

IG/SL debate: an opportunity to set a few things straight

During our November 2023 debate with the Spartacist League in London we noted a new openness to addressing past positions. Unfortunately, thus far this has chiefly meant repudiating positions James Roberson got right (e.g., on Khomeini, the Arab-Israeli wars and the national/communal conflict in Ireland). We welcome the possibility floated by the new SL leadership of a serious (and in our view long overdue) discussion of Spartacist history. But the problem with only focussing on the period after 1990, as has been proposed, is that the organisation had been going off the rails for at least a dozen years before that.

We have highlighted below a few examples from the 1980s of what we hope comrades in the IG and SL can, in hindsight, agree were mistakes. Demonstrating a commitment to putting revolutionary principle over political prestige could open the door to fruitful political engagement on the vitally important history of the Spartacist tendency of the 1960s and 70s.

1981: Popular front flag-waving

“In reality, the Popular Front is the main question of proletarian class strategy for this epoch. It also offers the best criterion for the difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism.”

—Trotsky, ‘The POUM and the Popular Front,’ 1936

In 1981 SL-led “Anti-Imperialist Contingents” marched under the flags of both the Fourth International and the FMLN—the military wing of the insurgent Salvadoran popular front. The 11 February 1983 WV reprinted a photo from the FDR/FMLN Information Bulletin of a 3 May 1981 Spartacist demonstration featuring the flag of the FMLN. In an article entitled “FMLN Flag: Who Fooled Who?” (*ET Bulletin* No. 1, p11) we contrasted this with “the example of Cannon and the revolutionary SWP of the 1930s in their attitude to the popular front in the Spanish Civil War” when they sided militarily with the Republicans but refused to politically support, or march under the banner, of the popular front.

We call on the IG and SL to renounce this error and reaffirm Trotsky’s “simple but absolutely irrevocable principle” that “a proletarian revolutionist, cannot present himself before the working class with two banners.”

1982: Yuri Andropov Brigade

In 1982 a contingent of SL members participating in an anti-Klan rally in Washington DC were identified in WV as “the Yuri Andropov Brigade.” At that time Andropov was at the pinnacle of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy; in 1956 he had been “effectively the Soviet overlord in Hungary” and oversaw the crushing of the Hungarian workers’ political revolution (an event which was critical in propelling James Robertson, Shane Mage and Tim Wohlforth out of Shachtman’s Third Camp). When Andropov died in 1984 WV featured a black-bordered death notice for him on its front page.

We engaged in a series of sharp polemical exchanges with

the SL on this issue which are reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1, “Only Trotskyism Can Defend the Gains of October.”

1983: KAL 007 flinch

In September 1983 the Soviet Air Force downed Korean Air Lines Flight 007 as it flew over sensitive military installations. The SL commented that, “If the government of the Soviet Union knew that the intruding aircraft was in fact a commercial passenger plane,” then, “despite the potential military damage of such an apparent spying mission,” shooting it down “would have been worse than a barbaric atrocity” (emphasis added). We characterized this as “a textbook example of flinching on the Russian question,” and asserted:

“Trotskyists have a different attitude. 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.”

—“Only Trotskyism Can Defend the Gains of October.”

In the introduction to *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1, we observed:

“What unites the KAL flinch with the ‘Yuri Andropov Brigade’ is an underlying pessimism about the historic possibilities of building a viable revolutionary tendency. The KAL 007 flinch is just the flip-side of the Andropov sycophancy—both are symptomatic of the political degeneration of the international Spartacist tendency from Trotskyist orthodoxy to political banditry.”

1983: Saving the US Marines

When Hezbollah/Islamic Jihad truck bombers blew up the barracks of the US Marines in Beirut in October 1983 the SL leadership called for saving the survivors. *Workers Vanguard* ran a headline on its front page proclaiming “Marines Out of Lebanon, Now, Alive!”

We had a very different attitude:

“After weeks of U.S. Navy warships pounding defenseless Muslim villagers, while the ‘peace-keeping’ Marines launched increasingly aggressive attacks on Muslim militiamen, a few hundred of these professional killers were given a one-way ticket to hell. We say: Good riddance! Two, Three, Many Defeats for Imperialism!”

—*Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 2, “A Loss of Nerve and a Loss of Will”, 12 November 1983

WV offered the following justification for the SL’s slogan:

“‘Marines out of Lebanon, now, alive!’ evokes the widespread antigovernment outrage felt by the American masses at Reagan’s squandering of life

in the Lebanon ‘quagmire,’ reviving memories of Vietnam.”

