

# Introduction

by Luma Nichol

*Permanent revolution today takes aim at the capitalist state, its institutions, and the vast interlocking system of human and social relations that form the matrix of world bourgeois oppression. It recognizes the proletariat as the motor force of world economy and the strategic spearhead of international revolution. And it bases itself on the **mutual interdependence** of the proletarian struggle and all other liberation movements.*

—Murry Weiss\*

**A**n anyone reaching the conclusion that the future of Mother Earth and her inhabitants depends on a total overhaul of the current system will ask: “How do we change the world? And what’s a better way to operate?” Permanent revolution, both the book and the theory, answers these questions with a thorough historical analysis of the dynamics of revolution, an analysis that has stood the test of time.

The concept of permanent revolution was developed by Leon Trotsky, who used it to foresee key elements of the world’s first successful overturn of capitalism, the Russian Revolution of 1917, in which he was a central leader. Today the axioms of his theory still hold true: Every fight to end poverty, increase human rights or achieve national liberation requires the leadership of the working class and socialism in order to have lasting success.

Permanent revolution is the expression of humanity’s unceasing quest for justice, which simmers and erupts on every

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\* *Murry Weiss on Women’s Emancipation and the Future of the Fourth International* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2006), 33.

continent. Poor and working people are in revolt whether it's women in Iceland banging pans to demand economic aid for people, not banks; or indigenous Bolivians erecting roadblocks to prevent the privatization of water; or immigrants in the U.S. marching en masse on May Day; or a general strike paralyzing the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe.

At the core of many of these struggles are women, proving Trotsky's maxim that the most oppressed will rise to become the backbone of resistance. Women, indigenous people, queers, immigrants, oppressed races and nationalities—these are the sparkplugs of workingclass revolt in the 21st century.

This edition of *The Permanent Revolution* is published by Red Letter Press on behalf of the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP), a Trotskyist feminist party that upholds the principle of permanent revolution—and has expanded the theory's scope with the recognition that the *leadership* of women, who occupy the lowest rung of every segment of society, is critical to revolution in this era.

FSP believes *The Permanent Revolution* is an essential theoretical handbook for 21st century revolutionaries. Unfortunately, however, many activists today are unaware of this work. It was deliberately buried and distorted by Joseph Stalin, whose police state regime terrorized the USSR for much of the last century, and by his disciples in the worldwide Communist movement. Further, the concept has been abandoned by some groups with Trotskyist roots who have elevated popularity over revolutionary principle. Most notably, the Socialist Workers Party, once the U.S. standard-bearer for Trotskyism, has discarded permanent revolution and ceased publication of the book. In addition, the International Socialist Organization carried a debate in their magazine in 2006 that questioned the relevance of the notion—without ever drawing a conclusion on this keynote political principle of Trotskyism.

Sadly, ignorance of Trotsky's theory is holding back move-

ments all over the world, leaving aspiring revolutionaries to relive the fatal approach of seeking a kinder, gentler capitalism—a motif in the anti-globalism struggle, in Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution, and elsewhere.

The current worldwide economic system, where wealth and power are in the hands of the few who own finance capital and big business, is inherently unfair. Every aspect of life, from personal relations to the ecosystem, suffers from capitalism's competitive drive to increase profits. Clearly, a new economy is needed where productive forces are owned socially by the mass of society, where the workingclass majority controls industry and makes goods and services available to all. That system is socialism.

Permanent revolution is the key to unlock that future. Its scientific, Marxist analysis of societal tectonics examines the clash of classes, and recognizes that their seismic shifts are connected across continents. Trotsky's theory is a study of those hot spots from which new societies emerge. As such, it is an indispensable guide to modern revolutionaries.

### Key elements of the theory

The stellar political organizer and Marxist analyst Murry Weiss provided a concise summary of Trotsky's concept:

Permanent revolution is the process of worldwide, uninterrupted and unintermittible struggle of all oppressed people, led by the proletariat, for economic, social and political liberation.\*

Weiss identified three interrelated laws of social development that comprise Trotsky's theory.

