’s semi-abstention from the campaign to free Mumia can be to seal off their membership from excessive exposure to other leftists and social reality in general.”

—*Ibid.*

ICL Renounces 1974 Contribution on General Strike

The ICL’s sectarian practice is beginning to find tentative programmatic expression in its shifting position on the question of the general strike. The SL’s insistence that a precondition for calling for a general strike is the presence of a mass revolutionary party constitutes an explicit repudiation of a rather important extension of Marxist tactics that the SL made thirty years ago when it was still a revolutionary organization. In the winter of 1974, Britain’s militant miners’ union, under the leadership of overtly reformist bureaucrats, was locked in conflict with Ted Heath’s Tory government:

“Therefore we have a contradiction: the situation poses the need for a general strike, for mobilizing the entire organized working class to answer Heath’s attacks; a general strike poses the question of power and can easily lead to a revolutionary situation; and the present sellout union and Labour Party/Communist Party leaders will betray a general strike if it challenges capitalist state power. What to do?”

“Taking account of the objective need for a general strike and the treacherous present leadership of the class, we have called for a general strike for *limited, defensive* aims centering on breaking the state wage controls and reversing the measures decreed to enforce them (e.g., the Tory lockout).”

—“Why We Call for a General Strike in Britain Now,”
WV No. 39, 1 March 1974

Acknowledging that success could not be guaranteed in advance, WV argued:

“However, it would be the worst kind of scholastic passivity to argue that the workers must accept, without struggle, whatever the Tories do to them because their leaders might betray a general strike that could win....”

“The task of revolutionaries in Britain today is to maximize the possibility of winning a general strike (and thereby defeating the bosses’ attempts to load the costs of massive inflation onto the workers) under conditions where a successful insurrection is impossible given the strength of the reformist leadership of the mass workers organizations.”

—*Ibid.*

This policy, entirely congruent with Trotsky’s writings on the question, is one we uphold. Yet the degenerated ICL now insists that a general strike must always be a precursor to a struggle for state power, and therefore must not be undertaken without the leadership of a mass-based revolutionary party. In Ontario in the mid-1990s, when the trade-union bureaucracy initiated a series of one-day, one-city shutdowns to protest attacks by the right-wing Conservative government of Mike Harris, we wrote:

“The answer to a generalized capitalist attack is a generalized response: *i.e., a general strike to defend social programs....* But we cannot expect the professional ‘labor statesmen’ to run an effective general strike. Instead it should be organized and controlled by democratically elected strike committees in every workplace coordinated through delegated regional and provincial assemblies.”

—“Resistance and Betrayal,” 1917 No. 19, 1997

The TL disagreed and denounced everyone advocating a general strike as “charlatans,” citing the absence of revolu-

tionary leadership. *Spartacist Canada* (Winter 1996-97) specifically attacked our leaflet for the Toronto shutdown for omitting “the need to politically defeat and replace the pro-capitalist misleaders in order to achieve a workers’ victory.” We replied:

“Missing from this lifeless schematism is the fact that it is only through their experiences in struggle that the masses of workers will come to reject their existing leaderships and adopt a new, revolutionary alternative.

“...Anyone who can read can see that the concluding paragraph [of the IBT statement] does in fact call for ‘a new workers’ leadership with ‘revolutionary socialist’ politics.’ But regardless of the TL’s careless (or deliberately dishonest) characterization of our position, the key issue is their apparent failure to grasp that the *only* way for communists to ‘politically defeat and replace’ the bureaucrats is by intervening in the actual class struggle to broaden and generalize it.

“The masses want a general strike. The bureaucrats are afraid to initiate one. In this circumstance, the call for a general strike can both expose the bureaucrats’ cowardice and demonstrate to militant workers (who may even be anti-communist) that, at least on this one question, the communists are right against their existing leaders.”

—“Resistance and Betrayal,” 1917 No. 19, 1997

As we observed in a letter to the IG at the time, the same error characterized the ICL’s propaganda during the mass strikes against government austerity that shook France in November and December 1995:

“We think that the question of the general strike is posed for French Trotskyists in the mid-1990s as well.... Yet, while calling for extending the strikes into the private sector, the Ligue Trotskyste de France [LTF—the SL’s French affiliate] deliberately refrained from calling for a general strike, instead asserting that ‘the question of power is posed.’ Its central slogan was a call to build a ‘new revolutionary leadership,’ (i.e., the LTF).”

—“IBT Letter to the IG/LQB,” 15 December 1996,
reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 6

We pointed out that in its revolutionary period, the SL had called for general strikes in many places (including San Francisco, New York and Australia) where there was no immediate prospect of a struggle for state power. In our final, unanswered, reply to the ICL on the issue, we wrote:

“The core of the TL’s polemic is the assertion that a ‘general strike poses the question of *power*—which class shall rule, the bourgeoisie or the proletariat?’ Having framed the issue in these terms they dismiss our call for a general strike to defeat a capitalist offensive, and bring down the government that is spearheading it, as ‘nothing more than pressure tactics aimed at a parliamentary shake-up.’ The SL’s 1974 article was directed against exactly this brainless syllogism....”

“If a general strike were *only* appropriate in situations where the struggle for power is immediately posed, it would be difficult to justify the Toledo, Minneapolis or San Francisco general strikes of 1934. All of these began as limited and defensive local actions—but they touched off a labor upsurge that finally established industrial unionism in North America....”

—“In Defense of Tactics,” 1917 No. 20, 1998

ICL’s Record of ‘Opportunist Flinches’

The obverse of the SL’s sectarian abstentionism, according to *Spartacist*, has been a series of “opportunist flinches”:

“The conference took note of opportunist departures that accompanied the pattern of sectarianism. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the intervention of leading cadre outside our center was crucial to our continued capacity to function under extraordinarily difficult conditions. This

entailed an ongoing struggle to combat opportunist flinches as well as empty bombast in our propaganda. The most pronounced example of the former was our failure for a full month to publicly state that Marxists draw a distinction between attacks on institutions like the Pentagon—which directly represents the military might of U.S. imperialism—and random terror against innocent civilians, as in the case of the World Trade Center.”

—“The Fight for Revolutionary Continuity in the Post-Soviet World,” *Spartacist* No. 58, Spring 2004

Unlike the SL, we made the elementary distinction between the World Trade Center and the Pentagon from the outset. In fact, WV only corrected its error after we raised the issue in an intervention against radical-liberal Tariq Ali on 28 September 2001 at a public meeting in Toronto. After the event, we challenged several Tlers on the political significance of this omission from the SL’s statement on the September 11 attacks. Our 18 September statement had pointed to the critical importance of winning American workers to recognize “that their interests lie in opposing the bloodthirsty military adventures of their rulers” and recalled the SL’s 1983 flinch when an earlier attempt to establish a U.S. foothold in the Middle East was blown sky-high by a Muslim truck bomb: “Marxists differentiate between acts aimed at imperialist military targets and those aimed at innocent civilians. For example, we recognize that the demolition of the U.S. and French garrisons in Lebanon in 1983 by ‘Islamic Jihad’ were defensible blows against imperialist attempts to establish a military beachhead in the Middle East. Some supposed Marxist organizations flinched, including the left-posturing Spartacist League/U.S., which issued a social-patriotic call for saving the surviving U.S. Marines.”

—“U.S. Imperialist Rule: An Endless Horror,”
18 September 2001, reprinted in *1917* No. 24

Whether in Lebanon, Somalia, Afghanistan or Iraq, revolutionaries always side militarily with indigenous opposition to neo-colonial occupation. We don’t care if the imperialist thugs leave on their own or in body bags, the important thing is that they leave.³⁴

The SL leadership’s loss of nerve over Lebanon, like its dive on KAL 007 a few months earlier, was driven by fear of the aggressively anti-communist Reagan administration. The same cowardly impulse led to the bizarre offer the next year to send a dozen SLers to “defend” the Democratic National Convention against “Reagan reaction” and “ultrarightist assault.” *Workers Vanguard* absurdly warned:

“A fitting historical model for Reagan’s exploitation of a ‘terror scare’ to smash political opposition can be found in the 1933 Reichstag...fire, which was...exploited by [the Nazis] to repress political dissidence and consolidate the Third Reich.”

—“Are Cops, Reagan Planning Violence at Democratic Convention?,” WV No. 358, 6 July 1984

In an 11 July 1984 letter, we noted that the SL’s proposal was distinguished from standard Communist Party “unite to stop the right” popular-frontism only by its hysterical Chicken Little tone, and reminded the SL of its historical position that there is “not a dime’s worth of difference” between the twin parties of racism and imperialist war.³⁵ The SL leadership responded in the 31 August 1984 issue of WV: “Anyone but a blind man can see that there is more than ‘a dime’s worth of

difference’ between Mondale and Reagan....”

A year and a half after ludicrously propositioning the Democrats, the SL flinched again when, in January 1986, the accidental destruction of the space shuttle *Challenger* aborted an important Star Wars mission, killing five members of the U.S. military:

“What we feel toward the astronauts is no more and no less than for any people who die in tragic circumstances such as the nine poor Salvadorans who were killed by a fire in a Washington, D.C. basement apartment two days before.”

—“Challenger Blows Up in Reagan’s Face,” WV No. 397,
14 February 1986

What sort of “revolutionary” feels no more sympathy for impoverished refugees from a right-wing terror regime than for the professional military cadres of imperialism?³⁶

Afghanistan 2001: Another Flinch

The *Spartacist* article refers to “opportunist flinches,” but cites only the Pentagon example. So it’s hard to know if the ICL now regrets its cowardly dive on revolutionary defeatism during the U.S. conquest of Afghanistan in 2001:

“Thus, the call for a U.S. military defeat is, at this time, illusory and the purest hot air and ‘revolutionary’ phrasemongering—and one which derives from forsaking the mobilization of the U.S. proletariat with the aim of the conquest of state power.”

—“No to Bosses’ ‘National Unity’! For Class Struggle at Home!”, WV No. 768, 9 November 2001

As we noted, this contrasted starkly with the ICL’s own record:

“The essential issue posed for the left by the attack on Afghanistan is which side to take—should we favor the victory or the defeat of our rulers? Two years ago, when NATO bombs began to fall on Belgrade, the SL answered that question clearly: ‘Defend Serbia! Defeat U.S./NATO imperialism! For workers revolution!’ (WV, 16 April 1999). Why should its answer be different today?”

—“Where is the ICL Going?”, *1917* No. 24, 2002

This is a question the ICL cannot answer. In contrast to the Robertsonians, we did not consider imperialist victory inevitable:

“If the imperialist coalition is compelled to deploy significant numbers of ground troops to finish off the Taliban and its allies in its Pashtun base area, it seems conceivable that the Islamist guerrillas could prolong the conflict long enough, and inflict enough casualties on the U.S. forces, to dampen domestic support for the campaign. This would be a ‘best case’ outcome, and at this point it cannot be entirely excluded.”

—*Ibid.*

With the conflict in Afghanistan in its third year, the ICL leadership’s demoralized speculation about the futility of resistance to the imperialist war machine stands exposed as just one more, as yet unacknowledged, flinch. In 2003, when Bush Jr. launched the invasion of Iraq, the domestic political climate in the U.S. had changed enough for the SL/ICL to revert to an explicitly defeatist position:

“Every victory for the U.S. imperialists can only encourage further military adventures. In turn, every humiliation, every setback, every defeat they suffer will serve to assist the

34 The SL’s scandalous call to save the Marines in Lebanon was the subject of an extended series of polemics, all of which are reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 2.

35 This letter is reprinted in *Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt* No. 4, May 1985.

36 See: “No Disaster for the Working Class,” *1917* No. 2, Summer 1986

struggles of working people and the oppressed around the globe.”

—“Statement of the Political Bureau of the Spartacist League/U.S.,” WV No. 800, 28 March 2003

Very true, but why was the same position just “hot air and ‘revolutionary’ phrase-mongering” sixteen months earlier? The reason is obvious—the cowardly ICL leaders did not want to appear “unpatriotic” in the aftermath of “9/11.”

The *Spartacist* No. 58 article begins with Lenin’s famous observation that:

“A political party’s attitude towards its own mistakes is one of the most important and surest ways of judging how earnest the party is and how it fulfills *in practice* its obligations towards its *class* and the *working people*. Frankly acknowledging a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analysing the conditions that have led up to it, and thrashing out the means of its rectification—that is the hallmark of a serious party; that is how it should perform its duties, and how it should educate and train its *class* and then the *masses*.”

—‘Left-Wing’ Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920)

Good advice, but as its recent flip-flops on defeatism demonstrate, the ICL lacks the “hallmark of a serious party.” The self-criticism in *Spartacist* is not so much “a frank acknowledgment of mistakes,” as an exercise in damage control. By repudiating a few of their more egregious errors, Robertson and Co. are hoping to refurbish their credentials with the critically important, but very thin, layer of intelligent younger ICL members.

One of the most significant indicators of the leadership’s real attitude toward the few mistakes it has so far owned up to is the timetable for their correction. While it took four and a half years to retract the idiotic sectarianism over Seattle, ten years to formally renounce its Stalinophobic deviation on China, and 14 years to finally repudiate the absurd claim that the ICL had led the working class in the DDR, the WV ed board’s failure to defend Robertson’s chauvinist “Turds” slur was “corrected” *immediately*.³⁷ In Jimstown, nothing is more precious than the reputation of the perfect master.

Why the SL Mattered

The SL, while still capable of making fundamentally correct observations about the world and doing valuable historical/archival work,³⁸ is an organization which, when the going gets tough, has a record of determining its positions on the basis of expediency and perceived organizational advantage, rather than Marxist principle. The decline and fall of the House of Robertson would not be worth chronicling were it not for the fact that in the 1960s and 70s the Spartacist tendency represented the living continuity of Bolshevism. In this period, Robertson played a critically important role in preserving Trotskyism and made several valuable programmatic extensions to it. For this he deserves recognition, despite his subsequent devolution.

By the mid-1950s, as Robertson was reaching political maturity, most claimants to the heritage of Trotsky’s Fourth In-

ternational stood considerably to its right. This was not only true of partisans of the pseudo-Trotskyist “Third Camp,” like Max Shachtman and Tony Cliff, and the “New World Reality” revisionists like Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel and Ted Grant, but also, by the mid-1960s, of Pierre Lambert, Joe Hansen and Gerry Healy, who for a time had purported to champion “orthodox Trotskyism” against Pablo et al. Robertson and the organization he built stood, by contrast, on the actual politics of the Fourth International under Trotsky. Hansen’s dismissal of Robertson in the 1970s as a “talented archivist,” was a tribute to the fact that he took the programmatic heritage of the Trotskyist movement seriously at a time when few others did.

Having spent the 1950s and early 1960s as a left oppositionist in first Max Shachtman’s Independent Socialist League as it collapsed into social democracy, and then Farrell Dobbs’ SWP as it embraced Castroism, Robertson was not inclined to view political liquidation as the key to success. In his prime, James Robertson was an important link in the chain of revolutionary continuity:

“The Spartacist League was not just one left grouping among many—it was the crystallization of the left-wing opposition to the political destruction by Pabloite revisionism of the revolutionary Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—a party built by James P. Cannon and trained by Leon Trotsky to carry forward Bolshevism amid the destruction of the Communist International by the syphilis of Stalinism.

“Even before it was expelled from the SWP, the Revolutionary Tendency (RT), the SL’s progenitor, underwent a split. Gerry Healy, leader of the British Socialist Labour League (SLL) and erstwhile mentor of the RT, ordered his followers to sign their names to a lie. A majority of the group, led by James Robertson, refused to do so. They broke from almost half their tendency at the cost of substantially reducing their chances of winning over a section of the SWP cadre because telling the truth was more important. It was an honorable beginning.”

—“The Road to Jimstown,” *Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt* No. 4, May 1985

While the revolutionary SL of the 1960s and 70s was rigidly principled, it also worked hard to develop effective tactics to root the program of revolutionary communism within the most advanced sections of the oppressed and exploited. SL cadres participated in all the mass struggles of the day without adapting to the reformist and sectoralist ideologies that predominated in them. In the trade unions, while most of the left sunk into economism or signed up as publicists for left-talking out-of-office hustlers, Spartacist supporters struggled to find ways to make class-struggle politics relevant, and in the process won the respect of many workers as principled militants who “walked the walk.”³⁹

The Spartacist League in its best period was easily distinguished from its centrist competitors by its fidelity to revolutionary principle—it put program first. While Gerry Healy and Livio Maitan enthused about Mao’s “revolutionary” Red

37 As we pointed out in “The Emperor Has No Clothes” (reprinted in *Kurdistan & the Struggle for National Liberation*) WV’s tortured alibi for Robertson’s chauvinism is “so ridiculous that even hardened SL hacks appear embarrassed by it.” Only ICLers who embrace the credo of St. Anselm of Canterbury and “believe in order to understand” can take the official story seriously.

