

On Bolivia, Haiti, Puerto Rico...

# SL/ICL Flip-Flopping Toward Oblivion

In a recent issue of *Workers Vanguard* (29 November 2019), the newspaper of the Spartacist League (SL), in an article titled “Down with the U.S.-Backed Right-Wing Coup!” we read:

“Our last article on Bolivia, ‘Trotskyism vs. Bourgeois Nationalism,’ (WV No. 868, 14 April 2006) pointed to the material and political decimation of the tin miners, who had once been some of the most class-conscious workers in Latin America, and asserted that ‘the proletarian instrumentality for overturning capitalism has been qualitatively diminished.’ While it is true that the tin mining industry was devastated decades ago, and that some 20,000 miners were fired and displaced and their radical union gutted, our article essentially denied that there was a working class in Bolivia and thereby argued that the basis for workers revolution did not exist in the country. The article also wrongly implies that struggle is futile in Bolivia unless it is sparked in countries with more ‘viable concentrations of the proletariat.’ These assertions amounted to a rejection of permanent revolution as applied to Bolivia.”

Well, well, an explicit renunciation of its previous, deeply anti-Trotskyist line by the SL/U.S. and the International Communist League (ICL) it leads. A little late (13 years), one might say. Better late than never? Let’s see. Is there any explanation of how the SL/ICL’s now-repudiated line came about? Nothing.



Miners who battled cops and army with dynamite cheer after forcing President Sánchez de Lozada to resign in 2003. This is the Bolivian proletariat that the ICL sneered “barely, if at all, exists.”

How about the fact that their earlier article was a foam-flecked polemic against the Internationalist Group and the League for the Fourth International for calling for workers revolution in Bolivia. Not a word. The fundamental political dishonesty remains.

The fact is that the latter-day SL/ICL isn’t the least bit interested in the Bolivian proletariat, or the struggle for revolution on the Altiplano. This is one of the countries that they rarely write about except in order to attack the IG/LFI (Venezuela is another). The 2006 piece was the only other article on Bolivia in *Workers Vanguard* since the founders of the IG were expelled from the ICL a decade earlier. “The IG can conjure up a proletariat where it barely, if at all, exists,” it sneered. This was WV’s cynical answer to *The Internationalist*’s coverage of the tumultuous Bolivian worker-peasant upheavals in the 2003 “gas war” and again in 2005.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, WV’s 2006 polemic, “Bolivia: Trotskyism vs. Bourgeois Nationalism,” was in response to our report that the ICL’s Mexican comrades declared there is “no working class in Bolivia today.” We replied, “So the dynamite-wielding miners and other workers who battled the cops and army in

<sup>1</sup> See “Bolivia Aflame: “Gas War’ on the Altiplano, Workers to Power!” *The Internationalist* No. 17, October-November 2003; and “Bolivia Explodes in Sharp Class Battle,” and the collection of eyewitness reports in *The Internationalist* No. 21, Summer 2005.



Mine workers from Huanuni, Bolivia’s largest mine, protesting in La Paz during 2005 upheaval.

Sebastian Haecher/Indymedia Bolivia

Centro de Medios Independientes

2003 and again in last year's near civil war, bringing down the second president in two years, either 'barely' exist or don't exist 'at all'."<sup>2</sup> The SL's denial of the existence of a working class was a justification for its anti-Marxist "denial of the possibility of revolution in Bolivia" and "a transparent excuse for passivity, saturated with historical pessimism," we wrote.

In addition to "conjuring up a proletariat" where supposedly none existed, the SL claimed that the IG "ignores powerful concentrations of the working class." But precisely in one such concentration of the working class, in the Brazilian "steel city" of Volta Redonda, where there was a campaign in the municipal workers union to exclude the police, the ICL turned tail, declaring that the struggle posed "unacceptable risks to the vanguard" and telling our comrades, who were leading that historic fight, that it was necessary to "pull our hands out of the boiling water." The ICL's International Secretary wrote that the ICL should never "set foot in that town [Volta Redonda] again." The Brazilian comrades indignantly refused the ICL's shameful call to flee the battle, and have continued the fight for genuine Trotskyism as part of the LFI.<sup>3</sup>

But now that the ICL has very belatedly recognized the existence of the Bolivian proletariat, what program does it put forward for struggle? In its article on the November 10 coup d'état by racist rightist forces that overthrew the populist president Evo Morales and his indigenous-based Movement for Socialism (MAS), aside from calling to "oppose the coup without giving any political support to Morales or MAS" and to form a Trotskyist party, the only concrete proposal was "For an Indigenous-Centered Workers and Peasants Government!" This is a blurred copy of the LFI's call for a "workers, peasants and Indian government" in Bolivia and other Andean countries, which we have (uniquely on the left) called for since 2003<sup>4</sup> and today.<sup>5</sup> And again, they put forward no program for action by the workers and oppressed.

### The SL/ICL's Retrogression of Consciousness

The claim that Bolivia, of all places, lacks a proletariat was not some absurd misreading of the academic studies it cited, or just simple ignorance and imperialist arrogance (although it showed plenty of both). It was an invention intended to buttress the SL/ICL's mantra of a qualitative "retrogression of proletarian consciousness worldwide" accompanying the destruction of the Soviet Union in the counterrevolutionary wave of 1989-92. This thesis has been used by the now-centrist Spartacists as a justification for declaring workers revolution off the agenda in one country after another, fleeing from the class struggle everywhere, and step-by-step abandoning the Trotskyist program.

As Leon Trotsky wrote in his essay "Stalinism and Bolshevism" (August 1937):

<sup>2</sup> "Spartacist League Disappears the Bolivian Proletariat," *The Internationalist* No. 24, Summer 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See our bulletin *From a Drift Toward Abstentionism to Desertion from the Class Struggle* (July 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See "Marxism and the Indian Question in Ecuador," in *The Internationalist* No. 17, October-November 2003.