First is the premise that the basic needs of workers (the proletariat) and the poor can only be met by overthrowing

\* *Murry Weiss on Women's Emancipation and the Future of the Fourth International* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2006), 32.

capitalism. Movements that spring up to fight for demands such as liberty, equality, land reform, voting rights, full employment, childcare, and healthcare must become transformed into movements for socialism when the bourgeois (capitalist) governments refuse to concede. As a result, the effort to gain increased rights under capitalism (“bourgeois democratic rights,” in Trotsky’s words) has to grow over into a struggle to overthrow capitalism and achieve socialism. The proletariat, mobilized in a revolutionary party, must lead the assault on capital because it is the only class with the unmitigated need to overthrow the private property system and the only class with the power to stop production by withdrawing its labor.

The second element of permanent revolution is that socialism must be international in character and scope in order to defeat world capitalism. Battles for national liberation and democratic rights in economically disadvantaged countries can only be won through a global sharing of the wealth and are dependent upon successful revolution in advanced nations.

The third aspect of the theory recognizes that the defeat of the profit system and the establishment of a workers’ state with a planned economy do not end the revolutionary process, but open it. Transformation proceeds through political clashes in the cultural, social and economic spheres until first socialism and then the classless society of communism are achieved.

As a member of the FSP at the close of his life in 1981, Murry Weiss drew on this latter aspect of the theory to explain how that period’s booming movements of women, people of color, and queers were signs of permanent revolution irrepressibly unfolding even under the thumb of capitalist rule.

The three principles of permanent revolution underlay the uprisings against capitalist globalization that exploded with the protests of the World Trade Organization in Seattle (1999) and Cancun (2003), and spread like wildfire throughout Latin

America, India, Asia, the Caribbean and elsewhere. The struggles for land and indigenous rights in underdeveloped nations became linked with Left-led worker resistance to “free trade” policies of privatization and austerity, as requests for local control of resources and rights of poor nations were forcibly denied by the world’s richest corporations. Societal conflicts generated by sexism and racism were central issues for the movement. And effigies of Uncle Sam were prominent targets, reflecting recognition of the primary U.S. role in imperialist domination and abuse. But the movement, though critical of capitalism, did not as a whole go beyond demands for “fair trade” under the profit system, a weakness that relegated it to limited success at best. The conscious embrace of permanent revolution would have given this international rebellion a goal and strategy that could have truly stopped imperialist depredation.

### **Marx: “Make the revolution permanent”**

Trotsky’s concept of permanent revolution is firmly grounded in the Marxist fundamental that human society advances through conflicts of classes.

Karl Marx and his collaborator and co-thinker Frederick Engels first raised the cry of “permanent revolution” after a series of anti-monarchical revolts swept Europe in 1848. All classes were in turmoil as capitalism struggled for ascendancy over the old feudal agrarian economy. In order to oust the royal dynasties and gain state power, the owners of new manufacturing enterprises (the bourgeoisie) needed the assistance of small tradesmen, workers, and peasants. But once the new capitalist rulers gained dominance, they were threatened by, and put a stop to, revolts for broader rights by their former allies. The rapidly developing urban petty bourgeoisie (a middle layer of “small bourgeois” traders and master craftsmen) had opposed feudal absolutism, and soon learned it had to defend its economic and political interests against the large capitalists

as well. The workers too opposed the old system, but had their own demands to make against both the large and small owners who exploited their labor. The peasants, a petty-bourgeois class that includes both prosperous small landowners and impoverished sharecroppers, also had particular interests that only intersected with the workers' needs at certain points.

Marx urged the workers to fight alongside the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie in opposing feudalism and the big capitalists, but to never give up their own independent demands and organizations. He warned that once in power, the capitalists and petty bourgeoisie would try to placate workers with a few reforms and attack them if they pushed for more. To achieve liberation, the working class would need to drive forward to socialist revolution. In the "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League" in 1850, Marx and Engels stated:

While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible...it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far—not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world—that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one.\*

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\* Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>.

