

Chapter 2:

The WSWS as a Left Apologist for Bourgeois Nationalism in Iraq

The Iraq war is one of the defining political issues of our time, and it is no surprise that an upheaval of this magnitude puts all political tendencies to a severe test. As the WSWS itself declared at the end of a critique of Noam Chomsky: “Harsh times have this painful but salutary effect: organizations and individuals are tested. Whatever is false, unresolved or unprincipled inevitably reveals itself.”¹ The events in Mexico, which we just discussed, were such a test and they demonstrated the IC’s abdication of its responsibilities to intervene in the working class. Much the same could be said about the SEP’s failure to hold a meeting in the US for nearly a year to protest the Afghan war. The events in Iraq posed an even greater test, and produced a more striking failure. This time we are dealing not with a sin of omission but one of commission – the abandonment of the permanent revolution and the embrace of bourgeois nationalism in the form of a Shiite cleric and his militia. If we are to understand the International Committee’s political trajectory, then we need to set aside North’s document for a while and examine in detail the WSWS record on Iraq.

Since the US invasion of 2003, the events in Iraq have been bloody and tumultuous, with rapid shifts in the political and military landscape. Of course insofar as it was a question of opposing this criminal war, the responsibilities of the revolutionary movement were relatively straightforward – to do everything possible to mobilize the international working class against US imperialism in order to bring the war to an end. But within Iraq the situation was a good deal less clear. First and foremost was the question of the Iraqi resistance, with its bewildering array of Sunni and Shiite militias. Under these conditions a correct orientation to the working class was critical; otherwise, one could lose one’s bearings and end up lending credibility to some deeply reactionary forces.

The relevance of Trotsky’s theory of the permanent revolution in these circumstances should be apparent to any Marxist. Here is the essential point in Trotsky’s own words:

With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving *democracy and national emancipation* is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses.²

¹ David Walsh, “Professor Chomsky Comes in from the cold,” Apr. 5, 2004 <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/apr2004/chom-a05.shtml> The critique was occasioned by Chomsky’s support for John Kerry in 2004 election.

² L. Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, p. 276. On line: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1931-tpv/index.htm>

Applied to Iraq, this would mean that the working class is the only social force capable of overcoming the welter of religious and ethnic divisions and of leading a progressive and consistent struggle against imperialism. Which should make the political independence of the Iraqi working class *the decisive question* for revolutionary Marxists.

This does not mean adopting a ‘plague on both your houses’ stance in relation to the military conflict between the various Islamist militias and the US occupation forces. The only position consistent with Marxist internationalism is to be unequivocally for the defeat of the forces of US imperialism. But to be *against* US imperialism is not to be *for* the victory of the Islamists. To ignore that distinction is to abandon a proletarian orientation, i.e. to abandon the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the Iraqi working class. The Islamists are neither a substitute for nor an ally of the working class; they are instead a toxic blend of religious fundamentalism and bourgeois nationalism. Their military resistance to the occupation is a pressure tactic to strike a better deal with imperialism and to improve their position vis-à-vis their religious and ethnic rivals. And their following among workers and youth is based on stupefying them with religious demagoguery for the purpose of using them as political pawns and cannon fodder. Indeed it needs to be said that our opposition to US imperialism is *of a piece* with our opposition to the Islamists because it is the occupation that breeds the despair and disorientation among the masses that the Islamists exploit. We are for driving the imperialist forces out of Iraq precisely in order to create the best possible conditions for building a *secular*, socialist movement of the working class that can break the hold of the religious demagogues on the masses.

To be sure, fighting for such a perspective is hardly an easy matter in a country wracked by foreign occupation, internecine warfare and sectarian brutality, to say nothing of the wholesale collapse of social and economic life that has left as much as 70 percent of the population unemployed. But Trotsky called for bringing a socialist program to workers living under the iron heel of fascism in Germany and Italy in the Thirties,³ and certainly political conditions in Iraq today are no worse than that. Even functioning under severe restraints and with limited resources, it should be possible to reach out to Iraqi workers through coverage of their struggles, critical analysis of the various nationalist and ‘left’ parties, and the development of a program of democratic and socialist demands with the aim of eventually gathering a nucleus of workers and intellectuals to spearhead the fight for socialist revolution in Iraq. It should go without saying that an important part of such work would be the dissemination of material aimed at countering religious backwardness and ethnic prejudice. Obviously, the internet can be a valuable tool in putting such a perspective into practice.

