



Spartacist Letters

A Journal of Polemic and Exchange



Debates with the International Bolshevik Tendency on the National Question

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Table of Contents

Editorial Note.....	4
Debates with the IBT on the National Question	
Quebec.....	5
Quebec: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question, IBT Presentation by Josh Decker.....	5
A Leninist Approach to the Quebec National Question, ICL Presentation by G. Perrault.....	11
Palestine	14
Why Palestinian Liberation Is a Lever for Social Revolution, ICL Presentation by Mansa Kaur.....	14
Palestine: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question, IBT Presentation by Josh Decker.....	17
Ireland.....	22
Ireland: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question, IBT Presentation by Barbara Dorn	22
Theses on Ireland: A Centrist Capitulation to British Imperialism, ICL Presentation by G. Perrault.....	26
South Africa.....	30
What Is the Task of Trotskyists in South Africa?, ICL Presentation by Mansa Kaur.....	30
South Africa: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question, IBT Presentation by Barbara Dorn	34

Editorial Note

This edition of *Spartacist Letters* consists of presentations on the national question given by the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist) and the International Bolshevik Tendency during a day of discussion between representatives of each organization in London in July 2025. The agreed format was each group presenting on the questions of Quebec, Palestine, Ireland and South Africa, with debate following the presentations on each topic.

— 14 August 2025

Quebec

Quebec: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question

IBT presentation by Josh Decker

Let us start with what we agree on. Quebec is a nation, and like all nations it has the democratic right to self-determination. That means it has the right to leave Canada and form its own independent state. We oppose any use of force by the Canadian state to retain Quebec, and it would in fact be the duty of Marxists to militarily defend Quebec were Ottawa to use violence to keep it. We oppose any national privilege for English Canadians inside or outside Quebec, and we denounce any manifestation of Anglo chauvinism within the English-Canadian working class.

Our similarities would seem to end there. The basic difference is encapsulated in the following passage from your 2017 article, "[The Struggle Against the Chauvinist Hydra](#)":

“The only consistently Marxist position was to support independence for Quebec from the moment it was oppressed by another nation, that is, starting with the conquest of 1759. Calling for the independence of Quebec as of 1995 marked a qualitative improvement of our program on the national question. Nevertheless, this line change had a centrist character *since it remained within the framework of Anglo-chauvinism.*”

Your claim that Quebec should have been independent “starting with the conquest of 1759” because “it was oppressed by another nation” reflects a retreat not only from Leninism but from any materialist understanding of the national question. Whether the francophone Catholic *seigneurs* and their tenant farmers on the banks of the St. Lawrence should have been independent from an anglophone Protestant mercantile empire in the mid 18th century is a moral question, not a question of proletarian class strategy. Your formula is simple: since Quebec was oppressed, it should have become independent. Where is the class struggle? What does this have to do with the proletariat and its fight for socialism? These are questions that are outside your framework.

What is the point of saying that Quebec should have been independent since (or even before) its inception as a nation? There is no question that the British Empire dominated Quebec and tried to assimilate francophones, and there is no question that the Québécois were oppressed within Confederation from the beginning. Even today, despite the growth of the French-speaking bourgeoisie in Quebec and its increasing integration with Anglo capital, Ottawa continues to formally subjugate Quebec through the Clarity Act, denying Quebec’s right to separate with a simple democratic majority. Leninists oppose forced assimilation and national oppression and are for equal democratic rights for both nations, since any other policy would hamper the development of a revolutionary workers’ party.

So what *is* the point of your position that Quebec, abstracted from any consideration of the class struggle, should be independent? The answer can only be that you see a positive historical development in the growth and maintenance of the Quebec nation and an independent Quebec state. In other words, your position is Quebec nationalist. It is anti-Leninist. We will explain why.

Let’s start with the fact that you, unlike Lenin, are opposed to the voluntary assimilation of nations, specifically Quebec and the English-speaking nations of Canada and the United States. In the 2017 “Hydra” document, you write:

“The article in *WV* [*Workers Vanguard*] Nos. 123 and 125 [by Joseph Seymour] undermines Lenin’s principled polemics against Luxemburg, claiming falsely that like Luxemburg ‘he was opposed to federalism, and favored limited regional autonomy for minority nations *in a unitary state*’ (our emphasis). Further, the article

advocates the assimilation of the oppressed nations by the oppressors under imperialist capitalism: ‘While championing the equality of languages and related democratic rights, we work for the gradual, organic assimilation of the various nationalities making up the working class.’”

Seymour’s article, [“The National Question in the Marxist Movement, 1848–1914,”](#) falsifies nothing about Lenin’s position. You assert that the revolutionary iSt advocated “the assimilation of the oppressed nations by the oppressors under imperialist capitalism,” i.e., which is to suggest *forced* assimilation, but the quote you cite does not say that. It says the Leninist position is “for the gradual, organic assimilation of the various nationalities making up the working class,” i.e., whatever new national identity emerges from the intermingling and increased interaction of working-class people from different nations. You don’t like this because you want to maintain the distinct identity of a French-speaking Quebec nation even in the *absence* of forced assimilation by the Anglo-dominated Canadian state. This puts you at odds with Lenin, who wrote:

“The proletariat cannot support any consecration of nationalism; on the contrary, it supports everything that helps to obliterate national distinctions and remove national barriers; it supports everything that makes the ties between nationalities closer and closer, or tends to merge nations. To act differently means siding with reactionary nationalist philistinism.”

—[“Critical Remarks on the National Question”](#) (1913)

Lenin continued:

“Whoever does not recognise and champion the equality of nations and languages, and does not fight against all national oppression or inequality, is not a Marxist; he is not even a democrat. That is beyond doubt. But it is also beyond doubt that the pseudo-Marxist who heaps abuse upon a Marxist of another nation for being an ‘assimilator’ is simply a nationalist philistine....

“No one unobsessed by nationalist prejudices can fail to perceive that this process of assimilation of nations by capitalism means the greatest historical progress, the break down of hidebound national conservatism in the various backwoods, especially in backward countries like Russia.” [Ibid]

Lenin argued for a consistently democratic policy towards nations, a policy that would remove state compulsion and let economic realities assert themselves on the development of nations, which could include their assimilation:

“The requirements of economic exchange will themselves decide which language of the given country it is to the advantage of the majority to know in the interests of commercial relations. This decision will be all the firmer because it is adopted voluntarily by a population of various nationalities, and its adoption will be the more rapid and extensive the more consistent the democracy and, as a consequence of it, the more rapid the development of capitalism.” [Ibid]

Marxists oppose the forced assimilation of national minorities and the denial of their right to form their own states. Outside the framework of force, we favor the voluntary assimilation of nations. It seems you do not, as you have denounced the iSt’s simple advocacy of “the gradual, organic assimilation of the various nationalities making up the working class.” Lenin favored voluntary assimilation and the adoption of “the international culture of democracy and of the world working-class movement.” He spoke clearly of “the benefits to be gained from the intercourse, amalgamation and assimilation of the proletariat of the two nations” (in this case, he was talking about Great Russians and Ukrainians).

You do not attempt to refute Lenin but instead to falsely claim his authority. The mental gymnastics you must engage in are astounding. Take, for instance, your support for Quebec’s

language laws. In the “Hydra” document, you write:

“We fight for the independence of Quebec. Absent independence, our organization should have supported the language laws in Quebec (as in Catalonia, where the situation is qualitatively similar), because they constitute defensive measures essential to the very existence of the oppressed nation. Despite it having a quality of compromise vis-à-vis the fight for independence, we should have supported this partial expression of self-determination, in defense of the French language in Quebec. The struggle against privileges for the English language in Quebec is an extension of Lenin’s struggle for the equality of languages.”

The right to self-determination means the right to form a separate state. Lenin argued that “the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state.” He added that “it would be wrong to interpret the right to self-determination as meaning anything but the right to existence as a separate state” (“The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” 1914). You invent the category of nationalist “defensive measures” as a “partial expression of self-determination.”

Going back at least to the Official Languages Act of 1969, the French language has not been threatened by any form of state compulsion, despite your convoluted argument that official bilingualism represents the forced assimilation of francophones:

“When the Canadian bourgeoisie imposes bilingualism, it does not seek to ‘save’ French and defend the equality of languages (as it was presented in *Spartacist Canada*); rather, it is forcing the English language on French speakers. With this policy, Francophones are expected to speak English, but for Anglophones bilingualism stops at ‘pickle jars.’ We oppose ‘official’ bilingualism in Quebec, which is a tool for the forcible assimilation of the Quebec nation.” [“Hydra” document]

Ottawa is not “forcing the English language on French speakers” by offering government services in both languages or requiring English and French on food packaging. For more than half a century, the threats to the survival of the French language in North America have come from the numerical and economic preponderance of anglophones and the use of English as a global *lingua franca*.

Bill 101 sought to *promote* the use of French *above* English (and other languages, including those spoken by Indigenous people off-reserve) by making “French the language of Government and the Law, as well as the normal and everyday language of work, instruction, communication, commerce and business.” For instance, immigrants who settle in Quebec must put their children in French-language schools and are denied the possibility of enrolling them in English-language schools. This is not “an extension of Lenin’s struggle for the equality of languages” but a total contradiction of it.

You refer to the *historic* state suppression of French within Quebec to justify your shameful policy of supporting the *forced assimilation* of non-francophone immigrants to Quebec:

“The French-English division of Quebec’s school system sparked justified struggles in defense of the French language in the 1960s and 1970s. Due to the deplorable status of the French language, immigrants preferred to have their children educated in the privileged language, English, in order to give them a better shot at upward social mobility. The language of education was the most controversial question at the time, because French speakers understood that they would become a minority in their own province if immigrants did not integrate into French-speaking society. The defense of an education system permitting immigrants ‘free choice’ of English or French as the language of education for their children is, in Quebec, a defense of the privileged language: English.”

You support the *law* preventing “free choice” of immigrants to school their children in a language other than French. Your reason, dressed up as opposition to oppression (!), is that you “are in favor of immigrants in Quebec integrating through learning the French language,” i.e., assimilating. You *admit* that you favor the forced assimilation of immigrants, but you think this is acceptable because they do not constitute a nation and because Quebec is oppressed:

“Immigrants who leave their country to settle permanently in a more advanced country generally accept the reality of assimilating into that society, if they are allowed. The nature of this population is not the same as an oppressed nation in a multinational state, because immigrants do not constitute a nation. Oppressed nations striving to exist as distinct nations struggle *against* assimilation. This is the framework in which we must apply the Leninist program for the equality of languages.”

What non-francophone immigrants to Quebec are not “allowed” to do is send their children to non-French schools. In other words, their acceptance of “the reality of assimilating into” the Québécois nation is not voluntary but *forced*. Leninists favor the right of the inhabitants of Quebec or any area (whether or not they are part of one of the recognized nations) to education either in the dominant language or in another language, provided there are enough people choosing it to make it feasible. And the fact that the government of an oppressed nation is doing the forced assimilation does not make it a legitimate (or “partial”) expression of that nation’s right to self-determination.

In “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” Lenin wrote:

“Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, we are always, in every case, and more strongly than anyone else, in favour, for we are the staunchest and the most consistent enemies of oppression. But insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stands for its own bourgeois nationalism, we stand against. We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation.”