38 The two volumes of James P. Cannon’s writings published by the SL’s Prometheus Research Library are significant contributions to the history of the Trotskyist movement, as are the titles so far published in the *Prometheus Research Series*.

39 The history of the SL’s trade-union work in the 1970s is one of the brightest chapters in its revolutionary past. We documented some of the highlights of the group’s attempts to build programmatically-based caucuses in strategic unions in our edition of Trotsky’s *Transitional Program*.

Guards, the SL correctly described the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” as an intra-bureaucratic power struggle, and observed that Mao’s “anti-revisionist” posturing pointed toward an alliance with American imperialism against the Soviet degenerated workers’ state. Unlike every other ostensibly Trotskyist tendency, the SL also had the distinction of refusing any electoral support (however “critical”) to Salvador Allende’s multi-class Unidad Popular in Chile:

“Any ‘critical support’ to the Allende coalition is class treason, paving the way for a bloody defeat for the Chilean working people when domestic reaction, abetted by international imperialism is ready.”

—“Chilean Popular Front,” *Spartacist* No. 19, November-December 1970

Nine years later the SL again stood alone on the left when it refused to endorse Iran’s “Islamic Revolution” against the hated Shah. The SL’s policy of “Down With the Shah! No Support to the Mullahs!” scandalized all those who hailed Ayatollah Khomeini’s ascension as a great revolutionary victory, but was tragically vindicated by subsequent events.

Unlike almost all the rest of the world’s ostensible Trotskyists, the Spartacist tendency refused to defend pro-imperialist Soviet “dissidents” like Anatoly Shcharansky. Yet it did not shrink from denouncing the crimes of the Stalinists. In 1973, at the height of veneration for Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party, the SL published a valuable, and original, account of the Stalinists’ record of betrayal in Vietnam.⁴⁰

Between 1970 and 1973, as the New Left went into terminal crisis, the SL/U.S. quadrupled in size, regrouping dozens of dedicated militants from a wide variety of radical organizations. These cadres gave the SL the capacity to produce a high-quality, polemical bi-weekly newspaper; to undertake a serious intervention into several strategic unions; and to extend the tendency internationally. By the mid-1970s, the SL was a tightly disciplined organization with a talented, highly motivated membership cohered by agreement to the Trotskyist program. The pristine clarity of its sophisticated and internally consistent political line imbued the youthful Spartacist cadres with a self-confidence and determination that contrasted dramatically with their ostensibly Trotskyist competitors.

But as opportunities dried up and the class struggle turned down in the U.S. during the late 1970s, the SL began to degenerate, Robertson’s lifestyle drifted upward and the group’s inter-

nal corrective capacity atrophied as a wave of purges swept the iSt aimed at those thought potentially capable of constituting a political opposition in the future. The results of this “Bolshevization” campaign were soon evident in a series of erratic programmatic wobbles. Today, the members of the ICL have become so habituated to unquestioning obedience that they do not expect to be able to make sense of the group’s political line, or even that the line *should* make sense.

In a 1995 article, we noted the connection between the SL’s programmatic departures on the Russian question and its highly bureaucratized internal regime:

“The Spartacist League now finds itself in a state of complete confusion regarding the single question that more than any other had defined it as a tendency—the Russian question. This is not simply a case of faulty analysis. The adaptation to Stalinism in the early 1980s, like the social-patriotic deviations, could easily have been reversed in a healthy, democratic-centralist group. Even the misestimate of the situation in the DDR, or the failure to grasp the significance of the August 1991 events, do not in themselves constitute betrayals. Honest revolutionaries can make mistakes. The SL, however, lacks the capacity for correcting these mistakes that only a democratic internal life can provide. It is the doctrine of Robertsonian infallibility, and the adamant refusal to acknowledge that an opponent could be right where it was wrong, that drives the SL to persist in and compound its original errors, to play havoc with reality in the process, and finally to descend gradually into incoherence.”

—“A Dismal Symmetry,” 1917 No. 15, 1995

The SL/ICL is an organization in which criticism only flows downward. In cauterizing potential opposition from below, James Robertson and his acolytes originally imagined that they would be able to avoid the costly overhead of faction fights and splits. Robertson always considered that the loss of most of its brightest youth to Shachtman in the 1940 split had permanently damaged Cannon’s SWP. He was determined to avoid making the same mistake, but only succeeded in strangling the once-revolutionary Spartacist League and setting it on the path to political oblivion. The SL/ICL’s current intractable problems demonstrate the inextricable connection between the internal regime of a revolutionary organization and its formal political program. The necrosis of the Spartacist League, like the split between the Russian Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in 1903, demonstrates that in the final analysis, for revolutionaries, *the organizational question is a political question.*

40 WV No. 21, 25 May 1973, summarized the SL’s position as follows:

“The Spartacist League has consistently, throughout its history, called for military defense of the NLF/DRV, including in times or places where this has not been a popular demand....At the same time, as Trotskyists we hold high the banner of permanent revolution and expose the repeated betrayals of the Vietnamese Stalinists.”

This article was one of a series that the SL reissued in 1976 as a pamphlet entitled *Stalinism and Trotskyism in Vietnam.*

Appendix 1

Debate in the ICL Over Yeltsin's Coup

The following documents were circulated in an internal discussion in the Spartacist League/Britain in June and July 2003. The first and final ones are by Tony R., who while not associated with the IBT, had, as a result of the intervention of our British comrades, come over to our position on the August 1991 confrontation in Moscow between the remnants of Soviet Stalinism and the forces of capitalist restoration. The seven documents written in reply to Tony R. by a variety of ICL members reveal the extent of the group's political confusion on the issue and the impact of our Trotskyist analysis on residents of "Jimstown."

Document 1.1

On the Counterrevolution in Russia

Tony R., London, 26 June 2003

As comrades are aware I was for some time confused over our position on the counterrevolution in Russia in 1991/2. I was directed to several works by Trotsky, as well as documents about the collapse of the workers state. I also had a series of discussions with more senior comrades a month ago or so and have been going over the issues in my head ever since. During this time I have, despite my own questions on the issue, defended our position in public. I have tried to find a way to understand the arguments presented by comrades as best I can, but after thinking it over for some weeks, and reading everything recommended to me, I find myself increasingly certain that while our stance of unconditional defence of the degenerated Soviet workers state is entirely correct, our position on the August 1991 coup was flawed at the time and needs to be thought through seriously. For this reason I have written up the following document so that comrades can understand precisely what my criticisms are and hopefully there can be a full and clear discussion.

Comradely Greetings, Tony R

In October 1917 the Bolsheviks, ousting the Provisional Government, took power and the Russian workers state was born. Lenin, at the Second Conference of Soviets, opened his speech with the words, "We shall now proceed to construct the Socialist order".

At this point the Bolsheviks had far from consolidated their power, as the events which followed were to show all too clearly. Neither had the Bolsheviks yet established a collectivised and centrally planned economy. What made Russia a workers state was the fact that an armed body of men, dedicated to the building and defence of a "Socialist order", had taken state power. This workers state, despite its bureaucratic degeneration, was to survive for over 70 years.

On the events of 1917 we hold a correct and clear position rooted in Trotsky's outstanding analysis of the Soviet Union. As comrades are aware, the ICL's defencist position was key in my recruitment from the stalinophobic politics of the LRCL. However, while I have learned a great deal since joining the SYG, I feel that our position on the destruction of the Soviet workers state is not as clear as it should be, and in fact, not entirely correct.

In August 1991 an armed body of men dedicated to the construction and defence of capitalism (led by Boris Yeltsin) took state power in Russia. As with the Bolsheviks in 1917 this new government was yet to be consolidated and there was still a conflict between the economy and the state. Does the fact that the economy was not yet capitalist mean that a bourgeois counterrevolution had not yet taken place? No. As Trotsky explained in 1937:

"In the first months of Soviet rule the proletariat reigned on the basis of a bourgeois economy. In the field of agriculture the dictatorship of the proletariat operated for a number of years on the basis of a petty-bourgeois economy (to a considerable degree it does so even now). Should a bourgeois counterrevolution succeed in the USSR, the new government for a lengthy period would have to base itself upon the nationalized economy. But what does such a type of temporary conflict between the economy and the state mean? It means a revolution or a counterrevolution. The victory of one class over another signifies that it will reconstruct the economy in the interests of the victors."

(*'Not a Workers' and Not a Bourgeois State?'*)

As Trotsky makes clear, the return of private property and destruction of the planned economy are not pre-requisites for counterrevolution, but rather "the replacement of a workers' government by a bourgeois...government would inevitably lead to the liquidation of the planned beginnings and, subsequently, to the restoration of private property" (*'The Worker's State, Thermidor and Bonapartism'*, 1935). But what about the fact that Yeltsin had not yet consolidated his power in August '91? Does this mean that the workers state had not yet ceased to be? Again the answer is no. Every new state, whether it be the workers state created by the Bolsheviks in 1917 or the bourgeois state created by Yeltsin in 1991, is initially extremely fragile and vulnerable. Yeltsin needed to consolidate his repressive state apparatus but this does not change the fact that he held state power. In 1917 the workers state had to go through a massive civil war before it was fully consolidated, and yet our movement never placed the date of the beginning of the workers state after the civil war.

As comrades are aware we often have to deal with the IBT at public events. This obviously involves the question of the coup, which is one of the issues they routinely raise at our

public forums. I think the reason they do so is because they sense that we are not entirely clear about our position, and this gives them the chance to score points and make us look bad. I have to say that in reading over the articles from the past decade or so, our analysis of what happened in '90/'91 has been characterised by contradictory statements and a disturbing vagueness. Nowhere has this been more apparent than on our attitude towards the attempted Emergency Committee (EC) coup.

Over three days the attempted coup, led by Vice President Gennady Yanayev, put Gorbachev under house arrest and sent tanks and armoured personnel carriers towards the White House. Rumours abounded that they were going to move in and attack the building. As it turned out the coup was a total failure. The EC leaders failed to give clear instructions to the tank commanders, arrest Yeltsin before the coup was announced, or even to cut the phone lines to the White House to stop communications between Bush and Yeltsin. The fact that the coup was so inept is one of the main reasons we put forward for not supporting it ("the gang of eight that couldn't shoot straight"), asking "what was there to 'militarily' support?" (WV, 27 Sept. '91). There were tanks and armoured vehicles. That it was pathetic and horrendously organised is unarguable, but since when did Trotskyists start basing their decisions on who to support on their military strength? By the same token it could be argued that we should not have given military support to Iraq in the recent war as the Republican Guard was a ramshackle force in comparison to the US marines and British army.

The EC was certainly no friend of the Russian workers, but the question that has to be asked is whether the victory of the EC would have made it less difficult or easier for the workers to seize power. The victory of the EC would have meant that the workers would have to overthrow a fractured and decimated Stalinist bureaucracy, not the western capitalist backed state represented by Yeltsin. Can we honestly say that had the EC tanks opened fire on the White House in August '91 it would not have made any difference to the course of the counterrevolution? That idea was unfortunately spelled out in 'The International Bolshevik Tendency—What is it?' where we state that the coup plotters were "just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin" (something which veers towards the [formulation] that the Stalinist bureaucracy was 'counter-revolutionary through and through', something we of course reject). If this was the case then how come the failure of the coup "unleashed a counterrevolutionary tide across the land of the October Revolution" (WV, 30 Aug. '91)? For our position on such an important issue to appear, to say the least, muddled and confused, is to make our political competitors' jobs a lot easier than they should be, and ours a lot harder.

When bringing up these problems with comrades I have been repeatedly told that things were more complicated than this and that I had to really understand dialectical materialism, especially the idea of "quantity becoming quality", in order to see why the position was correct. Let's therefore look at the law of transformation of quantity into quality. From a dialectical perspective everything is of course constantly changing. Although all this change has a quantitative element it always reaches a certain point when these slow, gradual, changes give rise to a qualitative change. This means that in all things there will be periods of gradual change interrupted by rapid periods of sudden change. The clearest example of this is the heating of water. When we heat water from 1 to 99 degrees centigrade there is a quantitative change, the water is getting hotter, but there is no qualitative change, it is still water. Heat the water to 100 degrees centigrade however, and it changes to steam. The slow quantitative changes have given rise to a

qualitative change, the water has ceased to be and now we have steam.

In the case of the collapse of the Soviet workers state these quantitative changes had been occurring for years as the workers state was undermined by degrees. Yeltsin's victory in August 1991 marked the qualitative change this process had given rise to, the end of the workers state and the beginning of the bourgeois state. Our position, as I understand it, is that this qualitative change occurred at some unknown point in 1992. When the counterrevolution took place is not just an academic question. As Trotsky clearly stated in 1939, "To determine at the right moment the critical point where quantity changes into quality is one of the most important and difficult tasks in all the spheres of knowledge including sociology" (The ABC of Materialist Dialectics). It is a task at which the ICL has not yet succeeded in, as to this day we are still unable to state when the workers state ceased to be.

In relation to the question of counterrevolution in Russia Comrade Victor, who was there at the time, states in a recent letter that:

"It might be useful for the Marxist education of our own comrades to take a look at Eastern Europe 1945-47, and the Cuban and Nicaraguan Revolutions. The situations could not be more different from the piecemeal destruction of the Soviet Union of 1991-92, but in all these instances, the question of what state would emerge—its class nature—required a more or less prolonged period to fight out and clarify property forms that the new ruling class would defend."

("Reply to GR 28 May 03, Proposed Readings for 'Why We Defended the USSR' Presentation", 7 June 03)

Comrade Victor is right, "the situations could not be more different" from the destruction of the Soviet Union. Unlike the above examples the nature of the property forms the new ruling class would defend in Russia was not in question, Yeltsin was openly and aggressively for the restoration of capitalism. Victor's statement that there was a "piecemeal destruction of the Soviet Union" is also confusing. Counterrevolutions, as with revolutions, are not "piecemeal" processes. As we stated in the classic document "Genesis of Pabloism", in relation to Ernest Mandel's "The First Phase of the European Revolution" (*Fourth International*, August 1946),

"The title already implies the outlook: "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* English edition No. 21, Fall 1972, on our website)

A "sharp...confrontation", not a "piecemeal" process. The latter suggests what Trotsky referred to as "reformism in reverse" ('The Class Nature of the Soviet State', 1933), a gradual change.

Yeltsin's victory was, of course, not an inevitable outcome. Had the working class acted as an independent force it could have stopped Yeltsin and taken power itself. It did not however. To militarily support the EC coup at the time did not mean writing off the working class, but rather recognising the reality that the working class was not acting while the EC was (an EC victory would have meant more time, at least, for the working class to act). Equally, to recognise the fact that the forces of open counterrevolution had won in August '91 did not mean giving up the defence of the gains the workers had made. All it meant was that to defend the gains of the working class the workers would have to fight as they would in any bourgeois state to defend their gains (e.g. the NHS in Britain)

and through a socialist revolution to oust Yeltsin. They would be fighting not a bureaucratic Stalinist caste, but a body of armed men dedicated to the building and defence of capitalism. Hope was certainly not lost but to deny the fact that the workers had suffered a major defeat (counterrevolution) was to deny reality.

I cannot think of a good reason not to acknowledge the obvious; that the moment when Yeltsin won and a “counter-revolutionary tide” was unleashed was the moment of qualitative transformation. The fact that one of our political rivals

happens to be right on a question is no reason for us to be wrong. It is of course a bit embarrassing to admit that we are late in making this assessment, but in response to those who might try to ridicule us for correcting an error, we can point out that even Lenin and Trotsky made occasional errors. If anything the fact that we corrected ourselves would show everybody exactly how seriously we take the Russian question. The test of a revolutionary organisation is of course not infallibility, but rather capacity to recognise and correct errors. And that is always better late than never...

