**UNDERSTANDING THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL**

David North, a supporter of the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote one of the most comprehensive histories of the Fourth International in his work: ‘The Heritage we Defend’ (Labour Publications, Detroit 1988).North considers that the criticism of Trotsky and the Fourth International is an indication that this standpoint is an expression of demoralisation and the opportunist rejection of the revolutionary legacy of the struggle against Marxism that was carried out by Trotsky and the forces of revolutionary Marxism. But the question that immediately arises is whether North’s evaluation of the views of what had been the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International is able to uphold the principles of revolutionary Marxism in a consistent manner. The problematical issue that North does not resolve is that if the tendencies of opportunism within the Workers Revolutionary party are defined by its increasing elitist and pragmatic policies in the 1960’s why was there not a struggle by the other organisations associated with the International Committee to oppose these developments. The point is that such parties associated in an uncritical manner with the Socialist Labour League of the UK and then with the Workers Revolutionary party. Only the political crisis of the WRP in 1985 led to the International Committee asserting its independence, and so the book of North must in some manner justify the inability of the International Committee to uphold what were principled politics. Instead it has to be accepted by North that the International Committee was a tame expression of the politics of the WRP, and so this form of the organisation of the Fourth International was based on the domination of a national party. Instead of accepting responsibility for the apparent ability of the WRP to uphold opportunist politics consistently since the 1960’s, North instead implies that the Workers League of the USA was able to defend what he considers to be the principled positions of Trotskyism: “Between 1982 and 1984, the Workers League attempted to engage the Workers Revolutionary Party in a discussion of both its political line and its theoretical method. It produced an extensive analysis of Healy’s distortion of dialectical materialism, as well as the WRP’s reversion to a position historically identified with Pabloite revisionism.”(p12) Thus the apparent defence of authentic Trotskyism by the Workers League implies that the issue is not the domination of an international Marxist organisation by a single national group, and the related lack of democratic organisational procedures, but instead the apparent process of opportunist degeneration of the leadership of the International Committee and the WRP. In this manner the approach of what is revolutionary Marxism is being defended and upheld by the Workers League, who in this manner express the essence of principled politics. Therefore, the continuity of the Fourth International is being defended against the tendency for opportunism that has emerged within the WRP and the IC. In this perspective there is no inclination to engage in any thoughtful process of self-criticism or to explain why the apparently opportunist politics of Healy and Banda was tolerated over a prolonged period of time. Instead we have to assume that people like North were able to uphold the continuity of Trotskyism and as a result emerged to defeat the forces of opportunism in 1985-86. But this perspective implies that the leadership of organisations in the International Committee like the Workers League had no responsibility for the acceptance of policies that they recognised were opportunist and so undermined the realisation of the aim of attaining success in the class struggle. Instead it has to be recognised that the assertion of leadership of the International Committee by the Workers League only occurred as a result of the development of the political crisis in the WRP, and as a result they benefitted from that situation in terms of the rejection of what had been the hierarchy in the various organisations of the IC. The point is that the WL had not led a principled struggle for the transformation of the IC and instead had restricted its criticisms to a collection of articles. This meant that in general terms the WL had accepted the validity of the leadership of the IC and WRP as the expression of the continuity of the Fourth International and the heritage of the struggle against opportunism in the 1950’s and 1960’s. The point is that the WL benefitted in an organisational manner from the crisis that developed in the WRP in the mid 1980’s, and as a result of this situation began to interpret the history of the IC in terms that justified what became the leadership of that organisation by the role of the WL. In that sense the continuity of the Fourth International was carried on by the WL because it had challenged the opportunist degeneration of the WRP, which had repudiated the legacy of the IC and its activity of opposing the process of opportunist degeneration within the Fourth International. Thus, the standpoint of North and the WL is to suggest that in some sense they express the principled continuation of the approach of the Fourth International against the tendency for opportunism.

But we will try to indicate that this standpoint is an expression of an illusory approach because of the failure of the Fourth International to revise the initial understanding of the character of Stalinism in the period since 1945. The point is that when the FI was initially united in one organisation it consistently failed to flexibly and principally come to terms with new and changing events, whether this was the character of the second world war or the expansion of Stalinism. In other words, the problem was the continual justification of dogmatism as the basis to understand what was considered to be principled politics. The result of this situation was the increasingly rigid expression of forms of dogmatism in order to oppose any expression of opportunism. This aspect is not recognised by North who instead defines the initial tendency of opportunist degeneration within the FI to the role of Pabloism: “Pablo was working, whether fully conscious of it or not, for the destruction of the Fourth International as an independent revolutionary tendency in the workers movement. His programme repudiated not only Trotsky’s characterisation of Stalinism as an agency of imperialism, but also called into question the revolutionary role of the working class and rejected the Lenin-Trotsky theory of the revolutionary party. In place of the conscious struggle for Marxism against the prevailing and spontaneously evolving forms of bourgeois consciousness as the basis for building the revolutionary party of the proletariat, Pabloism proceeded from a crude objectivism which assigned to the existing leadership of the mass workers movement – first and foremost, the Stalinist bureaucracies – a decisive historical role in the victory of socialism.”(p19) The problem of this comment is not its validity, which can be said to be credible, but instead the apportioning of blame to Pablo for the crisis of the FI. The point is that the FI was unable to understand the post-war period as the process of the stabilisation of power in terms of the formation of the cold war bloc of the USA and the USSR. Instead the perspective of the continuation of the destabilisation of the situation of power because of the prolonged crisis of capitalism and imperialism was upheld in a dogmatic manner and this approach became the basis to consider that in a distorted manner Stalinism was the expression of the imperatives of international proletarian revolution. Therefore the actual problem was not primarily that of Pabloism but was instead the rigid character of the post-war perspectives of the FI, but if North was to uphold this view it would mean criticising the leadership of the American Socialist Workers party who also defended these rigid views about the crisis of capitalism and Stalinism. So, instead of outlining the problem of dogmatism within the FI, North has to blame the views of Pablo, and as a result of this standpoint he can praise James Cannon for upholding the principled character of Trotskyism. In this manner, North can oppose the view of Banda who considers that Healy and Cannon did not oppose Pablo in a principled manner. But the actual problem was the rigid adherence to the understanding of Stalinism as an expression of the character of the USSR as a degenerated workers state which led to the justification of the unprincipled conception that the Stalinist bureaucracy was able to act in a distorted progressive manner in terms of the formation of deformed workers states, or the view that in some sense the USSR was able to act as the agency of proletarian revolution. The result of adherence to this conception led Pablo to extend it and to suggest that the USSR was leading the process of the struggle for world proletarian revolution in bureaucratic terms. In order to emphatically reject this unprincipled approach would mean repudiating the view that the USSR was a type of degenerated workers state, and so could not form deformed workers states. But this is not what North is proposing to do because of his rigid acceptance of Trotsky’s conception of the character of the USSR, and the apparent elaboration of this approach by Mandel and Pablo. Hence in a one-sided manner instead North criticises the apparent unprincipled revisions carried out by Pablo. This means that North does not agree with Natalia Sedova who called for a new appraisal of the character of the USSR in the post-war period. We would also add that this theoretical development had to occur alongside the understanding that world capitalism had been able to stabilise in 1945 and so the concept that Stalinism was in some bureaucratic manner facilitating a process of world socialist revolution was completely illusory.

The limitations of the Fourth International does not mean that Banda was right to consider that it had effectively become defunct by the early 1950’s. Instead it was still an important expression of the aims of world socialist revolution, and the very Open Letter of James Cannon in 1953 was a precise and principled statement of what was meant by the aims of revolutionary Marxism. But Cannon made a mistake in supporting the organisational continuation of the role of the American Socialist Workers Party and other organisations within the existing Fourth International. This mistake meant that it become difficult to struggle to transform the FI in principled terms and instead it became a bulwark of Pabloism, as expressed by the views of Mandel. This development was an indication of the insular approach of Cannon and his rejection of an orientation to the FI. Such a situation meant that the aims of revolutionary Marxism was only upheld in a limited manner by the forces of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The result was that the important event of the Cuban revolution led to a crisis of the IC, the USA SWP considered that this event had led to the formation of a healthy workers state whilst the other organisations could only recognise the development of a bourgeois democratic revolution. In actuality Cuba was structurally assimilated into the social character of the USSR, which could not be considered any type of workers state. Therefore, the limitations of the Trotskyist theory of the USSR had ultimately facilitated the important political crisis of the IC in the early 1960s concerning the Cuban revolution. The result of this development was that the IC became dominated by the Socialist Labour League of the UK and its dogmatic politics. Effectively this situation meant that the continuity of the FI was over, and instead the forces of the FI became differentiated into many separate and diverse organisations. It was necessary to develop a thoughtful understanding of Stalinism and the post-war period if the revival of Trotskyism was to occur. But North does not recognise these issues because to him the IC was and is the continuity of revolutionary Marxism. This view is problematical.