In “Critical Remarks on the National Question,” he wrote:

“The national programme of working-class democracy is: absolutely no privileges for any one nation or any one language; the solution of the problem of the political self-determination of nations, that is, their separation as states by completely free, democratic methods.”

For Lenin, privileging “one language” is not part of the fight against oppression or the struggle for self-determination. As the 1974 *WV* article that you repudiate (and which cites Lenin clearly and accurately) notes:

“Did Lenin make an exception here for oppressed nations, in the sense of implying that their nationalism was progressive, that *their* languages (but not those of oppressor nations) should have privileges, etc.? Not at all. In fact, he was arguing precisely *against* Ukrainian ‘nationalist-socialists’ and Jewish Bundists who were fighting assimilation in the Russian empire.”

In Quebec, Marxists oppose all barriers to French in public life and support expanded French education, including making it easy for immigrants to access free, quality French-language instruction—but we also see no justification for opposing bilingualism or multilingualism in workplaces or education, making life harder for Québécois workers looking for jobs in other provinces or throwing up needless barriers to anglophone and allophone workers (including immigrants) in Quebec.

Your support for Quebec’s language laws is not Leninist. It represents your desire to foster the development of a French-speaking, Québécois “national culture” even in the absence of state

coercion from Ottawa. Here is what Lenin had to say about your approach: “Combat all national oppression? Yes, of course! Fight *for* any kind of national development, *for* ‘national culture’ in general?—Of course not” (“Critical Remarks on the National Question”).

Consider this question and see if you hesitate to answer it: If Quebec were to separate, i.e., exercise its right to self-determination, would you, in that context, continue to support its language laws? An independent Quebec would not be subject to Ottawa’s bilingual policies or any other law, though it would still be subject to the economic pressures towards assimilation, which Lenin favored. If you are not promoting the development of Quebec “national culture,” then you should at least be opposed to Law 101 in an *independent* Quebec.

Your general support for Quebec “national culture” leads you to elevate the independence of Quebec above the needs of the class struggle, though you falsely assert that the struggle for Quebec independence will somehow spark the class struggle. For you, defense of an oppressed nation’s right to self-determination requires *advocating* its independence, instead of making a “conjunctural” assessment as to whether or not advocating independence advances the class struggle (although it seems you do not apply this consistently, e.g., Scotland).

Let us demonstrate Lenin’s “conjunctural” approach to the national question:

“The Social-Democrats will always combat every attempt to influence national self-determination from without by violence or by any injustice. However, our unreserved recognition of the struggle for freedom of self-determination does not in any way commit us to supporting every demand for national self-determination. As the party of the proletariat, the Social-Democratic Party considers it to be its positive and principal task to further the self-determination of the proletariat in each nationality rather than that of peoples or nations. We must always and unreservedly work for the very closest unity of the proletariat of all nationalities, and it is only in isolated and exceptional cases that we can advance and actively support demands conducive to the establishment of a new class state or to the substitution of a looser federal unity, etc., for the complete political unity of a state.”

—[“The National Question in Our Programme,”](#) July 1903

A decade later, Lenin expressed the same view:

“The Social-Democratic Party’s recognition of the right of all nationalities to self-determination most certainly does not mean that Social-Democrats reject an independent appraisal of the advisability of the state secession of any nation in each separate case.”

—[“Theses on the National Question,”](#) June 1913

A year later, the same thing:

“The right of nations to self-determination (i.e., the constitutional guarantee of an absolutely free and democratic method of deciding the question of secession) must under no circumstances be confused with the expediency of a given nation’s secession.”

—[“Resolutions of the Summer, 1913, Joint Conference of the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P. and Party Officials,”](#) September 1913

Your “non-conjunctural,” strategic, eternal, time-travelling call for Quebec independence has nothing to do with Leninism, which is concerned *only* with advancing the class struggle for socialist revolution.

You claim that you support Quebec independence because it is a “motor force” for socialist revolution, but the reality is that you view Quebec independence as a higher priority than advancing the class struggle. Support for independence in Quebec has fluctuated over the decades, the highest point being around 50 percent in 1995. In 1995, we advocated a “no” vote in

the referendum on Quebec independence because there was neither a clear majority in favor of it nor evidence that nationalist antagonisms were undermining joint class struggle. If a majority of Québécois had voted for independence, we would have defended the actual separation of Quebec from Canada. But both before and since 1995, support for Quebec independence has mostly floated between 25 percent and 40 percent.

Significantly, there have been countless examples of united workers' actions across national lines (both within Quebec and between Quebec and English Canada). We could cite several Canada-wide strikes by rail, airline and postal workers—and in fact, we did precisely that in the second edition of our pamphlet, [Marxism & the Quebec National Question](#). Most recently we have written about the Canada Post strike late last year, a hard, month-long class battle involving 55,000 workers (including francophones and anglophones throughout Quebec and across the rest of Canada). In our article, we noted:

“As with other Canada-wide unions, CUPW [Canadian Union of Postal Workers] as a whole has exhibited a higher level of worker militancy owing in part to the influence of its Quebec locals. [Joe] Davidson’s successor as leader of CUPW was Jean-Claude Parrot, a former Montreal postal clerk who was jailed for two months in 1979 for defying the government’s back-to-work legislation. If trade-union leaders in Quebec have tended to show less respect for capitalist authority, it is because the rank-and-file workers have demonstrated a capacity for class struggle that has struck fear into the heart of the ruling class. One year ago, half a million public-sector workers [anglophone and francophone] in Quebec went on strike for better wages and working conditions.”

—[“Defend the Postal Workers!”](#) 1917 No. 49

It was not Anglo-Chauvinism or national antagonisms between Quebec workers and their siblings in English Canada that ended those strikes, but the treachery of a trade-union bureaucracy more afraid of unleashing the power of its base than of losing the battle. In other words, the class issues dominated the conflict, and this is the consistent pattern we have seen for decades. You can produce no evidence to the contrary, and you don’t feel you have to, since you place Quebec independence above maintaining links between workers and advancing the class struggle.

A Leninist Approach to the Quebec National Question

ICL Presentation by G. Perrault

A revolutionary approach to the national question in Quebec must start with a correct understanding of the dynamics of Canadian politics.

I'll start at the beginning: Why does Canada exist? The simple answer is the British Crown and the Quebec national question. These are the two features which historically distinguish it from the United States.

The French colony of New France was conquered by the British in 1760. The first great act of revolutionary disunity between francophones and anglophones in North America occurred during the American Revolution a few years later. After defeating the French and sensing growing discontent in the anglophone colonies, the British gave certain concessions to the newly conquered French population, playing them against the anglophone colonial population of North America. As a result, the Quebec elites overwhelmingly refused to join the struggle against the British monarchy in the 13 colonies. Because of this, the American Revolution did not extend north, and after the victory of the revolution the British loyalists migrated north, forming the province of Upper Canada, now known as Ontario.

However, the same economic and social trends of capitalist development that caused the American Revolution eventually developed in the British provinces. This eventually led to the rebellions of 1837-38; in Quebec we know it as the Patriots Rebellion. It was a bourgeois democratic revolution which united anglophone and francophone in a joint struggle against the parasitic hold of the British monarchy, which was holding back the development of the economy and society. Although the uprising in anglophone Upper Canada was much weaker, this is the great historic example of united class struggle in Canada. Key to this unity was the understanding by the anglophone revolutionaries that their own democratic emancipation was tied to that of the French population.

The physiognomy of modern Canada was directly determined by the defeat of this bourgeois revolution and was enshrined in the Act of Union of 1840. The francophones were placed in an artificial political minority and an explicitly assimilationist policy was implemented. This was in line with the report Lord Durham made after the defeat of the revolution, an infamous report taught in schools to this day in Quebec. In it he stated that:

“A plan by which it is proposed to insure the tranquil government of Lower Canada [now Quebec], must include, in itself, the means of putting an end to the agitation of national disputes in the legislature, by settling, at once and for ever, the national character of the province. I entertain no doubts as to the national character which must be given to Lower Canada; it must be that of the British Empire—that of the majority of the population of British America—that of the great race which must, in the lapse of no long period of time, be predominant over the whole North American Continent. Without effecting the change so rapidly or so roughly as to shock the feelings and trample on the welfare of the existing generation, it must henceforth be the first and steady purpose of the British government to establish an English population, with English laws and language, in this province, and to trust its government to none but a decidedly English Legislature.”

At the same time, to avoid further trouble the British enacted several top-down democratic modernizations, which laid the basis for the further capitalist development of both provinces.

The political dynamics of Canada today are directly inherited from this time. English Canadians were pitted against French Canadians, and to this day all social conflicts, whether they be over class, native rights, or immigration (questions I cannot get into today), are shaped by the national

conflict. Let me be clear: I am not denying that class struggle is the main motor force of history in Canada; I am simply saying that class struggle is warped by the national conflict.

In English Canada, the defeat of the Patriots Rebellion effectively killed off the struggles against the monarchy and the solidarity with the national-democratic aspirations of the French Canadians. This in turned shaped the Canadian workers movement, which for the most part grew organically from the United States rather than on the soil of homespun revolutionary traditions. Even in its more radical forms, whether trade-unionist, Communist or Trotskyist, the workers movement generally ignored the Quebec national question or embraced the chauvinist prejudices of the ruling class.

On the side of the francophones, this history has ingrained a deeply felt sentiment for national survival against forced assimilation and anglophone oppression. This brings a peculiar dynamic to the development of the workers movement in Quebec, where national and social aspirations are profoundly intertwined. It is this dynamic which is behind the emergence of the Quebec workers movement as the most militant and organized in North America. The IBT notes that this militancy has a strong positive influence on the English Canadian workers movement. This is true. What it misses is that this militancy is fueled by the struggle against national oppression. Of course, the other result of this national oppression is that the nationalist leaders in Quebec have historically been able to divert the class struggle by presenting themselves as the champions of national rights. And so you have the contradictory situation of a workers movement that is extremely militant and organized but does not view its political interests in class terms.

Political Conclusions

So how are we as Marxists to approach this overall picture?

The first thing to understand is that the historic struggle for the Québécois nation to emancipate itself from national oppression is a progressive cause which has fueled class struggle in Canada. This cause must be supported by Marxists no less than the struggles of other specifically oppressed groups that are not strictly class-based, whether it is the struggle of women, native people, black people in the U.S. or any nationally oppressed people fighting for their emancipation.

The basic and fundamental mistake made by the IBT is that it places itself in opposition to the progressive and legitimate democratic struggles of the Québécois nation. It sees struggles to assert national rights as an impediment to the class struggle when in fact the whole history of Quebec and Canada demonstrates that it is a powerful accelerant to class struggle.

The mistake is just as crude as it would be to argue that fighting for the emancipation of women somehow distracts from the class struggle. Of course, the bourgeoisie exploits women's oppression in all kinds of ways to blunt the class struggle. But to turn your back on the struggle for women's rights is pure idiocy. This is not the IBT's position, but on the national terrain it applies the same ultra-left methodology.

To recognize that the struggle against national oppression in Quebec is legitimate and a powerful motor force for class struggle is of course only the first step. The much more difficult task is to construct a revolutionary party which can unite not only English Canadians and Québécois workers but also all the other oppressed groups in Canada.