Document 1.2

['Our Position on the Russian Question']

Bonnie B., New York, 27 June 2003

TO: SL/B London; George R./home
cc: Jane/Toronto; Ali/home

FROM: I.S./New York

Dear George and comrades—

As per our brief conversation this evening, this letter is to follow up on some of the conversations you've had with Alison re: conducting a political fight over Tony's position on our position on the 1991 events. The punchline being that this is a question of a political difference brought up by a young comrade and it requires thoughtful political response on the part of comrades in the youth group and the party. It's also, if done right, a good opportunity for education and deepening comrades' understanding of our position on the Russian Question as well as our own party history; a learning (and re-learning) experience.

I'd like to pass on two points from Alison: first there's a Pabloite methodology that encompasses both the IG (the anti-Spartacists who abandoned the Trotskyist program in the aftermath of the destruction of the Soviet Union) and BT (who abandoned the Trotskyist program during the rigors of Cold War II, about which more below) and is reflected as well in Tony's document. That being that it is necessarily up to a wing of the bureaucracy to take up the fight against counter-revolution. As the events in August 1991 graphically proved, however, such was not the case. Had the coup committee taken decisive action to crush the counterrevolution, there is no doubt where we would have stood militarily, just as we did in the crushing of Solidarnosc counterrevolution in Poland. Comrades should review the material on the fight in the SL/B over exactly that question (see *International Internal Bulletin* No. 25, January 1992 [originally published as Spartacist League/Britain *Internal Discussion Bulletin* No. 14, December 1991]).

Let me make a (somewhat lengthy) digression on that 1991 fight: the (then) comrades who wanted to rule out military support to the coup-plotters, objected to our forthright statement that:

“Had the coup plotters stuck to their guns, it could have led to a civil war—which is what they feared above all. And in an armed struggle pitting outright restorationists against recalcitrant elements of the bureaucracy, defense of the collectivised economy would have been placed on the agenda whatever the Stalinists' intentions. Trotskyists *would have entered a military bloc with 'the Thermidorean section of the bureaucracy'* as Trotsky postulated in the 1938 *Transitional Program*. This precisely was our policy toward Jaruzelski in 1981.” (my emphasis)

These same comrades were loathe to continue our defense of the Soviet Union as a workers state in the immediate aftermath of Yeltsin's coup. They weren't alone. The then-Leninist organization (now the grotesque CPGB) decided to “briefly mourn before getting on with the job of organising on the basis of the lessons our defeat in the USSR teaches” with the results you see today in the pages of *Weekly Worker*.

And there was another group—namely the BT—which was in quite a hurry to declare the destruction of the USSR. Len usefully found a couple of *Workers Vanguard* articles documenting this at the time. See “Stalinophobes Go Stalinophilic?—No!/BT Writes Off the Soviet Union,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 535, 27 September 1991. As we wrote there:

“And on September 21, more than a month after the coup/counter-coup, the BT distributed a statement definitively declaring ‘Counterrevolution Triumphs in USSR.’ The failure of the putsch, they say, means that ‘the major organized obstacle to the consolidation of a bourgeois state has been effectively removed.’ Thus, they simply write off the Soviet working class as a force against capitalist restoration.”

We did not, which is why it is important for comrades to read the “Soviet Workers: Defeat Yeltsin-Bush Counterrevolution!” statement [dated 27 August 1991] which [was] distributed when and where it counted, an intervention which every ICL member should be very proud of. As the *WV* article cited above put it:

“While the botched coup and the ascendancy of Yeltsin have opened the floodgates for capitalist counterrevolution in the USSR, the Soviet proletariat has yet to be heard from. The question of which class shall rule is urgently posed, but it is not one that has already been determined.”

There are other useful things to read about the BT's cynical, after-the-fact support to the failed coup as their way of finally being able to dump Soviet defensism altogether; see “BT ‘Forgets’ Support to Gang of Eight” (*WV* No. 540, 6 December 1991). This is of a piece with their retrospectively spitting on our call to “Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!”—patently an entrée to the anti-Soviet fake-left swamp. (See articles on that in *WV* No. 444, 25 March 1988; No. 453, 20 May 1988 and No. 482, 21 July 1989). You will find that the Stalinophobic language used by the BT when they decried our slogan over Afghanistan (e.g., “Trotskyists never hail Stalinist traitors or their state...”) really gives the lie to their supposed military defense of the USSR in August 1991.

Moving from my digression to another point from Alison: Tony writes in his document that, in fact, the coup was “pa-

thetic and horrendously organised” and then goes on to say “By the same token it could be argued that we should not have given military support to Iraq in the recent war as the Republican Guard was a ramshackle force in comparison to the US marines and British army.” No, this doesn’t work as an analogy. There turned out to be no section, Thermidorean or otherwise, of the bureaucracy to bloc with against Yeltsin-Bush counterrevolution but, as above, this did not change our position at the time on the class nature of the USSR nor our position of unconditional military defense of the degenerated workers state. The Soviet proletariat was key and it was to them we directed our propaganda efforts. In Iraq, our position of defense of this neo-colonial country against imperialist attack was never contingent on the military prowess or lack thereof of forces which could resist the invading imperialist militaries—which is why our propaganda stressed the centrality of mobilizing proletarian opposition to the war within the imperialist centers (or citadels) as the agency for such defense. That fight—for an independent proletarian mobilization against the war as opposed to the rotten, Labourite (on British terrain), class-collaborationist, “all people of good will” “mass movement” that could not and did not stop the war—has been central to the work of most of our sections in the recent past.

The BT cut and ran during Cold War II; the IG departed after the destruction of the Soviet Union. But, even before Norden departed our organization, his proclivities to elevate the military over the political had been documented. Comrades recommend Ralph Eades’ document on the *Workers Vanguard* coverage of the first Gulf War, which falsely equated the tenacity of those fighting for *social revolution* (the heroic Vietnamese) with the forces at the disposal of the wretched, formerly Washington-backed Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. In the recent war, of course, the country had been devastated by imperialist sanctions and, while we hailed every act of resistance against the imperialists, it would have been utterly fatuous to assume that the rocks, sticks and ancient SAMs at the disposal of the Iraqis would “defeat” the U.S./British forces. The fight for defense of Iraq was, rather, political: a struggle against the obstacles to mobilizing class resistance to the war, which was acutely posed in Britain.

Here’s a military fact: had the Soviet Red Army crushed the CIA-backed Islamic reactionaries rather than ignominiously withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan, things would look a lot different in the world today. Those who took the other side, or tried to split the difference (like Workers Power with its “counterrevolutionary to go in, counterrevolutionary

to leave” position) were left chattering about a “united front” with the Taliban when the U.S. went to war against its erstwhile partners in Afghanistan in the aftermath of September 11. And the BT was much the same, and the IG, which managed to deep-six the whole question of the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan while pursuing its campus work in New York City during the war against Afghanistan. Beneath the paper/cyberspace howls about “defeating imperialism” lurks these explicit acts by both the BT and the IG to denounce and/or bury the Trotskyist position of unconditional military defense of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the conquest of which is how one defeats imperialism.

Lastly, given the important opponents’ interventions on the SL/B’s plate, I understand that comrades can only do so much reading. But on the BT itself: our exposure, subsequent trial and expulsion of one Bill Logan is very much part of the British section’s history. Those bulletins should be read by our members, not least because the BT hangs around our organization, having lost other host organisms (such as the SLP) as well as for its usual anti-Spartacist purposes. Knowledge of what a collection of sociopaths, misogynist bullies and outright creeps came to form the BT does not rid us of our obligation to politically fight on political questions arising from their “work,” but it could cut against the rather academic view of political struggle as simply that of ideas, divorced from the practice, history and composition of the purveyors of such ideas.

Hope this is helpful, and best wishes for our interventions upcoming. Will talk to you tomorrow.

CGs,

Bonnie

P.S. The SL/B and its youth group have had this problem since we began to break out and recruit new and young forces: the youth are recruited on a fairly soft basis, e.g., the ten-point program. But that is only the beginning of the work. The political consolidation within the common movement is in a sense where the real work begins. It’s not enough to tell a young comrade with a deviant line to go read X, it needs to be taken in hand through both formal and informal education, fights when necessary (such as now) and transmitting our party history to a younger generation. It sounds trite to write this, but it has and will keep coming up as long as we recruit and as long as the work of consolidating our newer members is neglected.

Document 1.3

On the Counterrevolution in the USSR

Ben M., London, 28 June 2003

In Reply to Tony R’s Document

I have taken time out from my reading and preparation for our intervention into Socialism 2003 to write a short document on the subject of Tony’s disagreement with our position on counterrevolution in the Soviet Union. I should firstly commend Comrade Tony on bringing his questions and disagreements to the fore in the manner that he has. As he stresses, he has defended our position in public and in raising his disagreement internally in his document Tony is fully ad-

hering to the principles of democratic centralism. I am also glad to see that the formal discussion on this matter has been referred to the SYG and a meeting has been accordingly called for next week, reaffirming our commitment to Leninist youth-party relations.

Though Comrade Tony’s position is also that of the International Bolshevik Tendency, it appears to me that his disagreement is more a result of confusion about the reality of counterrevolution and an incorrect theoretical approach

than one of hostility. I have no doubt that the distortions and parasitic phrasemongering of the IBT have abetted Tony's current confusion. It is our responsibility to counter this confusion by a political fight in the SYG aided by the experience of senior party comrades (not least those visiting from other sections). The newer members of the SYG have not experienced a political fight and the matter being debated has not been discussed in detail by the youth. Therefore we should put evermore stress on the proper and comradely conduct of all discussion that takes place and, where possible, comrades should write documents. The participation of the SYG in the fight with Stephanie—though very different—was such, and given that Tony's conduct is in no way hostile as Stephanie's was, and he is adhering to democratic centralism, we should make doubly sure of such proper and comradely conduct.

No doubt much of what I am going to write has been expressed in informal discussions over the previous days, as well as in Comrade Eibhlin's informative and useful presentation at the caucus for the Taaffeite event this weekend. Although my conclusions are based on these presentations and the reading of our propaganda, I do not intend to quote lengthily from our press. However, I intend to reply to Tony's document directly and hopefully address some of the confusion with clarity.

In short, Comrade Tony argues that our position on the August 1991 coup and not declaring the counterrevolution complete until eight months later in 1992 is flawed. In addition he declares that we should have supported the "state emergency committee" (EC) in their coup by giving them military support. He uses a number of quotes from various of Trotsky's and our own writings to support his arguments, as well as a number of illustrative examples. However, I think these are misplaced, and the conclusions made do not follow from the premises when material reality is taken into account. The first question asked is whether the fact that the economy was not yet capitalist (in August 1991) meant that a bourgeois counterrevolution had not yet taken place. Comrade Tony cites Trotsky, using the example of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. "In the first months of Soviet rule the proletariat reigned on the basis of a bourgeois economy" wrote Trotsky, "Should a bourgeois counterrevolution succeed in the USSR, the new government for a lengthy period would have to base itself upon the nationalised economy....The victory of one class over another signifies that it will reconstruct the economy in the interests of the victors." But does this take for granted that the "victory of one class over another"—the counterrevolution—takes place overnight, or even in a period of days? Not at all.

For sure, the Bolshevik revolution was neither begun (1) nor concluded on the 7th and 8th of November. The decrees of workers' control and land for the peasants issued by the People's Commissars on the 8th of November did not constitute the social revolution, just as Tsar Boris Yeltsin's decrees on the 22nd of August didn't constitute the reversal of those great gains. However, far more importantly, *in 1917 the working class was an active factor*. In the months leading up to the October insurrection—when the Bolsheviks gained majorities in the Soviets—the industrial workers in the proletarian centres were overwhelmingly in support of the Bolsheviks. The proletariat played an active role. The 1991 coup, counter-coup and subsequent counterrevolution were marked by the relative absence of the proletariat and a revolutionary leadership. In hindsight we know that the consciousness of the proletariat had been eroded by decades of Stalinist misrule, but this does not negate the possibility that had our forces been larger we could have provided this leadership—as was also the case in the DDR in 1989-1990. As comrades

know and are proud of, the ICL fought with all its ability to instil conscious[ness] necessary in the proletariat to fight for political revolution to oust the Stalinist bureaucracy. As Trotsky stated, a battle that is not fought constitutes a battle lost. But for Yeltsin and his counterrevolutionary rabble to win the battle it took more than just decrees and barricades attended by a few thousand yuppies and frauds of the likes of Workers Power, Militant and the International Socialists. It is well known that on the evening of August the 22nd, the day of the famous coup—which Comrade Tony argues was the moment of counterrevolution—Boris Yeltsin was found drunken and unconscious on the floor of his White House office by his deputy! It was by no means certain what would happen next, and the counterrevolutionaries, regardless of their ambition to become the new bourgeoisie, had not become organised as the new ruling class.

The other question, which Comrade Tony raises, is that of whether we should have given military support to the GKChP (EC). I think his analysis is based on the false premise that the EC *had it in its own interest to mobilise the proletariat*. The EC's official programme was one of "Perestroika without Glasnost"—capitalist restoration at a slower pace. "The fact that the coup was so inept" and that the gang of eight couldn't shoot straight was not the main problem with the EC, and it is not the sole nor the primary reason we gave for not giving it support. Surely we would have made a military bloc with them if they had sent tanks against the White House, but this would neither have prevented counterrevolution, or most crucially, mobilised the workers. To use the example of defending Iraq in the recent war is both out of context and misleading. Not only did we not emblazon "defeat imperialism" across our front pages (as the IBT and IG exclaim in cynical, parasitical horror), since such a possibility was negated by material reality, but the Republican Guard were not Stalinist bureaucrats with the power to delay a capitalist counterrevolution in a workers state. To ask, "since when did Trotskyists start basing their decisions on who to support on their military strength?" and cite the example of the decrepit Iraqi military is somewhat misled.

Equally, to state that our assertion that the EC were "just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin" is "something which veers towards the formation (sic) that the Stalinist bureaucracy was 'counterrevolutionary through and through'" is incorrect. The two cannot be equated. The EC were committed to capitalist counterrevolution, but that is not the same as saying that this was necessarily the case with all other elements of the bureaucracy. Neither is the dating of counterrevolution months later than the August 1991 counter-coup the same as believing that what was happening was "reformism in reverse". This is also out of context—Trotsky makes this accusation against state capitalist theorists who declared, as do their Cliffite contemporaries today, that a social counterrevolution had already taken place under Stalin.

Comrade Tony uses the example of boiling water to illustrate the dialectical logic behind an overnight counterrevolution. Let's use this example and provide a very different conclusion, a truly dialectical one. From 1 to 99° centigrade there is no quantitative change in the water. But at 100° centigrade the water doesn't all turn to steam. The quantitative change begins, but it takes time for all the water to evaporate. August the 22nd began the quantitative change, but the "water"—the gains of October—didn't become "steam", that is, bourgeois property forms, until some time later.

These gains could have been saved, and what's more, it is by no means a hopeless dream to declare that the proletariat could have been led to a victorious political revolution, beginning a far different process to that which eventually took place. I hope that, by talking to comrades who were in Mos-

cow in 1990-92, in Germany in 1989-90 and by reading our excellent propaganda from the time, Comrade Tony will see that, to use his own words, “when the counterrevolution took place is not just an academic question.” I do not accuse Comrade Tony of disregarding the ICL’s intervention, however the odious consequence of declaring counterrevolution to have happened overnight and well before the gains of October were really sold out *is the writing off of the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat*. It is nothing less than to run from the defence of the Soviet Union in the face of the final fight, something that our opponents—not least the IBT—are fully guilty of.

I hope my comments have been of some use, and no doubt where I have missed crucial points or exhibited inaccuracies other comrades will bring these to light.

Comradely Greetings,
Ben M.

(1) In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky gives the example of the Provisional Government’s attempt to shut down the Bolshevik press and his own ability to send a detachment of Red Guards to reopen them to show that the working class held a large degree of power some weeks before the insurrection; one reason why the revolution in Petrograd was so bloodless.

DATE: 01/07/2003

Erratum notes on my document

In the interest of clarity, I should make one factual and one grammatical correction to my document (“On the Counter-

revolution in the USSR. In reply to Tony R...” which is of political significance.

1. Where I write “In short, Comrade Tony argues that our position on the August 1991 coup and not declaring the counterrevolution complete until **eight months later in 1992 is flawed**” (my emphasis), I initially intended to write “November 1992” but opted for stylistic purposes to give a timescale. However, due to my rather inept, unmaterialist mathematical faculties, I made a small miscalculation... November 1992 happens to be over 15 months later. (Though of course we do not give an exact date to when counterrevolution was not actually completed and thus “over a year later in 1992” is more appropriate I think.)