<sup>5</sup> "For Workers Resistance Against Rightist Bolivian Coup," *The Internationalist*, 11 November 2019.

"Great political defeats provoke a reconsideration of values, generally occurring in two directions. On the one hand the true vanguard, enriched by the experience of defeat, defends with tooth and nail the heritage of revolutionary thought and on this basis strives to educate new cadres for the mass struggle to come. On the other hand, the routinists, centrists and dilettantes, frightened by defeat, do their best to destroy the authority of the revolutionary tradition and go backwards in their search for a 'New World'."

The demise of the Soviet Union – the first workers state in history, bureaucratically degenerated under Stalinist rule – and the bureaucratically deformed workers states of East Europe in 1989-92 was a huge defeat for the proletariat worldwide. U.S. rulers proclaimed the "death of communism." Not only did counterrevolution devastate the livelihoods of millions of Soviet bloc citizens, all over the capitalist world it intensified attacks on trade unions and launched a wave of privatizations targeting social programs (public health, education, welfare). And it had a profound effect on would-be socialists everywhere.

Many drew defeatist conclusions from the world-historic defeat. Stalinist "communist" parties rebaptized themselves as "socialists," social democrats became "left" parties, while some went on to become bourgeois "democrats" (Italy). Various of those who falsely claimed to be Trotskyists dropped the label, transmogrifying themselves into "anti-capitalists." A number of pseudo-Trotskyist internationals have split or been rent by internal division, including the CWI,<sup>6</sup> IMT<sup>7</sup> and the United Secretariat/International Committee.<sup>8</sup> Smaller groups simply closed up shop and hung an "out of business" sign on the door. On their websites: Error 404 ("page not found").

The Spartacist League in the U.S. and the International Communist League underwent a variant of this degeneration. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, the Spartacist tendency stood for revolutionary political continuity from Marx and Engels through Lenin and Trotsky and their Internationals. It fought against petty-bourgeois nationalism and popular-frontism when these were all the rage among opportunist leftists. It added to the Marxist program, developing Richard Fraser's writings on revolutionary integrationism in the U.S. and outlining the proletarian internationalist position on interpenetrated peoples, from Palestine to Northern Ireland.

As the vast bulk of the left abandoned the defense of the bureaucratically degenerated Soviet workers state with the onset of the second imperialist Cold War in the early 1980s, the Spartacist tendency rightly denounced the U.S.-sponsored Polish nationalist Solidarność and defended Soviet intervention in Afghanistan against the CIA-backed *mujahedin* (holy warriors). When the imperialist offensive reached its high point in the late '80s, the ICL uniquely fought, first in East Germany and then in the Soviet Union, to defeat the counterrevolution and for a proletarian political revolution to replace the sellout bureaucracy with internationalist soviet democracy.

<sup>6</sup> Committee for a Workers International, led by Peter Taaffe, derived from the Britain-based Militant tendency.

<sup>7</sup> International Marxist Tendency, led by Alan Woods, the other offshoot of the Militant tendency.

<sup>8</sup> The current of followers of the late Ernest Mandel.

So the colossal defeat for the world working class in the Soviet Union and East Europe hit the SL/ICL particularly hard. The comrades had worked their hearts out to stave off capitalist restoration as the pseudo-Trotskyists lined up with the counterrevolution. While many of the latter dropped any pretense of upholding the revolutionary program of Lenin and Trotsky, the ICL leaders kept a veneer of Trotskyism, but declared that workers' struggles no longer had any relation to the goal of socialist revolution. Using this claim as an excuse to flee the battlefield, the ICL purged long-time leading cadres who went on to found the Internationalist Group and League for the Fourth International.

But the revolutionary program cannot be maintained as an icon on the mantlepiece, honored with a ritual bow from time to time, divorced from the class struggle. The backsliding soon set in. In response to the reaffirmation by the IG of Trotsky's statement that "The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership," the latter-day ICL proclaimed that this "predates the present deep regression of proletarian consciousness" with the destruction of the Soviet Union. As Trotsky described the "classical trick of all traitors, deserters and their attorneys," these ex-Trotskyists "unload the responsibility on the masses" for the defeat.<sup>9</sup>

This fundamental revisionism was written into an ICL Declaration of Principles (1998), replacing the 1966 SL Declaration of Principles, which centered on Trotsky's (now supposedly outdated) thesis about the centrality of the crisis of proletarian leadership. That, moreover, was the central tenet of the founding program of the Fourth International. In reality, it was not so much the consciousness of the working class that suffered a qualitative retrogression but above all that of the ostensibly socialist and communist left, including the SL/ICL, which began to revise Lenin and Trotsky, and its own past program, on one issue after another.

We could point to numerous examples. In the United States, the election of a black president, Barack Obama, we wrote, represented "a considerable social change in this country founded on chattel slavery.... But this has not changed the system of imperialist capitalism one iota."<sup>10</sup> In contrast, WV (4 December 2009) reported (in one of the endless chain of self-disavowals, many of which would then themselves be disavowed) on the SL's June 2009 conference, that a meeting of the SL Political Bureau and ICL International Secretariat "applauded" Obama's March 2008 "More Perfect Union" speech "as a 'turning point' for 'acknowledging race and racial oppression in the U.S.'"

Or take Britain, where the 2015 election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party set the left spinning. The Spartacist League/Britain hailed the not-so-left reformist social democrat in a leaflet calling Corbyn "Tony Blair's nightmare!"<sup>11</sup> A year later it proclaimed "*Jeremy Corbyn must be allowed to run the Labour Party, in his own way.*" But as the issue of Britain leaving the European Union (EU) came to the fore, with both

<sup>9</sup> "Stalinism and Bolshevism."