In brief, the capitalists and petty bourgeoisie sought "bourgeois democracy"—freedom of the press, freedom of association, religious freedom, the right to vote—in order to empower themselves and overthrow the "divine right" of kings and the inherited privileges of feudal lords. But from that day to this, the bourgeoisie has only truly intended these valuable democratic rights for itself, while giving workers an illusion of choice in order to "hush up class antagonisms." To win true freedom, the working class must push ahead to achieve socialism on an international scale.

### **Permanent revolution and the Russian experience**

Fifty-five years after Marx and Engels raised the call to "make the revolution permanent" in Western Europe, Trotsky re-introduced the phrase in reference to underdeveloped nations, based on events in his homeland.

In 1905, the workers and peasants of Russia rebelled against the autocratic Czar, and Trotsky was in the thick of it. The uprising started in response to the massacre of unarmed demonstrators as they peacefully approached the palace with a petition for reforms. Furious workers then formed their own governing council, the Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies, and elected Trotsky to be its head. The Soviet was soon crushed and Trotsky arrested, but Russian socialists recognized this failed insurrection as an important dress rehearsal for the next stage of revolution.

The course of Russia's pending upheaval was hotly debated by Marxist radicals in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. Everyone agreed that the country's immediate revolutionary tasks were bourgeois-democratic in nature—overthrow of the Czar and aristocracy, land reform, freedom of the press, etc. But on the question of who would lead this effort, three views developed.

The Menshevik (meaning "minority") faction argued that

only industrialized Western Europe had the material conditions necessary to make a bid for socialism. Impoverished, agrarian Russia must first establish a bourgeois democracy, they said; therefore the proletariat must subordinate itself to the rule of capital until the conditions for socialist revolution matured. This two-stage approach was the prevailing view of Social Democratic parties in the Second International, the European association of socialist and labor parties. (Because of their increasingly non-revolutionary approach, which was exposed at the beginning of WWI, the terms Menshevik and Social Democrat would eventually become synonyms for reformists and compromisers.)

Both V.I. Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik (meaning “majority”) faction, and Trotsky, then an independent, pointed out the fallacy in the Mensheviks’ thinking. Russia had a weak bourgeoisie that would never stand up to the Czar. Capitalist enterprises were primarily foreign-owned and under the influence of the feudal aristocracy. Lenin and Trotsky railed against the class-collaborationist approach of the Mensheviks, knowing the Russian bourgeoisie would side with feudal lords in an anti-worker counterrevolution.

So what was the alternative?

Trotsky and Lenin looked to the proletariat as the motor force of rebellion. Russia’s industrial workers, albeit not a large class, were concentrated in the cities and chafing under abusive sweatshop conditions. Both leaders also identified agrarian reform as a central issue for Russia’s massive peasant class. But at this point in time, Trotsky and Lenin differed on how they saw the relationship between workers and peasants.

Lenin summarized his concept in the phrase the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.” Lenin foresaw peasants and workers collaborating against the Czarists, landowners and bourgeoisie and establishing a “dictatorship”—or class-rule government—of the worker and peasant majority

over the capitalist minority. Lenin thought the state would be “democratic,” i.e., resting on a capitalist economic structure. (Because the fight for democracy—for expanded rights for ordinary people—arose as one of the bourgeoisie’s progressive demands in its fight against feudalism, the term “democratic” and “democracy” were often used by Lenin, Trotsky and other socialists as synonyms for liberal forms of capitalism.)

But he left open the question of the nature of the revolutionary government—worker-run, peasant-run, or some form of alliance. He said experience would provide the answer to this question.