2. More significantly Comrades pointed out that my statement that we would have made a military bloc with the EC if they sent the troops against the barricades “but this would neither have prevented counterrevolution, or most crucially, mobilised the workers” is incorrect and misleading, as well as inconsistent to the position I put forward throughout the document, which is that of the ICL (obviously in a simplified form). The sentence should read “but though this wouldn’t have prevented counterrevolution in of itself, most *crucially it would have mobilised the workers in defence of the gains of October*, regardless of the intentions of the Emergency Committee.”

I think comrades will agree that, though they recognise a grammatical error was involved, it is of decisive political significance and for that reason I have made this correction.

CG’s
Ben

Document 1.4

The Proletariat is Key

Ralf Neuer, 29 June 2003

Dear Tony,

After reading your letter “On the Counterrevolution in Russia” I would like to try to explain where you are wrong politically. (In the process of writing this note I was able to read not only Bonnie’s very useful note, but also Ben M’s document, which I liked. Ben deals with some of the main questions quite effectively.) In addition, I’d like to put these political issues into the context of our interventions as a revolutionary organisation:

1. The equation of the October 1917 Bolshevik uprising and taking state power with Yeltsin’s counter-coup.

2. Who was key, the Stalinists of the GKChP (EC) or the proletariat?

The Bolsheviks had the *majority of armed* soldiers and workers behind their program for taking power, *consciously* fighting for the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, for land to the tiller, for ending the imperialist war, for the freedom of the oppressed people and looking forward to sparking revolutions in the imperialist West.

Yeltsin in August 1991 was the leader of one of the two main wings of the *upper circles* of the bureaucracy (among them for sure *some* army officials) but he had no hold over the army or the proletariat, and he wanted to go ahead with capitalist counterrevolution in a more direct way than Gorbachev with his “500 day plan”. Therefore he got the backing of Bush

and U.S.-imperialism.

So to speak of him as having “an *armed body* of men dedicated to the construction and *defence of capitalism*” (my emphasis)—i.e. a capitalist state—in August 1991 is completely false.

To say it another way: Your false equation of Yeltsin and the Bolshevik revolution in reverse means to denigrate the October Revolution as a coup!!

As you write yourself there were soldiers in tanks and armoured vehicles who were pathetically and horrendously organised (by the EC!!)—they didn’t know what to do!

We knew! If we had at that time some comrades in the AZLK—or ZIL—auto plant (where we sold thousands of papers over the years we worked in Moscow till these were basically destroyed and closed), we could have mobilised some hundreds of workers to take out the rabble at the White House barricades (which did not at all have the support of the masses of people either). The soldiers of the armoured vehicles could have been easily won over to our side for the defence of the workers state and this would have opened up a civil war and a political revolution against the Stalinists. The coup plotters very much feared this. That’s the reason they consciously told the workers to stay home. If the EC had moved against Yeltsin, we would have been in a *military* bloc with them (for a short time). But they didn’t.

As for the line by the BT that the failure of the putsch means that “the major organised obstacle to the consolidation of a bourgeois state has been effectively removed”—this is to simply write off the Soviet working class as a force against capitalist restoration.

Right after the counter-coup we distributed tens of thousands of leaflets “Soviet Workers: Defeat Yeltsin-Bush counterrevolution!” (30 August 1991) in order to win workers to the defence of the gains of the October revolution. We were able to effectively intervene into workers’ conferences with our program.

At Revolutionary day 1991 our tiny Moscow group marched under the banner of the Fourth International with tens of thousands of workers to the Red Square while selling packets of our Trotskyist literature. (In fact we sold out and I had to get more from the office.) For us the key question was: will the working class fight back or will Yeltsin be able to establish and consolidate a capitalist state, which he *started* to build after his coup (naming new head of the soviet army, KGB and interior ministry; outlawing the CP etc.) but could not have had in August 1991.

The BT’s line, declaring with Yeltsin’s power grab that the Soviet military are henceforth “bodies of armed men’ dedicated to the objectives of western capitalists and their internal allies”, completely write off every soldier and officer of the Soviet army as a repressive agent of capital (see “BT Writes Off the Soviet Union” WV 27 Sept. 1991).

In Germany, the BT used the same methodology. When in October 1989 the repressive Stalinist apparatus fell apart, for the BT it was nothing but counterrevolution on the march. They spit on the massive pro-socialist demos in Berlin in December 1989 and they spit on Treptow, where the ICL addressed the working class with the Trotskyist program

of revolutionary reunification of Germany (i.e. proletarian political revolution in the East and social revolution in the West). Our call to build workers and soldiers Soviets was taken up in many areas in Germany. I myself was recruited in 1990 as an officer and tank commander with a group of 5 people from our barracks. I took my political experience to Moscow to try to win Soviet workers and soldiers to the road of Lenin and Trotsky.

Unfortunately, we didn’t succeed. The working class didn’t rise up; Yeltsin consolidated and tested his state. In February 1992 cops attacked an anti-Yeltsin demo. Racist cops murdered an African student in September 1992 and Yeltsin broke a strike by air traffic controllers in October.

In November 1992 we state in “How the Soviet Workers State Was Strangled”: “The period of open counterrevolution ushered in by Boris Yeltsin’s pro-imperialist counter-coup in August 1991 has, *in the absence of mass working-class resistance*, culminated in the creation of a bourgeois state, however fragile and reversible.” (my emphasis) And we say the task is social revolution.

The Stalinists bear responsibility for this world historic defeat. Beginning with 1924 they poisoned and destroyed the consciousness of the working class for decades from the nationalist lie of “socialism in one country” to their description of WWII as the “Great Patriotic War” etc.

But we fought on the ground for proletarian internationalism in the defence and the extension of the gains of the October Revolution—and we are very proud of our fight.

Comradely Neuer

P.S. Looking forward to seeing and talking to you more about this at “Marxism”.

Document 1.5

Smoke and Mirrors Over August ‘91: Beware BT’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’ (A Reply to Comrade Tony)

Chuck, Toronto, 30 June 2003

Dear Comrades,

I just happened to read Tony R.’s June 25 document, “On the Counterrevolution in Russia.” I wanted to weigh in, mostly as one who’s often had the “honor” of answering the Toronto BT’s stock intervention on the Yeltsin coup, and also because I was part of similar fights in the Rouen local back in the fall of 1991. I’ll try (but won’t promise) not to repeat what has already been said by Comrades Bonnie, George and Ben.

The Bolshevik Tendency’s position on the “coup” is a centrist crock from start to finish. While I do not want to ascribe the BT’s motivation to Tony, the Comrade owes it to himself to *think through* the sequence of positions taken by the BT on the Russian Question since their inception (denouncing our support for a potential Soviet crackdown on Solidarnosc, renouncing “Hail Red Army!,” sneering at our intervention in the DDR) and up to the 1991 coup. He should seriously consider this sentence from our polemic, which he seems to have read:

“Behind the veneer of its after-the-fact support to the coup, the BT has found in the flop engineered by the ‘gang of eight that couldn’t shoot straight’ their long awaited opportunity

to wash their hands of the Soviet Union—something they have yearned to do for years.”

(“BT Writes Off the Soviet Union,” WV No. 535, 27 September 1991)

What does Tony think of that statement?

Also, I don’t know how much Tony knows/remembers of the actual events of August 1991, but one of the BT’s “strengths” is to play on people’s ignorance. For instance, one thing that is important to know about the sequence of events in August 1991 is that the “Emergency Committee” coup was primarily directed against then-president (or whatever title he had) Gorbachev, *not* Yeltsin. It is in fact when Yeltsin took the offensive that the coup collapsed *without a fight*. Why? Because they *were* “just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin”—and the last thing they wanted to do was to displease Western imperialism which stood behind him. At the same time, we were keenly aware that the Yeltsin forces represented a more immediate danger. As we said in the same article: “Certainly any serious opponent of capitalist counterrevolution in the USSR would have looked long and hard to determine if there was a basis for giving military sup-

port to the coup against Yeltsin's open counterrevolution." But the Emergency Committee's boldest move was to...hold a press conference, where they advised everyone to stay home. Tony himself acknowledges that the coupsters were "inept," yet he still wants to give them military support. But in the absence of military action, "military" support is just...support, i.e. political support. As our 1991 polemic points out:

"In and of itself, the collapse of the Kremlin Stalinists does not signal that the Soviet degenerated workers state has been destroyed. With its position that the failure of the coup equals the victory of counterrevolution, the BT apes the Stalinists' lie which identifies the existence of the workers state with the continued rule of the parasitical, nationalist bureaucracy."

Incidentally, this is where the BT shares the Pabloites' "methodology," although they come to formally opposite positions (but not, in the real world, conflicting ones—if the Pabloites openly embraced counterrevolution, the BT ducked the fight against it.) It is the same "methodology," as we point out in the article, which led the BT to sneer at our intervention in the DDR in 1989-90.

And it was not just a question of "strength" either. This is the "straw-man argument" part of Tony's document which I liked the least. I mean, Yanayev and Co. may not have had much authority over the armed forces, but they certainly *could have* used more force than they actually did. The point is that they didn't, and they didn't want to. Bringing up the defense of Iraq in this context, as Tony does—as another example of the ICL's "confusion" I gather—only serves to muddy the waters. It also carries the implication that by not supporting the coup, we were simply neutral on defense of the Soviet Union, which echoes the BT's most pathetic argument.

In their "live" interventions, the Toronto BT has indeed taken to accusing us of "neutrality" and "defeatism" in August 1991. In answer to this, I usually just wave around a copy of our statement: "Soviet Workers: Defeat Yeltsin-Bush Counterrevolution!," which has the effect of cracking up the audience and distracting their intervention. More, seriously though, we can explain that our statement of active revolutionary defensism was distributed, in Russian, in the tens of thousands throughout the former Soviet Union. Contrast this to the BT's statement—their erudite "analysis"—which came out in English more than a month after the events and, as far as I know, was never put out in Russian. The point is that we cared about stopping counterrevolution, so *we fought*, (in the course of which our heroic comrade Martha Phillips was murdered); the BT didn't care, much less fight.

Instead, for the last 12 years, the BT has been obsessed with the question of "the date" of capitalist counterrevolution in the former USSR. Tony echoes this with a lecture on dialectical materialism. I thought Ben did a fine job at reply-

ing to this. I feel like adding that, yes, capitalist restoration over one fifth of the planet *is* a little more complicated than the evaporation of water. The only thing we can say for sure is that counterrevolution was a *process* which took place between August 1991 and July 1992 after a series of events showed that Yeltsin had indeed consolidated a capitalist state. The *decisive* moment was Yeltsin's August 1991 coup, but to write off the Soviet workers state right away would have been a betrayal of our most basic principles—we are revolutionaries, we *fight*.

To paraphrase Lenin, all opportunisms boil down to an underestimation of the revolutionary capacity of the working class. That's the other thing that struck me about Tony's document. Throughout, the Comrade treats the proletariat like a passive object of politics, not as a potentially active factor—something he also shares with the BT. Once again, Tony would do well to reflect on this excerpt from our polemic:

"The BT calls for support to Yanayev, Pavlov & Co...without even a nod to mobilizing the proletariat! While the botched coup and the ascendancy of Yeltsin have opened the floodgates for capitalist counterrevolution in the USSR, the Soviet proletariat has yet to be heard from. The question of which class shall rule is urgently posed, but it is not one that has already been determined."

As for dialectics, I find the BT rather lacking. The methodology of a "Marxist" group that is so obsessed with "the date" (why not the time-of-day too, while they're at it?), but not at all with intervening to change history is anything but dialectical materialism. For us, Marxism is a guide to action. For the centrist sectarians of the BT, it is a static "grid of analysis" (as my Quebecois sociology teachers used to say) mostly useful for posturing within academia and the fake-left swamp. When confronted with the choice of playing a role in the single most important historic event of the last several decades or staying on the sidelines, they chose the latter. "Military support" to the coup (long after it had collapsed!) is but a very thin cover for it all. I hope Tony can see this before too long.

With Comradely feelings, I hope Tony reconsiders his position. My best to the Comrades of the SL/B and SYG and hoped this helped a little.

Chuck
30 June 2003

P.S. As an aside, I do recommend that short piece by Socrates (see title), the "founder" of dialectics, so to speak. Tony's obviously a smart young comrade, but he should take to heart the Greek philosopher's admonition that it is not so important to be aware of how much you know, but of how much you don't.

Document 1.6

On Yeltsin's Coup

Ed C., Chicago, 1 July 2003

Tony's document is, of course, a challenge to our understanding of the factors leading to the overthrow of the October Revolution in the degenerated Soviet worker's state. Hopefully, he will abandon his current position. Simultaneously it gives us an important chance to review those events

that can only accrue to the benefit of the ICL. He has been well answered by others; nevertheless, I want to throw in my two cents without too frequently repeating the points that have already been made. A year or so [ago] (probably longer) I wrote a document in which I stood against Victor's position

that a formulation in (I believe) a youth article that Yeltsin's coup ushered in the social counterrevolution in the USSR demanded a WV correction. At that time I said something to the effect that in retrospect such a statement was not excessively errant and that a WV correction was not warranted. At that time the PB passed a motion essentially approving my position. I want to elaborate on this by noting that the youth statement was only acceptable in retrospect and neither should have been our international's position nor a full understanding of the factors involved.

First, a few words on dialectics. Tony seems to hold that if the exact point of transformation of quantity into quality were somewhat indeterminate then dialectic materialism would fail as a tool that reflects and assists in the understanding of natural and/or historical processes. I think not. Consider the construction of galaxies from inchoate gases. The standard for that transition, insofar as one exists, is not established by natural forces but rather by human estimation of the changes involved. Nor would any physicist or astronomer think of attempting to affix an exact date or time to this process. As to the example of boiling water cited correctly by Engels in his *Dialectics of Nature*, the point of transition—100 degrees Centigrade, is an approximation dependent on any number of factors, most importantly atmospheric pressure. Of course, one can tell by observation when the water begins to boil. That is hardly rocket science. Nevertheless, if one day it boils at 96 degrees (on a mountaintop) or at 103 degrees (below sea level) this does nothing to render invalid the dialectical processes used to understand this phenomenon.

To look more specifically at the events at the time of Yeltsin's coup it is important to realize that this had initial resonance primarily in Moscow and Petrograd and then only among the rather scant social forces of the lumpen bourgeoisie. Let us suppose that in the weeks following the coup workers' uprisings had occurred throughout the USSR with the result that Yeltsin had been overthrown and the October Revolution survived. Would Tony then say that a capitalist counter-

revolution was followed by a second proletarian revolution. Hopefully not. Obviously, in that case, an attempt at counterrevolution would have failed. Alternately, if the proletarian uprisings had been defeated by Yeltsin's forces that defeat would signal the capitalist overturn, not the coup in Moscow and Petrograd.

To cite another instance familiar to Marxists, one can look at France in 1870 when the Parisian working class rose *en masse* and seized Paris, an uprising that had echoes in other French cities. Certainly what was involved was a force infinitely more coherent than the rabble around Yeltsin. Did that uprising result in a social overturn in France? The answer is that was to be determined; on the one hand by the capacity of [the] bourgeoisie to put down the uprising and on the other hand by the capacity of the Communards to attract the peasants and workers throughout France to their banner. Similarly, depending on circumstances Yeltsin had to consummate his coup by seizing social power throughout the USSR. To mention one important task cited by Victor, the general staff of the Red Army had to [be] "rearranged."

Others have stated that the conspirators who arrested Gorbachev in no way were a force in defense of the workers state. In fact, the coup was directed at Gorbachev's attempts to weaken the hold of the bureaucratic caste on its positions of power. It is to be noted that the conspirators did not challenge perestroika. The bureaucratic caste retained political power at the time of Gorbachev's arrest. However whether that power—which was always a threat to the gains of the October Revolution—would be used to defend the gains was, to say the least, at that time in question. As we have pointed out such industry and government administration as exists today in Russia is carried, for the most part, by one-time members of the ruling bureaucratic caste.

Comradely,
Ed C.