In Quebec this requires waging a resolute struggle against the Quebec bourgeoisie. Of course, this includes their attempts to pit Québécois workers against anglophones, immigrants, Muslims and native people. But it is also necessary to show how Quebec nationalists undermine the very cause they claim to represent. If Quebec is not a country, it is because of the servile and treacherous nature of its ruling class, which always puts its economic interests above the fight against national oppression.

In English Canada it is necessary to struggle against the social-democratic leaders of the workers movement, who are ultimately loyal to the ruling class. A key component of that fight must be to champion the national rights of Quebec. This is the only basis on which a binational alliance can be built. Just as it would be absurd to ask black workers to unite with white workers based on continued racial oppression, so too is it absurd to expect that Québécois workers will unite with English Canadian workers based on accepting their national oppression. At bottom, it is the historic refusal of Canadian social democrats to stand for the national rights of the Québécois that is responsible for the national division within the workers movement in Canada. It is also necessary to oppose Trudeauist liberal ideology. Trudeauism and multiculturalism, the Canadian form of liberalism, was born explicitly in order to stem the wave of national liberation, deny national rights for Quebec and mobilize immigrants, native people and other oppressed groups as a battering ram against Quebec independence.

Some Concrete Questions

From this general Marxist approach let's get to specific questions.

If one looks at the Quebec national question with a Marxist historic lens, it is obvious that since its conquest by the British, the francophone nation of North America has fought ceaselessly against its assimilation. The natural and progressive outcome of this struggle for national existence is the formation of an independent francophone state, i.e., Quebec independence.

Short of this outcome, it is necessary to defend measures that defend the linguistic and democratic rights of the francophone minority. This includes insisting that immigrants who settle in Quebec should learn and be educated in French. This is not a privilege for French but a basic measure of self-defense against the historic policy of national assimilation by the anglophone ruling class. The Quebec language laws do not oppress the historic anglophone minority in Quebec, which remains the most privileged sector of society. Opposition to the language laws in Quebec is not a defense of the equality of languages but a defense of the privileges of English over French. The Quebec working class will never follow a party which defends this position.

Conclusion

Throughout my presentation I have sought to pedagogically explain the dynamics of the class and national struggle in Canada. I have not responded to demagogic slanders on the part of the IBT against me and other comrades from Quebec, accusing us of being unrepentant bourgeois nationalists.

If I have followed this approach, it is not because I have any doubts or illusions about the reactionary implications of the IBT's approach to the national question, but rather because it is my internationalist duty as a Québécois communist to do the utmost to build unity across the national divide by convincing comrades from the English Canadian workers movement that it is their duty to champion the national rights of Quebec. This is a huge historic challenge which cannot be solved with epithets. Ultimately, class struggle will resolve the debate. But it is our duty now in the current preparatory period to make the political contours of this debate as clear as possible in order to build the revolutionary movement in Canada on solid foundations.

Palestine

Why Palestinian Liberation Is a Lever for Social Revolution

ICL Presentation by Mansa Kaur

Your article “Stop the Gaza Genocide! Marxism and the Struggle for Palestinian Liberation” (27 November 2023) is a species of centrism on Palestine. In this article, you direct your fire against our view that the struggle for Palestinian liberation is a lever for social revolution, denouncing it as Pabloite. You argue that:

“[T]he ICL flips things around and argues that the ‘only way a revolution will happen in Israel/Palestine...’ is ‘an uprising for the national liberation of Palestinians...’ that will—presumably led by a nominally ‘communist leadership’—kindly decide to respect the rights of the currently dominant nations.”

Today, at the height of Israeli tyranny, Gaza is in ruins, attacks in the West Bank are rising and the Palestinians are literally fighting a life-and-death battle against Zionism. There is a **national war** going on and the two sides are Palestinian liberation or Zionist expansion. How can you deny that the struggle against national oppression is absolutely central to the struggle for revolution?

We must ask ourselves the decisive question: how are we going to actually have a revolution in Palestine? For us, the way is to fight for a communist strategy for the liberation struggle—the only course that stands a chance of success because it is premised on uniting the masses in the region, crucially Arab and Israeli workers. But consider what such a national liberation entails. It would mean going up against the entire social order of the Middle East that is held intact by the imperialists, Zionism and the various Arab nationalist regimes. If this is not advancing **social revolution**, then I would be curious to hear what your definition of social revolution is. Your loyalty to the so-called theory of interpenetrated peoples makes you forget the essence of permanent revolution: the fusing together of democratic with socialist tasks!

The truth is concrete, comrades. When it comes to Palestine, you cannot move a millimeter as a revolutionary without confronting head-on the complete inseparability of the national and social questions. You write that Palestinian communists would make military blocs with Hamas (fine) and raise “transitional ‘economic’ demands”! In the rubble of Gaza, your great intervention is to raise economic demands?! This is **crass economism** and a complete scandal. For all your correct points about the need to break workers from Hamas and anti-Jewish chauvinism, your intervention would **fail spectacularly** at doing so, because it is not premised on championing the national struggle that animates the Palestinian people. You will never challenge the hold of Hamas on economic grounds while they are literally under siege by Israel. The only way to break their influence is to show how they are an obstacle to the national liberation and self-defense of the Palestinian people, i.e., the basis of their popular support. But you cannot do this if you do not yourself seek to champion this cause but denounce those communists who do.

This brings me to the next question, which is about how to build the unity of the Palestinian and Israeli masses. We both agree on the need for this as this is the way to destroy the Zionist state. But in our view, your perspective cannot build such a unity. The only way to build unity is by **championing** the fight for Palestinian liberation and motivating to the Israeli working class **why** Palestinian liberation is in their material interests, that their own emancipation will come through Palestinian national liberation.

In line with your economist approach on what Palestinian communists should do, your approach to building unity is to call for class unity, or build an anti-Zionist Arab-Jewish workers’ defense force. Fine. But how should we build the defense force that you propose? It helps to be concrete.

There are two obstacles: first, getting Jewish workers to break from Zionism, and second, getting Palestinians and Arabs to join forces with Jewish workers. Why should they do these things?

In both cases, the answer is the same. As long as the Jewish workers do not win the trust of the Palestinians, do not say that they will fight against their own government for their national rights, then no Palestinian will ever want to join forces with an Israeli Jewish worker. Similarly, as long as the Jewish workers do not come to see that the very existence of the Zionist state is the reason for their degradation and lack of safety, they will not break from Zionism. They must be made to see that they are used as pawns of imperialism precisely because of the national oppression of the Palestinians. We must seek to apply the basic principle Engels elaborated: no nation can be free if it oppresses another. Only on the basis of the working class of the oppressor nation actively championing the cause of the oppressed nation can we speak of working-class unity; anything else is empty words.

The Reactionary Legacy of the iSt on Palestine

Since 1948 all the way to today, every single war waged by Israel has been a war whose purpose was to expand its territory at the expense of the Palestinians and the Arab countries in the region. They have been wars of national aggression on the part of Israel in the purest sense of the term. On the side of the Arabs, they have been wars of national defense, even when it was they who initiated the military clashes. This is true today just as it was true in 1948.

The reactionary approach of the iSt on the Palestinian question is most clearly seen when we look at how it approached these early conflicts. As the years went on and a substantial pro-Palestinian movement grew in the West, it moderated some of its early stances and took a more pro-Palestinian approach. But it never confronted or corrected the underpinnings of its program, which were pure and simple capitulations to Zionism.

The first major article of the iSt on the Israeli question is the 1968 article in *Spartacist* No. 11 titled “Turn the Guns the Other Way.” As the headline suggests, it opposes with equal measure both the Arabs and the Israelis in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

What was this war? It was a war of pure aggression on the part of Israel, in which it conquered the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. But for the iSt, all it saw was bourgeois forces on both sides. It denied the right of the Arab regimes of the region to self-defense against Zionism, even when their lands were being occupied and conquered. But it doesn’t end there. Not only does the article not take a side with the Arab regimes in 1967, but it retrospectively defends Israel against the Arab regimes in the 1948 war. The very war whose outcome caused the permanent displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and the massacre of thousands!

Now of course, comrades of the IBT will argue that the iSt changed its position. This is true at least as regards the 1948 war. But it matters on what basis this position was changed. Instead of accounting for the open capitulation to Zionism—which is what support to Israel meant in 1948—the iSt simply claimed that new facts were available that made clear that the Jews in Palestine were never under threat of being exterminated. Of course, these facts were available since 1948 and do not in any way explain this grotesque position.

The article which dodges this capitulation is the very article the IBT today defends as a key pillar of the iSt which must be defended at all costs: “The Birth of the Zionist State” (published in *Workers Vanguard*: Part One in No. 33, 23 November 1973; Part Two in No. 45, 24 May 1974). So let’s look at this seminal article and the position it took on the 1948 war.

The article starts off by stating that “we must look at the 1948 war which led to the present state of Israel and the simultaneous expulsions of several hundred thousand Arabs from their homes and lands.” It goes on to state correctly that:

“For the Palestinian Arabs 1948 was the origin of their ‘diaspora,’ the destruction of their nation, the deprivation of their means of livelihood and their relegation to the wretched refugee camps where they are imprisoned in an enforced state of idleness and subsist on ten cents of UN rations a day.”

However, when it comes to taking a position on the conflict itself, it refuses to take a side with the Arab forces against Israel.

I believe there is no fundamental dispute between us over the broad lines of what happened. Following the 1947 UN resolution partitioning Palestine at the expense of the Palestinians, the Israelis launched a military offensive, massacring Palestinians and expelling them from their land. After the state of Israel was declared, a coalition of Arab regimes declared war on Israel. There is also no dispute between us that the Arab regimes were militarily ineffectual, self-interested and even treacherous.

Rashid Khalidi’s *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine* explains how the King of Jordan actively worked against the formation of a Palestinian state. Again, we have no dispute here.

Where there is a dispute is on the interpretation of these facts. Here you defend the position taken by “Birth of the Zionist State” that there was no side to take in this war because:

“There were no effective forces fighting for the rights of the Palestinian Arab nation; none of the Arab forces fought for the national rights of the Palestinians or against imperialism, but rather against the Zionists and each other in order to carve up the Palestinian Arab nation among themselves and/or divert social struggle at home.”

We think this is totally wrong. For us there is a fundamental difference between the Zionist military campaign, which was exterminating and displacing the Palestinians, and the Arab regimes, some of which wished to expand their territory and rule over the Palestinians. It’s quite concrete for a Palestinian: the victory of one meant displacement, dispossession and murder, i.e., the Nakba, while the victory of the other meant having a monarch ruling over you rather than a Palestinian national government, which most would have preferred. Sure, the latter scenario is not ideal. But can you seriously treat these two outcomes as co-equal?

There is a reason why Palestinians were appealing to the Arab regimes to come to their defense. There is also a reason why the Arab populations of the neighboring countries felt so strongly that they needed to come to the defense of the Palestinians. While Palestinians were developing their own distinct national identity, they remained part of a common Arab people. Khalidi makes clear that it is under this popular pressure that the Arab regimes were forced to intervene. He also explains that despite his previous treacherous deals with the Israelis, King Abdullah of Transjordan was pushed to confront the Israeli army, halting their genocidal expansion in the process. Do you really think the Palestinians should have stood back and not taken a side in these clashes?