The problem with North’s approach is that he assumes the inherent principled and superior character of the IC which is considered to be able to generally understand political developments in a manner that upholds the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism. Thus, the question of what goes wrong is defined in terms of a betrayal of the legacy of the IC. Hence, North is not able to examine in a perceptive manner the history of the IC tradition, and instead that is considered to be upheld and maintained despite the problem of opportunist limitations and reverses. Thus, North is not able to explain the various flaws of the politics of the IC in terms of the importance of the influence of theoretical problems. Instead the question becomes the betrayal of the legacy of the IC for various opportunist reasons that can only be understood in terms of the various character flaws of its major leaders. Hence there is a rigid contrast between periods of the heroic adherence to the principles of revolutionary Marxism compared to limitations caused by the influence of forms of opportunism and the effective demoralisation of some of the major leaders of the IC. Therefore, these issues become resolved by the development of the ascendency of a principled leadership – such as North himself – that are able to assume the mantle of a situation of political dominance within the IC. The result of this development is the rectification of the opportunist errors that occurred in the period of the leaders who became unprincipled centrists, and as a result the IC in its ‘pure condition’ is defined as being inherently principled and able to uphold the aims of a revolutionary form of Marxism. The result of this viewpoint is criticism of Banda because he does not understand the ability of principled Trotskyism to understand the primary basis of social reality, which is the international class struggle. It is true that Banda upholds a demoralised view based on the apparently inherently unprincipled character of Trotskyism because of its opposition to Stalinism, but this does not mean that the IC has an inherent ability to explain what Stalinism is in a satisfactory and principled manner. The point is that the conception of the essentially adequate character of the IC, apart from periods of degeneration caused by the role of various leaders, is not able to explain the profound theoretical and political limitations of Trotskyism because of a serious inability to explain the character of Stalinism in the post-war period. This issue is connected to the dogmatism of the post-war FI which is unable to recognise the recovery of capitalism and the onset of the economic boom. Thus, it is the justification of dogmatism that causes the serious theoretical and political limitations of the FI, and the result of this limitation is an adaptation to the view that Stalinism has acquired progressive features. Instead of this understanding North exclusively blames Pablo and Mandel for the process of degeneration of the FI, and because of this subjective approach is able to deny the necessity of theoretical clarification of the period since the time of Trotsky.

The point is that the Trotskyists did not adequately come to terms with the period of the second world war and as a result did not understand the significance of the reactionary character and role of German fascism. One of the central tasks of this period was to develop the ability of the working class of the bourgeois democratic countries to oppose fascism and in this manner promote the aim of the formation of a worker’s government that could carry on this struggle in the most principled manner. This understanding meant that the revolutionary defeatism advocated by Lenin at the time of the first world war would have to be modified and instead moderated in terms of the critical defence of the countries of bourgeois democracy, but without any political support for the governments of these nations. The task was to promote the possibility of anti-fascist war which did develop in the countries occupied by the fascist powers. But instead of this perspective the parties of the Fourth International unenthusiastically upheld a form of a revolutionary defeatism, and as a resulted were isolated from the working class of the UK, France and the USA. The result of this situation was demoralisation that led to the decline of the Fourth International because the situation of political malaise led to the acceptance of the view that the forces of Stalinism had become an adequate substitute for the role of the working class and so were able to create deformed workers states in a bureaucratic manner. This standpoint led to a questioning of the feasibility and relevance of the Fourth International because it became considered that the forces of Stalinism could act as a substitute for the role of the working class in the process of the overthrow of capitalism. North would dispute this analysis and claim that the American Socialist Workers Party under the leadership of James Cannon was able to adopt a principled position on the second world war and then understand the expansion of Stalinism without adapting to the opportunist formulations of Pablo. In other words, the legacy of Cannon was the authentic expression of the standpoint of principled Trotskyism and so was unable to uphold the approach of revolutionary Marxism despite changing and complex circumstances. This means that Banda’s criticism of Cannon constitutes an explicit undermining of the revolutionary traditions of the most principled forces that supported the FI. But the problem is that the views of the FI in the period 1940-53 were based on the influence of Pablo and Mandel, and not Cannon. It was only in 1953 that Cannon opposed the views of Pabloism in his Open Letter, but he did not propose to openly contest this approach at the forthcoming world congress of the FI. This meant that the leadership of the FI consisting of Pablo and Mandel was not effectively contested and instead the intention was made to form an alternative organised based on a limited number of groups. The issue becomes whether North is able to address these objections to the apparent limitations of the apparently inconsistent attempt to uphold principled Trotskyism in the context of a rejection of an effective struggle for the leadership of the actual Fourth International. Instead a new organisation of a few groups was created on the basis of a brief ‘Open Letter’. In actuality the leadership of the FI by Pablo was accepted and accommodated to. The point being made is that the failure to create an alternative to Pabloism was actually based on the justification of a sectarian break with the Fourth International in terms of the creation of a new type of organisation that was reluctant to oppose the views of Pablo and Mandel in terms of open discussion within a single grouping. Instead the adherents of Cannon’s Open Letter justified the creation of a new type of organisation. But this was not an expression of a decisive decent into centrism as Workers Power claim because the Open Letter did in an effective manner continue to uphold the principles and aims of revolutionary Marxism and the necessity for principled leadership in the class struggle. But there was an outstanding issue which was the failure to establish a credible understanding of Stalinism based on its post-war durability. The choice was between the conception of the USSR as the distorted expression of the process of world revolution – which was adopted by the Pabloites – or the elaboration of a more principled understanding of Stalinism that was able to uphold the connection of the class struggle to socialism in a more credible manner. The problem was that the USA SWP and its allies tried to uphold the apparently contradictory tendencies of firstly, acceptance of the standpoint of bureaucratic proletarian revolution, combined with adherence to principled opposition to Stalinism. This theoretical and political tension was ultimately resolved in terms of the conception of the Chinese Communists being centrist and then by the affirmation of the genuine proletarian character of the Cuban revolution. This situation led to the realisation of the crisis of the organisations claiming to be the Fourth International because of the inability to recognise the structural assimilation of Cuba into the social character of the Soviet bloc. Thus, the era of the Fourth International was reduced to the contrasting claims of small groups. It could be argued that the role of James cannon has a major responsibility for this development because of his inability to promote principled tactics and strategy in the era of the history of the Fourth International. North contends that this issue only became apparent in the late 1950’s. We have to study whether Cannon’s opportunism is connected to possible limitations in the 1940 in relation to this defence of the aims of Marxism outlined in ‘Socialism on Trial’. (Pathfinder Press, New York 1970)

North contends that Cannon defends the principles of revolutionary Marxism in terms of an effective explanation that outlines that the responsibility of the party in the period of the onset of war is to advocate a peaceful defence of its principles of opposition to the imperialist war, but not to encourage acts of individual resistance. In his work: Socialism on Trial’, Cannon outlines how the aims of the American Socialist Workers Party are to realise the formation of a workers government that will act to end the domination of capitalism and instead establish socialism. But Cannon is aware that this perspective is not presently supported by many people in the USA. Therefore, the SWP has no effective political alternative than to strive to realise its aims by means of the role of peaceful change and so try to voluntarily persuade the workers of the superiority of socialism. Thus, it is being envisaged that the process of social change should be primarily of a political and ideological character that means that it will generally have a peaceful character. In other words, the major purpose of the development of mass support for the role of the SWP is to create the conditions for social revolution and so in that manner overcome the reactionary resistance of the forces of fascism and the national bourgeoisie. The problem that Cannon has is in explaining how a small organisation such as the SWP can become a major party with the majority of the support of the working class. Instead there is discussion about how the workers government will have to overcome the resistance of the capitalist class and in that manner establish the political conditions for the development of socialism. Thus, it is assumed that the dynamics of the class struggle will be successful and so establish the basis to establish a democratic and socialist society. This means that the aims of the SWP are outlined in rigid terms that imply the inherent possibility of success: “The purpose was to organize our forces for the more effective propagation of our ideas, with the ultimate objective that I have mentioned before, of building up a party that would be able to lead the working masses of the country to socialism by means of social revolution.”(p52) This confident type of comment is not able to accept the possibility that the inability to realise the gains of the revolutionary party might occur. Instead it is assumed that the party will be able to understand the dynamics of the class struggle in an effective manner, and so in this manner generate the possibility of certain victory. In this context it would seem that there is an inherent end of history in terms of the realisation of the victory of socialism which the party is able to understand in terms of its ability to apply the role of Marxism within social reality. This standpoint does not seem able to tackle the issues of the actual events that may occur that represent a challenge in relation to the possibility to realise the aims of socialism. For example, Cannon accepts that it is not possible for the party and the working class to prevent the development of imperialist wars and the implicit assumption that the international working class becomes divided in national terms: “Our party has always stated that it is impossible to prevent wars without abolishing the capitalist system which breeds wars. It may be possible to delay wars for a while, but eventually it is impossible to prevent wars while this system, and its conflicts of imperialist nations remains.” (p61) So there is an important contradiction in the approach of Cannon. On the one hand he assumes that the victory of socialism is inevitable, but on the other hand also insists that the working class within capitalism is not strong enough to prevent the development of inter-imperialist conflicts. But if the latter aspect is inevitable then this would suggest that the working class is not strong enough to be able to develop the social and international power to be able to challenge the domination of capitalism and imperialism. But if it could be suggested in contrasting terms that the working class can organise in both national and international terms against the prospect of imperialist wars then this development would suggest that the working class was becoming able to achieve socialism. Thus, it could be argued that the inability of the working class to oppose the outbreak of world war two was not because of any inevitability, but instead was because of the lack of an effective internationalist consciousness and practice that could have undermined the possibility of the development of this conflict.