<sup>10</sup> "Obama Presidency: U.S. Imperialism Tries a Makeover," *The Internationalist* No. 28, March-April 2018.

<sup>11</sup> "Corbynmania Sweeps Britain" (*The Internationalist* No. 41, September-October 2015),

sides campaigning against immigrants, the SL/B went hard for "Brexit." So in the last election it headlined "BREXIT NOW!" (*Workers Hammer*, Summer 2019) echoing Tory Boris Johnson's campaign slogan "Get Brexit Done"! Having given up on the program of revolutionary internationalist class struggle to bring down the EU, the ICL climbs aboard a rabidly anti-immigrant, bourgeois-nationalist campaign.

### Capitulating to Imperialism: Germany, China, 9/11 ...

Having lost the anchor of Soviet defensism, which it had upheld "against high wind and high water" in fighting the fake Trotskyists, the recurring pattern has been that at every crisis the now-centrist, ex-Trotskyist SL/ICL would dump its former principled positions. First, during a year-long fight over Germany that led up to the 1996 expulsions, the leadership declared that the "Stalinists led the counterrevolution." This negated Trotsky's analysis of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a parasitical, contradictory layer incapable of leading revolution or counterrevolution; was counterposed to the ICL's valiant intervention in East Germany (the DDR) against imperialist-led counterrevolution; and flew in the face of reality, as the Stalinist ex-leaders of the DDR ended up in jail.

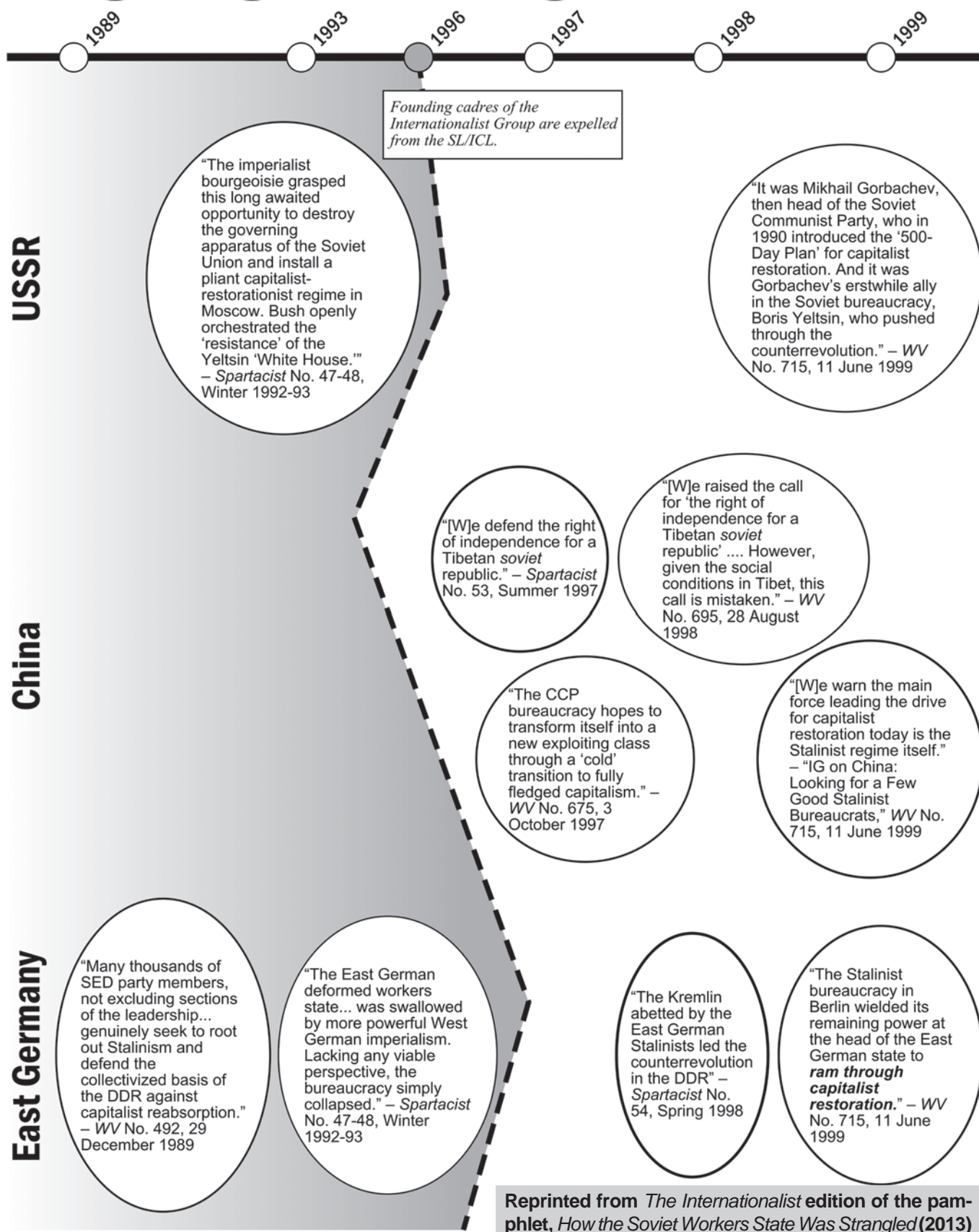
After decades of programmatic consistency, a characteristic feature of the "post-Soviet" ICL has been its zigzags, typical of centrism. On China the ICL declared that "the CCP bureaucracy hopes to transform itself into a new exploiting class through a 'cold' transition to fully fledged capitalism" (WV, 3 October 1997). In a polemic against the IG, it declared: "the main force leading the drive for capitalist restoration today is the Stalinist regime itself" (WV, 11 June 1999). But when we denounced this, it conceded that "the Beijing regime is not committed to capitalist restoration" (WV, 17 November 2000). And a decade later it finally admitted: "the Stalinist bureaucracy is incapable of implementing a cold, gradual restoration of capitalism from above" (*Spartacist*, Spring 2011).