Everything that has been stated so far – above all, the key point that opposition to imperialism does not mean support for the Islamists – would be considered fundamental to revolutionary politics by any literate Trotskyist. Indeed, if we go back to the IEB report on Latin America for a moment, a similar distinction with regard to the bourgeois nationalist regimes in that region is made virtually as a matter of course: “Certainly, a key

³ See for example “The Program of Transitional Demands in Fascist Countries” in *The Transitional Program* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1938-tp/index.htm>

responsibility of the WSWS is to expose and denounce the threats of US imperialism. This active defense of Latin America against Washington's aggression, however, does not oblige us to adapt to the illusions in Chavez or any other bourgeois nationalist regime."⁴ One would think that what applies to a bourgeois nationalist like Chavez, who calls himself a "revolutionary" and a "socialist," would apply many times over to preachers of religious obscurantism. It certainly isn't the 'anti-imperialist' rhetoric of these forces that matter or even their armed conflicts with imperialism, which can be intense but are always of a temporary and limited nature because of the class character of these movements. What matters is that these forces are a major obstacle to the political independence of the working class and therefore any tendency "to adapt to the illusions" in these forces is a betrayal of the struggle for that political independence.

And yet it was precisely such an adaptation that came to characterize the political line of the WSWS on Iraq. Here we need to go back to April 2004, a time of intense military conflict: as US forces were conducting a brutal siege of the Sunni city of Fallujah, an uprising against the US occupation by the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army militia broke out in Baghdad and the south of the country. Sadr was the young, and until then relatively obscure, heir of a dynasty of Shiite clerics whose power base was the working class slums of Baghdad. The uprising was a reaction by Sadr to a series of provocations by the US occupation regime, including a threat to arrest him, but as would become clear later, it was also to some extent a calculated move designed to raise Sadr's political profile.

There is no question that the Sadrist uprising was a striking new feature in the Iraqi political landscape that Marxists needed to analyze and understand. Undoubtedly the job of making such an analysis was considerably complicated by the intensity of the crisis within Iraq, to say nothing of the fact that there was no Trotskyist movement on the ground there. But if our adherence to Marxism is not just an empty phrase, then it should be able to provide us with a correct orientation in the midst of a crisis as well as in more relatively peaceful times; indeed, it is precisely in a crisis that our adherence to Marxism is most essential.

This doesn't mean that Marxism makes us infallible: obviously mistakes will be made, especially under difficult conditions. But an adherence to Marxism does guarantee a firm orientation to the working class, and so long as we have that to guide ourselves by, we will always be in a position to correct our errors and find our way through the maze of conflicting social forces. By contrast, those whose adherence to Marxism is only superficial throw the orientation to the working class overboard at the first sign of a crisis. This is to leave oneself prey to impressionism under conditions where events are unfolding at breakneck speed, with the predictable result that one soon ends up aligned with alien class forces. This is just what one would expect from the cabal of middle class radicals, but what is deeply troubling is that it is also true of the WSWS record on Iraq, as we are about to see.

⁴ "Report on Latin American perspectives", WSWS, Mar. 18, 2006:
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/van1-m18.shtml>

The WSWS Record on Iraq: The Perspective of “National Resistance”

The first WSWS reports on the Sadrist uprising (April 5 and 6, 2004) were relatively straightforward accounts of events, with the political message focused on opposing the occupation. On April 7, 2004, the WSWS editorial board came out with a statement on the uprising (“Stop the war on the Iraqi people”), which presumably was either written by North or vetted by him, and already there is a noticeable shift. The characterization of Sadr is still cautious: “Al-Sadr has adopted a posture of militant opposition to the US occupation, winning the support of Shiite workers and youth and the ire of the US authorities,” which seems to suggest that this “posture” of Sadr’s may be political posturing. But later in the statement there is no such caution when it comes to describing the Islamist resistance as a whole:

What is emerging in Iraq is a war of national resistance that has transcended the religious divides that many had predicted would erupt into an internecine civil war. The Iraqi resistance against US occupation is just as legitimate as the struggles waged by the French resistance against German occupation in the 1940s and the liberation struggles that swept the colonial countries in the 1960s and 1970s. The claims of the administration and its apologists that the US is fighting only a small minority of “extremists” and “terrorists” in Iraq will be rejected by all those in the US who are capable of independent and critical thought.⁵

Reading this raises an immediate question: *whatever happened to the Iraqi working class?* It has simply disappeared into the heroic mist of “national resistance.” And the historical precedents cited here are equally free of any class ‘taint’ – the ‘national’ resistance of the French against the Germans in the 40s and the anti-colonial struggles of the 60s and 70s. It would appear that those “who are capable of independent and critical thought” (yet more non-class terminology) don’t seem to be capable of thinking much beyond liberalism: the distinction so crucial to a Marxist perspective – that being against US imperialism does not mean being for the Islamists – is entirely lost sight of here.

We will have more to say on these remarks later on, but for now we need to see how this “national resistance” perspective unfolded in the coverage of the WSWS on Iraq. A day later (April 8, 2004), the editorial board issued yet another statement on Iraq, “Defend the Iraqi masses.” This in itself was noteworthy: why issue two editorial board statements on the same issue in the space of two days unless there was something not quite right about the first statement?⁶ The fact that the April 8 statement was also issued in a PDF format for the purpose of being downloaded and distributed as a flyer indicates that the second statement was intended as the more authoritative one. And what is it that was not quite right about the first statement and that had to be corrected in the second? Certainly not the “national resistance” perspective: on the contrary, that would be expanded upon. No, what needed to be ‘corrected’ were the lingering reservations about the Shiite cleric Sadr.

⁵ “Stop the war on the Iraqi people”, WSWS, Apr. 7, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/apr2004/iraq-a07.shtml>

⁶ There was still another editorial board statement a day later (i.e. Apr. 9, 2004), but this focused on the role of the Democrats in relation to the Iraq war.

Gone are any suggestions that Sadr is posturing. In the “heroic and justified nation-wide uprising against colonial repression,” Sadr is portrayed uncritically as “the uprising’s main political spokesman” who is uniting the resistance against the occupation: “In response to direct calls by Sadr for the unity of all Iraqis, contact has reportedly been established between his ‘Mehdi Army’ militia and the resistance organizations in Fallujah and elsewhere.” The praise for Sadr reaches a crescendo in the editorial board’s comments on an appeal he made to the American people for support for the uprising. The statement quotes the appeal – “*I call upon the American people to stand beside your brothers, the Iraqi people, who are suffering an injustice by your rulers and the occupying army, and to help them in the transfer of power to honest Iraqis. Otherwise Iraq will become another Vietnam for America and the occupiers.*” – and then the editorial board goes on to declare:

Sadr’s call displays a degree of political sophistication that is completely absent in the American political establishment. It is a direct appeal to the objective common interest between the Iraqi masses and American working class—who are both victims of the policies of the Bush administration and the American corporate elite. Contrary to the propaganda of the US media, there is no popular support for the occupation of Iraq among the majority of the American working class (emphasis added).⁷

These are the statements of a movement that has lost its Marxist bearings. Since when have Marxists uncritically repeated appeals for “the unity of all Iraqis”? This was a shameful capitulation to bourgeois nationalism. Sadr of course had no pretensions of being anything else except an Iraqi nationalist and Islamist, and his appeal to the American public that the WSWS editorial board was so eager to laud was nothing more than a banal specimen of bourgeois nationalism: he called on “the American people” to support “the Iraqi people” and demanded that power be transferred to “honest Iraqis,” a breathtakingly vacuous phrase. And yet this is what the chief publication of the world Trotskyist movement held up as proof of Sadr’s “political sophistication”! In order to make that claim credible, the editorial board writers asserted that he was appealing “to the objective common interest between the Iraqi masses and American working class.” But this is nonsense: Sadr made no mention of the working class, either in America or Iraq. And it is noteworthy here that while the WSWS itself acknowledged the existence of a working class in America, when it came to Iraq it chose to use the deliberately non-class term, “Iraqi masses,” presumably in deference to its newly anointed hero of “national resistance.”