Trotsky also tackled this problem. His answer was contained in *Results and Prospects*, the first section of this book, written in part while in prison for his role in the 1905 revolution. Trotsky called for a “dictatorship of the proletariat, supported by the peasantry.” This formulation identified workers as the only class capable of confronting the powers-that-be and foresaw that their victory would usher in a socialist regime, something no country had yet attempted. Trotsky explained that the peasant petty bourgeoisie was too stratified in its interests and too geographically scattered to lead. The proletariat needed the backing of this huge oppressed class. However, Trotsky warned, the peasants’ petty-bourgeois class interests would ultimately conflict with those of the workers in the struggle against capitalism. He pointed out that peasants aspire to own their own land and employ wage-laborers. Workers, on the other hand, do not solve their problems by becoming bosses but by working collectively for their needs. Additionally, Trotsky said, a Russian workers’ state would have to turn for help to European socialist revolutions to survive.

The core of permanent revolution was thus formulated: In the modern age, the bourgeoisie can no longer play a progressive role—they are the oppressors; leadership of revolution devolves to the proletariat. A revolution may begin as bourgeois,

but will become transformed into a struggle against capitalism. Socialism can be victorious only if it grows over into international revolution.

Soon, these theories were tested in real life. On International Women's Day in 1917, female textile workers led Petrograd's workers into the streets and, with the help of peasant-soldiers, tossed the monarchy from its throne. Just as Trotsky had predicted, workers in alliance with peasants led the insurrection against feudalism and set capitalist forces in complete disarray.

Lenin quickly recognized this as the historic opportunity to push for socialism, a view in accord with Trotsky's perspectives. But rushing back from exile in April, he discovered that the Mensheviks had handed state power to the capitalists, and that the Bolsheviks were supporting this position! Lenin's famed April Theses urged the Bolsheviks to repudiate the bourgeois Provisional Government and call for establishment of a Soviet of Workers Deputies. Six months later, the Bolsheviks led the Russian workers in the world's first victorious socialist overturn. Permanent revolution had been proven in the field of battle.

Tragically, the European revolutions that Trotsky and Lenin were counting on for support never materialized. Instead, a phalanx of bourgeois nations attacked the fledgling workers' state, already reeling from the devastation of World War I. Rather than building socialism on a foundation of cultural advancement and plenty, the vast land was wracked by famine and civil war.

In circumstances of paucity, bureaucracies arise to police the allocation of scarce resources. In the Soviet Union, a privileged bureaucratic caste arose that undermined the new workers' democracy. Following Lenin's death in 1922, Joseph Stalin maneuvered his way to head the regime and set about creating a formidable bureaucracy and predatory police state.

To establish his rule, Stalin had to discredit Trotsky, the

respected, living voice of the Leninist tradition, who was spearheading a Left Opposition to the bureaucracy. Stalin also was determined to bury permanent revolution because its call for international revolution was the polar opposite of Stalin's desire to stabilize his ascension to power via harmonious relations with imperialist nations. With the help of Karl Radek, a former member of the Left Opposition, Stalinist propagandists recast the Russian Revolution as having been a two-stage affair, in which Trotsky and Lenin never resolved their differences.

Written in 1929, *The Permanent Revolution*, the second piece in this book, is Trotsky's answer to Radek. It defends Trotsky's record and the program of Marx and Lenin against the distortions of Stalinism.

### Critical strategy for colonial revolt

Trotsky's later elaboration of the theory also applies permanent revolution to the question of whether workers of a colonized country should look to their indigenous bourgeoisie as an ally in the struggle for national liberation. This was prompted by the then-recent crushing of a revolutionary attempt in China as a result of treacherous Stalinist policies.

Two main ideological distortions of Marxism underlay these policies.