Cannon outlines in a principled manner that the US SWP is opposed to the imperialist war conducted by the American government. The assumption being made is that any war conducted by the USA under its present political circumstances must be reactionary. Cannon is categoric that the present imperialist war of the USA does not represent a war for democracy and against fascism: “We say, that is a subterfuge, that the conflict between American imperialism and German imperialism is for the domination of the world. It is absolutely true that Hitler wants to dominate the world, but we think that it is equally true that the ruling group of American capitalists has the same idea, and we are not in favour of either of them.”(p65-66) But the problem with this perspective is that it ignores the important difference which is that whilst America is a bourgeois democratic regime, Germany is fascist. This would mean that it seems that there is a distinction that has to be explained and which could modify the position of opposition to both imperialist powers. The obvious question that becomes apparent is how can it become possible to transform the potential imperialist war of the USA into what would become a more genuine form of anti-fascist struggle. Cannon attempts to address this issue when he comments: “We consider Hitler and Hitlerism the greatest enemy of mankind. We want to wipe it off the face of the earth. The reason we do not support a declaration of war by American arms is because we do not believe the American capitalists can defat Hitler and fascism. We think that Hitler can be destroyed only by way of conducting a war under the leadership of the workers.”(p66) But the logic of this formulation implies, even if it does not suggest it directly, that the increased influence of the working class in America could provide the political justification of a critical form of defence against Germany. But instead of recognising this logic of his position, Cannon advocates the formation of a worker’s government of the USA in order to oppose fascism. In other words, the logic of Cannon’s position is to support anti-fascism under a regime of bourgeois democracy, but this is not formally substantiated because the position is defined in terms of the perspective of the establishment of a workers government as the criteria by which this approach can be upheld in principled terms. What is not recognised is that there is a precedent for the perspective that of critical support for bourgeois democracy against fascism in terms of Trotsky’s position on the Spanish civil war which maintained that it was possible to defend the view that critical support could be provided by the working class for a bourgeois democratic government against the threat of fascist counterrevolution. But instead of making this logical conclusion, Cannon uneasily upholds the position of revolutionary defeatism in relation to an inter-imperialist war between a bourgeois democratic and fascist power, and so he rejects the logical possibility of a critical defence of bourgeois democracy against fascism. The point is that this stance would not represent class collaboration because it would be based on the development of the influence and power of the working class within society to the point that a dual power situation would be established. Hence the very defence of bourgeois democracy would enhance the basis for the working class to make progress in relation to the objective of the realisation of proletarian revolution. Instead the problem with the approach of Cannon is that he tries to uphold Lenin’s approach of revolutionary defeatism as applied to the first world war, but the situation in 1939 is different because of the importance of the role of fascism. The limitations of Cannon’s approach means that he can only conceive of a war conducted by the working class against fascism when the workers have formed a workers government in the USA, but the development of the influence of the working class within bourgeois democracy would mean that such a type of war could begin to be conducted prior to the assumption of power by the working class. Therefore, the actual limitation in the approach of Cannon is that of dogmatic orthodoxy, and this problem results in the denial of a popular anti-fascist war. But the result of this rigid approach is that Cannon denies the possibility for the working class to enhance its influence within society in terms of the progressive dynamics of what would be an anti-fascist war. Consequently, Cannon advocates that the supporters of the SWP should accept the situation in terms of passively becoming part of the army and obeying orders, and that the role of the party should not be to promote dissatisfaction with the government and its military policy. Instead the most that is being advocated is the proletarian military policy, or support for the election of officers by the rank and file soldiers, and the formation of schools to train the soldiers under the conditions of trade union rights. But this would merely result in the enhancement of the capacity of the soldiers to become effective instruments of the role of an imperialist army. It would not mean that the soldiers would be able to influence the character of the war so that it became a genuine expression of the objectives of anti-fascism. Instead the actual political approach of Cannon is the apparent justification of passivity in relation to the question of the connection of the working class to the bourgeois government during the second world war.

David North suggests that the proletarian military policy was both a flexible and principled alternative to the approach of accommodation to imperialism which had been adopted by the Socialist party led by Norman Thomas. But there was an alternative to either the passivity of the proletarian military policy or uncritical support for imperialism and this was defined by a perspective that would attempt to generate the increased political strength of the working class in order to develop a situation in which it had effective ability to be able to influence the character of the war as expressing the principled objectives of anti-fascism. The proletarian military policy of Trotsky and Cannon was unable to uphold this possibility because it had little to suggest concerning the issue of how to increase the political influence of the working class in relation to the conduct of the war. This perspective was not a betrayal of the aim of the formation of a workers’ government but was instead the most effective manner in which this aim could be realised. The point being made is that support for bourgeois democracy in the second world war did not have to express class compromise but instead could be conducted in terms of the increased influence of the role of the working class within society. Instead it was the abstract character of the approach of revolutionary defeatism which meant that the workers lacked a perspective that could have enhanced their social influence in relation to the character of the war. This point was not recognised by Cannon and the SWP. Instead in an inconsistent manner what was being advocated was a position of revolutionary defeatism which suggested that there was no difference between the various imperialist countries involved in the second world war. But there was a difference because the countries based on bourgeois democracy were in opposition to fascism. This meant that it was still principled to develop a strategy based on the importance of this aspect, but instead Cannon comments: “We say that the conflict between American imperialism and German imperialism is for the domination of the world. It is absolutely true that Hitler wants to dominate the world, but we think that it is equally true that the ruling group of American capitalists has the same idea, and we are not in favour of either of them.”(p65-66) This point is true in terms of the character of the war in terms of the intentions and character of the American government. But the point is that the development of the influence and effectiveness of the working class could mean that the war can become transformed into a people’s struggle against fascism. This means that the crucial task is to generate the ability of the working class to increase its political strength to the extent that it is able to influence the policies and actions of the American government. In this manner what has started as an inter-imperialist war can become an expression of the development of a genuine struggle against fascism. This would mean the working class agitates in favour of the democratisation of the army and aspires to create important political organisations that can begin to influence the actions of the government. The result of this situation would be the creation of a form of dual power that enabled the character of the war to become transformed into a people’s struggle against fascism. This prospect would mean the repudiation of the imperialist aims of the government and instead its aims would be limited to the issue of the defeat of fascism. In contrast Cannon’s perspective of the aim of the formation of a worker’s government in order to defeat fascism is based on a passivity that accepts the working class should merely submit to the government before this possibility is realised. There is no conception of the necessity for the working class to agitate and organise in order to realise the possibility of the generation of a democratic transformation of the character of the war. Instead the most that Cannon is willing to support is the policy of the training of the soldiers by the trade unions. But if the role of the working class is still subordinated to the objectives of the American government this would merely mean that the soldiers are being trained to be the most efficient expression of the military objectives of the bourgeois state. Instead the only manner in which the character of the war could be changed would be if the workers under the influence of a revolutionary party agitated in favour of the objectives of the war being defined by the aim of the defeat of fascism. If this possibility does not occur, then it could be said with justification that the war continued to be that of an inter-imperialist character. Only the effective intervention of the working class could alter the character of the war. But instead of this perspective Cannon suggests that the workers should accept the objectives of the capitalist class in relation to the war, and then in an ambiguous and inconsistent manner suggests that only with the formation of a worker’s government would the character of the war be changed. He provides no analysis of how the development of this possibility will occur because he implies that the working class should merely accept the role of the imperialist government of the USA in the war. There is no conception of tactics or strategy that would result in the formation of a worker’s government and the realisation of the ability to conduct an anti-fascist war. There is vague mention by Cannon of the necessity of democratic change by the working class, but this approach is not connected to the situation of an imminent inter-imperialist war. In other word’s there is no elaboration of the importance of the possibility to transform the inter-imperialist war into a people’s war as a result of the democratic action of the working class. Instead the workers should submit to the present situation and then in the future in some mysterious manner it will be possible to create a worker’s government.

In a mention of the role of the working class in the Spanish revolution, Cannon implicitly outlines the strategy that should be adopted in relation to the second world war: “The workers organisations were the most aggressive opponents of the fascists. Our party in Spain, while it did not give political support to the People’s Front government, did support and participate in the military struggle to beat back the fascists, fought in the army side by side with the republicans and democrats and so on.”(p127) But this analysis is limited to the issue of the tasks of the Spanish revolution and is not applied to the issues of strategy that are raised by the second world war. The problem is that the importance of the imperialist character of the USA is utilised in a manner that seems to reject any possibility of the importance of the intervention of the working class in order to transform the character of the war. It is true that without this intervention the war remains that of being imperialist, but this is the very reason to suggest the necessity and importance of the conscious intervention of the working class in order to transform the character of the war. Cannon suggests that in relation to Spain the ability of the working class to form their own regiments changed the character of the struggle into becoming a popular opposition to fascism, so why does he not advocate this approach for the USA. The formation of regiments by the trade unions would imply the realisation of the influence of the working class concerning the character of the war. This development could occur alongside the militant mobilisation of the workers within the factories in favour of anti-fascist aims. But he does not make these conclusions from this observation about the events in Spain. Instead the advocacy of the rejection of the national defence of the USA as an imperialist power means that Cannon does not have a perspective that could enhance the ability of the working class to increase its influence within society and so in that manner create the possibility to transform the character of the imperialist war. Obviously if this development does not occur then the war remains that of imperialism, but this would mean that the SWP would have failed in what should be its objective which is to create democratic sentiment within the working class so that it is able to advance a form of politics that could result in the transformation of the inter-imperialist war into that of a peoples opposition to fascism.