On counterrevolution in the DDR, the ICL also shillyshallied. In WV (11 June 1999) it wrote, repeating the Stalinophobic arguments of Max Shachtman and other renegades from Trotskyism, that "the Stalinist bureaucracy in Berlin wielded its remaining power at the head of the East German state to **ram through capitalist restoration**" (their emphasis). But after the ouster of the post-purge SL/ICL leadership, these were declared "polemical excesses in the heat of battle" against us, and that "it is not correct to say the PDS led the counterrevolution in the DDR" (*Spartacist*, Spring 2004). Yet the line that "The Kremlin abetted by the East German Stalinists led the counterrevolution in the DDR" is still in its "Declaration of Principles." (See the diagram "Zig-Zag: ICL Caught Between Shachtman and Trotsky" on pages 44-45 of this issue.)

By claiming that the Stalinists "led the counterrevolution," the ICL alibied the imperialists and their social-democratic agents who actually spearheaded the capitalist reunification of Germany. And their capitulation to imperialist pressure, combined with venomous denunciation of the IG/LFI, became

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# Zig-Zag: ICL Caught Between



# Shachtman and Trotsky



"The IG's incantation that the Stalinists cannot 'lead the counterrevolution' because they constitute a caste and not a class is a political amnesty for these treacherous sellouts.... It is a lying cover for the Stalinists to say, as does the IG in its 1998 article, that 'it was Washington's man Yeltsin, in constant contact with president Bush, at the head of elements that had split from the Stalinist bureaucracy, who seized power in August 1991 and proceeded to destroy the Soviet Union.'" – *WV* No. 746, 17 November 2000

"In China today, insofar as it is pushing market-oriented 'reforms,' conciliation of imperialism and repression of workers' struggles, the bureaucracy is leading the drive for capitalist restoration.... At the same time, there is a crucial difference between the act of counterrevolution itself and the lead-up to it. In that sense, the Beijing regime is not committed to capitalist restoration..." – "IG: Still Looking for a Few Good Stalinist Bureaucrats," *WV* No. 746, 17 November 2000

"However, *WV* [No. 746] never made clear, as it should have, that we were correcting the earlier [No. 715] polemic. And it would have been better to have stated that the Beijing bureaucracy is 'promoting and greatly strengthening the forces of capitalist restoration,' rather than 'leading the drive for capitalist restoration.'" – *Spartacist* No. 58, Spring 2004

"The fact that it took repeated party fights in the late 1990s and early 2000s against agnosticism on the question of defending the Chinese workers state and/or third-campist formulations in our propaganda on China ... reveals that the critical importance of this question was not assimilated by the previous party leadership." – *Spartacist* No. 60, Autumn 2007

"As a brittle, parasitic caste resting atop the socialized property, the Stalinist bureaucracy is incapable of implementing a cold, gradual restoration of capitalism from above." – *Spartacist* No. 62, Spring 2011

"These assertions of our revolutionary purpose ['the PDS led the counterrevolution in the DDR' and 'we were the revolutionary leadership'] contained an important kernel of truth .... At the same time, they were polemical excesses in the heat of battle." – *Spartacist* No. 58, Spring 2004

"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." – *Spartacist* No. 58

"The conference rejected the claim... that a purported failure to evaluate our intervention into the incipient political revolution in the East German deformed workers state (DDR) in 1989-90 was at the root of the ICL's problems." – *Spartacist* No. 62, Spring 2011

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even more direct. Following the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, the panicked SL/ICL abandoned its longstanding call for the defeat of U.S. imperialist wars. In a particularly vile smear, it accused the IG of “Playing the Counterfeit Card of Anti-Americanism” for upholding this basic Leninist position.

It went further, grotesquely claiming we were “playing to an audience of ‘Third World’ nationalists for whom the ‘only good American is a dead American’.”<sup>12</sup> As the SL knew perfectly well when they printed this filth, particularly in the hysterical atmosphere following the 9/11 attacks, this monstrous lie could have led to serious repression against us. In contrast to the SL/ICL’s cringing before imperialism, three days after the attack, with New York City under military occupation, we wrote:

**“The Internationalist Group, section of the League for the Fourth International, calls on the working class throughout the world to fight to defeat the imperialist drive for war and repression. As the U.S. gears up to invade Afghanistan, revolutionaries defend it, Iraq and any other countries assaulted by the would-be global cops of the New World Order led by Bush & Co. who are far and away the biggest mass murderers of all.”**

–“U.S. Whips Up Imperialist War Frenzy, Drives Toward Police State,” *The Internationalist* No. 12, Fall 2001

### **Social-Imperialist Betrayal Over Haiti**

This combination of groveling before the imperialists and foam-flecked denunciation of the IG/LFI for upholding Trotskyism (i.e., the SL/ICL’s own past positions) reached its nadir with the U.S. invasion of Haiti following the January 2010 earthquake that devastated the impoverished black republic in the Caribbean. The IG took the lead in initiating united-front protests demanding “U.S./U.N. Forces Get Out!” of Haiti, warning that the troops were intended “to **put down unrest by the poor and working people of Haiti**.”<sup>13</sup> WV, however, grotesquely *justified* the U.S. occupation forces, claiming they were providing humanitarian aid:

“The U.S. military is the only force on the ground with the capacity – e.g., trucks, planes, ships – to organize the transport of what food, water, medical and other supplies are getting to Haiti’s population.”