First, Stalin had declared the fiction that socialism had been achieved in the USSR and produced the catchphrase "Socialism in one country." This flew in the face of the Marxist definition of socialism as a society in which a collective economy functions on an *international* scale, where wealth is shared equitably, where education and culture are accessible to all, where bigotry and misogyny are abolished, and where a workers' government rules with the utmost democratic participation of the proletariat and its allies. The Soviet Union had managed to retain its planned, collectivized economy, despite civil war, poverty and imperialist hostility. It was a workers' state, the

first step toward socialism. But its development toward socialism was thwarted by the Stalinist police state, which smashed workers' democracy and parasitically siphoned off the wealth created by the workers.

With the declaration of socialism in one country, Stalin turned away from the workers of the world and made defense of the USSR the guiding principle of foreign policy. Any radical movement, internal or external, that threatened the Soviet Union's "peaceful coexistence" with capitalist nations was decapitated. Loyalty to the Soviet bureaucracy and the USSR were deemed more important than international revolution.

Stalin's second assault on Marxism was used to justify this course. He took the two-stage theory of revolution down from the Menshevik shelf, dusted it off, and made the bald-faced lie that it had been the pattern for the Russian Revolution.

The bureaucracy reverted to the two-stage theory in order to calm the roiling waters of colonial revolt. With the authority of the Russian Revolution behind him, Stalin and his cohorts instructed subjugated peoples to fight for national liberation now and socialism later. China's revolution of 1925-27 was the first casualty of this policy.

China was a semi-colonial country with a drive for national independence and a militant workers' movement. Stalin put forth the view that the pressure of imperialism had diminished differences between China's four classes (the bourgeoisie, urban petty bourgeoisie, peasants and workers), who should unite under the bourgeoisie to defeat the colonial oppressors. Trotsky disagreed. Through a close examination of Chinese events, he saw that imperialism actually *heightened* divisions between Chinese capitalists and the mass of workers and peasants. He advised the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to agitate for workers' rights and support the battle for national emancipation, but never give up its independence.

Instead, the CCP followed Moscow's orders to dissolve

itself into the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang, the party of General Chiang Kai-shek. With the CCP out of the way, Chiang Kai-shek butchered thousands of Communists and workers in Shanghai, crushing the revolution. It would be 20 years before the millions of subjugated Chinese got another shot at freedom. (In 1949, Stalin again urged moderation, but he was defied, and the Chinese Revolution succeeded.)

In *The Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky draws the lessons from China's horrible 1927 defeat in order to guide insurgents in colonial countries. The bourgeoisie of colonized nations is too dependent on foreign capital, too involved in feudal land relationships, and too afraid of the masses to lead the struggle for independence and democratic rights for all. But the proletariat can exert an influence beyond its numbers, uniting behind them the urban poor and peasants. Though a struggle may initially focus on national liberation, it is propelled into a movement for socialism. The uprising begins in one country, but its victory is safeguarded only on an international level, as workers in the colonizing country solidarize with those rebelling in the colonized state.

These principles underlay the Chinese and Cuban revolutions and the valiant battles waged in the 1980s by the workers and peasants of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Central American workers fought to throw off U.S.-backed dictators and break up large estates to provide land to destitute *campesinos*. These efforts became Left-led wars against the likes of United Fruit Company and U.S.-funded *contra* forces. Native oligarchies, rather than defending independence, fomented bloody civil wars on behalf of their comfortable status quo and U.S. imperialism.

In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas took hold of the government, but were eventually undone by their adherence to Stalinist two-stageism. They refused to move beyond calling for a "mixed" economy blending capitalist and socialist features—a

mythical combination that is always a triumph for the profit system. Failure to promote a socialist program lost them the support of workers and peasants and invited sabotage by the bourgeoisie. Today, the former guerilla organizations of Central America are bourgeois electoral parties getting fat from the despised system they once wished to replace.

Without an understanding of permanent revolution, and lacking support from workers' revolts abroad, especially from the U.S., these audacious efforts could not slay the capitalist Goliath.