Instead in vague manner, Cannon outlines the approach of the SWP as the following: “I explained the other day, that if the majority of the people decide on war, and participate in the war, our people and the people under our influence will also participate in the war. We do not sabotage the war, we do not obstruct it, but we continue to propagate our ideas, calling for a cessation of the war and calling for a change of government.”(p133-134) This comment implies that the role of the SWP is not to try and change the character of the war but instead to promote the realisation of pacifist objectives of peace as the policy of the bourgeois government, but this approach seems to deny the validity of war against fascism in a total manner. Only when a workers’ government is formed will the character of the war become changed. This passive approach denies the capacity of the working class to influence and alter the character of the war. Instead in a dogmatic manner the SWP is formally for the development of the class struggle in order to overthrow the government but in practice this perspective is not practiced and instead the members of the party accept the actuality of the war being carried out by the bourgeois government. Implicitly this seems to be an accommodation to the objectives of the bourgeois government because of an effective refusal to develop a dynamic policy for the intervention of the working class in the situation. The primary limitation was the lack of a strategy that could transform the situation in terms of the creation of a more favourable balance of class forces in favour of the working class. This meant that the actual policy of the SWP was limited to passive propaganda in favour of the formation of a worker’s government. It was not recognised that there could be transitional stages that changed the balance of class forces. Such a process would be defined in terms of the creation of a people’s war against fascism. The development of this possibility would be an indication that the influence of the working class was increasing to the extent that it could transform the character of the war and so mean that anti-fascist aspects became a genuine aspect of the situation. But Cannon does not acknowledge this possibility. Instead his formal adherence to revolutionary defeatism is based on the apparent view that the working class cannot alter the situation until a worker’s government is formed. The problem is that the strategy to promote this possibility is not elaborated.

Munis, a Spanish Trotskyist, carries out a critique of the approach of Cannon, in terms of the problems involved in an acceptance of the values of bourgeois democracy, the peaceful conception of transition to socialism, and rejection of the approach of revolutionary defeatism. Munis considers that Cannon has compromised the principled understanding of the class struggle and this is connected to a passive understanding of the tactics of revolutionary defeatism. But there is no awareness in the views of Munis of the importance of developing an approach to oppose the aims of fascism. Instead the importance given to the intransigent role of the class struggle is outlined in an abstract manner that is not connected to the aspects of the political situation with the realisation of the second world war. In his reply Cannon suggests that Munis ignores the importance of trying to influence people who have been brought up in a situation of bourgeois democracy and the overall popularity of parties that defend capitalism. Nor is it unprincipled to outline a preference for a peaceful process of transition to socialism. Cannon also outlines how it is necessary to submit to the will of the majority of the people even if we do not agree with the sentiments of the situation. This does not mean acceptance of the role of a bourgeois government but instead the necessity to promote views that try to transform the situation in favour of the ideas of revolutionary change. Cannon outlines in effective terms how the approach of Munis which is to call for more active opposition to the war is a recipe for individual subjectivism and instead it is necessary to patiently accept the forms of discipline of the army while also promoting an alternative in the form of a workers government. But the problem is that Cannon still evades the issue of the necessity to develop a strategy in order to connect the anti-fascism of the working class with the ability to transform the character of the imperialist war into a popular struggle against fascism. Instead he emphasises in a defensive manner the dogmatic limitations of Munis’s advocacy of revolutionary defeatism. In other words, it is apparently quite simple to indicate the problems with the ultra-left conception of Munis, which has meant that terminology replace the importance of the development of an approach that can appeal to the working class. But the problem with Cannon’s critique of Munis is that the strategy of a programme for the transformation of the political situation has not been outlined.

North outlines the principled role of the Trotskyists during the second world war, but he ignores that this activity was based on opposition to fascism in the occupied countries of Europe. The point is that in practice the political situation meant that the Trotskyists attempted to become the left wing of the process of opposition to the domination of fascism. But the tensions created by the limitations of revolutionary defeatism were never resolved. Instead North assumes that the forces of the Fourth International upheld a principled approach under the influence of Trotsky. But primarily North considers that the complexity of the political situation that led to may disputes and differences in the 1940’s was primarily an expression of the role of a centrist form of opportunism: “Underlying the renegacy of Shachtman was the scepticism of a broad layer of petty-bourgeois intellectuals who, beneath the impact of proletarian defeats, the apparent strength of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the spectre of war, lost all confidence in the perspective of socialist revolution.”(North p101) This understanding is a crude and one-sided interpretation of the politics of the Workers party of the USA, which despite limitations such as its dogmatic understanding of the second world war, also made a useful analysis of the character of the Soviet Union. The point is that many diverse and different views of the international situation occurred in this period because of its challenging character but instead North wants to reduce the issues to those of revolutionary politics versus various forms of opportunism. But with this rigid approach North indicates his acceptance of intellectual intolerance and the defence of the view that the leadership of what is defined as principled Trotskyism is infallible and so is justified in the rejection of any standpoint that seems to uphold the premises of opportunism. The result is that the unorthodox views of Max Shachtman can be rejected as being nothing more than a justification of accommodation to American imperialism. The possibility that Shachtman has anything to contribute in relation to the understanding of Stalinism and the development of Marxism is rejected in these terms. But Shachtman was trying to indicate that the conception of the degenerated workers state was problematical because of the exploitation of the working class within the context of the role of the nationalised economy of the USSR and that this meant the conception of the rule of a stratum that was not an exploiting class was questionable. However, Shachtman also made the error of not supporting the defence of the USSR against the invasion by the armies of German imperialism, and this view led to the inability to understand the contradictory character of the second world war which meant that the perspective of revolutionary defeatism was applied in a problematical and dogmatic manner. But these limitations of Shachtman’s Workers Party did not mean that it failed to contribute to the development of revolutionary Marxism in terms of its views about the USSR. The aim of the Fourth International should have been to facilitate the process of unity with the Workers Party, but this type of reconciliation is mistrusted by North who can only consider the situation in terms of principled politics as against those who have become renegades.

North elaborates the conception of the apparent unceasing struggle of Trotskyism against the influence of various forms of opportunism: “The struggle against Felix Morrow and Albert Goldman represented the continuation of the battle waged by the SWP in 1939-40, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, against the petty-bourgeois opposition of Shachtman, Burnham and Abern. The fight against the Morrow-Goldman minority faction eventually assumed the form of an international struggle against petty-bourgeois and right-wing elements throughout the Fourth International.”(p99) It seems that the question of adherence to the correct and principled position is so fragile that it is necessary to constantly struggle for the assertion of what can be defined as the ‘correct’ political position. But the actual views of Morrow and Goldman was to suggest that bourgeois democracy might become stabilised in Western Europe because of the possibility of the re-development of economic boom and the related ability of the capitalist class to stabilise under the situation of the domination of the American government. This Is actually what happened, but instead of acknowledging the merits of this analysis, Morrow and Goldman were reprimanded by Cannon and the Fourth International for rejection of the perspectives of the Fourth International which had been developed in the years 1939-40. In fact, Morrow and Goldman were replying to the ‘Three Theses’ of the German group the IKD which had questioned the continuing importance of the class struggle and had predicted that the era of socialist revolution would be replaced by the more limited perspective of democratic revolution. They instead argued that the process of a limited stabilisation would not amount to the rejection of revolutionary possibilities, but that this situation would also amount to the necessity to amend the over-optimistic perspectives of the Fourth International concerning the imminent possibility of proletarian revolution in Europe. This standpoint underestimated the strength of American imperialism and the USSR which was able to create a counterrevolutionary resolution of the political situation.

Morrow developed his views in his article ‘Balance Sheet on Europe’ (Marxist Internet Archive) He outlines that the Political Committee of the Fourth International was wrong to suggest that the situation In Europe could only be stabilised by the imposition of authoritarian dictatorship. To Morrow it was necessary to reject the dogmatic view that the development of bourgeois democracy could not be possible in Western Europe. Morrow was not arguing that this would not mean the formation of stable regimes but instead that the situation would be characterised by the serious development of class struggle. However, it was rigid to argue that the only option was the formation of military dictatorships sponsored by the USA and UK. Indeed, Morrow indicates that this perspective of military dictatorship in Western Europe has to be rejected by the leadership of the Fourth International because of the obvious stabilisation of countries in these terms. The point that Morrow makes is that the realisation of bourgeois democracy is not because that is wanted by the Allies but that it is the outcome of the balance of class forces by the working class in Western Europe. In other words the workers are spontaneously striving to realise a democratic form of revolutionary process and the Allies have to accommodate to that situation in terms of the character of the political developments: “The minority on the other hand, saw an evolution towards bourgeois democracy in Europe as the objective resultant of the class struggle and of the struggle between the contending capitalist classes. The Allies might not desire this objective resultant, the working class may and in fact strive for something more, nevertheless this is the objective resultant of the conflict between the various forces at this stage.”(p22-23) Thus it would be a caricature to suggest that bourgeois democracy is the objective of the standpoint of Morrow, instead he is outlining what has happened and is likely to happen in relation to the developments within the class struggle and the level of class consciousness. In other words, there is nothing to suggest that this approach expresses any pessimism about the role of the working class. Instead what is being outlined are the likely developments in relation to the practical effects of the given level of class consciousness of the workers. This point is also connected to the opposition of the capitalist class of the USA to the possibility of the development of the process of proletarian revolution. This initial analysis of the situation did not in any sense repudiate the perspective of socialist revolution but instead adapted the role of political demands to what seemed to be the character of the situation which was characterised by the illusions of the working class in the progressive potential of bourgeois democracy. It was necessary to adapt the programme of transitional demands to this context and to outline a democratic programme that would facilitate the development of revolutionary forms of struggle. Thus, it could be indicated that Morrow was not upholding an opportunist stance and was instead trying to relate to the situation of the apparent stabilisation of the economic and political power of capitalism in the period since the end of the second world war. This meant that the perspectives of the Fourth International should be modified because it was obvious that the situation was not that of the possibility of the realisation of the success of the struggle for international proletarian revolution. This meant that the attempt to continue to uphold the objectives of the aim of the success of socialism was a rigid and unrealistic perspective given the apparent realisation of the ability of the major capitalist powers to be able to achieve the domination of the hegemony of bourgeois democracy. In this context it was only realistic and necessary to adapt the perspectives of the Fourth International to this situation. Consequently, it would be dogmatic to suggest that the situation could still be defined by the perspectives of the period of 1938. Instead the outcome of the war was the ability of bourgeois democracy to establish its domination over Western Europe, and this meant that the policy of the Fourth International should be based on an accommodation to this situation. In this context it was not opportunist to advocate democratic demands that would aspire to increase the influence of the working class within society in terms of the expression of the possibility to develop the ability of the proletariat to be able to establish its demarcation from the bourgeoisie in terms of the creation of a genuine form of democratic change that would be more radical than that being proposed by the capitalist class and the Stalinists.