Chicago local
cc: Chicago local

Document 1.7

Dating the Counterrevolution— A Reply to Comrade Tony's document

by Olly, London, 3 July 2003

Tony's difference is based around the charge that our tendency is unable to specifically date the counterrevolution in the Soviet Union, and that from this follows inconsistencies in our analysis and an actual incorrect political line, post-Yeltsin's coup.

Tony asserts that dating the counterrevolution is no mere academic task, quoting from Trotsky's *The ABC of Marxist Dialectics* to demonstrate that being able to determine when quantitative turns to qualitative is one of the most important and difficult tasks. In this he is right: The Trotskyist Party's attitude to counterrevolution must not be an abstract academic one, but must be based on urgent intervention into the concrete situation with its revolutionary programme. Yet [it] is exactly this understanding that Tony's document desperately lacks. According to the analysis Tony appeals to, as soon as the victory of Yeltsin's barricades is assured over that of the Emergency Committee "counter-coup", the counterrevolu-

tion has succeeded, the world's first workers' state has been lost. There is no room for the Soviet working class in this analysis, and no window for the intervention of the revolutionary party (represented by *our* tendency) to lead that working class against the counterrevolution. For all of the document's dialectical verbiage of quantitative turning into qualitative, the subjective role of the working class (the agent Marxists look to) led by its revolutionary vanguard (our entire reason for being) is written off, discarded straight away. The only forces shown to be in a position to become the catalyst in this point in history are the Yeltsinites or the gang of eight, ie the bureaucracy.

This is a theory based on hindsight and an aloofness from revolutionary struggle. It is well documented in our press that we saw Yeltsin's coup as a "counterrevolutionary tide", but it was not in itself the determining factor. The decisive factor was the absence of the working class' fight to defend its state

against the forces of counterrevolution. Yeltsin's coup announced the intention of a state committed to capitalist restoration, but Yeltsin had to consolidate that state. He had to ensure control of the apparatus of that state i.e. the judiciary, the police and the army, for the purpose of capitalist restoration.

When Tony claims that Yeltsin's coup represented a "special body of armed men" committed to particular property forms as the Bolshevik revolution did, he is mistaken. Before the Bolsheviks could take power, they had to fight for it. They had to resolve the system of dual power by winning or consolidating the support of the vast majority of the soviets. This was a process of class *struggle*, a period in which they had to win over the masses and split the army. Only then could they take state power as a special body of armed men. To keep with Tony's parallel of the Russian counterrevolution with the Russian revolution, Yeltsin's coup should be compared with February rather than October: It was the opening up of a situation of the bid for power.

This correct parallel, together with looking at what the ICL actually did, conditioned by what *programme* during this period, should I hope, clarify things for Tony. We called for workers' committees to defend the collectivised gains of the workers state, threatened by the counterrevolutionary tide that had been unleashed by Yeltsin's coup. We called for officers' and soldiers' committees to defend against Yeltsin's purges of the army. We were, uniquely, the upholders of the Trotskyist programme of unconditional military defence of the USSR, in this case, against internal counterrevolution, of which our ultimate call was political revolution: the ousting of the conservative parasitic bureaucracy, and its replacement with the rule of the workers, the revolutionary party at its head.

The facts are plain for all to see. Only those with a different programmatic appetite can choose to interpret them differently...which brings us on to the IBT, whose political line (and ultimately programme) Tony's document is an expression of. The IBT is based on a collection of individuals who, in the main, fled our tendency over an inability to give any real content to the call of Soviet defence. From Solidarnosc to the Red Army intervention in Afghanistan, when the pressures from the imperialists and their fake left lackeys were intensified to the extreme, these individuals broke with the Trotskyist programme, only later coming together with a characteristic retrospective cowardly and shameful cover of a "programme". (As an aside, these are the guys who today give critical support to South Korea's social democrats, i.e. the forces of counterrevolution in this area of the world, who are for a *capitalist* reunification of Korea, which is wholly consistent with their criticisms of us not uniting with the SPD in a front to defend the DDR!)

The IBT line (and that of Tony's document) that we should have militarily blocked with the EC counter-coup is nothing

more than a cover for their immediate writing-off of the Soviet Union—and a pathetic one at that. This "perestroika coup" was no force for the halting of capitalist restoration, demonstrated by concrete events: They made no real move to crush Yeltsin. There was no arrest, they did not cut his phone lines, they even allowed his appeals to be broadcast. We make the point that had the EC moved against Yeltsin, we would have militarily blocked—but it did not. Incidentally, Tony should look again at his comparison with our line on the recent imperialist war on Iraq. The fact that we called for defence of Iraq (an appeal to the working class in the imperialist centres and semi-colonial outposts) rather than victory to Iraq, was based on our correct assessment that the military forces in Iraq had no chance of defeating the imperialist onslaught and that the call for a military bloc in this case would be ludicrous and could only be taken as support for the regime. There is no point in entering a military bloc with non-existent military forces. In fact [it] is counterproductive in that it illustrates political support to alien elements.

The crucial point, the thing that separates our tendency from the swamp, is programme, and what motivates that programme. For the OTOs, and not least the IBT, the Soviet Union was a thorn in their side, something they wanted rid of as soon as possible. Yeltsin's coup initiated a period that posed the Russian Question point blank for the final time in the world's first workers state. The OTOs had built a political career on conceding to the camp of the imperialists on this question, the question of revolution. The last thing they were going to do is fight in the camp of the working class and oppressed. And the last thing the ICL was going to do was give up the fight before it was finished. The penultimate paragraph of Tony's document is very revealing of the typical social-democratic position of the fake left. Tony states:

"...to recognise the fact that the forces of counterrevolution had won in August '91 did not mean giving up on the defence of the gains the workers had made. All it meant was that to defend the gains of the working class the workers would have to fight as they would in any bourgeois state to defend their gains (e.g. the NHS in Britain) and through a socialist revolution, oust Yeltsin"

The implication here is: 'So the Soviet Union has fallen, big deal. The fight now is merely transformed to defending nationalisation on to the terrain of bourgeois democracy.' But the fall of a state *based* on collectivised property forms is of the greatest loss to the world's working class and oppressed, as can be seen with the devastation in the former Soviet Union, post-USSR world austerity, and the strengthening of imperialism. In this context the maxim that those who cannot defend old gains cannot gain new ones is greatly illustrated.

Document 1.8

On the Capitalist Counterrevolution in the USSR— A Reply to Tony R

Edward, London, 3 July 2003

Comrades have already identified the central problems with Tony's position, in particular the absence in his document of a perspective for fighting to mobilise the proletariat

to sweep away the counterrevolutionary forces. I want to respond to some of the particular problems with Tony's document and where I think some of the confusion on his part

might be coming from.

It is completely untrue as the IBT claims that we were “neutral” on the question of fighting against counterrevolution. This is obvious to anyone who reads our propaganda from the time. We distributed over 100,000 copies of our Russian language leaflet “Soviet Workers: Defeat Yeltsin-Bush Counterrevolution!” across the Soviet Union. We fought to mobilise the proletariat to defend the gains of October which even after the counter-coup included the proletarian dictatorship—and to fight for a proletarian political revolution, which required the early forging of a Trotskyist party. If we hadn’t it would have meant the political death of our tendency.

Tony’s argument rests on the assertion that after the counter-coup Yeltsin had cohered “an armed body of men dedicated to the construction and defence of capitalism...(that) took state power in Russia”. Comrades Ben and Olly have already responded to this assertion. I wanted to ask: how can Tony know? What had happened to the previous state apparatus and the Soviet armed forces, which until that point had been defending a completely different set of property relations? Did they disappear overnight? It certainly isn’t clear that the workers state had been destroyed and replaced by a capitalist state at this point. Tony’s position identifies the collapse of the CPSU with the collapse of the workers state. Yeltsin’s counter-coup *opened up* a period where a clear alternative was posed: capitalist counterrevolution or proletarian political revolution.

We would have blocked with a section of the bureaucracy that made a move to sweep away the open counterrevolutionaries. Such a move would have pulled the proletariat into political struggle against the forces of open counterrevolution. Such a situation would have developed into a *civil war*, with fundamental class forces being pulled into play. Under this pressure the bureaucracy would have split, a more or less significant part going over to the side of the proletariat.

However, this is precisely the reason that the “Gang of Eight” did not make any move against Yeltsin. The Emergency Committee feared the prospect of civil war and the independent political mobilisation of the working class above all. Tony claims that we didn’t support the EC because they were “inept”. This is not true. We didn’t support the EC because there was no prospect they would move militarily against Yeltsin. By way of comparison, Tony should familiarise himself with our position on the crushing of Polish “Solidarity”, after it was clear the Soviet bureaucracy would mobilise against Solidarity:

“If the Kremlin Stalinists, in their necessarily brutal stupid way, intervene militarily to stop it we will support this. And we take responsibility in advance for this; whatever the idiocies and atrocities they will commit, we do not flinch from defending the crushing of Solidarity’s counterrevolution.”

“Stop Solidarity’s Counterrevolution”, WV No. 289, 25 September 1981 (emphasis in original)

This principled defencist position drove the BT crazy, of course.

It is important to understand the BT’s (retrospective) “support” to the EC for what it is. The BT was desperate to relieve itself of the burden of having to “defend” the Soviet degenerated workers state, so they wrote off the USSR as soon as they could. Their after-the-fact support to the EC is a cynical cover for their failure to lift a finger to mobilise the Soviet proletariat against the counterrevolution. Tony should think about the BT’s history on the Russian Question to see this. They hated our line on the crushing of Solidarity; they hated the slogans “Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!” and “Ex-

tend the Gains of the October Revolution!”; today they give critical support to the Democratic Labour Party in South Korea, which has a programme for counterrevolution in North Korea. Their position on “the date counterrevolution happened” is related to this.

There is also a connection between their writing off of the Soviet Union before the decisive battle and their proximity to the reformist left internationally, for example their support to the Socialist Alliance in Britain. Lenin and Trotsky said that all revisionism has the same source: an underestimation of the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat and of the importance of the subjective factor, i.e. the revolutionary party. The IBT is hostile to the need for a Trotskyist party and this is consistent with their objectivist, passive position on the “date” of counterrevolution. This is also consistent with their support to the Socialist Alliance. Tony disagrees with their position on the Socialist Alliance; this is a contradiction. The BT reduces the proletariat to a passive object. There is an unfortunate similarity with Tony’s document where he says nothing about the possibility of mobilising the working class against counterrevolution, or about the need to have forged a Trotskyist party. Tony says it behoved revolutionaries to “recognis(e) the reality that the working class was not acting while the EC was”. The task of fighting off counterrevolution is therefore passed over to the Stalinist bureaucracy. What about the proletariat?

Tony claims “to recognise the fact that the forces of open counterrevolution had won in August ‘91 did not mean giving up the defence of the gains the workers had made.” Well, you’ve already written off the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that’s a pretty big loss. What else is there? “(T)he workers would have to fight as they would in any bourgeois state to defend their gains (e.g. the NHS in Britain)”, although Tony allows they would also need to fight for “a socialist revolution to oust Yeltsin”. But he has already written off the proletariat as a revolutionary force. So what you’re left with is the proletariat simply as an economic “class-in-itself” fighting against privatisation. That seems to me a fairly social-democratic conception of the proletariat. Also, although we do defend the National Health Service, it is hardly equivalent to the collectivised economy in a workers state.

Tony evidences a lack of understanding of the character of the bureaucracy. He quotes from the “Genesis of Pabloism” against our position on counterrevolution. I think this section is in fact a polemic against Tony’s position. It states that a revolution is “a sharp and necessarily time-limited confrontation over the question of state power, the outcome of which will shape the entire subsequent period”. If counterrevolution happened at the failure of the counter-coup, then this would be the “sharp and necessarily time-limited confrontation over the question of state power”, i.e. the “confrontation over the question of state power” was between the Yeltsinites and the EC. This was not the case, and could not be. Such a confrontation, as Trotsky states repeatedly in his writings, *had to be between the active forces of counterrevolution and the working class: the bureaucracy could not play an independent role*. In “The Class Nature of the Soviet State”, written in 1933, Trotsky wrote:

“A real civil war could develop not between the Stalinist bureaucracy and the resurgent proletariat but between the proletariat and the active forces of the counterrevolution. In the event of an open clash between the two mass camps, there cannot even be talk of the bureaucracy playing an independent role. Its polar flanks would be flung to the different sides of the barricade. The fate of the subsequent development would be determined, of course, by the course of the struggle. The victory of the proletarian camp, in any case, is conceivable only under the leadership of a proletarian party,

which would naturally be raised to power by the victory over the counterrevolution.” (emphasis mine)

Tony also claims that Victor’s reference to the “piecemeal destruction of the Soviet Union of 1991-92” “suggests what Trotsky referred to as ‘reformism in reverse’”. Victor is referring to the historical process by which the Soviet degenerated workers state was destroyed. Tony has misapplied Trotsky’s phrase about “running backwards the film of reformism”. Trotsky used this phrase in “The Class Nature of the Soviet State” as a polemic against those who argued that the Soviet Union had already been destroyed by a capitalist counterrevolution. Tony obviously has the following section in mind when referring to Victor’s statement:

“The class theory of society and historical experience equally testify to the impossibility of the victory of the proletariat through peaceful methods, that is, without grandiose battles, weapons in hand. How, in that case, is the imperceptible, ‘gradual,’ bourgeois counterrevolution conceivable?”

Trotsky continues that all previous feudal or bourgeois counterrevolutions have required the intervention of “military surgery”. He concludes, “he who asserts that the Soviet government has been *gradually* changed from proletarian to bourgeois is only, so to speak, running backwards the film of reformism”.

Tony fails to see the difference between the situation in 1991-92 with that in the 1930s, centrally in the question of the *consciousness of the Soviet masses*. It is important to consider the question of capitalist counterrevolution in its historical context, which Tony’s document fails to do. The Soviet proletariat in the 1930s was intimately connected to the proletariat that made the Russian Revolution. The proletariat would have responded much more decisively against an attempt at capitalist counterrevolution in the 1930s (and this would have certainly led to a civil war) than in 1991-92. This was after several more decades of Stalinist misrule had atomised the Soviet proletariat. The proletariat in 1991-92 was a different proletariat to that of the 1930s. The projection that a civil war would be needed to restore capitalism in the 1930s does not mean one was a *sine qua non* for capitalist counterrevolution in the 1990s. So in looking for this decisive military confrontation Tony seizes on the “coup” by the EC, which is hardly the “grandiose battle” for state power that Trotsky refers to. Tony’s position is misled and fails to take into account the changes in the consciousness of the proletariat in the period between the 1930s and the 1990s.

I think the documents reprinted in *Spartacist* no 45-46, “On the Collapse of Stalinist Rule in Eastern Europe” and “For Marxist Clarity and a Forward Perspective” are very important and Tony would benefit greatly from re-reading them. In “For Marxist Clarity and a Forward Perspective” Albert St. John cites Comrade Andrews making the point that “by assuming a workers state would be as resistant to counter-

revolution as a capitalist state, Trotsky had overdrawn the analogy with bourgeois society”.

“The proletariat is a different kind of ruling class than the bourgeoisie, he said. At the upper levels capitalist society consists of a relatively small group of large property owners, a net of conscious individuals each protecting their own property through a system of property. Behind the special bodies of armed men, each big capitalist therefore is a particular point or node of resistance to the overthrow of the system as a whole.”

The proletariat is more atomised as a ruling class, and as such the preservation of proletarian power depends principally on consciousness and organisation, and the link between the vanguard with the most conscious layers of the class. “Thus, the ability of a workers state to defend itself depends heavily on the political character of its central cadre.”

This explains how the Soviet bureaucracy disintegrated in 1991 after the coup. The BT’s position, which identifies the last gasp of the Stalinists with the end of the workers state, echoes the Stalinists identification of themselves with the workers state. After Yeltsin’s coup, the Stalinists were finished as a force but the workers state was not; the decisive confrontation—between the proletariat and the forces for open counterrevolution—had not yet been fought.