–*Workers Vanguard*, 29 January 2010

The Internationalist Group immediately called this garbage what it is, “a classic example of the term Lenin coined during World War I: ‘social-imperialism’” (“Spartacist League Backs U.S. Imperialist Invasion of Haiti,” *The Internationalist*, 30 January 2010). Behind the cover of “socialist” rhetoric

<sup>12</sup> “ICL Refuses to Call for Defeat of U.S. Imperialism, ‘Anti-American’ Bait the Internationalist Group,” *The Internationalist* No. 11, Fall 2001.

<sup>13</sup> “Haiti: Workers Solidarity, Yes! Imperialist Occupation, No!” *The Internationalist*, 20 January 2010.



Spartacist

**If Stalinists “led the counterrevolution” in East Germany, why was ICL up there with Stalinist leaders speaking from the Soviet War Memorial at a united-front anti-fascist mobilization on 3 January 1990?**

the Spartacist League was supporting imperialist occupation. After the 9/11 attack in 2001 it had *flinched* under imperialist pressure; this was an outright *betrayal* of the first order. Our denunciation – and a subsequent article (“SL Twists and Turns on Haiti,” *The Internationalist*, 9 April 2010) – stung, and the SL unleashed a new torrent of ranting invective against the IG.

Over and over, in five out of six consecutive issues of WV, we were accused of “Third World Cheerleading and Cynical Phrase-mongering,” “IGiocy,” “oh-so-revolutionary rhetoric,” “bravado,” “adaptation to Third World populist nationalism,” and the like. The IG was declared guilty of “conjuring up fantasies of proletarian revolution in Haiti” because we had written of Haitian workers: “This small but militant proletariat can place itself at the head of the impoverished urban and rural masses seeking to organize their own power.” In response, the SL decreed that “even before the earthquake, there was virtually no working class in Haiti.”

As we wrote at the time, “Haiti has now joined a growing list of places where, according to the SL, there is no working class. It started off with Bolivia in 2005, then came Oaxaca in 2006, now Haiti in 2010.” Moreover, there was a pattern here: “in each case the SL proclaims there is no proletariat in country x just when there are explosive workers struggles there. Those Bolivian miners leading mass marches while setting off sticks of dynamite, those Oaxacan teachers and government workers who set up hundreds of barricades to stop the death squads, those Haitian workers who shut down the factories to march on parliament,” they don’t exist, said WV.

The SL/ICL began to backtrack, calling for “All U.S./UN Troops Out of Haiti Now!” (26 March 2010). But in the end, it was too much to stomach. The ICL’s International Executive Committee declared that the IG “quite correctly characterized our position as ‘social imperialist’ – socialist in words, support for imperialism in deeds.” It even admitted that, “In the context of polemics with the IG, *Workers Vanguard* misused the authority of the revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky in order to alibi support to an imperialist occupation” (“Repudiating Our Position on



**U.S. troops patrol Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince, January 2010. ICL shamefully supported U.S. occupation, later admitted IG was right in labeling this betrayal "social-imperialist."**

Haiti Earthquake – A Capitulation to U.S. Imperialism,” WV, 7 May 2010).

In an “Open Letter from the Internationalist Group to the Spartacist League and ICL” (8 May 2010), we suggested that any militants in the SL/ICL who wanted to get to the bottom of this capitulation should investigate, “1) *How did this betrayal come about?*” and “2) *Why did this betrayal come about?*” We answered, “*It was an extension of previous capitulation to the pressures of U.S. imperialism,*” and listed some of them. But even as the ICL called for “a savage indictment of our line,” it continued to insist that there was/is no working class in Haiti, and thus to fight for workers revolution there was nothing but IG “Third Worldist fantasies.”

They maintained this lie for almost a decade. The IG published several articles about Haitian women workers,<sup>14</sup> initiating a solidarity protest in New York in 2013 and highlighting Hillary Clinton’s theft of earthquake relief funds to set up sweatshops. We campaigned and wrote articles in 2015 against the expulsion of Haitians from the Dominican Republic.<sup>15</sup> We initiated an emergency trinational LFI protest in 2016 when Obama excluded Haitian refugees, and an article on “Haiti Hurricane Disaster: Workers Revolution the Answer.”<sup>16</sup> We protested Trump’s plans in 2017 to deport Haitian refugees,<sup>17</sup> and covered the 2018 revolts in Haiti against imperialist austerity.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> “Haiti: Women Workers Strike Against Starvation Wages,” *The Internationalist* No. 36, January-February 2014; and “Haitian Workers Brave Repression in Fight Against Starvation Wages,” *The Internationalist* No. 48, May-June 2017.

<sup>15</sup> “Stop Expulsion of Haitians from the Dominican Republic,” *The Internationalist* No. 40, Summer 2015.

<sup>16</sup> “Protests in U.S., Mexico and Brazil Demand: Stop Exclusion of Haitians! Stop All Deportations! Occupation Troops Out of Haiti!” *The Internationalist* No. 45, September-October 2016.

<sup>17</sup> “LET HAITIANS STAY!,” *The Internationalist*, January 2018.

<sup>18</sup> “Revolt in Haiti Against IMF-Dictated Austerity,” *The Internationalist* No. 54, November-December 2018.

For its part, after 2010 the SL had a few articles on the U.N.-imported cholera epidemic, one on the Obama order barring refugees (with no mention of the LFI-initiated protests, to which they were invited), and that was about it. Until last fall, when an article appeared on “Haiti: Mass Revolt and State Terror” (WV, 15 November), in the issue before the article on the Bolivia coup. There we read, lo and behold, that Haitian “workers must pursue a class perspective” leading other oppressed sectors to “sweep away capitalist rule,” and “fight for a workers government.” Out of nowhere, suddenly Haitian workers surface in the pages of *Workers Vanguard*.