But North rejects this standpoint. Instead he contends that what Morrow is advocating is nothing more than opportunism. Instead of an appreciation of the complexity of the situation North comments: “Morrow’s perspective had a form of opportunism which was to emerge again and again inside the Fourth International. Proceeding from an impressionistic assessment of the immediate political conjuncture, Morrow worked out a political line which promised to make the Trotskyist movement more accessible to the masses but in reality threatened the dissolution of its historically developed revolutionary programme. Even if one were to concede that petty-bourgeois democratic sentiments dominated the consciousness of the proletariat it was a betrayal of Marxism to conclude that such a situation called for the ditching of revolutionary socialist slogans in favour of more ‘popular’ democratic ones. Marxists do not seek to find their way out of ‘political isolation’ by transforming the proletarian socialist party into a petty-bourgeois socialist one. Rather, like Lenin and Trotsky in 1917, they fight against the prevailing moods and seek to educate the working class and raise it to the level of its political consciousness.”(p112-113) The implicit assumption being made is that the only principled standpoint is one that rigidly repeats the perspectives of the Transitional Programme of 1938 and so rejects the importance of revision of views in relation to the importance of a new and changed situation in 1945. Morrow has not in any sense rejected the aims of the development of proletarian revolution and the role of the class struggle, instead he has outlined the connection of these objectives to the situation as he perceives it in 1945. The point is that it is an undeniable fact that capitalism has stabilised in terms of the consolidation of bourgeois democracy within Western Europe. This means that it is necessary to develop a conception of revolutionary politics that relates to this situation, and in that manner the aim is to enhance the possibilities expressed by bourgeois democracy in terms of the prospect of the advance of the progress of the process of proletarian revolution. Instead of acceptance of the necessity to modify perspectives in relation to the changed situation of 1945, North effectively supports the dogmatism of Pablo who insisted that the possibility of revolutionary change was still imminent. This rigid view was not an expression of principled politics as opposed to the justification of opportunism but was instead the defence of dogma and the refusal to recognise the situation of the stabilisation of capitalism caused by the role of bourgeois democracy and Stalinism. Morrow also makes the important point that capitalism was able to achieve stability because there was not a mass revolutionary party that could develop support for an alternative to the present system. In this context the radicalisation of the working class was not connected with the dynamism of a Marxist alternative that could have posed the possibility for the development of the process of proletarian revolution. Instead a coalition of Gaullist and Stalinist forces in France, and similar arrangements in Italy acted to undermine the spontaneous dynamic of proletarian revolution. In this context of the stabilisation of bourgeois democracy the aim of the Trotskyists should have been to try and transform what was a process of bourgeois democratic counterrevolution into a movement for the generation of the progressive democratic advance of the working class, and in this manner the objective of proletarian revolution would have acquired practical possibilities. But instead of this understanding the problem with the leadership of the Fourth International is that they refuse to recognise the importance of the actual balance of class forces and the implications of this situation.

Morrow defines his position in the following manner: “Such was the minority’s conception – that there was an evolution toward bourgeois democracy in Italy and France……as the objective resultant of (1) the rising struggle of the proletariat; (2) the limitations of that struggle due to the present hegemony of the Stalinists and Social Democrats and the smallness of the Fourth International parties; (3) the resistance of French imperialism, supporting itself on the masses, to US domination; (4) the ability of US imperialism to shift from methods of military dictatorship to bourgeois democratic methods under the above conditions; (5) the pressure of the US and British masses in opposition the imposition of dictatorship.”(Morrow p26) This comment indicates that far from expressing demoralisation and scepticism about the prospects of proletarian revolution, Morrow is indicating the dynamism of the role of the class struggle and the advances that have occurred as a result of its development. But despite the important role of the working class it has been possible to stabilise bourgeois democracy in Western Europe because of the lack of a genuine Marxist party that could be able to obtain mass support for a proletarian revolutionary alternative. There is nothing opportunist about this view but the Fourth International rejects it because of its ability to understand new political events in a flexible manner. Instead it considers that dogmatism is an expression of principled Marxism. Morrow is simply making the point that it is necessary to respond in a flexible and principled manner to the circumstances of changes in the situation which means that the situation is not expressed in terms of the possibility of imminent revolution. In contrast the Fourth International rigidly insist that nothing has to be altered in relation to the perspectives of the Transitional Programme. Morrow also outlines the point that the leadership of the Fourth International has a tendency to accommodate to Stalinism as an expression of the aims of proletarian revolution in a bureaucratic manner, and so its counterrevolutionary role is minimised. This standpoint is an indication that the question of the character of Stalinism has to be addressed because of the apparent opportunist formulations that are being justified.

In other words, Morrow is indicating that the apparent adherence to dogmatism by the Fourth International has led to a subjective conception of the perspective of the prospects of proletarian revolution and an acceptance of accommodation to the role of Stalinism. Morrow outlines in his ‘International Report’ (Marxist Internet Archive) that the problem with the perspectives of the Fourth International was that it was based on the dogmatic aspiration that the advance of Stalinism in Europe would also result in the success of genuine proletarian revolution. In opposition to this standpoint, Albert Goldman, a supporter of Morrow, outlines in his article: A Note on the Defence and Nature of Stalinist Russia’ (Marxist Internet Archive) He indicates that the outcome of the second world war has not been the success of socialist revolution, and in Eastern Europe the forces of Stalinism have become stronger: “In Eastern Europe the Stalinist armies crushed every attempt on the part of the masses to take power and at the present moment the masses of these countries are practically slaves of the Stalinist bureaucracy. In the important countries of Western Europe, the Stalinist parties have gained control over the decisive sections of the working class and have, by their policies prevented any attempt at revolution. In France and Italy, the workers have flocked to the Stalinist banner because they want a socialist revolution. Without the Stalinist parties only the bayonets of the American and English imperialist armies could have crushed any revolutionary uprising. It can be said with the greatest of certainty that the Stalinist bureaucracy is the most powerful counterrevolutionary factor on the European scene.”(p2) This situation is an indication that the notion that Stalinism can in some distorted manner advance the objectives of proletarian revolution has been shown to have been falsified by events, and yet this is the apparent view still upheld by the leadership of the Fourth International. It was correct to defend the USSR in 1940 against the reactionary possibility of the success of German fascism, but the situation has changed and so the aim of upholding the objective of the progress of international proletarian revolution in Europe means that it is no longer of primary importance to still defend the USSR which has expressed the character od dominating Easter Europe in the most repressive manner. Goldman does not conclude that the character of the Soviet regime is no longer a degenerated workers state, but rather that this type of society is able under the given conditions to undermine the possibility of any realisation of the prospect of proletarian revolution.

This outline of the views of Morrow and Goldman indicate that they are not motivated by any aspiration to accommodate to the standpoint of Shachtman and his Workers Party, but instead are intending to reject the rigid and dogmatic perspectives of the leadership of the Fourth International which have resulted in minimising the complexity of the possibility of European revolution, and also seem to suggest that Stalinism can represent an impetus to the advance of the class struggle. North contends that Morrow and Goldman denied the role of Soviet Stalinism in the overthrow of fascism in Europe, but the point that they were making is that this development was connected to the realisation of the subordination of the workers of Eastern Europe to the domination of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The only genuine and progressive alternative was for the generation of the possibility of the working class to create its own independent organisations that would create the conditions for the successful advance of the interests of the working class. This standpoint was not anti-Soviet because it would be based on the prospect of effective working-class support for the process of undermining the interests of the fascist powers, and in this manner facilitating the conditions for the liberation of Eastern Europe. The problem was that the Red Army under instructions from Stalin was not interested in these types of development, and this was shown by the lack of support for the Warsaw uprising. In this manner the liberation of Europe from fascism had a rigidly bureaucratic and even repressive character. This meant that there could be a conflict of interest between the role of the Red Army and the prospect of working-class action to create a left-wing regime. This contradiction was recognised by Goldman but ignored by the Fourth International. Instead they assumed that in some bureaucratic manner the interests of the working class were being promoted in some manner. Thus, the standpoint of Goldman was principled because in a decisive manner he was outlining the problems connected with the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism.