### Trotsky: "Turn to the woman worker!"

In *The Transitional Program*, written in 1938, Trotsky called on revolutionary parties to look for their staunchest adherents among women, youth and other sectors of the most-exploited workers. In his embrace of the fight for female equality, Trotsky was following in the footsteps of many other socialists from the earliest utopians to Marx, Engels and Lenin. (In addition to his other crimes, Stalin betrayed this proud legacy by rolling back the Russian Revolution's gains for women and by glorifying the so-called "revolutionary nuclear family.")

A generation later, Clara Fraser, a founder and key leader of the Freedom Socialist Party, emphasized the human liberation element of classic Marxism and Trotskyism in creating the synthesis of socialism and feminism that characterizes the FSP. She pointed out that feminism and other movements against discrimination bring women, people of color, queers, and the oppressed from all classes into the current of socialist agitation because the overthrow of capitalism is the only road to their emancipation. Women, being at the bottom of the working class of which they comprise 50 percent, lift the entire class. And women of color, she emphasized, are triply subjugated, on account of their sex, their class and their race. "They are situated directly in the vortex of the revolutionary tornado destined

to sweep away capitalism."\*

Socialist feminism was born among the explosive demands in the 1960s for civil rights, gay pride and women's liberation. To the bottom-line socialist pledge of *support* for the movements of the oppressed, socialist feminism adds the importance of the *leadership* of the most oppressed.

This new emphasis was greeted with delight by Murry Weiss, when he reconnected with Clara Fraser in 1976. Weiss was a lifelong revolutionary activist and educator who served as a national leader for 25 years in the Socialist Workers Party. His partner, Myra Tanner Weiss, was one of the SWP's forefront organizers and advocates for women. While heading the Los Angeles branch, the Weisses had trained Fraser when she first entered the Trotskyist movement. The Weisses and Fraser separately left the SWP when it took disastrously wrong positions and bureaucratically refused to allow dissidents a voice.

As an astute theoretician, Murry Weiss saw that the eruptions of social movements in the 1960s reflected the fact that bourgeois democracy's promises of fraternity and equality had been so long deferred that the cultural and social clashes Trotsky predicted *after* the proletarian seizure of power had now become a battering ram against the decrepit bourgeois state.

Weiss expanded permanent revolution to account for this new development. In the 1982 document "Permanent Revolution and Women's Emancipation," he stated:

Permanent revolution and the Trotskyist dictum that within its framework the *most oppressed* would rise from the depths to become the backbone of workers' and colonial struggles, provides the key to understanding the contours and dynamics of world revolution in our era.

An entire new generation of Marxists is awakening to the

\* Clara Fraser, *Revolution, She Wrote* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 1998), 90.

fact that permanent revolution is inextricably linked to the question of women's liberation.\*

Fraser saw the importance of this expanded understanding of permanent revolution. In an International Women's Day speech in 1990, she underscored the connection:

Permanent revolution is linked closely to women's liberation and women's liberation is central, pivotal, to modern politics. And why shouldn't it be? It's the oldest, the deepest, the most passionate unresolved problem of the majority of the human race. It is the unfinished struggle against the pre-historic crime of male supremacy. Women will have to free the world. And they will have to free themselves. The two things go hand in hand.\*\*

While Fraser and Weiss, as socialist feminists, gravitated to the most oppressed layers of the working class, their former organization, the SWP, failed this test. It eventually renounced permanent revolution and the Trotskyist politics it had pioneered in the U.S. Its history provides an object-lesson in the problem of orienting to the most privileged layers of labor.

Founded in the 1920s, the SWP was renowned for its brilliant leadership in hard-fought strikes, its courageous opposition to World War II and defiance of political persecution, and for numerous civil rights, electoral, and anti-fascist campaigns. A democratic centralist party in the Leninist tradition, the SWP was schooled in internationalism and steeped in Marxist theory.

But the party grew isolated when McCarthy Era witch hunts drove the most militant ranks from the house of labor, to the benefit of the conservative labor bureaucracy. As the

\* *Murry Weiss on Women's Emancipation and the Future of the Fourth International* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2006), 39.