Ben responds in his document to Tony’s false argument that our assessment of the EC “veers towards the formation (sic) that the bureaucracy was ‘counterrevolutionary through and through’”. I wanted to respond to Tony’s comparison between our military defence of Iraq and our “failure” to support the EC coup. The comparison is false. We had a clear side in the war between the imperialist powers and benighted, semicolonial Iraq, and we stood for military support to the armed forces that were fighting against the imperialists. We did *not* have a side with the EC’s “perestroika coup” because it was not a move against counterrevolution. I wanted to make a point on an unclear section in Olly’s otherwise excellent document. The Iraqi military forces were not “non-existent” and we did support them, and we hailed the resistance to the imperialists as “heroic”. However, it was always clear that the imperialists would defeat the Iraqi military, and as such we emphasised that the best way to give content to our call for the defence of Iraq was through class struggle against the capitalist rulers at home. This required a political struggle against the social-democratic left which sought to channel opposition to the war into parliamentarist channels safe for imperialism. This was in stark contrast to the IBT and Internationalist Group who while blowing off about the possibility of a military defeat for imperialism in Iraq did all they could to ingratiate themselves with said social-democrats wherever they put their heads up.

I hope Tony and other Comrades find this useful.

Document 1.9

Once Again on Counterrevolution in Russia

by Tony R., London, 10 July 2003

The first thing I want to try to clear up is the IBT red hering. I concede the fact that the IBT has substantially the same position as I do regarding the coup and its significance. I am not even going to respond to the various points comrades

have raised on the IBT, except to note that revisionists or centrists, or even outright capitalists, can say things that are true, just as revolutionaries can make mistakes. It is necessary to think very carefully if you find yourself agreeing with cen-

trists on an issue against revolutionaries, and I have certainly done so on this issue. But the simple fact that someone holds a particular view does neither prove it true or false. Cannon's mistaken polemics with the Shachtmanites over the Proletarian Military Policy demonstrate that very clearly.

It is true that the IBT's persistence in raising this issue at our public events initially brought it to my attention (and not only mine). I began to wonder why we seemed to have trouble effectively answering them. After looking more closely at our position I concluded that there are some contradictions or some confusion over it that the IBT has been able to exploit. I hope comrades will believe me when I say it has not been easy for me to make these criticisms; it is hard to disagree with the comrades who I like and respect and from whom I have learned so much. I thought about it a lot before raising it. But it is, of course, the duty of a Marxist to "say what is" and that is what I am trying to do.

Comradely Greetings, Tony R

Military Blocs And Revolutionary Strategy: 1991, 1917

I would like to try to explain to comrades the overall framework I am using for viewing the question. The events of '90-91 in the USSR seem to me to pose a strategic issue for revolutionaries that is essentially analogous, (in an inverted way because it is defence of an existing state, not its overthrow which was our objective), to a key episode in the 1917 revolution. A central question in this discussion is what policy a Leninist-Trotskyist vanguard would have pursued in a confrontation between the Kerensky/CPSU Perestroikaites and the Kornilov/Yeltsinites. (The coup against Gorbachev was carried out because the EC coup leaders considered that Gorbachev had made too many concessions to the Yeltsinites and the secessionist republics endangered the rule of the CPSU bureaucracy.)

Faced with two enemies who come to blows, we have a choice. We can bloc with one against the other and seek to use the struggle as an opportunity to win over elements of our partners' base, or we can await the outcome of the conflict and then intervene. Which option is best is a question that can only be answered in the concrete circumstances—we cannot establish a general principle. But I think that in 1991 a revolutionary party should have sought a bloc with the CPSU Perestroikaites who, like Kerensky in 1917, had gradually isolated themselves through a utopian attempt to [serve] the interests of both the working masses and the capitalist bourgeoisie [which] pleased no one and only produced social chaos. In this analogy Yeltsin would be the equivalent of General Kornilov, the consistent reactionary. What was missing in '91 of course was the intervention of the working class able to act in its own interests, as it had in 1917 under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky.

After the February Revolution Kerensky the fake-socialist emerged as prime minister. But of course the real task for him and the other "moderate" socialists was to preserve bourgeois property and maintain the Russian war effort. As time went on the workers began to see through the empty promises of the Mensheviks, Kerensky and other "moderates" and their base increasingly began to go over to the Bolsheviks. In response Kerensky was increasingly forced, after the July Days, to lean on the right wing, particularly the top army officers. According to Isaac Deutscher in *The Prophet Armed* (pages 280-282) by late summer 1917:

"The Conservative and anti-revolutionary forces rested their hopes on General Kornilov, whom Kerensky had appointed Commander-in-Chief....His attitude towards Kerensky be-

came ambiguous and then provocative. Finally, on 24 August, he openly declared war on the government and ordered his troops to march on the capital. Confident of victory, he boasted in advance of the clean sweep he was going to make of the counterrevolution".

"Trotsky and his friends in Kresty (prison) received the news with mixed feelings....But the situation also offered new hope. The moderate Socialists could not save themselves from Kornilov without the help of the Bolsheviks, just as in the July days they could not save themselves from the Bolsheviks without the help of the generals. Soon the government was pressing rifles into the hands of the Red Guards, whom it had just disarmed...."

"A scene of almost whimsical fantasy took place in Trotsky's cell. The sailors of Kronstadt sent a delegation to ask him whether they ought to respond to Kerensky's call and defend Kerensky against Kornilov or whether they should try to settle accounts with both Kornilov and Kerensky. To the hot-headed sailors the latter course certainly appealed more. Trotsky argued with them... They must now honour this pledge and postpone the reckoning with Kerensky, which could not be far off anyhow. The sailors took this advice...."

"Kornilov was defeated not by force of arms, but by Bolshevik agitation. His troops deserted him, without firing a shot. From Kornilov's defeat started a new chain of events leading straight to the October insurrection. Just as the abortive revolution of 3-4 July had swung the balance in favour of counter-revolution, so this abortive counter-revolution has swung it much more powerfully in the opposite direction".

I think that the correct position for a Leninist party with a base in the working class in 1991 would have been to [have] taken sides when the conflict between the completely reactionary Yeltsinites and the inept Stalinist fossils of the EC broke out, rather than try to "settle accounts with both" at once, or sit out the confrontation between them which is what Deutscher says the Kronstadt sailors had wanted to do in 1917. It seems clear that the Yeltsinites became harder to suppress with each hour they were left alone. The failure to move against them gave time for the counterrevolutionaries to assemble, get organised and begin building their barricades and rallying support from the imperialists and appealing to Russian reactionaries outside Moscow to come to their aid. Once Yeltsin assumed power over the Soviet military and police apparatus in Russia, even though his grip was very tenuous and reversible at first, he was in a far stronger position. He immediately moved to consolidate it by dissolving the mechanism of Stalinist rule (the CPSU) and replacing some of the most "unreliable" ministers, generals and KGB men with ones from his own (openly pro-imperialist) faction of former Stalinist functionaries.

August 19-21

Comrade Chuck suggested the IBT plays on ignorance about what was going on at the time in '91 and asked how much I remember of the events. Being only 7 at the time I have no memory of it at all. Chuck is right that a correct position depends on an accurate understanding of what was happening at the time. I am no expert, but I have tried to investigate the situation and I think that, based on what I have seen of the bourgeois press at the time, there was no expectation that the coup would necessarily fail. Presumably Pugo, the interior minister, and any others who committed suicide after it fell apart had not known in advance that it was assured of failure.

From reading microfilm copies of several issues of the capitalist press from those days, it seems that at least for a time, it was widely anticipated that the coup could succeed, at least

for a while. For example, Bernard Lewin in an editorial page comment in the *Times* on 21 August '91 (obviously written before the collapse was clear) boldly predicted the EC coup leaders would not be able to hang onto power past 1995!

Even more significantly, in a 2001 article by Frank Csongos on the US imperialist Radio Free Europe web site, written on the 10th anniversary of the coup, the author reveals how "then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker" viewed the situation at the time:

"Baker flew to Brussels to discuss the events in Moscow with other NATO foreign ministers. RFE/RL's Frank Csongos was chief diplomatic correspondent for United Press International at the time and flew with Baker. Csongos remembers that Baker seemed nervous during the flight and told him that 'the stakes are high'."

"In his memoirs, Baker said he felt 'powerless'. He said he kept waiting for news that KGB and Interior Ministry troops had overrun the barricades, killing Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the process. But that scenario never happened." (16 August 2001, RFE/RL)

If the foreign minister of the US, with all their spies and intelligence assets, expected the shooting to start soon, how could revolutionaries in Moscow or around the world possibly have known in advance that the EC would not offer serious resistance? I don't see how comrades can explain this, except that in hindsight it is clear that they did not do a very good job. The claims made that it was certain that the coupsters would not actually do anything to Yeltsin and his rabble are easy enough to make in hindsight, but why would a revolutionary party not have sought to intervene in a conflict that appeared to every single commentator, from *The Times* to *The Guardian* (and no doubt every other capitalist paper around the world), to be a decisive political struggle. And I think that the comrades tend to forget that, while the coup was about as inept as one could imagine, it is not as if nothing happened. As part of its coverage of the 10th anniversary of the coup the Radio Free Europe website published "Russia: A Chronology Of 1991 Failed Soviet Coup" by Jeremy Bransten which contained the following summary of events beginning on the morning of August 19 after the EC's press conference announcing their coup:

"Later that morning, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and other key Russian politicians denounced the coup as unconstitutional and called for a general strike. A joint statement—by Yeltsin, Russian Prime Minister Ivan Silayev, and Ruslan Khasbulatov, who was to become chairman of the Supreme Soviet—was issued condemning the motives of the coup-plotters...."

"Yeltsin told a news conference the GKChP's orders will not be carried out in Russia. Demonstrators began gathering on Moscow's Manezh Square, outside the Kremlin."

"At 1 p.m., Yeltsin climbed atop a tank outside parliament—known as the White House—and issued a call for mass resistance. Tanks took up positions on all the bridges in central Moscow. Movement on the capital's main Tverskaya Street was blocked by armored personnel carriers. Moscow military commander Nikolai Smirnov said a state of emergency had been declared and the troops had been brought in to defend order and interdict 'terrorist acts'."

"At 4:30 p.m. Moscow Deputy Mayor Yuri Luzhkov denounced the coup and called on citizens to heed Yeltsin's call for mass protests. A few minutes later, Yeltsin issued a decree declaring all USSR government bodies located on Russian territory, including the KGB, subordinate to his authority."

"Demonstrators around the White House spent the afternoon building barricades in anticipation of an army assault. That evening, Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoi,

whose legendary military career made him a powerful spokesperson, urged his fellow soldiers to side with those fighting the coup..."

"That same evening, Leningrad Mayor Anatoly Sobchak called for a city-wide strike to begin the next day. Across Russia, confusion reigned, as some officials publicly declared their allegiance to Yeltsin. Others adopted a wait-and-see attitude. The night passed without incident, amid mounting tension."

As the Yeltsinites mobilised the EC called on those who opposed the ravages of the market they had already been subjected to and were hostile to the greedy yuppies, spivs and racketeers who made up Yeltsin's base to refrain from any demonstrations or any other actions. This would have been the moment for a Trotskyist group with a base in the working class to have sought to mobilise the more class conscious Soviet workers who opposed Yeltsin and the Soviet Thatcherites plans to loot the collectivised economy, to crush the rabble who were assembling at Yeltsin's White House, the headquarters of the counterrevolution. The RFE account continues:

"On 20 August, Yeltsin spoke by telephone with U.S. President Bush, who told him Washington would not recognize the Yanayev government. In the evening, with reports of tanks moving toward the White House, Yeltsin offered amnesty to all military personnel and police who switched their allegiances and ignored the GKChP's orders."

"Radio Liberty correspondent Andrei Babitsky, who went on to cover the wars in Chechnya, filed frequent reports from inside the White House during the attempted coup. On the night of 20 August, he reported on attempts to prepare the defense of the parliament building:

"The action around the parliament building is reminiscent of an anthill. People continue to build barricades although the entrance to the building is already blocked with layers of material and all the nearest points are firmly secured. Granite blocks are surrounding the building, cars have been turned on their side. In the past several hours, security headquarters have moved to the center of the parliament building, where people are working out the plan for the defense of the building and coordinating the action of the defenders. The defenders have at their disposal automatic weapons and bottles of homemade incendiary liquid, boxes of which are standing right here'."

"Shortly after midnight on the morning of 21 August, a column of military vehicles approached the barricades around the White House. Clashes ensued. Two protestors attempting to block the vehicles' way were shot, a third was crushed under tank treads. Crowds swarmed the vehicles. One armored personnel carrier was set on fire. The others soon retreated. The coup had collapsed."

"The next day, the 'gang of eight' was arrested. The statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the secret police in 1917, was toppled in front of KGB headquarters in central Moscow. Gorbachev was free to return. But the crowds were chanting Yeltsin's name."

"Yeltsin and the entire Russian leadership would not give up this chance. As Gorbachev himself noted, in his 1996 interview: 'The initiative shifted fully to the Russian leadership, which had defended democracy and naturally felt itself to be in the saddle.'"

Red Guard Attack On Yeltsin: The Sooner The Better

Why should revolutionaries have waited until Yeltsin, the historic leader of the forces of counterrevolution was, in Gorbachev's words, "in the saddle" before seeking to inter-

vene? In a situation where the reactionary barricades were beginning to go up, tanks are sent, the actions of a few thousand socialist-minded workers, led by a serious revolutionary organisation, could have been decisive. The failure of the EC to strike hard at Yeltsin at the beginning encouraged the pro-capitalist rabble that began to assemble in greater numbers (although there never were that many) to erect what *Workers Vanguard* recently described as the “barricades of counterrevolution”. When the tanks arrived, they were met with various kinds of resistance. A political mobilisation of 10,000 (or fewer) opponents of capitalist restoration could have had a major impact on the morale of troops sent against Yeltsin. As it turned out a few of those sent hesitated and then went over to Yeltsin. This seems to have been an important moment in the way things turned out.

In his document Comrade Ralf wrote:

“If we had at that time some comrades in the AZLK—or ZIL—auto plant (where we sold thousands of papers over the years we worked in Moscow until these were basically destroyed and closed), we could have mobilised some hundreds of workers to take out the rabble on the White House barricades (which did not at all have the support of the masses of people either). The soldiers of the armoured vehicles could have been easily won over to our side for the defence of the workers state and this would have opened up a civil war and a political revolution against the Stalinists. The coup plotters very much feared this. That’s the reason they consciously told the workers to stay home”.

I agree with this, but a revolutionary party that represented only a small minority of the working class would have had far greater success mobilising support in the working class for action if it could hold out prospect of victory. Mobilising workers for a military bloc with the EC (even if they did not want one) would have provided a perspective of success. And the chances of such an intervention winning over the troops who were still following the orders of the EC, would have been vastly better if it was clearly posed as an action directed against the pro-capitalists that was militarily on the side of the EC.

The 1991 SL/B internal bulletin, “The Russian Question, Locally Viewed”, recommended as reading for this question, contains a September 20th 1991 letter by Len Meyers, on a *Workers Hammer* draft which criticized the RIL’s confused attempts to find a position that was both anti-coup and anti-Yeltsin at the same time:

“They recognize that a counterrevolution is taking place, they are opposed to it, but they refuse to break their ties with anti-communist ‘anti-Stalinism’. So they claim to oppose the Yeltsinites, but also oppose sweeping them away and call for participating in Yeltsinite strikes with the ludicrous aim of turning them into anti-Yeltsinite (and anti-coup) strikes. They really do have a ‘Third Camp’ position here, trying to situate themselves *between* the barricades and looking for a ‘third force’.”

In the same letter Comrade Meyers wrote:

“We were the only people who called for action by Moscow workers to suppress the pro-imperialist yuppie/black marketer/speculator rabble (the social/political character of which WP’s account empirically confirms) who were the most activist elements, the shock troops, of the social base of capitalist counterrevolution.”

I think that this was the correct perspective for us to have taken against Yeltsin, but there is no reason to have waited until the EC collapsed to implement it. Just to be clear, I am *not* saying that the handful of mostly non-Russian ICL comrades in Moscow at the time could have carried out such a perspective. We clearly did not have the base in the working class to allow us to give that kind of direct leadership.

I am proposing as a correction to our line that we simply state clearly that a revolutionary organisation with a real base in the Soviet proletariat should have sought to rally the workers to suppress the Yeltsinites *during* the coup. This would amount to a military bloc of the sort the Bolsheviks made with Kerensky against Kornilov. That bloc was made despite the fact that Kerensky’s lack of either the military capacity or the political will to settle accounts with Russian reaction in 1917. The same criterion would make sense for the EC in 1991.