Moreover, *mirabile dictu*, there is even talk of “a socialist revolution in Haiti” and the “extension of workers revolution throughout the region” and into the imperialist heartland. But, significantly, there is *no mention that this is in blatant contradiction with the ICL’s previ-*

*ous line* that there is “virtually no working class in Haiti” and that any talk of workers revolution there is a “Third Worldist fantasy.” So the SL/ICL decided to clean up its act a bit, surreptitiously over Haiti, more explicitly over Bolivia, but always without explaining the origins of their previous line rejecting permanent revolution in impoverished countries.

## 2, 3, Many Dodges on Independence for Puerto Rico

The ICL’s years-long insistence that a series of countries and regions where there were sharp and often explosive struggles of working people had no proletariat was an expression of its line of a qualitative “regression of proletarian consciousness” to justify retreat from the class struggle. It also expressed a visceral hatred of the Internationalist Group and League for the Fourth International, all the more virulent as the IG/LFI is the political continuity of the “old Trotskyism” that the latter-day ICL has junked, bit by bit. Over Germany, China, defeat of imperialist wars, Bolivia, Haiti, and a host of other issues, we continue to uphold the positions the SL/ICL used to defend before they bought into the imperialist “death of communism” lie.

But the ICL’s multiple line changes after 1996 also have a heavy dose of imperialist chauvinism. This brings us to Puerto Rico, where the ICL’s disdain toward colonial and semi-colonial countries first came to the fore. Puerto Rico is the world’s oldest colony, having been under Spanish rule from 1493 to 1898 and under U.S. colonial rule from 1898 to the present. It is also the largest remaining colony in the world today. A colony is inherently oppressive, a negation of the national rights of the colonized people, without control over its own affairs and subject to the dictates of the imperialist master. There can be no “democratic” colonialism.

Colonial rule is a form of capitalist slavery. During the imperialist World War I, Lenin wrote: “The demand for the immediate

liberation of the colonies that is put forward by all revolutionary Social-Democrats is also 'impracticable under capitalism without a series of revolutions'. He insisted that, "Socialists must not only demand the unconditional and immediate liberation of the colonies without compensation" but actively support the more revolutionary elements ("The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination" [1916]). Trotsky's 1919 "Manifesto of the Communist International to the Workers of the World" proclaimed:

"Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia! The hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will strike for you as the hour of your own emancipation!"

Revolutionaries in the imperialist country have a special responsibility to fight for the liberation of the peoples under the colonial boot of "their own" bourgeoisie. Although this is an elementary statement of principle, many social democrats shamefully supported colonial rule of African and Asian countries. Thus one of Lenin's famous "21 conditions" of the "Terms of Admission into the Communist International" (1920) was:

"Any party wishing to join the Third International must ruthlessly expose the colonial machinations of the imperialists of its 'own' country, must support – in deed, not merely in word – every colonial liberation movement, demand the expulsion of its compatriot imperialists from the colonies, inculcate in the hearts of the workers of its own country an attitude of true brotherhood with the working population of the colonies and the oppressed nations, and conduct systematic agitation among the armed forces against all oppression of the colonial peoples."

Genuine Trotskyists have always called for independence for Puerto Rico, as part of our program for international socialist revolution. At the 1938 founding conference the Fourth International, a special "Thesis on the World Role of American Imperialism" declared that the parties of the FI throughout the Western hemisphere "stand for the immediate and unconditional independence of Puerto Rico" and all other "direct colonies, dependencies, and protectorates of American imperialism." That call was repeated in the 1938 founding convention of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the Trotskyist organization in the U.S.

The Spartacist League, which took up the banner of revolutionary Trotskyism as the SWP abandoned it in the mid-1960s, for years called for Puerto Rican independence, "even under bourgeois leadership," while fighting for a workers republic and socialist revolution from the Caribbean to the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Continuing that program, the Internationalist Group declared, in a leaflet distributed during the July 1998 general strike in Puerto Rico:

"The Internationalist Group and the League for the Fourth International advocate independence for Puerto Rico, in



**Above: Delegates to the Second Congress of the Communist International (including Lenin, Zinoviev, M.N. Roy and others), which voted the "21 Conditions" for joining the CI, including demanding expulsion of the imperialists from the colonies. When ICL renounced calling for Puerto Rican independence, it wouldn't have been admitted into the Comintern.**

order to strike a blow against U.S. imperialism and because only by breaking out of the national subjugation of colonial rule can the international class struggle come to the fore. We support struggles for independence from colonial rule, even when they are led by petty-bourgeois and bourgeois forces, at the same time as we fight for proletarian leadership of the struggle against imperialism through international socialist revolution. Genuine national liberation can only be achieved by workers revolution, in Puerto Rico and the U.S. We demand: Yankee imperialism get out! U.S. military out of Puerto Rico and all of the Caribbean! Return Guantanamo to Cuba! "At the same time, however distorted by the mechanisms of colonial referendums, the fact remains that an overwhelming majority of the Puerto Rican population does not presently favor independence. As the right to self-determination is a democratic question, and the working class has no interest in forcing independence against the will of the Puerto Rican population – especially when the impetus for separation comes from right-wing reactionaries – we underline our defense of Puerto Rico's right to independence."