The fact is that the war was only the first in a series of wars of Zionist expansion. The Zionist offensive in 1948 was ultimately against not only the Palestinians but all the Arab regimes in the region. This is one key reason why they intervened.

In its essence, the war of 1948 is no different from the genocidal war being waged in the Middle East today. It is the exact same dynamics at play: Zionist expansion, treachery on the part of the Muslim regimes and conciliation of imperialism in the workers movement in the West. If it is important today to re-examine the 1948 war, it is to understand and draw lessons from the legacy of not only the iSt but of the Trotskyist movement as a whole, which at the time of the events also failed to take a clear side in defense of the Arab regimes and Palestinians against Zionist expansionism. It is necessary for the IBT and all other communist tendencies to draw lessons from the failures of the past.

Palestine: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question

IBT presentation by Josh Decker

Palestine offers a great challenge which, as you note, “puts Marxists to the test” that most fail. A genocide is actively raging, the entire left is divided between pacifists and blind tailism of nationalists, and much of the world has settled into a hopeless fatalism on the issue. We have had many political disagreements over several different issues with you in the past, but Palestine was never one of them. Broadly speaking, we were usually in agreement with you when it came to the Middle East. One notable early exception occurred in 1983, when a group called “Islamic Jihad” blew up the US and French barracks in Lebanon, killing hundreds of imperialist troops. The SL/US raised the social-patriotic call to save the lives of the surviving American imperialist forces: “Marines Out of Lebanon, Now, Alive!” Our forerunners, instead, demanded: “Imperialists Out of Lebanon—By Any Means Necessary!” For this, you denounced us as “bloodthirsty” maniacs who craved the death of every American Marine and suggested that anti-black racism might be a motivating factor. We wonder if you still defend this slander or the original capitulation it was meant to cover up.

Our programmatic differences on Palestine began with your rejection of the revolutionary perspective developed by the Spartacist tendency in the mid-1970s, most significantly in “[Birth of the Zionist State, Part 2.](#)” In *Spartacist* No. 68, you write:

“[O]ur whole approach was to ponder how this or that democratic question could be ‘removed’ from the agenda. But this proved to be more complicated to do in regions of interpenetrated peoples like Northern Ireland or Israel/Palestine, in which two national groups have competing claims of self-determination over the same territory. The Spartacist tendency thus created a ‘theory’ for cases of interpenetrated peoples. Our seminal article on the question of Israel/Palestine postulated:

“‘When national populations are geographically interpenetrated, as they were in Palestine, an independent nation-state can be created only by their forcible separation (forced population transfers, etc.). Thus the democratic right of self-determination becomes abstract, as it can be exercised only by the stronger national grouping driving out or destroying the weaker one.

“‘In such cases the only possibility of a democratic solution lies in a social transformation.’

—‘Birth of the Zionist State, Part 2: The 1948 War,’ *Workers Vanguard* No. 45, 24 May 1974

“It was clearly impossible to ‘remove’ the national question from the agenda in places like Belfast or Gaza. We thus proclaimed the need for revolution. But the whole question remains: *how* can a revolution happen there? The entire program behind the ‘theory’ of interpenetrated peoples consisted of proclaiming the need for socialist revolution while rejecting the need to put the national liberation struggle of Palestinians and Irish Catholics at the center of our revolutionary strategy. Instead, the socialist revolution is viewed as a process in which both national groups will shed their national sentiments in favor of unity on economic demands and liberal solidarity.”

This passage is so full of distortions it is hard to know where to begin. We have often spoken of “removing” democratic (above all, national) questions from the agenda in the sense that divisions within the working class over such questions can prevent proletarian unity in the class struggle and foster allegiance to the bourgeoisie. This does not imply that we do not take these questions seriously and lack a program to address them. To the contrary, what it means is that Marxists have a duty to approach these questions in a manner that can bring class questions to the fore. We

develop tactics that aim to do that, e.g., calling for national independence when antagonisms between workers across national lines have reached the point of undermining joint struggle. By contrast, you now seem to view these issues (or least the national question) as possessing some sort of inherently revolutionary content, although you are quick to add that this is only true if the working class takes the lead in promoting them.

Due to its interpenetration with the Jewish-Israeli nation (which like *all* nations has the right to self-determination), it is impossible to equitably resolve the question of Palestinian national oppression under capitalism. The SL created no new “theory” but merely recognized this objective reality and refused to abandon the Leninist approach to the national question by recognizing only the rights of the oppressed nation, as did the Pabloites. On the one hand, you seem to acknowledge that the SL was correct to recognize the mutual incompatibility of the national rights of interpenetrated peoples under capitalism and the need for proletarian state forms to resolve them. On the other hand, you assert, without evidence, that the SL viewed the revolution to put those state forms in place as “a process in which both national groups will shed their national sentiments in favor of unity on economic demands and liberal solidarity.” If by “economic” demands you simply mean class issues, then yes of course we seek to build binational workers’ unity around such demands. Where is your evidence that the revolutionary SL ever promoted “liberal solidarity” in place of joint working-class struggle? And if the Spartacist tendency believed that “both national groups will shed their national sentiments” in the course of the revolution, then why did it seek to win Jewish-Israeli workers to the perspective of a *binational* workers’ state, which necessarily implies the existence *after* the revolution of two nations?

You suggest that the advantage you have over the position outlined in “Birth of the Zionist State” is that you, unlike the SL of the time, *really* know how to make a revolution. Yet your perspective, we are told, is “to put the national liberation struggle of Palestinians ... at the center of our revolutionary strategy”:

“Any ‘Marxist’ who thinks that the national liberation struggle is a thorn in the side of revolution and must be put aside in order to fight for socialism is at best condemned to irrelevance or, at worst, an agent of the ruling oppressor who demands that the oppressed abandon their national aspirations as the precondition for unity. The only way a revolution will happen in Israel/Palestine or in Northern Ireland is through an uprising for the national liberation of Palestinians and Irish Catholics, which would not impinge on the national rights of the Protestants and Israelis but emancipate the workers from their ruling class and its imperialist backers. It is precisely because Irish and Palestinian nationalists are incapable of and opposed to such a perspective that only a communist leadership can bring about a just and democratic resolution to the national problem there.”

Your strategy, then, is to foster a “national liberation” uprising “of Palestinians” which, because led by communists, will not “impinge on the national rights” of Israelis. You describe this as a fusion of the struggle for national liberation and that for socialism, but it is *you* who cannot explain *how* a struggle for *Palestinian* national rights being placed “at the center of our revolutionary strategy” could be merged with the struggle for socialism when the latter requires at least a major sector of the *Jewish-Israeli* working class to fight as well. The point that “Birth of the Zionist State” was making, and which you seem not to understand, is that it is precisely the *agitational* significance of recognizing that the right to self-determination of Israeli Jews (which they currently exercise through their apartheid state) will be respected that can allow the national question to be “removed from the agenda” in the course of mobilization on class (or “economic”) issues and the fight for socialist revolution.

We *of course* defend the Palestinians. We *of course* recognize that they are nationally oppressed. We *of course* defend their right to self-determination and promote it. But we believe that their

freedom can *only* come about through joint class struggle with Jewish-Israeli workers, who are strategically positioned to destroy the Zionist state and expropriate the racist Israeli bourgeoisie, which is in their own material interest. Joint struggle for socialism will not be possible if Jewish workers remain under the spell of Zionism, which chains them to the bourgeoisie largely by manipulating their fear that their national rights (indeed, very existence) will be threatened without a “Jewish state.” “Centering” the struggle for Palestinian national rights, which would *exclude* Israeli Jews under capitalism due to interpenetration, will do little to assuage those fears, no matter what phrases about the national rights of Jewish Israelis you bury in your propaganda. Even if your main political motivation is not the struggle for socialism but for Palestinian national liberation, you must “center” *class* interests and the struggle for socialism as the framework in which democratic problems could be resolved equitably. Anything else is bourgeois nationalism, which is a dead-end not only for those who want socialism but even for those who want the national liberation of the Palestinians.

Given all of this, we confess to being somewhat surprised that you have not come out with a worse line on the current crisis in Gaza. We were pleased that your supplemental “[Only Death and Defeat with Hamas: A Revolutionary Road for Palestinian Liberation](#)” recognized that sectarian violence on 7 October 2023 bound Jewish Israelis closer to Zionism, that breaking this link required some orientation to Jewish-Israeli national rights, and that the only possible solution requires joint class struggle towards a socialist revolution. In broad strokes at least, the line on Palestine expressed in your supplemental was still a distillation of the interpenetrated peoples “theory” you had trashed in *Spartacist* No. 68 less than a month before. We considered the possibility that the supplemental was just a knee-jerk response to events that called the bluff of every abstract formulation in *Spartacist* No. 68.

At the Melbourne debate between our organizations (which we published as “[Spartacists Adrift: Revolutionary Leadership & Permanent Revolution](#)”), we found ourselves being denounced by comrade Charlotte for retaining a “theory” that still clearly informed the public stance of the ICL. She did not actually repudiate any core element of the interpenetrated peoples “theory,” instead emphasizing in the most abstract way the “centered-ness” of Palestinians, their oppression, anti-imperialism and national liberation.

The decision to republish the supplemental in *Spartacist* No. 69 later that year suggested the ICL was no closer to figuring out a coherent strategy for Palestine. That issue’s new content, “[Marxists & Palestine: 100 Years of Failure Lessons and Prospects](#),” doubled down on its rejection of interpenetrated peoples while reintroducing, in the most confused manner possible, programmatic elements that flow from just such an understanding:

“Moreover, the article [“Birth of the Zionist State,” Part Two (*Workers Vanguard* No. 45, 24 May 1974)] developed the so-called theory of interpenetrated peoples, proclaiming: ‘The democratic issue of self-determination for each of two nationalities or peoples who geographically interpenetrate can only conceivably be resolved equitably within the framework of the proletariat in power.’ It is true that a just resolution of the Palestinian conflict requires proletarian power. However, the purpose of the theory was to present the fight for Palestinian self-determination as illegitimate, invoking the bogeyman that any struggle in this direction would violate the right of self-determination of Israelis. In this framework, the Spartacist tendency issued abstract calls for class unity, putting forward such slogans as ‘Not Jew against Arab but class against class!’ In more recent years, our tendency’s propaganda heavily denounced Zionist terror but still refused to put the national liberation of Palestinians at the center of a revolutionary perspective.

“The question of self-determination for Israel is a red herring. Israelis already have a state, and its purpose is to stop the Palestinians from having their own. Under current

conditions, refusing to fight for Palestinian self-determination in the name of Israeli self-determination simply amounts to defending the Zionist status quo.”

Your assertion that “the purpose of the theory [of interpenetrated peoples] was to present the fight for Palestinian self-determination as illegitimate, invoking the bogeyman that any struggle in this direction would violate the right of self-determination of Israelis” is a strawman. A *class-struggle* approach to “the fight for Palestinian self-determination” is what the revolutionary iSt advocated—a perspective that distinguished it from the Pabloites and Stalinists who sought to put a “socialist” face on the bourgeois nationalist “fight for Palestinian self-determination.” The latter was and is characterized by a complete disregard for the national rights of Israeli Jews and, of course, the leading role of independent proletarian action. A “fight for Palestinian self-determination” that ignores the national rights of Israeli Jews is bound either for a reversal of the terms of oppression (an unlikely outcome) or failure due to the lack of resonance from a fearful Jewish working class (see: the past 80 years). The only “red herring” is your claim that the Spartacist tendency’s position was one of “refusing to fight for Palestinian self-determination in the name of Israeli self-determination” and hence “defending the Zionist status quo.”