A Trotskyist group that actively mobilised workers to move against Yeltsin would inevitably have won over many workers and soldiers (and officers) who sympathised with the EC. By leading them in struggle against the counterrevolution, defying the instructions of the EC, revolutionaries could have sapped the ability of the EC to resist the forces of anti-bureaucratic political revolution after Yeltsin and his rabble were dispersed, in the same way that the successful fight against Kornilov sapped Kerensky’s ability to resist the Bolshevik Revolution. A military bloc with the EC was thus a dagger pointed at the heart of the Stalinist regime.

Comrade Meyers actually summed up the essential issue in his letter of 12 October 1991 (page 26 of the bulletin) where he wrote:

“...a call on Moscow workers to clean out the counterrevolutionary rabble would have been in order. If Keith were to plumb this question a little more deeply, he would first ask himself why we didn’t simultaneously call on the workers to clean out the coup plotters’ headquarters....”

“So we were already (retrospectively) in a limited, de facto military bloc against the Yeltsinite forces. This was about as far as it could go given that the coup committee had neither the intention nor the capacity to move against the most blatant counterrevolutionary forces.”

This is exactly what I am proposing that we should adopt as our line, a “limited, de facto military bloc with the EC against the Yeltsinite forces”. For those who are concerned that this would be to give support to the perestroika coupsters, I would say that, to paraphrase Lenin, it would support them like a stool supports someone with a noose around their neck. As soon as the Yeltsinites were suppressed the revolutionaries would break the bloc (kick out the stool) and watch the EC swing, just as the Bolsheviks did with Kerensky after their military bloc against Kornilov.

Why wait until Yeltsin wins before calling on the workers to mobilise to crush him and his rabble?

That is the question that comrades who are opposed to taking sides in this confrontation have to answer.

In her contribution Comrade Bonnie mentioned:

“the (then) comrades who wanted to rule out military support to the coup-plotters, objected to our forthright statement that:

“Had the coup plotters stuck to their guns, it could have led to a civil war which is what they feared above all. And in armed struggle pitting outright restorationists against recalcitrant elements of the bureaucracy, defence of the collectivised economy would have been placed on the agenda whatever the Stalinists’ intentions. Trotskyists *would have entered a military bloc with “the Thermidorean section of the bureaucracy”* as Trotsky postulated in the 1938 *Transitional Program*. This precisely was our policy toward Jaruzelski in 1981”. (my emphasis—Bonnie)”

In 1917 Lenin and Trotsky did not wait for Kerensky to demonstrate that he had the organisational capacity (or the will) to mount a serious military challenge to Kornilov before engaging in a de facto military bloc. Why should we have had a different position in 1991? No one has addressed that critical issue.

The Stalinists were hostile to Gorbachev because they could see that his market “reforms” were strengthening the Yeltsinites, and undermining their privileged positions. They were rotten, cynical and demoralised, they had no positive programme and no historical perspective. And they did not shoot straight. But in their own inept fashion they did intend to offer some last minute resistance, and once they had failed the possibility of further resistance from elements of the state apparatus were vastly reduced. I think that the most important thing is that the extent and effectiveness of that resistance could not be known for certain in advance. But what was obvious, or should have been, was that there was a better chance of stopping Yeltsin, the declared agent/ally of imperialism, before his people got into the top positions in the military and the police than after. And a successful proletarian mobilisation against the Yeltsinites would have posed the opportunity for overturning the rule of what was left of the divided and demoralized Stalinist CPSU.

What Is A Revolution?

I want to point out a few other problems with the arguments of comrades in the 7 documents written in response to mine. I cannot deal in detail with all of the points raised (although many of them overlap to a considerable extent) but some things clearly need sorting out.

Ben wrote: “For sure the Bolshevik revolution was neither begun nor concluded on the 7th and 8th of November (1917)”.

The victory of the Yeltsinites and the dissolution of the CPSU in August 1991 represented the decisive moment of qualitative change in the political situation in favour of counterrevolution, just as the victory of the October Revolution was won on November 7, not in September or in January. Lenin, Trotsky and the ICL all agree that the deposing of Kerensky by the Bolshevik insurrection was the critical moment. Revolutions and counterrevolutions come at the end of a long chain of developments and both take time to consolidate (in a sense the revolution was not consolidated until the victory in the civil war that followed). But the victory is won or lost in the course of an insurrection, which is why it is an art. Yeltsin’s counter-coup was the equivalent of an insurrection and we should date the destruction of the workers state from his victory, not the final consolidation of his rule, just as we date the origin of the workers state from November 7.

What Makes A Workers State?

One of the arguments put forward in various documents seems to be that the working class character of the USSR was not determined by the existence or character of the armed bodies (as well as other various governmental bodies) but by the Soviet working class regardless of its organisation or leadership (or lack of). It seems clear enough to me that after August 1991 in Russia the core of the state (which Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky defined as armed bodies committed to defending definite social property relations) had changed. If the workers state still existed in some way within the working class, despite the change in the character of the institutions of repression comrades should recognize that this is a new way of defining a state.

Bonnie says:

“I’d like to pass on two points from Alison: first there’s a Pabloite methodology that...is reflected as well in Tony’s document. That being that it is necessarily up to a wing of the bureaucracy to take up the fight against counterrevolution...”

It is not necessarily up to a wing of the Stalinists to fight

counterrevolution; if a revolutionary organisation exists with a sufficient popular base the Stalinists could be pushed aside while the counterrevolution was crushed. But if a state apparatus in a deformed workers state has no elements willing in any way to fight against the restoration of capitalism, can it still be called a deformed workers state? I don’t think so, and Trotsky did not think so either. He addressed this question in his 1935 essay “The Workers’ State, Thermidor and Bonapartism”:

“The replacement of one political regime by another exerts only an indirect and superficial influence upon market economy. On the contrary, the replacement of a workers’ government by a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois government would inevitably lead to the liquidation of the planned beginnings and, subsequently, to the restoration of private property. *In contradistinction to capitalism, socialism is built not automatically but consciously.* Progress towards socialism is inseparable from that state power that is desirous of socialism or that is constrained to desire it”. (emphasis in original)

Trotsky reiterated the point later in the document:

“The inevitable collapse of Stalinist Bonapartism would immediately call into question the character of the USSR as a workers’ state. A socialist economy cannot be constructed without a socialist power. The fate of the USSR as a socialist state depends upon that political regime that will arise to replace Stalinist Bonapartism”.

There can be no question that the “political regime” that replaced the CPSU Stalinist Bonapartist rule was entirely dedicated to capitalist restoration.

Ed C. wrote from Chicago to say:

“Let us suppose that in the weeks following the coup workers’ uprisings had occurred throughout the USSR with the result that Yeltsin had been overthrown and the October Revolution survived. Would Tony then say that a capitalist counterrevolution was followed by a second proletarian revolution. Hopefully not”.

Why not? The Paris Commune held power for only a few months, but Marxists considered that to be the first case of workers holding state power. When it was crushed that was the victory of the counterrevolution and the end of the workers state. Had workers’ uprisings occurred in France a few weeks after the defeat of the Communards that had re-established workers rule in Paris would that not have been a second revolution?

If there had been an ongoing series of struggles for weeks or months following the coup then I think that we could have said that the issue of the victory or defeat of the capitalist counterrevolution was not decided. But as soon as the capitalist restorationists defeated their opponents they were immediately able to move to abolish the CPSU, the backbone of the bureaucracy’s rule, without any resistance. I think that can be fairly seen as proof that a capitalist counterrevolution had taken place. And if, after that, Yeltsin had been overthrown by workers’ uprisings I think that it would indeed have been a second proletarian revolution, and the old Stalinist bureaucracy would not very easily have been able to re-establish their control.

Ed C. also wrote:

“The bureaucratic caste retained political power at the time of Gorbachev’s arrest. However whether that power—which was always a threat to the gains of October—would be used to defend the gains was, to say the least, at that time in question”.

But if there was no element of the state power that was going to attempt to defend the social base of the USSR would that not mean that the deformed workers state had already

ceased to exist? And if that were true would that not pose an issue of the peaceful restoration of capitalist rule? And would we not have to try to establish when it had been re-established? That is why the formulation in the pamphlet on the IBT about the more conservative bureaucrats represented by the EC being “just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin” is mistaken, as I pointed out in my original document.

Chuck quoted the following from *Workers Vanguard* in 1991:

“In and of itself, the collapse of the Kremlin Stalinists does not signal that the Soviet degenerated workers state has been destroyed. With its position that the failure of the coup equals the victory of counterrevolution, the BT apes the Stalinists which identify the existence of the workers state with the continued rule of the parasitical, nationalist bureaucracy”.

What does this mean? What would the Soviet degenerated workers state have looked like without a ruling parasitical, nationalist bureaucracy? Would that not be the definition of a *healthy* workers state? I know that no comrades are claiming that, but it seems to be the logic of the assertion that the bureaucracy was destroyed but the workers state survived. The fact that the collapse of the Kremlin Stalinists occurred as a defeat by counterrevolutionaries who then were able to assume (unconsolidated) control of the police and military

apparatus and reorganise society according to their own programme was evidence that the Soviet workers state had indeed been destroyed.

Edward raised similar objections in his contribution:

“Tony’s argument rests on the assertion that after the counter-coup Yeltsin had cohered ‘an armed body of men dedicated to the construction and defence of capitalism...[that] took state power in Russia’. Comrades Ben and Olly have already responded to this assertion. I wanted to ask: how can Tony know? What had happened to the previous state apparatus and the Soviet armed forces, which until that point had been defending a completely different set of property relations? Did they disappear overnight? It certainly isn’t clear that the workers state had been destroyed and replaced by a capitalist state at this point”.

Well I think it was clear enough that Yeltsin’s victory and the abolition of the CPSU signalled that counterrevolution had won an enormous victory. Yeltsin certainly thought so and, as far as I am aware, so did every capitalist government around the world. The coup and counter-coup produced a polarization of forces within the Soviet bureaucracy between the “conservatives” and the Yeltsinite pro-capitalists. It was not at all obscure: the pro-capitalist elements which had been growing stronger and stronger during the end of Gorbachev’s rule emerged as the new rulers with the success of the counter-coup.

Appendix 2

Compare and Contrast

ICL vs. IBT on Stalinism & Soviet Defenseism

The following is a selection of quotes from publications of the International Bolshevist Tendency (IBT—including the External Tendency of the iSt, the IBT's predecessor) and the International Communist League (ICL—including the international Spartacist tendency, the ICL's predecessor) highlighting differences between the two organizations on questions connected to Stalinism and the defense of the deformed and degenerated workers' states. The complete texts of many of these items can be found at www.bolshevik.org.

1980s: 'Military Victory To' or 'Hail' Soviet Army in Afghanistan?

ICL:

In an early polemic against the then-External Tendency, we noted: "If the ET were more honest, they would admit that they hated it when we hailed the Soviet Red Army's military intervention in Afghanistan" (see "The 'External Tendency': From Cream Puffs to Food Poisoning," WV No. 349, 2 March 1984). Four years later, they finally openly renounced and denounced our call, "Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!" arguing that it was "not a Trotskyist slogan, because what it tells workers is to trust the Stalinists, put your faith in the Stalinists, hail the Stalinists."

On the contrary, our hailing of the Soviet Army intervention was based on the recognition that, whatever the intentions of the venal bureaucrats in the Kremlin, this military action offered the possibility of extending the gains of the October Revolution to Afghanistan. Many Soviet soldiers saw themselves as fulfilling their internationalist duty in fighting to defeat the imperialist-financed forces of Islamic reaction. But for such internationalism to have been fulfilled required, as we pointed out, a political revolution to oust the Kremlin Stalinists and a return to the proletarian internationalist program of Lenin and Trotsky's Bolshevist Party.

—"The International Bolshevist Tendency—What Is It?"

IBT:

The trouble with the slogan "Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!" is that it failed to distinguish between political and military support. The Soviet army (which has not officially been called the "Red Army" since 1946) is the military arm of the Kremlin bureaucracy. The army's policies are those of the bureaucracy. Its role is therefore a contradictory one, like that of the bureaucracy itself. Insofar as the Russian army defends the Soviet Union against imperialism (and this was indeed its purpose in going into Afghanistan), we are on its side militarily. If it sweeps away oppressive social structures and replaces them with collectivized property in the areas under its control (and this was undoubtedly *one possibility* of the Russian intervention), we will support such measures. But to support the Soviet army uncritically (i.e., to "hail" it) would put us in the position of having to apologize for the Stalinists when they accommodate themselves to the social *status quo* or undertake a cowardly retreat. And, not surprisingly, this is exactly what they have done in Afghanistan.

...the SL advanced this deliberately angular formulation in the face of a wave of anti-Sovietism which was sweeping America. Commendable as this impulse may have been, there is no getting around the fact that taken literally and by itself, the slogan amounts to a blanket political endorsement of the Soviet role in Afghanistan.

...The call for "Military Victory to the Soviet Army" corresponded to the concrete situation in Afghanistan because it placed us squarely on the Soviet side of the battle lines without assuming any responsibility for Stalinist betrayals.

—1917 No. 5, Winter 1988-89

1981: Solidarnosc vs. Polish Deformed Workers' State

ICL:

From their inception, the BT claimed to hold many positions in common with us. For example, they too raised the slogan "Stop Solidarnosc Counterrevolution in Poland!" But when the question of stopping Solidarnosc was most urgently posed, they went crazy over our statement that if the Kremlin Stalinists intervened militarily, in their necessarily stupid and brutal way, that we would support this and take responsibility in advance for whatever idiocies and atrocities they might commit. The Trotskyist position of unconditional military defense of the deformed and degenerated workers states meant exactly that, i.e. no conditions. For the BT, this was simply further evidence of our supposed "Stalinophilia."

—"The International Bolshevik Tendency—What Is It?"

IBT:

This paragraph is a Stalinophilic perversion of the Trotskyist position of unconditional military defense of the bureaucratized workers' states. As we noted in *ETB* [Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt] No. 1:

"Trotskyists give unconditional *military* support to Stalinist regimes battling internal counterrevolution (i.e., Solidarnosc) or external capitalist forces (i.e., Finland 1940). This is quite a different matter than extending *political* support to the Stalinists. We take *no* responsibility for the crimes of the Stalinists against the working people—whether in the course of military defense of proletarian property forms or otherwise. Military support is extended *despite* such crimes."

The SL's willingness to "take responsibility in advance for whatever idiocies and atrocities they [the Stalinists] might commit" is precisely the opposite of the position put forward by Leon Trotsky in the context of the defense of the USSR against Nazi Germany in World War Two:

"While arms in hand they deal blows to Hitler, the Bolshevik-Leninists will at the same time conduct revolutionary propaganda against Stalin preparing his overthrow at the next and perhaps very near stage.

"This kind of 'defense of the USSR' will naturally differ, as heaven does from earth, from the official defense which is now being conducted under the slogan: 'For the Fatherland! For Stalin!' *Our* defense of the USSR is carried out under the slogan 'For Socialism! For the World Revolution! 'Against Stalin!'"

—*In Defense of Marxism* (emphasis in original)

The slogan "Against Stalin!" signified that instead of "taking responsibility" for the anti-working class crimes of the bureaucrats, the Fourth International *opposed* the atrocities committed by Stalin and the caste he represented.

—"ICL vs. IBT," *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5

1983: Downing of KAL 007 Spy Plane

ICL:

If the government of the Soviet Union knew that the intruding aircraft [Korean Air Lines Flight 007] was in fact a commercial passenger plane containing 200-plus innocent civilians, despite the potential military damage of such an apparent spying mission, if they deliberately destroyed the airplane and its occupants, then, to paraphrase the French, the act of shooting it down would have been worse than a barbaric atrocity....

—*Workers Vanguard* No. 337, 9 September 1983

IBT:

We say that defense of the Soviet Union includes defense of Soviet airspace. The loss of innocent civilian life was indeed lamentable, but the only "barbaric atrocity" committed was by the South Korean and American spymasters who used these unfortunate people as their unwitting hostages.

—*ET Bulletin* No.2, January 1984 (reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1)

1984: On Yuri Andropov

ICL:

He sought to curb the worst excesses of the bureaucracy.
 He sought to increase the productivity of the Soviet masses.
 He made no overt betrayals on behalf of imperialism.
 He was no friend of freedom.

