

Statement dissolving PRG/BT fusion

Comrades:

Thirty-six years ago, three of us (Jensen, Nason and Riley, plus comrade Harlan, who is with us politically but no longer able to actively participate) published the “Declaration of an external tendency of the iSt” and attempted to launch a struggle to reverse the “process of degeneration” which threatened to destroy what we considered to be the only Trotskyist organization in the world. A few years later, after the Spartacist League attempted to wreck the historic labor boycott of apartheid cargo initiated by cde Harlan in the Bay Area, we concluded that it was “over the brink” and published “The Road to Jimstown” analyzing its decline and fall. We set about building a new, competing organization, the Bolshevik Tendency and in 1986 began publishing *1917* as an expression of our commitment to uphold the programmatic heritage of the RT/iSt in the face of the irreversible degeneration of its historic leadership.

Four years later the BT, with comrades in Germany and North America, fused with the New Zealand PRG led by Hannah and Logan. Soon the newly fused group was joined by the German GIVI and we changed our name to the International Bolshevik Tendency. The core cadres of GIVI dropped away after a while (with the exception of comrade Lichtenberg) and the IBT developed into an increasingly programmatically homogenous micro propaganda group. This changed when the Kremlin intervened in Georgia on behalf of the South Ossetians in August 2008, and comrade Logan sent out a memo in which he proposed that Russia had emerged as a new imperialist power.

The issue of “Russian imperialism” has, for the past decade, sharply divided the comrades who participated in the original 1990 fusion—with all from the ET/BT on one side and all but one of the PRGers on the other. (Comrade Davis, the sole exception to this pattern, left the IBT some years ago.) Comrades who joined the IBT after the fusion ended up on both sides of the question.

The difference over Russian imperialism naturally resulted in disagreements over the underlying roots of both the Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts, which, in some instances, could potentially put us on opposite sides of the barricades. In Crimea, “Imp” comrades opposed the right of the population to vote to secede from Ukraine and proposed that we demand that Russia vacate its historic naval base on the Black Sea, a move that would represent the achievement of a long-term strategic objective of NATO’s war planners.

In a revealing exchange, comrade Dorn inquired about our attitude to the prospect of a conflict in Ukraine. Comrade Riley, on behalf of the “Nimps,” responded (on 3 March 2014) that “If there is a

civil war in Ukraine between two qualitatively similar bourgeois opponents we would not have a side,” but that we would support the right of the population of Crimea to separate from Ukraine. We also stipulated that if there was an attempt “to forcibly seize the Russian base and assert Ukrainian nationalist/Nazi western imperialist government control” we would “side militarily with Crimean resistance and any Russian troops to repel the invaders.” We explained that our attitude would be the same “had Russian anti-aircraft batteries been sent to Libya to interfere with the ‘no fly’ murderous bombing of that country in defense of Qaddafi’s regime.” The Imp comrades did not reply, but we all knew that this was not a trivial difference.

A few years later mistaken notions about “Russian imperialist” intervention in Syria left the Imp comrades susceptible to cynical imperialist/White Helmet disinformation about supposedly massive “war crimes” by the Russian military during the siege of East Aleppo. They proposed that, despite the fact that we were defeatist on both sides, the IBT should denounce Russian bombing of “rebel” held areas (see Skype chat 17 December 2016). It turned out that the number of civilian victims in East Aleppo had been grossly exaggerated by the imperialist media (which of course showed no similar concern about the far higher level of civilian casualties resulting from a simultaneous U.S.-led assault on Mosul).

The T&P document that we (representing the majority) drafted for last year’s conference observed:

“Following the failure to resolve the rather important internal division on whether Russia is imperialist or not despite a serious discussion at the 2014 international conference the group is programmatically less coherent and this has been an overhead we have had to carry. We have at least maintained an exemplary model of internal democracy and serious application of democratic-centralist norms.”