–"Puerto Rico General Strike Forge a Revolutionary Workers Party!" *The Internationalist* No. 6, November-December 1996

The Spartacist League, however, used the occasion to abandon its call for independence for Puerto Rico. Its article on the strike included a quote from a 1993 article, that declared "We advocate independence in order to strike a blow against U.S. imperialism," while saying it wasn't in favor of "forcing" that. But a few weeks later, *WV* (11 September 1998) printed a "correction" which claimed that to advocate independence while opposing forcing it on the Puerto Rican people is "self-contradictory." Not at all. Revolutionaries advocate all kinds of positions that are today minority views, which in no way

<sup>19</sup> "Puerto Rico: National Independence and the Class Struggle," *Young Spartacus*, No. 20, November-December 1973.

means imposing them by force. On the basis of this absurd argument, the SL claimed to defend the Caribbean nation's "right to independence," but declared: "We do not currently advocate independence for Puerto Rico, not least because the vast majority of the population there is not in favor of it at this time." Against this turn to "socialist" colonialism, we wrote:

"For the Spartacist League in the United States, this renunciation of the call for independence for this key U.S. colony, the linchpin for U.S. military and economic domination of the Caribbean, amounts to outright capitulation before 'their own' bourgeoisie.... For socialists in an imperialist country to refuse to call for independence for a colony is a betrayal and a colonialist, chauvinist position. Lenin insisted, over and over, that the right of self-determination for colonies can only mean independence."

—"ICL Renounces Fight for Puerto Rican Independence," *The Internationalist* No. 6, November-December 1998

In response to our denunciation of this betrayal, *Workers Vanguard* (8 January 1999), published a frenzied and exceedingly dishonest polemic, claiming that "IG Centrists Pander to Latin American Nationalism," *for defending the principled position that the SL had upheld for the last quarter century*. Quoting Lenin's 1916 article "The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up," WV omitted his insistence on "the demand for the immediate liberation of the colonies." It never mentioned that Trotsky, the Fourth International and the then-Trotskyist SWP called for independence for Puerto Rico.

So for the next 21 years, the SL refused to advocate independence of Puerto Rico. Yet all the while, these erstwhile Trotskyists were continuously dancing around the issue, with one evasive formulation after another. (Meanwhile, they continued screaming that by "advocating" independence, the IG stood for "forcing" it.)

Thus in their January 1999 screed they wrote that, actually, "we favor Puerto Rican independence, in order to fight against chauvinism in the United States and to undercut the bourgeois-nationalist leadership of the working class on the island." So the SL "favors" independence, but doesn't "advocate" it. What then *does* the SL advocate? Far from a guide for revolutionary struggle against U.S. subjugation of the island colony, this pious wish was an excuse for passive acceptance of the colonial status quo. One might similarly "favor" rain (or not, depending).

Then came another variant: "As forthright opponents of all forms of U.S. imperialist colonial oppression, we would favor independence for Puerto Rico," declares a Programmatic Statement of the Spartacist League/U.S. published in 2000. So now the SL doesn't "favor" independence in the abstract, but instead "would favor" it ... if what? If the majority of Puerto Ricans favor it? If there was a mass movement for it? If it happened? This is a meaningless statement, at most a platitudinous expression of sympathy, without any concrete application.

One might think that the difference between "favor" independence and "would favor" is insignificant, especially since they are both empty phrases. But from SL internal documents it turns out the most determined opponents of calling for Puerto Rican independence objected to the statement in WV 799 that it "favors" independence. In the Jesuitical nature of SL internal discussions,

the objection cited a resolution of a November 1998 Central Committee plenum which said "would favor." But a report on Puerto Rico at the same meeting by SL chairman James Robertson said that "we strongly advocate independence." Go figure.

Amid all this double-speak, the 2000 SL Programmatic Statement adds:

"At the same time, the sympathies of the population are a large factor for Marxists in determining how best to get the national question off the agenda and clear the road for revolutionary internationalist class struggle. In recent years, referendums in Puerto Rico have shown those in favor of independence to be in a minority, although referendums are not the main or only means of measuring the sympathies of the population; for example, the 1998 two-day general strike against privatization of the telephone company through sale to an American firm was a powerful demonstration of opposition to the island's national subjugation."

In the first place, in a colonial or semi-colonial country, the struggle for independence is not just to "get the national question off the agenda" and clear the road for the class struggle. For Trotskyists who fight on the program of permanent revolution, the struggle for national liberation from colonial subjugation is an integral part of the class struggle, requiring a socialist revolution in order to throw off the yoke of imperialism. Secondly, the two-day 1998 general strike did not just show popular sympathies, it was led by pro-independence unions and unionists.

And thirdly, the small vote for independence in colonial referendums is nothing new. There have been four referendums on the status of Puerto Rico, in 1967, 1993, 1998 and 2012, as well as a "referendum" called by pro-statehood forces in 2017 that was widely boycotted. At most 5% of the population voted for independence in these plebiscites. This does not reflect the sentiment for independence, which is substantial, or the affirmation of Puerto Rico's nationhood, which is massive, but rather the fear of being cut off from the mainland, where a majority of Puerto Ricans now live, and of becoming another impoverished Caribbean island.

This is why the struggle for the liberation of Puerto Rico from colonial domination must be part of a program of socialist revolution, from the Caribbean to the imperialist heartland. It is *not* a reason why revolutionaries should drop the demand for independence for all colonies, which for Leninists is a matter of principle. Lenin insisted that while the right of self-determination in colonies can only mean independence, for nationalities in a multinational state (such as the Russian empire), it is akin to the right to divorce, which one can exercise or not depending on the situation. The SL/ICL has in a confusionist way conflated these two different situations.

Then suddenly last summer, we read (in WV, 23 August 2019): "We advocate independence for Puerto Rico as part of our opposition to U.S. imperialism." Whoa! What about all your screeching against the Internationalist Group that to advocate independence can only mean imposing it by force? Not a peep. A public correction, perhaps, about the fact that you just changed your line? Or that you were returning to the position that you dumped in 1998? Nary a word. How about a little political honesty here? Like saying of the two decades

of sharp clashes between the SL/ICL and IG/LFI over Puerto Rico, *who was right and who was wrong*.