—Andropov In Memoriam box, *Workers Vanguard* No. 348, 17 February 1984

IBT:

Andropov's failure to make any "overt betrayals on behalf of imperialism" can properly be attributed to his short tenure in office. He certainly didn't send any more MIGs to Nicaragua or AK-47s to the Salvadoran leftists than his predecessor. He did want to raise productivity—but big deal, so did Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. (In any case, Trotskyists must view any productivity schemes devised by the bureaucracy skeptically since they usually have an anti-working class character. Trotsky was no endorser of Stakhanovism!) Any sensible top-ranking bureaucrat is going to be interested in curbing "the worst excesses of the bureaucracy" in order to increase the efficiency, security and stability of the regime he runs. Your little homily for Andropov focuses on his subjective intentions rather than the objective inevitability, and even necessity, of corruption and inefficiency in a planned economy run by bureaucratic fiat and secret police.

—Reply to Reuben Samuels, 22 April 1984, *ET Bulletin* No.3, May 1984 (reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No.1)

ICL:

Your comparison of Andropov with Stalin and Beria, the mass murderers of tens of thousands of Communists and Red Army officers, is an obscene amalgam worthy of the pages of *Commentary*. Andropov's entire political career was shaped by a more tranquil period domestically. To hold him personally responsible for the psychopathological mass crimes of Stalin reflects the methodology that holds the bureaucracy to be a homogenous reactionary mass counterrevolutionary through and through—i.e. a new exploiting class.

—Letter from Reuben Samuels to ET, 3 January 1984, *Workers Vanguard* No. 348, 17 February 1984 (reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1)

IBT:

The crux of your argument eventually devolves on your profoundly revisionist assertion that it is "obscene" to compare Yuri Andropov with Joseph Stalin. This you say is worthy of *Commentary*. But this must be taken to mean you think that: (a) Andropov is in some sense closer to Leninism than his predecessor and/or (b) he is in some sense less a representative of the bureaucratic caste which strangled the political rule of the working class in the Soviet Union and/or (c) the caste which he represented has in some fundamental sense been transformed since the time of Stalin. Any of these positions belong in *Pravda* or in the *Daily World*, but certainly not in a newspaper purporting to be Trotskyist.

—Reply to Reuben Samuels, 22 April 1984, *ET Bulletin* No.3, May 1984 (reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No.1)

ICL:

Trotskyism provides a coherent world-view in which the contradictory character of the Stalinist bureaucracy is reflected. Your assertion, "On the most general level Andropov and the bureaucrats he represents are counterposed to everything that Trotsky fought for," is both undialectical and very distant from Trotskyism.

—Letter from Reuben Samuels to ET, 3 January 1984, *Workers Vanguard* No. 348, 17 February 1984 (reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1)

IBT:

For Trotsky, unlike your goodself, the axis of the dialectical contradiction in Soviet society is not *within* the bureaucracy (energetic Andropov versus sluggish Brezhnev), but between the bonapartist oligarchy and the social structure from which it derives its parasitic existence. This naturally conditions the Trotskyist attitude toward the relationship between defense of the Soviet Union and the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy. It is the responsibility of revolutionists to defend the Soviet Union *despite* the rule of Yuri Andropov and his caste—but not in his name!

—Reply to Reuben Samuels, 22 April 1984, *ET Bulletin* No.3, May 1984 (reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1)

1989: Stalinism & Consciousness**ICL:**

The false identification of Stalinism with Bolshevism provided Stalin with dedicated political agents throughout the world; only Stalin and perhaps a half-dozen cronies (who these were changed over time) knew what it was all about.

—“International Communist League Launched,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 479, 9 June 1989

No longer can a Stalin and his half-dozen conscious accomplices wield “monolithic” parties as instruments of class-collaborationist treason in the name of “building socialism.”

—*Ibid.*

IBT:

Like the trade union bureaucracy in bourgeois society, the ideology of the Soviet oligarchy has a *material basis* in its desire to protect its own privileged social position. Trotsky estimated, in a 13 January 1938 article, “that the bureaucracy devours not less than half of the national consumption fund.” He stated that “the big aristocrats, *the very highest stratum of the bureaucracy, live like American millionaires*” (emphasis added). When he talked of the highest *stratum* of the bureaucracy, he was clearly not referring to Stalin’s personal clique. In June 1937, Trotsky observed:

“Even from the standpoint of ‘vengeance,’ terrorist blows cannot offer satisfaction. What is the doom of a dozen high bureaucrats compared to the number and scope of the crimes committed by the bureaucracy?”

Trotsky never considered that the erratic political zig-zags of the Stalinist bureaucracy, its crimes and betrayals, were determined in advance according to some design known only to “Stalin and his half-dozen conscious accomplices.” The SL’s recent “discovery” that, apart from an inner core of “conscious” Stalinists, the rest of the bureaucratic caste, as well as their international agents, were either hostages or unwitting pawns, has more in common with Khrushchev’s self-amnestying denunciation of Stalin’s “cult of the personality” than Trotsky’s materialist analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy.

In a historical sense, none of the conservative and careerist bureaucrats, *including Stalin*, were fully conscious about what they were doing....

With the criminal idiocy of the “Third Period,” the Soviet bureaucracy quite unintentionally facilitated Hitler’s victory. Similarly, the Kremlin oligarchs proved to be the Nationalists’ most valuable ally in the Spanish Civil War, although they did not deliberately seek to hand victory to Franco. Stalin’s murderous purge of the Red Army officer corps, and his irrational confidence in Hitler’s promises, laid the basis for the military catastrophe of the summer of 1941. But again, this was not what he intended.

It is ludicrous to imagine that, apart from a sinister half-dozen who “knew what it was all about,” the rest of the cogs in the machine of bureaucratic terror which physically exterminated tens of thousands of revolutionists, were simply “dedicated political agents” of what they mistakenly took to be Leninism. This was certainly not Trotsky’s opinion....

So why are the Spartacists suddenly pushing this whole notion in the first place? Is it a Robertsonian metaphor for life in the SL? Perhaps, but it may also have a more immediate practical purpose: to make it easier for disaffected Stalinists to feel at home in the ICL.

—1917 No. 7, Winter 1990

1989-90: Capitalist Counterrevolution in the DDR (East Germany)**ICL:**

At bottom, the IBT’s position reflected complete defeatism over the capacity of the Soviet working class to struggle. They had an identical posture toward the nascent political revolution in the former East German deformed workers state following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, i.e. they declared that there was no possibility of a proletarian political revolution. Correspondingly, they denounced the ICL

for mobilizing our resources heavily and internationally to intervene with a revolutionary Trotskyist program into the events in the former East German workers state in 1989-90.

—"The International Bolshevik Tendency—What Is It?"

IBT:

Here the ICL utilizes one of its favorite polemical techniques—ascribing a position to an opponent and then attacking the invention. We certainly did not argue that proletarian political revolution was *impossible* in the DDR—simply that, contrary to the ICL's assertions, it was not *under way*. "In the aftermath" it has been the ICL, not ourselves, that has had to adjust its position. It is easy to understand why the ICL's "optimistic" position with regard to the DDR proletarian political revolution is one they would prefer to bury quietly.

—"ICL vs. IBT," *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5

With his perspective of a "treaty community" between the DDR and the BRD [West Germany], Prime Minister Modrow had already signaled his readiness to capitulate to West German imperialism when the new government was formed on 17 November 1989. The concessions he offered did not, however, give the bureaucracy its anticipated breathing space, but only provided further impetus to the counterrevolutionaries. The right won on the ground, while confusion prevailed among the more politically conscious workers who trusted the "honest, reformed" Stalinists. This is why the Modrow regime was *especially dangerous*, and why it was *imperative to warn* the workers against it.

The ICL avoided a sharp confrontation with the Modrow regime. Fearing isolation, it saw such a confrontation as inopportune, since all tendencies in the Stalinist party supported Modrow to the end. Such a confrontation would have endangered the ICL's policy of "Unity with the SED."

In this period, the ICL did not focus on attacking Modrow as a sellout whom the workers must sweep away in defense of the DDR. Instead, they criticized him only in passing....

—1917 No. 10, Third Quarter 1991

1990: The Treptow Demonstration

ICL:

The Trozktistische Liga Deutschlands and the Spartakist-Gruppen played a key role in initiating the united-front action at Treptow. Our speakers called there for workers militias and for workers and soldiers soviets to stop the Nazis and prevent the political revolution from being turned into a social counterrevolution. We warned that social democracy was the agency for selling out the DDR. We noted that the struggle for workers soviet rule in the DDR could inspire the workers in the Soviet Union, the prime target of imperialism, to take the same road.

—*Workers Vanguard* No. 495, 9 February 1990

IBT:

In the TLD's call for the demonstration there was *absolutely no criticism of the SED-PDS's* [SED, the Stalinist ruling party of the DDR, changed its name to the Party of Democratic Socialism in December 1989] course of capitulation, and *not one word* about Modrow bowing to BRD imperialism and German nationalism. But it was these politics that had initially emboldened the Nazis who had carried out the attacks [at the war memorial].

In her speech at the Treptow demonstration, TLD/SpAD comrade Dahlhaus laid out the "SED-Unity" line in full: "Our [!] economy is suffering from waste and obsolescence. The SED party dictatorship has shown that it is incompetent [!] to fight this" (*Arprekor* No. 15, 4 January 1990). This statement, along with "the SED's monopoly on power has been broken" was all that was said about the politics of the Stalinists (*Ibid.*). In Dahlhaus' speech only Honecker's SED, which the demonstrators wanted nothing more to do with anyway, was mentioned. But the actual illusions in the "reformed" SED-PDS were not attacked.

...Treptow is worth mentioning again. An invitation to the SDP/SPD [Social Democrats] to participate in the mass demonstration against the fascists was indispensable. Workers had to be broken from the SPD. One way to raise the class consciousness of the SPD's base would have been to challenge its leadership to take a position *before* the demonstration took place. When Vogel, Boehme, Meckel & Co. [SDP/SPD leaders] initiated the bourgeois outcry against the demonstrators *after* January 3, the anti-fascist mobilization naturally had to be defended against these SPD scoundrels. Revolutionaries had to try to win SDP workers and SDP branches to support this defense....The ICL, on the contrary, refused to try to draw the SDP into a united action, and justified this a week later on the grounds that the SDP had "no proletarian mass base" (*Arprekor* No. 18, 12 January 1990)....The TLD [SpAD] *deliberately* sought to involve *only* the SED in the Treptow demonstration. [For the Robertsonites] obviously the SDP/SPD workers were part of the "reactionary mass," and the TLD even had the gall to cite Trotsky's writings against fascism as a basis for this (*Arprekor* No. 16, 8 January 1990).

—1917 No. 10, Third Quarter 1991

1991: Capitalist Counterrevolution in the Soviet Union

ICL:

The working people of the Soviet Union, and indeed the workers of the world, have suffered an unparalleled disaster whose devastating consequences are now being played out. The ascendancy of Boris Yeltsin, who offers himself as Bush's man, coming off a botched coup by Mikhail Gorbachev's former aides, has unleashed a counterrevolutionary tide across the land of the October Revolution.

—*Workers Vanguard* No. 533, 30 August 1991

The "gang of eight" not only did not mobilise the proletariat, they ordered everyone to stay at work.

The "gang of eight" was incapable of sweeping away Yeltsin in its pathetic excuse for a putsch because this was a "perestroika coup"; the coupists didn't want to unleash the forces that could have defeated the more extreme counterrevolutionaries for that could have led to a civil war if the Yeltsinites really fought back.

—*Workers Hammer* No. 127, January/February 1992

November 7 [1992] marked the 75th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. But the workers state erected by the Bolshevik power...did not survive its 75th year. The period of open counterrevolution ushered in by Boris Yeltsin's pro-imperialist countercoup in August 1991 has, in the absence of mass working-class resistance, culminated in the creation of a bourgeois state, however fragile and reversible.

The August 1991 events ("coup" and "countercoup") appear to have been decisive in the direction of development in the SU, but only those who are under the sway of capitalist ideology or its material prerequisites would have been hasty to draw this conclusion at that time.

—*Workers Vanguard* No. 564, 27 November 1992

The events of August 1991, placing the forces of open capitalist restoration in the ascendancy in the Soviet Union, marked a turning point in contemporary world history.

—*Spartacist* No. 47-48, Winter 1992-93

The IBT attempts to dress up its defeatism in August 1991 by declaring military support for the Stalinist coup plotters—a ludicrous position since the coup plotters, who were just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin, were not about to undertake the kind of political and military mobilization required to mount a serious opposition. In any case, the BT's position that "it's all over," if propagated in the Soviet Union at the time, could only have had the effect of *demoralizing and paralyzing* any nascent proletarian opposition to Yeltsin's takeover.

—"The International Bolshevik Tendency—What Is It?"

IBT:

We took sides in August 1991—with the Stalinists, against the Yeltsinites. The SL, which claimed to be the party of the Russian Revolution, didn't support the victory of *either*—which amounts to being neutral. The SL is uncomfortable with this characterization, but the political logic of it is contained in their contention that:

"military support for the Stalinist coup plotters [is] a ludicrous position since *the coup plotters, who were just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin, were not about to undertake the kind of political and military mobilization required to mount a serious opposition.*"

—emphasis added

All the contradictions of the SL position are contained in the above passage. If in fact the Yanayevites were "just as committed to capitalist restoration as Yeltsin," then why should Trotskyists care about whether or not they undertook a political and military mobilization? If the Stalinist bureaucrats (including the heads of the KGB and the military) had been "just as committed" to capitalist restoration as the CIA's friends gathered around Yeltsin in the Russian White House, then there would indeed have been nothing of great importance at stake in August 1991. Yet, if one asserts that Yanayev et al were "just as committed to capitalist restoration" as Yeltsin, then it follows that at some point prior to 19 August 1991 the CPSU bureaucracy had been transformed into a formation that was counterrevolutionary through and through and to the core.

If Yeltsin's triumph was merely a victory of one gang of counterrevolutionaries over another, if by 19 August 1991 the social counterrevolution had *already* taken place, then the coup and counter-coup were merely squabbles over the spoils. Yet such a position would conflict with the SL's equally absurd assertion that Yeltsin, the historic leader of capitalist counterrevolution, presided over a workers' state for over a year,

until, at some undisclosed point in the latter half of 1992, Jim Robertson decided that "it was clear that the working class was not going to move against Yeltsin." If Yeltsin's successful counter-coup opened the "floodgates of counterrevolution," as WV asserted, then the SL *should* have taken sides. (See the extensive polemics on this question in 1917 Nos 11 and 12.)

—"ICL vs. IBT," *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5

All is by no means lost for the working class of the Soviet Union. The pro-capitalist governments that have hoisted themselves into the saddle are still extremely fragile, and have not yet consolidated their own repressive state apparatuses. Most of the economy remains in state hands, and the Yeltsinites face the formidable task of restoring capitalism without the support of an indigenous capitalist class. Workers resistance to the impending attacks on their rights and welfare will therefore involve a defense of large elements of the social/economic status quo. The embryonic bourgeois regimes now forming in the ex-USSR can be swept aside much more easily than mature capitalist states.

None of this, however, can change the fact that the workers will now be forced to fight on a terrain fundamentally altered to their disadvantage. They have not yet constituted themselves as an independent political force, and remain extremely disoriented. The Stalinist apparatus—which had an objective interest in maintaining collectivized property—has been shattered. Further resistance by the Stalinists is unlikely, since they have already failed a decisive political test, and those cadre who attempted to resist are now in forced retirement, in jail or dead. In short, the major organized obstacle to the consolidation of a bourgeois state has been effectively removed. Before the coup, massive working-class resistance to privatization would have split the Stalinist bureaucracy and their armed defenders. Now workers struggling to reverse the restorationist drive will face "bodies of armed men" dedicated to the objectives of Western capitalists and their internal allies. This incipient state power must be disarmed and destroyed by the workers.

—"Counterrevolution Triumphs in USSR," September 1991 IBT statement, reprinted in 1917 No. 11, Third Quarter 1992

The critical question is not when did the new Russian bourgeois state *consolidate* itself (it is still only very partially consolidated), but rather when did it *come into being*? Unlike the LRCI, [League for a Revolutionary Communist International] the ICL has never claimed that there was a dual-power situation in the ex-USSR following the coup. Nor have they argued that the post August governing apparatus was not committed to either bourgeois or collectivized property. If these two possibilities are excluded, there is only one other answer: the bourgeois state came into being with Yeltsin's victory in August 1991.

—1917 No. 12, 1993