This is of course a credit to comrades on all sides of the dispute. Yet, as we all recognize, the difference over whether or not Russia is imperialist impacts a huge number of other issues and makes it impossible to agree on a broad overview of global politics. This is a serious matter for a micro Trotskyist propaganda group, as was clearly illustrated by the sharply variant analyses of key elements of the world political situation put forward in the counterposed motions on the T&P at the 2017 conference.

We had hoped that the intermittent, but detailed and intensive, discussions on this question over the past decade would at least narrow the differences—and perhaps even allow us to come to a common estimation on the basis of new historical developments. But there has been very little convergence and a lengthening list of differences, many of considerable importance.

We have no animus toward the former PRGers and other Imp comrades, nor of course toward comrade Mikl and his cothinkers. We just do not have the same politics. And just as it became obvious that it is necessary to separate from the latter when they proclaimed their wholesale rejection of the RT/iSt tradition (as explained in the letter of 21 June our IEC comrades co-signed with the Imp IEC members) we recognize that, after a decade of essentially fruitless debate over the notion of “Russian imperialism” and derivative issues, our differences with the former PRG and other Imp comrades are too substantial and too intractable for collaboration in a single micro propaganda group to be a viable long-term perspective.

We have been reluctant to come to this conclusion and do so with mixed emotions, and some regrets. But it has become clear to us that the IBT, as presently constituted, is no longer an effective vehicle for carrying out the project we launched in 1982. The failure to reach agreement on the 2016 coup in Turkey (and its analogue in Egypt three years earlier) was a significant factor in this decision. While seemingly unrelated to the difference over “Russian imperialism,” the factional lineup once again found former ET/BT cadres on one side and former PRG comrades on the other. This suggests a divergence in our basic approaches to politics (something referred to as a difference in “methodology” during our discussions). Despite an initially lively and intensive series of political exchanges, which were limited to some extent by the fact that no one had a great deal of familiarity with Turkish politics, we were unable to come to a common position.

The intense, but more or less casual, discourse on the Turkish and Egyptian coups and related questions prior to the pre-conference discussion period made it clear that significant issues were posed. We sought to seriously explore these, and, following Lenin’s injunction regarding concrete analysis, attempted to dig more deeply into both recent events and their historical roots.

The axis of the internal discussion chiefly involved differing assessments of the extent to which democratic rights for the workers’ movement were at stake in the two coups. Early in the discussion we suggested that there were important parallels between Iran in 1978-79 and Turkey in 2016. The comrades who advocated siding militarily with Erdogan against the coupists argued that the two situations were not comparable because Khomeini was a theocrat who openly advocated Islamic rule, while Erdogan was an Islamist who based himself on (attenuated) bourgeois democracy.

During the pre-conference discussion period we submitted two substantive documents on this question with significant new information (“Revolutionary Continuity & Islamic Reaction” and “On Erdogan’s Bonapartist Regime”). We hoped to prompt comrades who did not share our position to undertake their own investigation and, on that basis, either challenge our conclusions by pointing

out facts we had overlooked or misinterpreted, or, alternatively, rethink their position in light of what they discovered.

But there was no evidence that any Imps did any serious research. For most of the preconference period we got radio silence and evasion on this, the central political disagreement that had arisen since the 2014 conference. We hoped that this might mean that the comrades were thinking about the issues and perhaps grappling with some of the questions we had raised. It became clear that this was not the case when, shortly before the event, we received a proforma summary of their position (“Turkey and the Tactic of the Military Bloc”) without either factual substantiation or any serious commentary on our contributions. We responded to their document a week after it was submitted, but received no subsequent reply. The tendency exhibited by the Imp comrades throughout the Russian discussion to ignore or sidestep evidence or arguments that were difficult to counter was also apparent in the debate over Erdogan.