### From Colonialist “Socialists” to Annexationist “Socialists”

So what is going on here? Does this reversal of positions of the post-1996 SL/ICL signify a return to revolutionary Trotskyism. Not at all. What happened is that around 2015 the ICL recruited a circle of leftists in Quebec who were under the sway of Quebecois nationalism. Rather than fighting for independence of Quebec, an oppressed nation within Anglo-dominated Canada, on a proletarian internationalist program in order to combat the Anglo-chauvinism of the oppressor and the bourgeois nationalism of sections of the Quebec bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, the actual aim became to build a (bourgeois) Quebec nation-state.

This group was then used as a battering ram by Skye Williams, who at a memorial meeting for SL founder and leader Jim Robertson (who died last April) modestly proclaimed that “I became the central leader of the SL/U.S., and later, of the International” (WV, 13 December 2019). The newly re-configured leadership went after a whole layer of older SL/ICL cadres, demagogically charging them with having – for 40 years! – promoted a program of “chauvinism on the national question.” Anglo chauvinism certainly did rear its head within the ICL, but not in its political line on the national question, which was straight Leninism ... until it lost its moorings as it increasingly internalized a defeatist program following counterrevolution in the Soviet Union, and generated a new leadership (actually a series of attempted new leaderships) on that basis.

The new program was laid out in the monster document of the ICL’s Seventh Conference, published under the title “The Struggle Against the Chauvinist Hydra” in *Spartacist* (Summer 2017). It was announced that “A leadership guided by comrade Coelho” led the internal fight to “regenerate the party.” *However, the program on which they are “regenerating” the party is not revolutionary Trotskyism but bourgeois nationalism.*

Regarding Bolivia, Haiti and Puerto Rico, the latter-day ICL’s line (which was in fact shot through with imperialist chauvinism) was an embarrassment for a new leadership committed to nation-building in the imperialist countries. So after years of denouncing the IG for allegedly “tailing after Third World nationalism,” suddenly these First World nation-builders declared that we are Anglo chauvinists for whom “imperialist white Americans can decide the fate of Puerto Ricans without any concern for their national will” (“Hydra”). All because we advocate independence for Puerto Rico, which they lyingly equate with forcing it on Puerto Ricans.

In “Hydra,” the “new leadership” of the “regenerated” ICL admitted that “we have had problems with our line on Puerto Rico as established over the years in WV,” that its line was “ambivalence toward colonialism,” and that “*until 2010*” its leading organ “disappeared” the “argument” that “we favor Puerto Rican independence!” But on the “do they or don’t they, yes or no” question of *calling for independence*, the regenerated leadership waffled, opining that “whether we use the term

‘advocate’ or (would) ‘favor’ independence” was not the point. *The point is that for two decades, these ex-Trotskyists did not fight for independence for Puerto Rico.*

Nor do they today. For the ICL, it’s all just words, which is why they play around with favor, would favor, don’t advocate, do advocate – it’s all about what’s in their heads, and has nothing to do with real intervention in the class struggle. Thus in “Hydra,” they came out for “the right of Puerto Ricans to freely decide on annexation” (sic!), and a few months later they blithely declare that “should Puerto Ricans decide they want statehood, we would support the will of the population” (WV No. 1123, 1 December 2017). This is truly perverse. As we wrote:

“In reality, becoming a state would be a *colonial annexation*. It would inevitably mean the destruction of the Puerto Rican nation, which is what advocates of statehood, namely the far right wing of Puerto Rican bourgeois politicians, intend.... So the *ex-Trotskyist anti-Leninists* of the Spartacist League/ICL are *explicitly supporting colonial annexation*.”

–“SL/ICL on Puerto Rico: Annexationist “Socialists,” *The Internationalist* No. 50, Winter 2017

### *So the colonialist “socialists” of the ICL have become annexationist “socialists”!*

Now they have come back to saying they advocate independence for Puerto Rico, and recognizing that there is a proletariat in Bolivia and Haiti, even suggesting there could be a fight for workers revolution in these impoverished semi-colonial countries. But while they may try to quietly undo some of the more blatantly chauvinist lines, with a half-correction in the first case and back-door line changes in the other two, not mentioning their previous, vociferously defended positions, their only explanation for this topsy-turvy policy is to guilt-trip the SL/ICL membership, saying that for four decades they were all Anglo-chauvinists.

After all this, they still incongruously claim to be the continuity of Trotskyism and Leninism. To make this boast while condemning their 40-year line on a central issue (the national question) as not merely wrong but out-and-out chauvinist, they have transformed the whole conception of revolutionary continuity to turn it into a personal attribute, so that the line of succession goes from Marx to Engels to Lenin to Trotsky to Cannon to Robertson and now the new Central Leader. Yet in carrying out this self-aggrandizing operation, the “regenerated” ICL/SL unintentionally reveals that the *political continuity of the revolutionary program* is embodied in the League for the Fourth International.

In the hothouse atmosphere of the Spartacist League and ICL, things could seem like a version of “As the World Turns,” with new leaderships installed in 1996, 2004, 2008 and 2017, each with a new set of politics, which then get discarded in the next fight. But rather than regenerating revolutionary politics, it is spinning like a top, wobbling ever more wildly on the way to oblivion. The SL/ICL may persist as a centrist sect, with a mediocre leadership devoid of Marxist grounding. But the degenerated SL/ICL, a caricature of Trotskyism, can’t provide a materialist analysis of its endless twists and turns, and can never forge a genuine world party of socialist revolution. Carrying forward that task falls to the League for the Fourth International. ■