\*\*Clara Fraser, *Revolution, She Wrote* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 1998), 350.

political landscape changed, the SWP refused to see that the class struggle in the 1960s and '70s was most alive in the civil rights and women's movements. Instead, the party viewed the labor movement as the only springboard for the American revolution and kept its priority on privileged white male workers. Its attitude toward women, student activists, people of color, and gays was single-issue, superficial, manipulative, and opportunist. Orienting to the aristocracy of labor rather than the most oppressed workers eroded the SWP's faith in the possibility of U.S. revolution. The final blow came with its repudiation of permanent revolution in the 1980s and its pull-out from the major coordinating body of world Trotskyist parties, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. The SWP is now chiefly a publishing house, electoral machine and educational group.

The consequences of refusing to recognize permanent revolution in theory and in life could not be clearer.

### **An essential guide for today**

Failure to adopt the strategy of permanent revolution has kept international revolt in a holding pattern for decades.

As early as 1938, Trotsky observed wryly, "All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not 'ripened' for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only 'ripened'; they have begun to get somewhat rotten."\*

How is it possible that dilapidated capitalism survived into the new millennium? What tasks face the new generation of radicals seeking to bring it down once and for all?

One social mechanism that has derailed revolutionary momentum is a political layer of society whose function is to mute confrontation between capital and labor. In *The History*

\* Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 112.

of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky described this strata—the middle caste—as the “petty bourgeois partition-wall between the revolutionary masses and the capitalist bourgeoisie.”\* The middle caste is recognizable today as the union bureaucrats, conservative aristocrats of labor, reformist political leaders, non-profit professionals, and Stalinists and other “progressives” who promote class detente with the Democratic Party. This powerful social layer does everything to maintain harmony between exploiters and exploited, everywhere from international politics to the shop floor. It channels radical impulses into reformist dormancy. But for its constant misdirection and betrayal, world revolution would have long since triumphed.

The antidote to the middle caste is radical leadership—mobilized in the form of vanguard parties. Lenin’s concept of the vanguard party enabled the Russian workers to seize power. Lately, though, this model has been much maligned, wrongly blamed for Stalinism’s despotic bureaucracy and rejected in favor of decentralized, anti-leadership forms of organization. This dangerous trend ignores the fact that, in order to defeat the colossus of Wall Street and the Pentagon, workers need a combat-ready party of their own, a democratic organization of professional revolutionaries who are disciplined, centralized, trained in theory and experienced in action. The birth of a new society urgently needs the accumulated knowledge and skill of a trained political midwife; in fact, its very life may depend on her. This is the function of a vanguard party.

Nowhere is the construction of a vanguard party as critical as in the U.S.A., the economic, political, and military center of the capitalist universe. The U.S. not only sucks the wealth out of less-developed countries, it also stands ready to crush revolutions wherever they break out. In accord with permanent

\* Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Sphere Books, 1967), Vol. I, 167.

revolution’s recognition that there are no national answers to the abuses of global capital, the international workers’ movement cannot fully succeed until the triumph of the U.S. revolution. For this task, a disciplined Bolshevik party is absolutely necessary.

The history of failed rebellions in the century since the Russian Revolution reflects the glaring truth that there is no solution short of socialism; halfway measures do not work. Capitalist reform, mixed economy experiments, “third way” attempts, popular fronts that put the liberals in charge: all shackle the working class to the misery of the profit system and wage slavery.

In South Africa, the awe-inspiring anti-apartheid movement, with women as its backbone, was able to free Nelson Mandela and eradicate the Bantustans. But the Stalinist-led African National Congress pulled short at the gateway to socialism. Now at the head of a capitalist state, the ANC has proven incapable of eradicating poverty, racism, workers’ oppression or violence against women.

Sandino’s daughters, the brave women of Nicaragua who fought for freedom alongside their Sandinista brothers, are now battling their ex-comrades’ ban on abortion in that former bastion of progress. Here, as always, political retreat is accompanied by a fallback on women’s rights.