None of this criticism of the US SWP or the Fourth International on the question of Stalinism implied an acceptance of the views of Shachtman’s Workers Party. Hence the actual decision of Goldman and Morrow to join the Workers Party was not because of any inherent opportunist logic to their politics and instead was because of a situation of political isolation and the fact that the Workers Party seemed to be the most logical organisation to join because of the disagreement with the US SWP. To North this development was an indication of an inherent opportunism in the politics of Morrow, but instead it was the outcome of a failure to convince the US SWP of the merits of their views. But this development did not mean that the SWP did not have problems, which were based on a rigid adherence to the perspectives of the 1938 Transitional Programme. Instead of recognising the complexities of this situation, North crudely comments that: “The Goldman-Morrow tendency reflected the desertion of large sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia from the workers movement into the camp of US imperialism.”(p121) This is a ludicrous criticism because the motives of Goldman and Morrow was to try and understand the complexities of the possibility of the realisation of the aim of proletarian revolution. They convincingly outlined how dogmatism was the basis of an inadequate approach and that instead the necessity of a sophisticated approach was the only manner in which the class struggle could be understood in a realistic manner. The later right-wing trajectory of Goldman and Morrow did not undermine the credibility of this attempt to understand the developments of the international class struggle in the most profound manner. But instead of this recognition, North can only consider them to be unprincipled heretics who rejected the important analysis of the Fourth International concerning the post-war situation. But it is possible to indicate that Morrow and Goldman were instead attempting to understand the situation in the most perceptive manner, and in this sense were not motivated by the opportunist trajectory that is being suggested by North. Instead it was the failure of the US SWP and the Fourth International to respond to Morrow in a sympathetic manner that led to the situation in which it was considered that the forces of Trotskyism had become dogmatic. This development was not inevitable but was instead the outcome of a rigid adherence to the perspectives of the Fourth International of 1938. To North this is an indication of political principal. But what was actually needed was to recognise the effective ability of the forces of Stalinism and bourgeois democracy to be able to defeat fascism in a manner that also undermined the possibility of the advance of the realisation of the objective of proletarian revolution. North fails to recognise the importance of this point and instead can only consider it an indication of the opportunism of Morrow and Goldman. In this sense, North’s approach is nothing more than the justification of dogmatism.

North continues to uphold the view that the Fourth International and the US SWP is principled in terms of his evaluation of the ‘American Theses on the American revolution’ (1946) (Marxist Internet Archive) North contends that Cannon’s position is based on an optimism about the prospects of the development of revolution in Europe and America, and so Cannon questions the perspective that the stabilisation of capitalism can occur under the hegemony of the USA: “The united states, the most powerful capitalist country in history, is a component part of the world capitalist system and is subject to the same general laws. It suffers from the same incurable diseases and is destined to share the same fate. The overwhelming preponderance of American imperialism does not exempt it from the decay of world capitalism, but on the contrary acts to involve it ever more deeply, inextricably and hopelessly. US capitalism can no more escape from the revolutionary consequences of world capitalist decay as than the older European capitalist powers. The blind alley in which world capitalism has arrived, and the US with it, excludes a new era of capitalist stabilisation. The dominant world position of American imperialism now accentuates and aggravates the death agony of capitalism as a whole.”(p2-3) This prediction about the decay, decline and instability of USA capital was shown to be erroneous and it is based on an underestimation of the ability of world capitalist system to revive and undergo a period of boom because of the continued dynamism of the role of the American economic system. This rigid standpoint was unable to anticipate the importance of Marshall Aid which the USA utilised in order to revive capitalism within Europe. It could be argued that this development could not be anticipated because of the apparent uncertainties of the period immediately after the end of the second world war, but the point was that the international economic system was stabilised by the introduction of the dollar as a universal currency of exchange and the encouragement of the revival of Europe based on the promotion of trade with the USA. But instead of recognising these possibilities the American Theses rules out the possibility of mutually beneficial trade between the USA and Europe because of the economic decline caused by the second world war. Thus, there is no anticipation that the USA is still in a position to be able to promote the revival of Europe based on the role of Marshall Aid. Instead it is suggested that the USA economy has not recovered from the crisis of the 1920’s and 1930’s despite the mini boom of the war economy. In this context a declining American capital cannot afford to increase the wages of the workers in order to facilitate genuine economic recovery. Instead: “The following conclusion flows from the objective situation. US imperialism which proved incapable of recovering from its crisis and stabilizing itself in the 10-year period preceding the outbreak of the second world war is heading for an even more catastrophic explosion in the current post-war era. The cardinal factor which will light the fuse is this: the home market after an initial and artificial revival, must contract. It cannot expand as it did in the 1920’s. What is really in store is not unbounded prosperity but a short-lived boom. In the wake of the boom must come another crisis and depression which will make the 1929-32 conditions look prosperous by comparison.” (p8) This perspective consists of a prediction which was falsified by events. The point is that the forces of American capital were able to utilise their domination in international terms in order to create the conditions for a post-war boom. This possibility was entirely unanticipated by Cannon and the SWP because they could not envisage that the American government could promote the realisation of Keynesian type policies that could result in the development of a boom. It was not understood that the forces of American capital could benefit from their position of world domination in order to generate the economic policies that could revive the situation of international capitalism.

North tries to defend these erroneous predictions as the unfortunate expression of the fact that events occurred in an unexpected manner: “The course of developments proceeded differently. But is Cannon to be criticised for not having anticipated, on the basis of the betrayals of the European proletariat by the Stalinists and Social Democrats between 1944 and 1948, the reestablishment of the political equilibrium of capitalist rule which created the conditions for the post-war boom? In 1946 the future course of events was not so clear. The previous 17 years had been dominated by catastrophic economic crises. Moreover, the SWP concentration on the limitations of the American home market was not misplaced. As Bretton Woods and a host of other critical economic conferences made clear, American imperialism was preoccupied with the problem of restoring international trade and markets for US goods. Without the Marshall Plan and the vast increase of capital exported overseas, the United States would certainly have faced a devastating financial crisis in the late 1940s.”(p127) This comment may have been valid if it were not for the fact that the American Theses is a collection of economic and political predictions about developments in the immediate future. This included the categorical view that the economic recovery of the USA was unlikely and that instead the possibility of revolutionary events was imminent in America. Such an erroneous perspective could only have been based on an underestimation of the ability of American capital to utilise its dominant position in order to promote the revival of the world capitalist system. The result of this flawed perspective is a rigid prediction of the onset of a forthcoming struggle for political power by the American working class.

However, these criticisms of the American Theses are not meant to deny its merits. The Theses also outlines the crucial role of America in relation to the possibilities for the progress and success of the process of world proletarian revolution. It Is outlined how the success of the American proletariat to obtain political power would decisively change the balance of class forces in favour of the possible success of international revolution. Not only would the success of revolution in the USA encourage its replication in world terms, but also a socialist regime in the USA could provide the material basis to successfully consolidate a nationally isolated regime until this development was replicated internationally. Thus, Cannon is outlining that in an important sense the role of the USA is an expression of its importance as a centre of world revolution. But in outlining in a confident manner the possibilities for revolutionary developments based on the role of an increasingly combative and socially homogenous working class, Cannon seems to ignore the importance of the influence of bourgeois ideology. The fact is that the working class in America of the 1940’s still supported the continuation of capitalism in popular terms. Cannon tries to ignore this fact by contending that it is possible for a revolutionary party to acquire popular support in a short period of time. But the problem is that this perspective is based on the economic determinist view that the forthcoming crisis of American and international capital will mean that the issue of proletarian revolution becomes imminent: “The hopeless contradictions of American capitalism, inextricably tied up with the death agony of world capitalism, are bound to lead to a social crisis of such catastrophic proportions as will place the proletarian revolution on the order of the day.”(p14) Thus we can conclude in relation to the American Theses of the US SWP that it is not a unprincipled document that betrayed important objectives of revolutionary Marxism, but it is limited by the apparent fact that it underestimates the apparent durability of world capitalism and so glosses over the related complexity of the process of achieving the success of world revolution. In this manner the American Theses is an unsatisfactory document that is not acknowledged by the uncritical support for it that is provided by North. What is not recognised by the authors of the American Theses is that the very domination of the international situation by the USA created the economic and political conditions for the revival of the durability and strength of capitalism. In this context the perspective of proletarian revolution would have to be modified accordingly and so instead be defined in terms of more long-term criteria. But North’s dogmatic defence of this document means that he is unable to recognise the importance of this process of theoretical revision and improvement of the perspectives of the American Theses. Instead he justifies his own dogmatic stance.