We responded:

“It both saddens and sickens us to read this social-patriotic crap in the paper which for over a decade has been the world’s leading exponent of revolutionary Marxism. We say that every lifer ‘squandered’ in Lebanon is one less who will be wading ashore in the upcoming Battle of Managua. Two, Three, Many ‘Quagmires’ for Imperialism!”

We reprinted the entire series of polemics on this issue as *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 2. The IG, for its own reasons, chose not to repudiate the “Marines Alive” position after leaving the SL. In a July 1998 letter to the Albany-based Marxist Educational Group, Jan Norden wrote: “contrary to the assertion in your 4 June letter, the IG does not reject the [Marines Alive] slogan in *WV*.” (Reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 6).

1986: Challenger ‘tragedy’

When the US space shuttle *Challenger* accidentally blew up in 1986 at the start of a mission to deploy spy satellites against the Soviet Union, *WV* cravenly intoned:

“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

We observed that those who feel no more sympathy for impoverished Salvadoran refugees from right-wing terror than for the professional imperialist military cadres aboard the *Challenger* have no claim to be revolutionaries (see: “No Disaster for the Working Class—*Challenger*’s Major Malfunction”).

The *WV* article explicitly linked the solicitude for the *Challenger* Star Warriors to the earlier dives on KAL 007 and the Beirut bombing:

“Those who died [aboard *Challenger*] were the victims of the U.S. imperialist anti-Soviet war drive, like the 200-plus dead Marines in Beirut or the passengers on the KAL 007 spy plane.”

The passengers and crew of KAL 007, like the impoverished Salvadoran refugees in Washington, were innocent victims of US imperialism. But the Reaganite military cadres aboard the *Challenger* like the imperialist enforcers in the Marine barracks in Lebanon belong in a different category. The SL’s cowardly rationalizations for attempting to avoid the wrath of the American ruling class in the 1980s contrasted starkly with its previous record of twenty years of intransigent opposition to American imperialism.

The SL originated as the Revolutionary Tendency within the rightward moving Socialist Workers Party in the early 1960s. In its first issue, which appeared a few months after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *Spartacist* observed:

“The acid test of any organization presenting itself as socialist takes place in periods of revolutionary opportunity or crisis. All such organizations were tested in their ability to maintain their principled positions at the time of the Kennedy assassination.”

Kennedy’s assassination was a crisis for the American ruling class in 1963; two decades later the devastating blow landed

against the US expeditionary force in Lebanon posed a different sort of crisis. In the interim the SL’s “ability to maintain their principled positions” had shrivelled. The February 1964 *Spartacist* approvingly quoted Gerry Healy’s declaration that “Marxists express no sympathy whatsoever over Kennedy’s death.” Healy’s remark was in response to Farrell Dobbs’ cringing expression of “deepest sympathy to Mrs. Kennedy,” words which *Spartacist* aptly characterized “not those of a revolutionary Socialist, but rather of Social Democrats and bourgeois liberals.” The same is true of “Trotskyists” who equate the tragic deaths of innocent civilians with losses of imperialist military personnel (whether through the spontaneous abortion of spy satellites or neo-colonial military resistance).

1987, 1990, 2002: Slander is not a revolutionary weapon

In his recent correspondence with the SL leadership, comrade Norden rightly objected to *WV*’s Stalinist-style “provocateur-baiting” of a leading IGer in October 2002:

“unable to politically answer criticisms raised by our comrades, the repulsive strutting demagogue and provocateur Negrete has taken to demonstrably pulling off his glasses, as if looking for a fight.”

—*Workers Vanguard* No. 789, 18 October 2002

This unprincipled smear should be formally retracted by the SL—as should the equivalent slanders levelled against the Bolshevik Tendency during Norden’s tenure as *WV* editor, including the following two examples:

“The whole tone of the BT recalls nothing so much as the insinuating style associated with the FBI’s infamous COINTELPRO.”

—*Workers Vanguard* No. 428, 15 May 1987

“As for the BT’s own political positions, besides hatred of the Soviet Union, these highly dubious provocateurs 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.”

—“Trotskyism, What It Isn’t and What It Is!”, 1990

We regard the Revolutionary Tendency of the SWP and its successor, the Spartacist League/U.S. of the 1960s and 70s, as the sole legitimate claimant to the political legacy of Trotsky’s Fourth International which in turn was alone in carrying forward the program of the Communist International under Lenin. In 1996, shortly after it was driven out of the SL, we sought to engage the IG in a discussion of the history of the political degeneration of the Spartacist tendency (<https://direct.bolsheviktendency.org/IG-letter-1996>). More recently we engaged in a discussion with a former leading cadre who has drawn what we consider to be the wrong lessons from this experience (direct.bolsheviktendency.org/on-revolutionary-continuity).

We look forward to comments and criticisms (as well as expressions of agreement) from all those attending today’s event.

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