You then went on to write:

“The real question is for the Palestinians to exercise *their* right of self-determination in a way compatible with the continued existence of a Jewish nation in the Near East. This is possible only in the form of a unified, binational state based on resolving the historical injustice committed against the Palestinians and where both nations enjoy full democratic rights in regard to language, culture and religion. Such a state can only be established by shattering the Zionist state and through a revolutionary overturn of the entire region.”

Comrades, that is the revolutionary iSt’s position and our position today, and it is one that is rooted in the “theory” of interpenetrated peoples. We would remind you that “the continued existence of a Jewish nation in the Near East” under a binational state would inherently imply that Jewish workers had come to identify their nation’s own self-determination with that state. Otherwise, it would not exist as binational. That means that the national rights of Israeli Jews must be incorporated in the *proletarian-socialist* struggle for Palestinian liberation. In other words, “Not Jew against Arab but class against class!”

And if you now hate that slogan, then why did you (correctly) note that “[t]here is a material basis to win the Israeli working class,” that Israelis experience the “second highest rate of poverty in the developed world,” and that Jewish minority populations are “consigned to the worst jobs and the worst segregated living conditions”? This sounds like you’re suggesting a class-struggle program with—shock horror—“economic” demands. In the recent article “[After October 7: Where Are We Now?](#)” you confirmed that this program would involve a mutual struggle against the effects of imperialism on *both* Palestinians and Israeli Jews, explaining to “Israeli toilers” that Zionist militarism exacerbates their poverty and calling for the spread of class struggle even into the ranks of the IDF.

At the same time, you seem to want to go out of your way to undermine the application of this program by intimating that the Israeli Jews shouldn’t have equal national rights after all. In “[Marxists & Palestine: 100 Years of Failure Lessons and Prospects](#),” you write that “the entire state of Israel is a settler colony built on the dispossession of the Palestinians. The 700,000 settlers in the West Bank, some of whom have lived there for decades, are not fundamentally different from those living in the rest of Israel.” If by “settler colony” you simply mean that the ancestors of (most) Israeli Jews settled in the area the way that white Australians, New Zealanders and North Americans did, then why are you equating them with the settlers who are currently in the process of stealing Palestinian land? The dispossession of the Palestinians was a historic crime, but it contributed to the forging of a Jewish-Israeli nation. The existence of that

nation is a fact, whether or not we like the way it was created. Presumably you don't like the fact that Indigenous Canadians were dispossessed and killed to create the Quebec nation, but you recognize the right of Quebec to self-determination.

Of course, at a sufficient level of abstraction there is no hard and permanent distinction between West Bank settlers and the rest of the Jewish-Israeli population, but the immediacy of the dispossession they are carrying out is a *felt political* reality both by Palestinians and Israeli Jews. Does your equation of all Jewish Israelis with the West Bank settlers mean that they have no national rights? Presumably you don't think so. Why, then, do you make the equation in the first place? It is not in the service of a Leninist program but of petty bourgeois moral conscience. It is a concession to the nationalism of the oppressed nation, which you imbue with revolutionary content.

Ireland

Ireland: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question

IBT presentation by Barbara Dorn

The North of Ireland was—together with Cyprus and Palestine—one of the three main examples of “interpenetrated peoples” commonly cited during the period of revolutionary Spartacism. As we have already heard, you reject “interpenetrated peoples” as a “theory,” which obscures its content. No reasonable person would disagree that there are cases of distinct peoples who intermingle in the same territory. Nor could they disagree that there are situations where two peoples have exhibited some drive to form a polity of their own in that area. What we disagree on is whether Marxists should develop a careful programmatic approach to these situations or simply support the struggle for self-determination of whichever people is currently oppressed.

The historical Spartacist position on Ireland is outlined in the 1977 “[Theses on Ireland](#)” (*Spartacist* No. 24) published alongside a talk “[Workers must Crush Sectarian Terror](#),” which incidentally reads a lot like a polemic against you. These documents greatly developed revolutionary Spartacism’s approach to interpenetrated peoples. I’m going to discuss them in some detail because this approach has been so distorted by your recent publications and because it remains foundational for a revolutionary approach to the national question in Ireland. *Spartacist* No. 68 devoted a handful of paragraphs to repudiating a complex set of programmatic demands originally developed over years of research and practice. We have already heard the only argument with much content:

“The entire program behind the ‘theory’ of interpenetrated peoples consisted of proclaiming the need for socialist revolution while rejecting the need to put the national liberation struggle of Palestinians and Irish Catholics at the center of our revolutionary strategy. Instead, the socialist revolution is viewed as a process in which both national groups will shed their national sentiments in favor of unity on economic demands and liberal solidarity.”

Yes, the 1977 documents did proclaim socialist revolution as the only way to protect mutual rights to self-determination in cases of interpenetrated peoples, that is, without genocide, population transfers or other forms of oppression. Find us a case where bourgeois self-determination in such a situation *didn’t* result in historic crimes. And in Cyprus this actually happened. Until the Turkish army invaded in 1974 the Turks were the oppressed population. However, the invasion resulted in the brutal expulsion of some 200,000 Greek Cypriots from the northern portion of the island, which effectively reversed the situation.

You may object that such a thing would never happen “under communist leadership” but the point is that Protestant workers will *fear* a reversal of the terms of oppression, particularly if the “communist leadership” is “centering” the rights of Catholics and denying the very existence of Irish Protestant national rights.

Indeed, the claim that the “theory” of interpenetrated peoples did not “center” the liberation struggles of the oppressed Catholic population is revealing. What does that mean concretely *in terms of actions advocated in a transitional program*? What *specific* demand for liberation should the Spartacists of the 1970s have taken up which they did not? They blocked with the politicized Catholic population on a huge number of questions: militant opposition to British troops, civil rights, the Special Powers Act, wages, discrimination in housing and employment, RUC brutality, internment and raids on Catholic communities. The content of your critique would appear to be that the original Spartacist line dared to also emphasize the need to reduce sectarian tensions, avoid zero-sum games over limited resources, find opportunities for joint working-class struggle and form mixed defense guards against sectarian violence. Such measures

were not some attempt to mollycoddle an “oppressor people,” but were *necessary to make Catholic liberation possible* by denying the state various tools it could use to mobilize the Protestant population.

We consider the claim that the revolutionary Spartacist tendency offered only “unity on economic demands and liberal solidarity” in its program for interpenetrated peoples to be a lie. Should we tally up all the “minimum” economic demands in old materials, and compare them to democratic and transitional measures? We think the latter would handily outweigh them. And we think the onus is on *you* to explain what is “liberal” about advocating joint struggle against British troops and for socialist revolution.

For a while after 2023, you had no program for Ireland, having repudiated your old one in a few throwaway lines. Two years later you came out with:

“The idea that the Protestants have separate national rights leads to reactionary conclusions: acceptance of partition and rejection of struggle for a united Ireland.”
—[For a United Irish Workers Republic!](#) (*Spartacist* No. 70)

You claim the Protestants don’t meet any of the Leninist criteria for a nation, but nations are never born completely formed. The “Theses on Ireland” recognized that the Protestants are not a fully-fledged nation but had cohered a nation-like consciousness with the potential for further development, largely defined against the Irish Catholic nation and as loyalist allies of British imperialism. Strangely, nationalists don’t give up when you tell them they’re not a proper nation, and history has shown that nationalists with guns and financial backers can do a pretty good job of carving one out for themselves. This is one of the potential outcomes of the increased sectarianism that would arise amidst any looming bourgeois-led unification.

Of course you would be justified in pointing out that much has changed in Ireland since 1977, most significantly the “peace process” and the Good Friday Agreement. This has seen a reduction in both sectarian violence and British troops on the streets of Belfast and Derry. Sinn Fein, in North and South, attempt to position themselves as reasonable nationalists that can forge an Irish nation without upsetting anyone too much. Even the Catholic state in the South is less Catholic, with liberalization on gay marriage and abortion law. But none of this takes the Protestants any closer to being part of an Irish nation. You claim:

“Far from having a separate language and culture, Catholics and Protestants who grow up there can barely tell who belongs to which denomination, if not for the rigid system of segregation that separates them. Belfast’s Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods exist side by side but are physically divided by miles of metal barriers that are up to eight meters high and known as ‘peace lines.’ Only 7 percent of pupils attend integrated schools.” [ibid.]

The idea that Catholics and Protestants in the North are indistinguishable is nonsense. Segregation creates cultural difference, and once that difference exists it cannot be simply wished away. The 93 percent of children at the segregated schools learn their identity very fast. They learn whether to support Celtic or Rangers. The metal “peace lines” reinforce it. The Irish language is increasingly used (positively or negatively) as a symbol of identity, such as Kneecap’s Mo Chara’s demand to speak Irish in court. Kneecap themselves are an interesting example—their name, their clothes and their lyrics put them in the nationalist camp, yet as a gesture of the non-sectarianism that they often advocate, they invited Young Spencer, a “proud Protestant” rapper to join them on stage at a gig in Belfast. But there are still Catholic rappers and Protestant rappers. Finally, if any proof of cultural difference were needed, it is only necessary to go back to last weekend. The Orange marches and other celebrations of the Twelfth of July are an expression of political Loyalism, but also of Protestant culture, to which children are introduced via bonfires and marching bands. We may not like it, but it exists.

You can slap the label “Irish” on Protestants, but the question is whether they will view themselves as Irish if that word becomes synonymous with “citizen of a Catholic-dominated state.” We aim to break through the cultural, religious and political segregation with class struggle, including around democratic demands—seeking opportunities for joint action, for instance in integrated workplaces, or in opposition to specific instances of oppression. Your call for a border poll on Irish unification open to the entire island, on the other hand, seems perfectly designed to present unity as something imposed by an uncaring majority in alliance with the Catholic bourgeoisie. *You yourselves* note the Catholic bourgeoisie can’t deliver unity, and *you yourselves* note that the Protestants aren’t any closer to wanting it.

What you are proposing is “nation-building” by forcibly incorporating the Protestants into the Irish Catholic nation the way you want to forcibly integrate non-francophone immigrants into the Quebec nation, granting the oppressed nation the right to violate the rights of workers from other communities (whether part of an oppressor nation or not) in the name of national liberation.

So “centering” the national liberation struggle of Irish Catholics means denying the national rights of the Protestants—a qualitative step beyond what you are so far prepared to do in Israel/Palestine. Your article in *Spartacist* No. 70 states:

“Our old position explicitly rejected the struggle for a united Ireland, accepted partition, peddled the Unionist myth that Protestants are not part of the Irish nation, denied that Orange ideology is Great Power chauvinism and claimed to offer a path toward class unity between Catholics and Protestants by forgetting about national oppression and focusing instead on economic struggles of the working class.”