North outlines his support for the position of the Fourth International with regards to the situation in Yugoslavia in 1948 in relation to the Open letter that was adopted by the second congress of the Fourth International in 1948. This letter indicates that in Yugoslavia a genuine popular revolution had occurred which created the basis for the formation of a genuine workers state based on the expression of the principles of popular democracy. The letter is right to outline the importance of the ability of parties based on the standpoint of the role of soviets to be able to organise. In other words what is understood is that a process of political development had occurred which indicated that the situation was different in Yugoslavia because of the dynamic role of the Communist party and its ability to establish leadership of the workers and peasants in a principled manner. Thus the Fourth International was right to express solidarity with the people of Yugoslavia in terms of the aims of the formation of a democratic workers state and the advance of the objective of international proletarian revolution in order to strengthen the ability to realise the objectives of a genuine revolutionary process. Hence it could be argued that this position was not an expression of accommodation to Stalinism in Yugoslavia and instead was an expression of principled solidarity with what was a process in which the workers and peasants of a particular country were able to increase their influence within society under the leadership of a communist party that had been able to act in an effective independent manner and so overcome the bureaucratic limitations that were being imposed by the role of the Soviet Stalinists within Eastern Europe. But the problem with the analysis of the Fourth International was that it was unable to establish in cohesive terms the importance of the issue of the limitations of the character of the Yugoslavia revolution if it does not result in the success of the advance of genuine proletarian revolution. This point is connected to the limitations expressed by the formation of what was a one- party regime that lacked the aspect of genuine multi-party democracy. In other words, it was also the political responsibility of the Fourth International to criticise the actual formation of a single party state and to call more explicitly for the role of other soviet parties if an authentic workers state was to be formed. The lack of this type of critique meant that the Fourth International expressed necessary solidarity with the people of Yugoslavia but this was not balanced by the elaboration of the view that under the present political circumstances what was being created was a deformed workers state under the bureaucratic leadership of the communist party. However, this omission was understandable because the primary task was to uphold solidarity with a genuine process of revolutionary transformation by the workers and peasants. In this context it would be wrong to suggest that the Fourth International had committed opportunist errors on the issue of Yugoslavia and instead it recognised in a non-dogmatic manner the importance of the process of revolutionary change in Yugoslavia for the possibility of the advance of the objective of the realisation of world socialist revolution.

On the issue of the social character of the countries dominated by the Stalinism of the Soviet Union, North rightly argues that this was a complex issue that could not be resolved by the Fourth International adopting an immediate position without a process of theoretical reflection. But the problem was that what was of crucial importance was defining the character of the Soviet Union in a more satisfactory manner. The understanding that that the USSR was a degenerated workers state had proved to have been unsatisfactory given the fact that nationalised property relations could not adequately define the social character of the given social formation. The repressive character of Stalinist society, the complete lack of political power of the workers and peasants, combined with the exploitation of the producers in the process of production, meant that the expansion of the control of the Soviet bureaucracy into control of Eastern Europe could not be defined as the creation of what were to be defined as deformed workers states. Instead the process of the absorption of the countries of Eastern Europe by the dynamics of structural assimilation into the USSR could only be satisfactorily explained in terms of the expansion of a new exploitative social formation. But the Fourth International reject this conclusion because of its adherence to the view that the USSR was a type of degenerated workers state. Therefore, it was to come to the conclusion that the only position that could be adopted was that the USSR created deformed workers states in Eastern process, or in a bureaucratic manner had carried out the distorted process of an expression of proletarian revolution. In this context the role of Stalinism was defined as progressive. North tries to deny the dilemmas of this adherence to the view that the characterisation of Eastern Europe as deformed workers states was necessarily opportunist, instead he agrees with Mandel’s view that the role of the extension of the importance of nationalisation did not primarily define a deformed workers state. North seems to agree with John G Wright’s understanding that it was still premature to define Yugoslavia as a deformed workers state in 1950 and presumably this analysis could be extended to Eastern Europe. But this standpoint ignores the inconsistent acceptance of the term deformed workers state in another comment by North when he contends: “The use of the term deformed places central attention upon the crucial historical difference between the overthrow of the capitalist state in the late 1940’s in Eastern Europe – that is the absence of the mass organs of proletarian revolution, Soviets led by a Bolshevik type party. Moreover, the term itself implies the merely transitory existence of state regimes of dubious historical viability, whose actions in every sphere – political and economic – bear the stamp of the distorted and abnormal character of their birth.”(p178) But this inconsistency is because of the problematical conception of deformed workers state which implies that the role of Stalinism can have a progressive aspect. In opposition to this contradictory stance the extension of nationalisation in Eastern Europe represented a process of structural assimilation of these countries to the social system of the USSR. But this society could not be defined as being the expression of a degenerated workers state and instead its exploitative and repressive features were an indication of the development of the domination of a ne type of ruling class based on the role of the Soviet communist party. It was the failure to revise the standpoint of Trotskyism which had caused the process of confusion in the Fourth International concerning the class character of the societies of Eastern Europe. Ultimately the adoption of the conception of the generation of deformed workers states seemed to suggest a progressive role for Stalinism.

North suggests that the development of opportunism within the Fourth International was systematically associated with Pablo’s view that in the context of international civil war the USSR would promote the creation of deformed workers states and so be the agency of world revolution in bureaucratic terms. But in actuality this perspective was a logical extension of the conception of that the USSR had facilitated the creation of deformed workers states in Eastern Europe. Such an understanding was being applied to a conception of the role of a type of class struggle that would occur under the influence of the role of the USSR. North is right to outline how the objectivist adaptation to the supposed dynamics of the class struggle in terms of the acceptance of the leadership of the reactionary forces of Stalinist was a profoundly opportunist standpoint that denied the importance of the role of the independent expression of the working class. But this conception was the logical outcome of the understanding that Stalinism could create deformed workers states and so advance the progress of proletarian revolution in a bureaucratic manner. What North ignores is that the political committee of the SWP agreed with the perspectives of Pablo in general terms.(Trotskyism Versus Revisionism, Volume 1, New Park London 1974 p46-51) However, in contradictory terms the US SWP political committee also contend that it is still necessary to emphasise the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism in any conflict with USA imperialism. Furthermore, the understanding of the formation of deformed workers states for the forthcoming period is also rejected. But these criticisms are an indication of actual opposition to the perspectives of Pablo, but in a contradictory manner this tension is not recognised and instead formally the standpoint of the Forth International is upheld.

In contrast to the inconsistencies of the criticism of Pablo made by the US SWP, the most effective critique is carried out by the French section in the document: ‘Where is Pablo going’ (Trotskyism volume 1 p52-79) In this document Pablo’s opportunist position is openly critiqued and the conception of the contradiction between imperialism and Stalinism is replaced by the role of the international class struggle. The critique explicitly indicates that there is a contradiction between the genuine advance of world proletarian revolution and the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The progress of any expression of genuine class struggle will undermine and not express the aims of Stalinism, and so in this manner there is still a contradiction between the requirements of Stalinism and the objectives of genuine international proletarian revolution. But the critique of Pablo also makes a serious error in upholding the development of the Chinese revolution as an expression of the standpoint of proletarian revolution. This limitation is an expression of the flaws of the critique of the French section which are summed up in its conclusion: “We must react without delay and return to the Marxist method of analysing society, return to the Leninist concept of the function of the working class, return to the Trotskyist analysis of the degeneration of the USSR and the character of the bureaucracy, return to Trotsky’s fundamental statement that the crisis of humanity is and remains the crisis of revolutionary leadership, return to the working class line, that of the construction and the victory of the Fourth International, the World Party of the socialist revolution.”(Trotskyism p79) The problem with this conclusion is that more than a return to orthodoxy is required and instead it is necessary to criticise the conception of the character of the USSR in order to uphold the principles of the perspective of international proletarian revolution in a more principled manner. But despite these flaws it can be argued that the French section is outlining an effective critique of Pabloism. However, despite the limitations of the views of the critique of Pabloism by the French section it can be shown that opposition to the resolutions of the Third World Congress was apparent, and so the view of Workers Power that the Fourth International degenerated into centrism in 1951 was a dogmatic conclusion. The point was that even if we accept that there were important limitations in the opposition to the politics of Pablo, it can still be suggested that this development of criticism upheld in some sense the aims of revolutionary Marxism against the influence of centrism. In this manner there was an expression of the continuation of the principles of the Fourth International in this struggle. Therefore, it was not surprising that this aspect resulted in the critique of Pabloism made by Cannon’s Open Letter of 1953.

However, can it be suggested that the praise of this document made by North is justified. He comments: “Since 1953 the “Open Letter” has been the nemesis of every revisionist tendency that has broken with Trotskyism. In opposition to the revisionism of Pablo, the “Open Letter” reaffirmed the foundations and historic perspective of the Fourth International. Inasmuch as virtually all revisionist tendencies since 1953 have done little more than improvise on the themes composed by Pablo, the principles articulated by the “Open Letter” and a series of associated documents written by Cannon in 1953-54 have provided Trotskyists with a basic orientation in combating the enemies of the Fourth International.”(p212) This comment is a dogmatic contention that the essence of principled Trotskyism is expressed by this Open Letter of Cannon. But in actuality Marxism has to be a dynamic and continuous doctrine that is not content with the apparent achievements of any given article or book. Instead Marxism has to provide consistent support and defence of the aim of international proletarian revolution and in this manner aspire to uphold the principles of its doctrine in an imaginative and flexible manner. Only in this context can the Open Letter be evaluated, instead of assuming that it is an inherently expression of revolutionary Marxism. Furthermore, the issue that has to be addressed is whether this Open Letter does express an effective rejection of the views associated with Pabloism.