It seemed pretty obvious that the comrades did not consider it necessary to seriously engage on the issue because, having counted the votes, they knew they had a solid majority due to the support of comrade Mikl et al. Comrade Baker aptly described this as a “bureaucratic” approach to politics. In the intro to comrade Riley’s “Erdogan, Pilsudski & Khomeini” (originally delivered at the conference and subsequently circulated on 13 May 2017) he described the discussion as somewhat “disturbing”:

“The comrades who consider that Russia is imperialist were uniformly of the view that we should defend Erdogan’s regime against the coup. In the course of the discussion they preferred to sidestep the question of a parallel with Iran. In my remarks to the conference I complained that the comrades who earlier rejected the comparison on the grounds that Khomeini’s regime in 1979 was an Islamist dictatorship, while Erdogan’s in 2016 was an attenuated bourgeois democracy, ignored the carefully researched document I submitted early in the pre-conference discussion period which proved that there had been considerably more democratic space in the early days of the Iranian Islamic Republic than in contemporary Turkey. Comrade [Dorn], after prompting, responded that the reason there had been no response to the document was because she and her co-thinkers agreed with ‘most’ of it. Except, obviously, the essentials.”

The only substantial asset the IBT has ever possessed is our political continuity with the programmatic legacy of the RT/iSt. As we noted in the T&P:

“The world political situation is changing rapidly and the best efforts of even very serious subjective revolutionaries who do not have the benefit of a connection to the revolutionary tradition of the RT/iSt are extremely unlikely to be sufficient. This is why our survival and success is just as important today as it was 35 years ago when the External Tendency of the iSt was launched.”

We also observed:

“Despite the severe difficulties we face, which we are all too well aware of, there is no other road forward. Our political heritage gives us the capacity to make a decisive contribution to reviving a viable Trotskyist movement internationally, and thus reopening the road to the future that was staked out in October 1917.”

But the positions taken by the Imp comrades on many key issues in the recent past highlight the problems that flow from their profoundly mistaken perception of contemporary Russia as imperialist. This impressionist error has been further compounded by their record of turning away from the iSt’s hard opposition to “anti-imperialist” Islamist reaction in favor of defending Sisi’s Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt and Erdogan’s in Turkey on “democratic” grounds. As we pointed out at the conference:

“There is a logic to politics; which is why comrades who want to bloc with Erdogan [in 2016] sound a lot like the Hansenites circa 1980 explaining why they sided with Khomeini during the Iran-Iraq war. Their argument was simply that there was more democracy under the mullahs than Saddam Hussein”.

It is simply a fact that there was considerably more democratic space under Khomeini’s regime in 1979 than under Erdogan’s in 2016; but the revolutionary iSt opposed Islamist reaction on principle and stood alone against virtually every other left tendency in refusing to characterize Khomeini as a lesser evil compared to the U.S.-supported Shah. We take the same approach toward Islamist reaction in Egypt and Turkey today.

During the debate over Russian “imperialism” we considered Mikl and his co-thinkers to be partners in the struggle to uphold Trotskyism within the IBT. But their recent emergence as a faction that overtly and completely rejects the RT/iSt tradition (see: “Iran, nationalism and imperialism,” 29 May 2018) makes continued participation in a common organization with them pointless. After a decade, it is clear that our difference with the Imps on Russia is intractable. The inescapable corollary is that we must undo the 1990 fusion with the former PRG comrades and resume independent existence.

We do not take this step lightly—we are acutely conscious of just how tiny the IBT is and recognize that this separation will mean having even less weight and significantly reduced operational capacity. But we refuse to participate in a charade in which three disparate political tendencies share a common name and present themselves as a programmatically homogenous tendency. A decade of polemics and discussion, even though, almost without exception, conducted in a proper comradely fashion, have not brought us closer—we are all aware the differences are as deep as ever and growing in number. It is unreasonable to expect that to change.

So, given a choice between remaining as a revolutionary minority in a tiny organization that is deeply divided programmatically and seems certain to remain so into the indefinite future, or attempting to go forward in a programmatically homogenous, but significantly smaller group, we choose the latter.

Yours for the Rebirth of the Fourth International,

[Tom Riley et al]

2nd October 2018