Again, nonsense. The Spartacist tendency never rejected the idea that joint class struggle might produce a united Irish workers’ republic as one of several different possible configurations of workers’ power across what is now Britain and Ireland. Nor did it “accept partition.”

The “Theses” do argue that the situation changed with partition and say “it was necessary to oppose the forcible reunification of the six counties with the rest of Ireland.” But it continues: “At the same time the present statelet guarantees the political and economic privileges of the Protestants. We oppose the Orange state and the demand for an independent Ulster as forms of determination for the Protestants which necessarily maintain the oppression of the Irish Catholic population of Ulster, an extension of the Irish Catholic nation.”

Orange ideology is certainly in support of Great Power chauvinism, but it is not exactly the same thing, and Great Power chauvinism does not always support the Northern Irish Protestants. The “Theses” note that the iSt found “inadequate” the presentation of “the Protestants as simply a backward sector of the Irish nation, whose loyalism/Orangeism is purely an imperialist ideology given a certain nationalist tinge in order to attract a mass base.” In other words, Orange ideology is not *simply* “imperialist ideology” (or “Great Power chauvinism”) but *also* the nationalism of the oppressor nation in the North of Ireland.

Your assertion that the iSt’s joint class-struggle perspective was one of “forgetting about national oppression and focusing instead on economic struggles of the working class” is contradicted again by the “Theses,” which link democratic demands and economic demands via a transitional program that transcends the framework of capitalism: “Without the demand for a sliding scale of wages and hours, for example, the call to end discrimination will simply imply levelling in an already economically depressed situation.”

The fact that you are compelled to misrepresent the programmatic document you are rejecting suggests that you have no serious way of challenging it from a Leninist perspective. Meanwhile, the tasks of revolutionaries remain broadly the same as in 1977 (albeit with different opportunities and problems along the way). We still call for troops out, which is effectively a call for the British

state out of the North of Ireland without prescribing either an independent Ulster or a united Ireland. We still fight discrimination against Catholics in healthcare, housing, jobs etc.

We still argue for joint class struggle against the bosses and the bourgeois state, whenever glimmers of non-sectarianism provide opportunities. It is both necessary *and* possible to bring workers together to fight for the common interests of the working class, whether for wages and conditions or for defense against oppression based on religion, race or gender. As the politics of the North of Ireland seeps across the Irish border and the Irish Sea, we also fight for united class struggle between different nations and national groups.

What we *don't* do is tell the Protestant workers that they can only be part of this struggle if they accept a united Ireland. "Not orange against green, but class against class" is still the correct slogan.

Theses on Ireland: A Centrist Capitulation to British Imperialism

ICL Presentation by G. Perrault

For almost 50 years, the iSt and the organizations in its tradition have upheld the “Theses on Ireland” (*Spartacist* No. 24, Autumn 1977) as a revolutionary program for Ireland and even a unique extension of Marxism. As my presentation will show, it is neither.

In our last issue of *Spartacist* (No. 70, May 2025), we published an article titled “[For a United Irish Workers Republic!](#)” This article does not claim any new theoretical discovery but rather defends the long Marxist tradition on the question of Ireland. Our article presents the Irish question in its historic evolution and offers a revolutionary program for Ireland based on a critique of Irish nationalism and British Labourism.

However, the article does not offer a detailed refutation of the “Theses on Ireland.” Since we defended this program for decades, it is only right that we offer such a refutation. I welcome today’s discussion with the IBT as a chance to do just that.

The difficulty in refuting the “Theses on Ireland” is that it is a centrist document. It covers what is essentially a traditional Labourite program on the Irish national question with all kinds of Leninist phraseology and overcomplicated theoretical schemes. By Labourite program on Ireland, I mean a program which advocates all kinds of supportable reforms while fundamentally upholding the unity of the United Kingdom.

Bait and Switch

For anyone not already predisposed toward supporting the unity of Ireland, the Theses can appear to offer a left-wing working-class perspective. Early on it makes a strong declaration against British imperialism:

“British imperialism has brought centuries of exploitation, oppression and bloodshed to the island. No good can come of the British presence; the existing tie between Northern Ireland and the British state can only be oppressive to the Irish Catholic population, an obstacle to a proletarian class mobilisation and solution. We place no preconditions on this demand for the immediate withdrawal of all British military forces or lessen its categorical quality by suggesting ‘steps’ toward its fulfilment (such as simply demanding that the army should withdraw to its barracks or from working-class districts).”

However, right after this passage it states:

“At the same time we do not regard the demand as synonymous with or as a concrete application of either the call for Irish self-determination (that is, a unitary state of the whole island) or for an independent Ulster—two solutions which within the framework of capitalism would be anti-democratic, in the first case toward the Protestants and in the second toward the Irish Catholics.”

Here you get a classic bait and switch. The Irish have fought for British imperialism to leave their island for centuries. This has been the focal point of their struggle. The Theses appears at first to support this struggle, basically calling for Britain out of Ireland, only to then present the main conflict in Northern Ireland not as one against imperialism but as a national struggle between two peoples fighting for the same territory. From this it goes on to present the realization of Irish unity, the natural outcome of any successful struggle against British imperialism, as a reactionary outcome.

The Theses later goes on to quote the *Observer* (!) presenting the continued presence of Britain in Northern Ireland as motivated by “moral” considerations. It uncritically quotes this and goes on

to state that British imperialism “is not now committed to the preservation of the Orange statelet and would prefer a settlement which would remove its direct political responsibility on the island” and that “British imperialism is constrained to maintain capitalist law and order and prevent a complete breakdown in the social order.” Really? That is the reason why Britain is still in Ireland? Of course not.

There is a reason that Britain partitioned Ireland, and it sure as hell wasn't for humanitarian reasons. Ireland has always been viewed as an essential part of the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland leaving the UK would undermine the unity of the entire state, opening the door for Scottish secession and maybe even Welsh independence. This is why to this day British imperialism will not part with its Irish territory.

The point of all of this is to once again deny the centrality of the fight against British imperialism. Despite the strong words at the start, this is the common thread of the entire Theses.

Straw Man

But what about the Protestants? This is the straw man argument used by the British to partition Ireland. The Theses recycles this argument, covers it with Marxist verbiage about the national question and uses it to present the reunification of Ireland as undemocratic.

To promote this charade, the Theses needs to present the Protestants as some kind of proto-nation akin to tribal people whose language, culture and economy were not yet sufficiently developed to lay the basis for a nation-state. This is total bollocks.

The dominant ideology of Protestants in the North of Ireland is not national but anti-national. It's all in the name: Ulster loyalism. The whole point is to stay in the United Kingdom, not form an independent state.

It is true that sometimes the loyalists clash with the British government and they have on occasion threatened separation. But these were always maneuvers to stimulate in the rest of Britain a reactionary royalist response to giving democratic concessions to the Irish. They are loyal first and foremost to the British monarchy and have no intention whatsoever of breaking with it, since loyalty to the crown is the core of their ideology. Here is an excerpt from the Ulster Covenant of 1912 against Home Rule in Ireland.

“BEING CONVINCED in our consciences that Home Rule would be disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship, and perilous to the unity of the Empire, we, whose names are underwritten, men of Ulster, loyal subjects of His Gracious Majesty King George V, humbly relying on the God whom our fathers in days of stress and trial confidently trusted, do hereby pledge ourselves in solemn Covenant, throughout this our time of threatened calamity, to stand by one another in defending, for ourselves and our children, our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland.”

Loyalism is difficult to understand today because most people understand the world through the prism of nationalities. But this was not always so. Under feudalism, there were no nation-states, and what mattered was the dynasty that owned the land, not the people who inhabited it. As such, the monarchies of Europe actively fought against national consciousness, viewing it as a dangerous, revolutionary idea—which for the feudal system it was. It is these reactionary royalist conceptions which are the basis of Ulster loyalist ideology. They owe their allegiance not to a nation with a definite territory but to a divinely ordained royal family and its rotting empire. It is no coincidence that their hero is the restorationist monarch William of Orange and that they hate Wolfe Tone, even if he was a Protestant.

The point is that pro-imperialist monarchism is not a national culture whose democratic rights Marxists should defend. It is a reactionary ideology which we must fight. We should, of course, defend the religious rights of the Protestant minority in Ireland. But they do not have, *nor do they want*, national rights.

Let me put it this way. What is left of the so-called Protestant national culture if you take away pro-imperialism, monarchism and anti-Catholic bigotry? Basically, Protestant religious beliefs and Irish culture. This is not the basis for a separate nation.

The “Theses on Ireland” confuses all of this. It falsely presents the conflict in Northern Ireland as one of “interpenetrated peoples” when in fact it is and always has been a conflict opposing republican Irish nationalism to British imperialism. Neither of the conflicting parties wants to displace the other population from the land to form a national state. The conflict is whether Northern Ireland should be part of the Republic or the United Kingdom. On this issue, communists all the way back to Marx have always had a clear side for Irish separation.

To reject this historic Marxist position, the Theses raises the specter of a genocide of the Protestants. This is another straw man argument. The Catholics do not want to drive the Protestants into the sea; they want to drive the British Empire out, a position that the Theses supposedly shares. Something we seem to forget is that there are Protestants who live in the Republic of Ireland. Were they put in camps and exterminated? No, they were not, because the existence of a Protestant minority—unlike the existence of the Palestinians for Israel—poses no existential threat to the Irish nation since they are part of the Irish nation. It is entirely false and quite reactionary to posit that a united Ireland would necessarily or even likely lead to a genocide of the Protestants.

One of the most outrageous statements in the Theses is that “the communalism/nationalism of the Protestants has a defensive character and is not the chauvinism of a great power.” This is wrong in so many ways. First of all, it is simply false historically. Protestants have never been oppressed in Ireland, and it is the Catholics who have always been the oppressed. There is nothing defensive about Protestant communalism. But also, it is self-evidently absurd to argue that so-called Protestant nationalism, which is expressed through British imperialist royalism, is not great power chauvinism! If this is not the ideology of great power chauvinism, then what is?

Dodging the Hard Question

Beyond explicitly opposing the reunification of Ireland, the Theses rejects in fact one of the main political tasks in Northern Ireland: fighting to break the Protestant working class from British imperialism and royalism. This is an essential condition for the unity of the working class, yet the “Theses on Ireland” does not so much as attempt to make an argument as to why Protestant workers have an interest in opposing British imperialism.

The thing is, there is a quite straightforward argument to make as to why British imperialism is bad for the Protestants. Just look at Northern Ireland—it is utterly devastated. The cause of this devastation is not the sectarian conflict but the City of London, which has also devastated the rest of Britain. Protestants just like everyone else on these Isles have an interest in fighting British imperialism for their own self-preservation.

Of course, it would be much easier to break Protestants from British imperialism on the basis of an internationalist revolutionary program rather than a Catholic-tinged nationalist one. This is one reason why it is essential that communists fight against the hold of the nationalists on the struggle for a United Ireland. But since the Theses rejects the very cause which animates Irish republicans, it of course cannot even begin to offer a program that could challenge the nationalists’ leadership of the Irish working class.