The Open Letter reaffirms the importance of the role of the class struggle and of the necessity to develop revolutionary leadership if this struggle is to be successful and realise socialism. In this context the role of Stalinism is reactionary and undermines the possibility to promote and fulfil these objectives. Instead of upholding this approach Pablo has outlined the conception of the leading role of Stalinism in the process of a protracted transition to socialism, and as a result has justified accommodation to the view that Stalinism is capable of reforming itself so that it becomes accountable to the interests of the working class. The result of this stance is a promotion of an opportunist understanding of the objectives of the French general strike of 1952 and the encouragement of an opportunist group within the US SWP led by Clarke and Cochran. Thus, in a modest but effective manner the Open Letter reaffirms the importance of the role of the working class and rejects any notion that the reactionary character of Stalinism can represent an adequate substitution for that role. In an effective, if brief manner, Pablo’s conception of an alternative conception of the process of transition from capitalism to socialism is rejected and instead the importance of mass struggle in the context of the leadership of the role of a revolutionary organisation is upheld. Hence the Open Letter upholds the principles of revolutionary Marxism, and so this indicates that the acceptance of the politics of adaptation to Stalinism, which had not been generally opposed between 1951-53, was effectively repudiated in 1953 by the actions of the US SWP. The basis to facilitate the renewal of Trotskyism was being established, but the SWP made a mistake in encouraging the formation of the International Committee and not encouraging the development of opposition within the Fourth International itself. This mistake weakened the basis to promote the victory of the forces of principled Marxism. Instead the International Committee was an organisation that was isolated from the sections of the Fourth International. North supports the rigid organisational approach of Cannon and quotes him sympathetically when he rejected any political relations with the Pabloite International: “The Fourth International today is a cadre organisation. Its striking power and historical justification derive from its programme and ideological homogeneity. Pabloism is not a mass movement to be penetrated and influenced but a revisionist tendency which discredits the Fourth International and disrupts its cadres.”(North p250) But this organisational sectarianism meant that the genuine opportunity to oppose Pabloism within the major group claiming to be the Fourth International was being rejected in the name of political principle. This was a mistake which led to the self-imposed isolation of the genuine forces of Trotskyism. North uncritically supports this organisational rigidity and comments: “Cannon, correctly, placed the central emphasis on the need to consolidate the ranks of the orthodox Trotskyists on the basis of an unrelenting political and theoretical struggle against the revisionists. He ruled out political and organisational concessions in the name of a specious unity; and looked askance at proposals for further discussions with the revisionists that threatened to undercut the essential political struggle.”(p253) But this rejection of organisational flexibility by Cannon only succeeded in isolating the principled forces of Trotskyism from the centrists, and the result was the creation of a small international group. The result actually meant that the influence and domination of the Pabloites was not effectively challenged. Furthermore, Cannon rejected all attempts to establish the political and organisational conditions for a unified fourth world congress. This rigid approach is supported by North, but the only result of this intransigent standpoint was to intensify the isolation of the principled Trotskyists from the forces of Pabloism. This sectarianism represented a pessimistic view that it was not possible to conduct successful ideological struggle in order to defeat Pabloism in the fourth international. Such an approach is supported by North because he cannot contemplate the validity of a broad international grouping and instead his concept of a principled group is based on rigid political and ideological homogeneity.

North rightly outlines the process of the right-wing degeneration of the US SWP in the late 1950’s that led to the increasing possibility of an unprincipled unification with the centrist Fourth International now led by Ernest Mandel. But the point that North does not discuss is that the very isolation of the International committee had not led to its ability to uphold the principled politics of revolutionary Marxism. Instead the various sections of the IC became susceptible to adapt to the influences of various forms of national opportunism. In this context there was a dynamic established that the situation of the increasing crisis of the national sections of the IC would be perceived as being resolved by re-establishing relations with the Fourth International. Thus, agreement between the FI and the US SWP on the issue of Cuba became the basis of this process of reunification. The common conception was that the radical character of the July26th movement had led to the formation of a worker’s state that had some deformations, but which had the political potential to overcome these limitations because of the dynamic possibilities of the revolutionary process. In this manner the view that an isolated revolutionary regime could not establish a principled type of workers state was rejected, and the importance of the increasingly close relation of the Cuban regime with the Soviet bureaucracy was ignored. The point was that it was a process of structural assimilation of Cuban society with the character of the USSR that ultimately defined the social and class character of Cuba. The bureaucratic nationalised economy of the USSR was re-created in Cuba in terms of the formation of an elite that dominated society. But despite these limitations it was obviously necessary to defend the Cuban regime against counterrevolutionary intervention by the forces of American imperialism. But the problem of the response of the International Committee that had effectively split from the US SWP was to deny the importance of the developments in Cuba. This approach is expressed by North in the following manner: “If workers states could be established through the actions of petty-bourgeois – based principally on the peasantry, who possessed no significant historical, organizational and political connections to the working class, and under conditions in which there existed no identifiable organs of class rule through which the proletariat exercised its dictatorship – there then followed a whole new conception of the historical path to socialism, entirely different from that foreseen by Marxists.”(p354-355) The only logical conclusion from this rigid stance was that the regime in Cuba was a type of bourgeois Bonapartism. In other words, the Socialist Labour League of the UK tried to uphold principled politics on the question of the social character of Cuba by denying the historical importance of the changes that had occurred. This meant they could not even define it as a type of deformed workers state based on its relationship with the USSR.

Such a contrast between opportunism and dogmatism meant that all the forces of the Fourth International had degenerated into forms of unprincipled politics. This development was the ultimate expression of the crisis of the Fourth International and meant that it no longer had any coherent organisational expression. Instead the result was the development of various forms of nationally based organisations that relied on pragmatism or dogmatism in order to define their conception of revolutionary politics. This acute character of the crisis of the early 1960’s meant that the aim should have become to try and regenerate the creation of the Fourth International in terms of an emphasis on the importance of theoretical creativity combined with political principles. The choice should not be between opportunism or dogmatism. This situation was also characterised by the development of various forms of authoritarian political regimes and increasing limitations on the ability of the members of the given organisations to be able to express themselves in a democratic manner. The principles of democratic centralism were applied in a rigid manner to deny the expression of intellectual freedom. However, this situation did not mean that it was necessary to call for the formation of a fifth international. This was because the principled standpoint of the Fourth International, the Transitional Programme had not been compromised. Instead it was necessary to redevelop the forces of a new genuine Fourth International in terms of the elaboration of the role of the revolutionary programme.

North would contend that the Socialist Labour League carried out a principled struggle against the adaptation to petty-bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism of the US SWP. In formal terms this had an aspect of truth in that the SLL did criticise the accommodation to the politics of Castro by the US SWP. But the adherence to the principle of the role of the revolutionary party in the struggle for socialism was based on the dogmatic assumption that the process of change in Cuba had not resulted in the overthrow of capitalism. It was outlined in rigid terms that the forces of petty-bourgeois nationalism could not end the domination of capitalism. This stance was a denial of empirical truth in that the July 26th movement of Castro did carry out the extensive nationalisation of the economy alongside the realisation of land reform. But this development did not express a type of genuine proletarian revolution because the ideology and character of the July26th movement was ultimately defined by the relationship to the Soviet bureaucracy. In terms of this relationship it was possible to overthrow capitalism in a bureaucratic manner. North concludes that the petty-bourgeois character of the Castro leadership meant that any form of workers state could not be formed: “For Trotskyists, the anti-imperialist and democratic leadership of the Cuban peoples struggle under the leadership of Castro, was sufficient to require tireless activity in defence of the Cuban revolution. But from the unconditional defence of Cuba it did not at all follow that Marxists were compelled to proclaim the existence of a workers state on the island.”(p366) In this rigid manner the choice is posed between defining Cuba as either a healthy workers state or a form of progressive capitalism. But in actuality the character of Cuba was decided by its relationship to the Soviet Union which carried out a process of structural assimilation into its system of a new type of bureaucratic economy. In other words, the apparent Choice between the SWP’s opportunism or the SLL’s dogmatism was an indication that the forces of the Fourth International had entered into a serious political crisis. But North tries to ignore this serious development and instead contends that the remaining sections of the International Committee had upheld the principles of the importance of the revolutionary party and the theory of permanent revolution and the leading role of the working class in the process of realising socialism in the oppressed nations. But the problem was that this apparent convincing defence of important principles of revolutionary Marxist theory was not based on a convincing analysis of the situation in Cuba. Instead it was merely maintained that a petty-bourgeois movement could not carry out a genuine proletarian revolution. In contrast to the apparent dogmatism of this stance, the uncritical stance of the US SWP seemed to be a more coherent and convincing understanding of the situation. In other words, a form of opportunist pragmatism was being contrasted to the standpoint of dogmatism. Marxism was not being utilised in a manner that could establish the basis of a principled understanding of the situation.

North would maintain that the SLL was upholding revolutionary principles in relation to the issue of Cuba. But what this situation indicated was that the SLL did not have the theoretical sophistication to outline a credible alternative ether in terms of developing the understanding of Cuba as a deformed workers state or as a new type of non-capitalist society based on its relation to the Soviet Union. But North also fails to indicate the bureaucratic character of the SLL because of an elitist and authoritarian political regime that meant it was not possible to develop Marxist ideas in a situation of inner-party democracy. Thus, the claim that the International Committee upheld the continuity of the principles of Trotskyism, until a process of degeneration starting in the 1970’s, is questionable. Indeed, it can be suggested that the International Committee tradition in the early 1960’s began to substitute dogma instead of dynamic and creative Marxist theory. The ultimate result was the justification of the view that the emerging crisis of capitalism since the mid 1960’s was continually creating revolutionary type situations. Indeed, North defends this standpoint and so indicates that he is not able to critique the limitations of the IC tradition in a consistent manner. North has tried to outline that the IC tradition is the expression of the continuation of the legacy of revolutionary Marxism. But this means that he fails to discuss its limitations in any consistent manner. Instead we have to conclude that the major groups claiming to be Trotskyist have been in a perpetual crisis since the important split of the International Committee in the early 1960’s.

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