If one were to believe the WSWS, then Sadr deserved the backing of Marxists by virtue of the fact that he was leading an uprising against the US occupation and had made calls for Iraqi unity and support from the American people. But if this is true, then why wouldn’t the same standard apply to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua or Fidel Castro in Cuba? Certainly Castro and Ortega have engaged in armed conflicts with US imperialism that make Sadr’s uprising (which turned out to be a relatively brief affair) seem trivial by comparison and Chavez was briefly deposed in

⁷ “Defend the Iraqi masses”, WSWS, Apr. 8, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/apr2004/iraq-a08.shtml>

2002 by a CIA-inspired coup attempt. As for anti-imperialist rhetoric, all these gentlemen could put Sadr to shame: they ‘talk the talk’ and not just about national unity (though they are of course all big on that) but also about revolution, socialism and the working class. Appeals for solidarity from the “American people”? Castro’s rhetoric on this score alone could probably fill volumes, and these sorts of appeals are equally a staple of Chavez’s rhetoric, to say nothing of his PR campaign to hand out heating oil to residents of poor working class neighborhoods in New York and Boston. By the same ‘logic’ the WSWS applies to Sadr, there is every reason to hail these other men as heroes of ‘national resistance’. And why stop there? What about Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine? After all, being a peddler of religious poison doesn’t seem to be an obstacle to winning accolades from the WSWS and these movements have just as much claim as Sadr to being leaders of “national resistance”. Once you go looking for substitutes for the working class, there is no end of candidates that you can come up with. But it is revisionists, not Marxists, who are in the business of looking for such substitutes and of becoming cheerleaders for bourgeois nationalism.

It seems incredible that in the 21st century one still has to repeat the elementary truth that the perspective of “national resistance” is *absolutely incompatible* with the perspective of Marxism. Indeed, only weeks before the Sadrist uprising began, the WSWS ran a nine-part series on Iraq which made precisely this point: “The history of the past half-century entirely confirms – if only in the negative – the theory of permanent revolution. At no point during the post-war period were any of the nationalist movements of the Middle East capable of consistently carrying out the basic democratic and national aims they proclaimed for themselves.” Those aims were “always subordinated to and ultimately foundered upon the narrow interests of the ruling classes of the various countries ... The fear and hostility of the bourgeoisie toward the working class meant that genuine democratic mechanisms could not be tolerated.”⁸

How can one possibly square these remarks with the editorial board statements of April 7 and 8? Either Sadr was some astonishing exception to “the past half-century” of experience – and there is absolutely nothing in the editorial board statements that justified such a claim – *or else the editorial board threw aside the fundamentals of a Marxist perspective*. This succumbing to impressions and disregard for theory is, to state the obvious, the hallmark of pragmatism. A good example of this ‘throwing aside’ of Marxist fundamentals was the claim by the editorial board that Sadr’s uprising marked the emergence of “a war of national resistance that has transcended the religious divides” in Iraq. But for a Marxist, there are far more important “divides” than religious ones – i.e. those between social classes. Had they too been “transcended”? To answer yes was to abandon Marxism completely; to answer no was to expose the perspective of “national resistance” as a fraud for the purpose of hoodwinking the Iraqi workers. The editorial board – bent on cheering on Sadr – got around the problem by never raising it.

(It is worth noting here that the WSWS was hardly alone in its embrace of Sadr: the Shiite cleric developed an enthusiastic following within many left-liberal circles in the

⁸ “The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy,” Part Two, WSWS, Mar. 13, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/mar2004/iraq-m13.shtml>