What we have instead is pure Labourite economism. The Theses expects Catholic and Protestant workers to unite on the basis of economic demands and certain democratic rights, but not based on support to Irish national freedom. The thing is that the Catholics will never abandon their struggle for reunification. And nor should they. As for the Protestants, if they are broken from their support to the British Empire and face an Irish workers movement which extends a fraternal hand, there will be no real basis to oppose Irish reunification. This is the only way true proletarian unity can be built.

South Africa

What Is the Task of Trotskyists in South Africa?

ICL Presentation by Mansa Kaur

That the International Bolshevik Tendency is itself “adrift,” or clueless, so to speak, is exposed in a rather embarrassing manner in your article assessing the debate on the national question between our two organizations in Australia last year. In this article, titled “Spartacists Adrift” (3 September 2024), you treat the Democratic Party in the U.S. and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa as essentially the same. You write: “But when a party which makes *no* attempt to represent the working class as a class—a party like the Democrats in the United States or the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa—then that party is fundamentally bourgeois, and critical support or a vote in no way leads in the direction of class consciousness” (emphasis original). This, you say, is knowing “how to draw the class line.”

This, I say, is the utmost ignorance about South Africa, and frankly, a healthy dose of contempt toward the existing state of consciousness of a sizeable section of the black masses in South Africa. But most egregiously, it is a capitulation of scandalous proportions to U.S. imperialism. Just look at what Trump had to say about the EFF and its leader, Julius Malema, when Ramaphosa came to the White House a few months ago. More than any argument I can make, this shows exactly why statements such as yours are an outright absurdity. Any self-proclaimed Marxist group that equates a petty-bourgeois black nationalist party from South Africa that talks about land expropriations with the Democrats, one of two parties of U.S. imperialism and genocide, is never going to be taken seriously by anyone, *let alone* a black militant in South Africa.

The entire approach of the IBT, alongside those in the Spartacist family who cling to the past, is a perversion of permanent revolution. In the rest of this presentation, I will defend our reorientation on South Africa as the type of perspective necessary to advance the interests of the black masses, in opposition to our old and your current perspective, which has absolutely nothing revolutionary about it; in fact, it is an obstacle to the fight for Trotskyism in South Africa.

For National Liberation and Black Proletarian Power!

The founding issue of *AmaBolsheviki Amnyama* lays out our perspective for South Africa as follows:

“The main task of communists in South Africa is to fight for revolutionary proletarian leadership of the liberation struggle, in counterposition to the black nationalists and in competition with them, by demonstrating to the black masses that only such a leadership is capable of advancing their struggle for national and social emancipation and taking it to victory.”

Our *general* task in South Africa is to compete with the black nationalists for *leadership* of the black masses. How we apply this is a concrete question, which I will come to later in my presentation. But I want to elaborate on this point a bit further: what does it mean to fight for leadership and compete against the nationalists? For now, we will put the question of the size of our forces aside and consider the historic tasks confronting Trotskyists in South Africa.

To fight for leadership means to enter the fray, put forward a course of action that propels the struggle forward, and in the course of events show how the nationalists hold back this struggle and act as a constant brake on it, trampling on the aspirations of the masses. The key is that we can only expose how the nationalists are a brake through a class-independent strategy flowing from the historic interests of our class. If all we do is stand on the sidelines, write journalism about the bankruptcy of those who have the allegiance of the masses and make grand

proclamations, we will convince no one. Why listen to the tiny Trotskyists when Malema today or Mandela then was able to rally millions?

What is the implication of rejecting this perspective of competing with the black nationalists? It helps to be concrete about South African politics. That the ANC today, after three decades of administering neo-apartheid and despite being hated by large layers of the population, is *still* in charge is due to the absence of a force that could put forward a perspective able to expose the vacillations of radical black nationalism and draw the lessons of the struggle against apartheid.

That for many years it was the EFF that posed the only serious challenge to the ANC is an expression of the lack of a force to fuse the struggle against national humiliation with the struggle for social development in opposition to white monopoly capital and imperialism. Instead of such a force, we have the emergence of yet another black nationalist party headed by Zuma, the MK. If revolutionary words were enough, comrades, we would not be in this state in a country where the energy of a most militant proletariat is being sapped by these misleaders.

But in what *exactly* consists the difference between old and new Spartacism? We understand that the task is to *champion* the national struggle and democratic demands, to be the most vociferous proponents of this just and legitimate cause while putting forward a class-independent perspective for their achievement. In other words, for proletarian leadership of democratic struggles. This approach is the only path that can fuse national and social liberation—the essence of the Trotskyist program.

You, on the other hand, while acknowledging that the “national struggle is key to revolution in the neocolonies,” dismiss the movement *in deeds* owing to its non-proletarian character or “bourgeois demands,” and in so doing stand aside from the movement, leaving the black nationalists in charge and thus undermining the struggle for revolution! This has nothing to do with the method of permanent revolution.

If the masses continue to be in thrall to petty-bourgeois leaders, such as the ANC then, or the EFF and MK today, then how will the communists use the national struggle to advance revolution? This is the key question: *how to use the national struggle to advance revolution*. I want to substantiate my claim by turning to how the old ICL and the organizations to come out of it *rejected* the fight for the Freedom Charter at the height of the struggle against apartheid.

Communists Should Have Fought to Implement the Freedom Charter!

The Freedom Charter is a radical democratic program adopted by the ANC in 1955, when it was turning toward radical populism following the coming to power of the apartheid government in 1948. The Charter advanced demands such as one person one vote, equality before the law, equal national rights for all groups, abolition of the color bar, an end to restrictions on land ownership on a racial basis, redivision of the land among those who work it, a national minimum wage and a 40-hour workweek, an end to child labor and much more. There is *not one objectionable thing* in the Freedom Charter, especially if you look at it from the point of view of black workers living under apartheid. These demands touched every aspect of their existence.

The old ICL tradition rejected the fight to implement the Freedom Charter based on the argument that it *limits the proletariat to a bourgeois program* and subordinates it to the nationalists. So, what we have is a declaration by the pure and principled Trotskyists that even though there is nothing wrong with the demands, they are nonetheless *bourgeois* and thus unsupportable because we are the “intransigent opponents” of the bourgeoisie. We will not fight for your Freedom Charter, say the Trotskyists to the black masses. Instead, we will fight for a socialist program. (What and when and how? That is another matter.) But we are with you in your national struggle and will await the day that it becomes the lever for revolution. (Again, how and when? We do not know.) This approach is utterly sterile from head to toe.

First, consider what it would take to implement the Freedom Charter: a struggle against the white bourgeoisie and the imperialists, which would itself show the limitations of the radical black nationalists in terms of their willingness and capacity to implement it. For the revolutionaries to refuse to wage this struggle *ensured* that the black nationalists remained in charge of the national and social aspirations of the black masses. It is *this* that ensured the political subordination of the proletariat to its bourgeoisie.

In contrast, if revolutionaries had championed the Freedom Struggle and at every turn pushed forward the struggle for its implementation, this would have shown how the nationalists are an obstacle and would have given the Trotskyists a real basis to fight for leadership of the national struggle on the basis of an independent program. *The ANC did indeed betray*. But no Marxist force was in a position to exploit this betrayal. As Trotsky explained in the Transitional Program: “It is impossible merely to reject the democratic programme; it is imperative that in the struggle the masses outgrow it.” The way for the masses to outgrow it is for a conscious force to demonstrate this in deeds, not by making sterile denunciations from the sidelines.

Gutting the Method of Lenin and Trotsky in Favor of Formalism

The other proof you cite of our degeneration is our critical support to the EFF in the last elections. Given that the IBT has not published an actual article laying out a developed critique of our position, I am basing myself on the remarks made by your comrades at the debate published in “Spartacists Adrift.” Again, these betray not only a cluelessness about class dynamics in South Africa but, crucially, an ultra-formalist approach to the question of the class line and the popular front. Incidentally, these two problems are not divorced from one another but are mere reflections of the same problem: rigidity that masquerades as Marxism.

On this question, you accuse us of burying the class line due to our supposed eagerness to tail nationalists. Your comrade notes, rather casually:

“Sure, you claim the EFF can’t implement their program, and communists can exploit their vacillations and betrayals, but you’re still calling workers to fight for a bourgeois program, rather than raising an independent class position.”

I want to pause here and just ask: Did any of you bother to look at what this “bourgeois program” was, what the balance of forces was, the mood of the black masses? What in your opinion was the class line in these elections? I would be surprised if you could even answer what was actually *posed by these elections!*

I want to lay out the concretes and our approach in order to impart to you the utter sterility of your orthodoxy. For the first time since 1994, the future of the Tripartite Alliance was in question. There was no independent force in the elections, and class struggle was, and remains, at an ebb. The right-wing DA and the radical populist EFF were contenders for an alliance with the ANC. The white bourgeoisie and imperialists had made crystal-clear that they would be against an EFF victory.

In the minds of workers, the choice was between more austerity in an alliance with the right-wing DA and the EFF’s radical version of the Freedom Charter. *Objectively*, the class line was between the radical demands of their Freedom Charter on the one hand and the forces that in one way or another promised to uphold or worsen the status quo.

The South African left cannot deal with the EFF, either ignoring it or being sucked into it. Furthermore, we are insignificant and this itself constitutes an important element in the situation into which we seek to intervene. In this *concrete reality*, we were confronted with the question of how to break the most advanced elements away from black nationalism and to the need for an independent working-class party.

So, we said vote EFF, they have supportable demands—for instance, the expropriation of South Africa’s land without compensation for equal redistribution and use; nationalization of mines, banks and other strategic sectors of the economy, without compensation; free quality healthcare, education, houses and sanitation, etc. Of course these are supportable! But we lay out exactly *why* the EFF cannot achieve these demands and why to be successful the struggle needs an alternative strategy, a strategy that we indeed provide! Instead of dealing with the substance of our political arguments, the high and mighty IBT dismisses this by saying “sure”—hardly an intelligent attempt. For you, the EFF is a bourgeois party, so any vote to it is a crime. Gone are the considerations of where the consciousness of workers is, what it would actually take to achieve those demands—i.e., a struggle against the entire social fabric of South African society. No. What is paramount is the realm of pure principles.

This is not Trotsky’s method but one of stupid ultraleftism. Here is what Trotsky had to say on the entry into the Guomindang in a 1 November 1937 letter to Harold Isaacs:

“The entering in itself in 1922 was not a crime, possibly not even a mistake, especially in the south, under the assumption that the Kuomintang at this time had a number of workers and the young Communist party was weak and composed almost entirely of intellectuals.... In this case the entry would have been an episodic step to independency, analogous to a certain degree to your entering the Socialist Party. The question is *what was their purpose in entering, and what was their subsequent policy?*” (emphasis added)

The popular front is not merely a formal organizational alliance or vote but the *political liquidation* of the proletarian program. The crime of the popular front is political subordination to alien forces. I ask the IBT: in what consists this political subordination? On what would you base your opposition to the seven pillars of the EFF’s Freedom Charter? Are you really so arrogant as to say to black workers in South Africa that land expropriation or nationalization of the mines is *bourgeois* and therefore not supportable? I would hope not.

But how bankrupt is the alternative, if you say these are supportable but we will not fight for these demands in action. That would be confusing and make you look silly. So what we did was to say yes, these are good, fight for these, but the EFF will not be able to achieve them and you need an alternative strategy. And we made actual political arguments to that effect and provided elements of a strategy to advance the struggle using class-struggle means. What is your political rebuttal to any of these? *Nothing*. All you have is formulas that you wave around like a talisman.