In Brazil, President Lula da Silva, a past union firebrand, promised to reduce poverty and redistribute land to the peasants. His election changed all that. The Workers Party, which won broad support for its anti-imperialist platform, has devolved into a mediator for corporate globalism, dashing the dreams of the poor and workers.

The Venezuelan people may soon suffer the same fate. President Hugo Chávez periodically extols Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution. But his Bolivarian revolution is at odds with his words. It touts revolution in stages and

reform of capitalism, which accounts for why Chávez has not moved to broadly nationalize industry or redistribute land to poor peasants.

With revenues from oil profits, Chávez has instituted important reforms that will improve the lives of women, who are 70 percent of the poor, and has recognized the rights of indigenous people. But as the price of oil drops, funds for social programs are jeopardized. Venezuela's transformation depends on developing a revolutionary workers' party that respects the leadership of the most oppressed and fights for the principles of permanent revolution.

Encouragingly, as the downtrodden search for a way forward, permanent revolution is experiencing a revival of interest. New editions of this book were recently published in Indonesia and India.

In the past decade, the audacious young Cuban revolutionary Celia Hart (who died tragically in 2008) introduced Trotsky's ideas to a generation of Cubanos previously schooled in Stalinism. She said that learning about permanent revolution gave her hope for the future. Arguing that "an isolated revolutionary Cuba cannot survive,"\* she advocated the necessity for socialist revolution throughout Latin America.

This need is becoming glaring everywhere. With the global economic crisis, the capitalist golden egg has cracked, and the financial pundits don't know how to put it back together again. Wall Street's meltdown has set off international economic free fall. Millions are losing their jobs, their homes, their businesses, their pensions—and their tolerance for the viciously insane profit system.

Capitalism is running out of fixes. The measures it has used in the past to climb out of cyclical slowdowns—wars and mega-

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\* Hans-Gerd Öfinger, "Cuba, Venezuela, Latin America: Is the revolutionary spark spreading? Interview with Celia Hart," 15 August 2004, <http://www.marxist.com/celia-hart-revolution150804.htm>.

trillion dollar budget deficits—are tapped out. And it can no longer afford the reforms it has previously used to quiet revolt.

The big bourgeoisie has one last desperate measure in its arsenal: fascism, which preserves profit by nationalizing banks and industry under *capitalist* control. Fascists prey on fear, using scapegoating and violence to mobilize a petty-bourgeois mass movement to break up workers' organizations and destroy unions and civil liberties. But fascism cannot come to power without first defeating the working class. Its threat is real, although not yet immediate. We'll have our chance to win socialism first. It is an accomplishment well worth the effort and sacrifice.

In 1953, during the darkest days of anti-Red hysteria, U.S. Trotskyism's founder, James P. Cannon, gave a series of lectures on the prospects for socialism in the U.S. His closing words still have the power to inspire:

Under socialism, all will share in the benefits of abundance, not merely a few at the top. All the people will have time and be secure for an ever higher development. All will be artists. All will be workers and students, builders and creators. All will be free and equal. Human solidarity will encircle the globe and conquer it...

We cannot be citizens of the socialist future, except by anticipation. But it is precisely this anticipation, this vision of the future, that fits us for our role as soldiers of the revolution, soldiers of the liberation war of humanity. And that, I think is the highest privilege today...the cause for which we fight has social evolution on its side and is therefore invincible. It will conquer and bring all mankind a new day.\*

As the conflict between labor and capital grows starker, the downtrodden of the earth have an unprecedented opportunity.

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\* James P. Cannon, *American's Road to Socialism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), 123-124.

## INTRODUCTION

By uniting in solidarity across borders, by promoting the leadership of the most oppressed, by building Trotskyist parties schooled in the art of principled politics—that is by applying the theory of permanent revolution—the international working class can launch a new era for humanity.