Comrades, there is an important distinction between a popular front that has been *consummated*, i.e., the Tripartite Alliance, and one that has not, i.e., the would-be alliance between the EFF and the ANC. The EFF has yet to betray the black masses. In the lead-up to the elections, Malema insisted that any bloc would be on the basis of the seven pillars, not on rejecting or gutting them. It is a question of who is the rider and who is the horse. Marxists must take these distinctions into account and not merely throw around red verbiage. If we ignore this point, then the October government of the Bolsheviks with the SRs would also be a popular front! Do you condemn the October government as a popular front, comrades?

Such are the implications of the old Spartacist approach to the national question. If you wish to claim this legacy, then, comrades, by all means it is yours. We do not want it.

South Africa: IBT/ICL discussions on the national question

IBT presentation by Barbara Dorn

In contrast to the other areas under discussion, a developed Spartacist line on South Africa emerged only in the 1990s, well after the period of revolutionary Spartacism. Even the degenerated ICL of the time remained capable of putting forward what we consider a respectable approximation of a program based in permanent revolution for South Africa.

But alongside the new program put forward in *Spartacist* No. 68, two ICL sections in non-imperialist countries, South Africa and Mexico, denounced *all* their previous writings and launched new journals with different names—in South Africa *AmaBolsheviki Amnyama* (The Black Bolshevik). And it is in the non-imperialist countries that the problems with your new orientation are most starkly revealed.

So, we don't need to tell you that your program for South Africa has dramatically changed. What we do need to tell you is how wrong your new program is and how close it takes you to the nationalists you claim to oppose, involving capitulation to bourgeois nationalist forces and programs, despite all the rhetoric about building an independent working-class alternative to the nationalist leadership. You say:

“To win the masses away from the nationalists, however, communists must push forward the national-democratic and anti-imperialist struggles, showing at every stage that breaking with nationalism is a necessary condition for victory.”

You claim to want to break with nationalism, but your argument is that the road to socialism *always* lies through the national-democratic struggle, which you have determined in advance and in generalized terms is the “lever” or “motor force” for revolution. This is an essentially stagist conception that makes it difficult to distinguish yourselves from the nationalists, as we will see.

Marxists can and do raise democratic demands that nationalists will also raise. Some of those democratic demands will cut across imperialist oppression. In that sense, we may find ourselves in temporary, shifting blocs with bourgeois-nationalist forces—anti-imperialist “united fronts,” if you will. But we do not (as you have done) project some sort of strategic bloc with the bourgeoisie (“*the* anti-imperialist united front”) in which we can “expose” them by being more consistently “national liberationist” than they are. We insist that the *real* struggle is *not* national-democratic or even anti-imperialist but anti-capitalist—a class-struggle orientation that targets not just the imperialists but their bourgeois-nationalist lackeys in the non-imperialist countries. Depending on the context, that can put revolutionaries on a completely opposite track to national-democratic forces (for instance in Ukraine today where Ukrainian nationalism is more often than not used as a cover for support to Western imperialism).

Your political adaptation to nationalism in South Africa is revealed in the three principal criticisms you make of your past selves in your article “[Spartacist South Africa Refounded](#)” (*AmaBolsheviki Amnyama* No. 1).

The first charge is “rejecting the Freedom Charter.” It is absolutely true that the Freedom Charter is a concrete representation of the broken promises of the ANC, which bargained away most of its content in return for seats in government. We too call for nationalizations, redistribution of land, adequate healthcare, housing, jobs and schools, and for equality of all races within South Africa—none of which has been obtained under the ANC and its various bloc partners. But raising these *demands* is an entirely different thing from supporting this bourgeois programmatic *document*, which was written to carry out a national rather than social overthrow of the existing order, to enable the building of a cross-class coalition, and to lead the South African working class *away* from socialist revolution. This is how bourgeois nationalism works. We don't want to

“push [it] forward,” but to *replace* it with class struggle. The task of revolutionaries is to break any supportable concrete democratic and economic demands from the constraints of a bourgeois program or bourgeois organizations and present them as part of a transitional program for workers’ power.

As you say, the ANC has already betrayed the Freedom Charter. Do we need to go through that again? You may say that only a proletarian revolution could implement the Freedom Charter but what you are doing is preparing the working class to develop not the revolutionary socialist consciousness it requires to achieve its democratic and economic goals (ie, *more* than the Freedom Charter) but the *nationalist-reformist* consciousness that will ensure it fails to achieve them. This is not Trotskyism.

Secondly, you next denounce the old SSA for “opposing nation-building.”

It is worth looking at what the old SSA meant when they wrote a polemic against nation-building in the 1994 “Letter to the New Unity Movement,” published in the pamphlet [Polemics on the South African Left](#). What the NUM meant by “nation-building” was a political project to forge South African blacks, belonging to various different intermingled sub-national peoples, into a new nation in the Leninist sense.

In practice this took the form of opposition to the rights of nations and peoples (in South Africa and elsewhere in the neocolonial world) to self-determination. The NUM opposed any form of federal or regional autonomy for the peoples of South Africa as a divide-and-conquer tactic akin to the Bantustans of the apartheid era. Indeed they articulate the construction of a South African black nation as the *primary* task of socialists in the country. They say: “anti-imperialism is not simply class struggle, but nation-class struggle. It means ‘We build a nation’.”

Against this, the old South African Spartacists advocated “the Leninist principle that overcoming national, racial and religious divisions among the toiling masses demands that the communist vanguard fight for the democratic rights and national equality of all peoples.” They advanced the traditional Leninist position, advocating the linguistic and cultural rights of minorities, support for national liberation struggles under certain conditions and the right to regional autonomy in a future worker’s state in South Africa as key components of forging unity among South African workers. It should be clear that the old SSA were in the right on this question. Revolutionaries must support the rights of national minorities against chauvinistic attempts to weld them together into a single people, which is what the NUM apparently meant by “nation-building.”

It is therefore startling when you come out in favor of nation-building, calling it “a just struggle” and demanding the fight for “a revolutionary proletarian leadership” of that nation-building project. No Leninist would be against the *voluntary* amalgamation of South Africa’s black peoples into a nation, but it is not a precondition for socialist revolution.

The most charitable interpretation here is that your South African section simply doesn’t understand what the old SSA was arguing against. Otherwise they are arguing for a pan-black unity project against the rights of South Africa’s national minorities. We remind you again what Lenin said: “Combat all national oppression? Yes, of course! Fight for any kind of national development, for ‘national culture’ in general?—Of course not” (“Critical Remarks on the National Question,” 1913).

Either way, it is clear that in your quest for nation-building you disappear the complexity of the national question within South Africa in a fog of generalizations. You fail not only to recognize the rights of different black minorities, such as the Zulu population in Natal, but also those of the Coloureds and Indians, distinct yet heterogeneous and class-divided populations that were designated as intermediate layers between blacks and whites in the apartheid racial hierarchy. The first issue of your new journal mentions the word Coloured exactly *once*. The second issue doesn’t refer to them *at all*.

What that one rather pro-forma mention of the word Coloured does is make it clear that when you use the word “black” you do not also include Coloureds and Indians, as is sometimes the habit of those who fight for the unity of the non-white population (Steve Biko for instance). Your “black liberation” and “black-centered workers’ government” disappears these other oppressed peoples. Your “nation building” is not Leninism but the *opposite* of the Bolsheviks’ nuanced approach to the national question related to the various oppressed groups within a country. As with Quebec, as with Ireland, your perspective of national liberation turns out to be a “positive” perspective of nation-building that downgrades the rights of workers from other minorities.

The third sin of the old SSA was apparently “dismissing the contradictions of black nationalism.” Instead, you say: “Only by grasping and sharpening these contradictions is it possible to expose this role and drive a wedge between the black masses and the petty-bourgeois nationalist tops.”

What strikes us here is the similarity of this language to the way that the Trotskyist movement, and occasionally yourselves, speak about social democracy. Bourgeois nationalism, for you, seems not really to be unambiguously bourgeois after all, but somehow expresses class contradictions—as might be seen in a bourgeois workers’ party.

You have *collapsed* the difference between working-class and bourgeois parties. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is the *archetypal* radical bourgeois-nationalist party. You even compared it to the early ANC yourselves. So it still held some surprise when later that year you called to *vote* for it on the basis of the illusions of black workers in its program for land, jobs, and an end to load-shedding. You did this with no effort to justify it theoretically, as if it were the most natural thing in the world rather than overturning a century of Trotskyist principle. You’re not even embarrassed!

As Trotsky noted in referring to the Comintern’s disastrous support to the bourgeois-nationalist Kuomintang in China in the mid-1920s, to sow illusions in any promise or posturing from the party of an oppressed bourgeoisie is to give it: “...the opportunity (with our assistance) to dupe the workers and peasants, more efficiently, more easily, and more completely to throw sand in their eyes—until the first opportunity, such as was offered in Shanghai” ([The Third International After Lenin](#), 1928).

The tactic of critical support for a social-democratic party can be used by communists to highlight the class contradictions between the working-class base of the party and its bourgeois program. However, the contradictions you seek to “expose” by voting for the EFF are *within* the bourgeois program of a bourgeois party. The lesson you are teaching workers is that there is no qualitative dividing line between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, since what *really* counts is not class struggle *per se* but pushing the democratic “national liberation” struggle to its logical conclusion.

We see how this happened. Of course Marxists will support struggles for land, jobs and an end to load shedding. You got involved in the entirely justified campaign to defend Xolani Khoza, but your new political framework does not give you the toolkit to carry out a bloc for action without also offering electoral support to your bloc partners. You have collapsed the fight for anti-racist demands as part of a transitional program into a generic call for taking leadership of “the struggle.”

You don’t use the phrase “black bourgeoisie,” but instead the generic term “black elites.” Notably you have also started identifying white capital in South Africa as straightforwardly an arm of US imperialism, while the black elite is merely its victim.

Which leads to the (meaningless at best) call to “[Defend South Africa against Trump](#)” (i.e., US imperialism) as part of a struggle for national liberation (*Workers Vanguard* No. 1185). South Africa is a neocolony, economically oppressed by imperialism but with legal autonomy since 1931 and republican independence from the British crown since 1961. Even if white capital were

merely an extension of US imperialism, the black majority has governed the state since 1994. To remind you what Lenin wrote:

“The right of nations to self-determination means only the right to independence in a political sense, the right to free, political secession from the oppressing nation....

“... [F]inance capital, in its striving towards expansion, will ‘freely’ buy and bribe the freest, most democratic and republican government and the elected officials of any country, however ‘independent’ it may be. The domination of finance capital, as of capital in general, cannot be abolished by any kind of reforms in the realm of political democracy, and self-determination belongs wholly and exclusively to this realm.”

—[Lenin: The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination](#) (1916)

Self-determination, or national liberation, is a bourgeois-democratic political demand, already achieved by South Africa as a whole in relation to imperialism. If you want to argue that you mean full liberation from any form of imperialist oppression, then you are talking about proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat—precisely the struggle that your anti-imperialist united front and votes for bourgeois parties will sabotage.

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