west at this time. A typical example is Naomi Klein, columnist for *The Nation* and a leading figure in the anti-globalization movement. She was in Baghdad in April 2004 and sent back reports brimming with the kind of wide-eyed enthusiasm of ‘radical tourists’, the sort who used to go to Cuba in the Sixties, Nicaragua in the Seventies or Venezuela more recently. One report began: “I heard the sound of freedom in Baghdad’s Firdos Square,” the sound being that of a demonstration by the Sadrists. The cleric himself is described as “a kind of cross between Ayatollah Khomeini and Che Guevara,” which presumably Klein meant as a compliment. She also tossed out the observation that if Sadr were in power, “His Iraq might look a lot like Iran,” but this didn’t seem to cause her much consternation.⁹ She had “heard the sound of freedom,” much like liberal intellectuals in the Thirties who came back from their guided tours of Stalinist Russia and claimed to have ‘seen the future’. *But this crass impressionism was, in no fundamental sense, different from the analysis being offered by the WSWS of the Sadrist uprising.* And in fairness to Klein, she raised aspects of Sadr’s program that the WSWS was conspicuously silent about: his Islamist goals a la Khomeini and also his call for the US occupation to be replaced by UN forces, a demand which Klein strongly supported.¹⁰ Of course Klein could afford to be honest because she didn’t have to pretend that her gushing over Sadr had anything to do with Marxism.)

Opposing the perspective of “national resistance” doesn’t mean being oblivious to the ‘divide and rule’ strategy that American imperialism was (and of course still is) employing in Iraq, fomenting religious and ethnic tensions that have finally spun out into a horrific cycle of mutual mass murder. Marxists fight to expose this strategy and inoculate the masses against the poison of religious and ethnic prejudice. But we do this precisely by *not* caving in to bourgeois nationalism and its demagogic appeals for the “unity of all Iraqis.” To be sure, there are divisions among the Islamists on this issue: the main Shiite parties are for Shia hegemony while the jihadists and supporters of al-Qaeda are for Sunni hegemony, whereas the Sadrists among the Shiites and the Baathists in the Sunni camp have a more national perspective.¹¹ But it isn’t the job of Marxists to line up behind any of these factions or to hail any amalgam between them: adding nationalism to Islamic fundamentalism doesn’t make the ‘blend’ any more progressive from the standpoint of the working class. All these factions, whatever their religious and political differences, share the perspective of exploiting the working class. And Sadr’s attempt to forge an alliance with factions in the Sunni camp changed nothing about the *class character* of these forces. That is why it is inexcusable for Marxists to rely on a bourgeois nationalist Shiite cleric to overcome the ‘divide and rule’ tactics of

⁹ “Freedom Fires,” Apr. 5, 2004. The column, originally in *The Nation*, is now posted on Klein’s website, nologo.org: <http://www.nologo.org/newsite/detaild.php?ID=380>

¹⁰ “Mutiny in Iraq,” Apr. 28, 2004. Again, originally in *The Nation*, now posted here: <http://www.nologo.org/newsite/detaild.php?ID=386>

¹¹ The combination of Iraqi nationalism and Islamism is chiefly what characterizes Sadr’s politics and what distinguishes him from the other Shiite parties, notably the various wings of the Dawa party as well as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). These differences reflect divisions within the Shiite clergy, whose top ranks are made up mostly of Iranian-born clerics including the Shia ‘pope’ of Iraq, the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. Sadr and his family represent a wing of the clergy with a more Iraqi nationalist orientation. (See a profile on Sadr, “America’s Unlikely Savior” by Nir Rosen, originally on Salon.com [Feb. 3, 2006] and reposted on the radical website Znet, <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=9665>)

imperialism: to do so is to boost the credibility of bourgeois nationalism in the eyes of the masses. Marxists fight for a different kind of ‘unity’ – the unity of the oppressed against their oppressors.

And Marxists have traditionally drawn different lessons from history than those proclaimed by the WSWS editorial board. The anti-colonial struggles of the 60s and 70s – fought precisely on the basis of a “national resistance” perspective – were ultimately traps for the oppressed masses, achieving little more than the exchange of a homegrown exploiter for a colonial one. And much the same goes for the French resistance against Nazi occupation. Trotskyists have never partaken – until now, at least – in the liberal and Stalinist mythologizing of this history. The Trotskyist movement was for an independent proletarian and socialist opposition to the Nazis, turning the resistance to fascism into an onslaught on French capitalism. The Stalinists, who dominated the French Resistance, imposed their Popular Front politics, i.e. their version of “national resistance,” to make sure that once the Nazis were gone, the French bourgeoisie would be back in the saddle. In other words, the historical precedents cited by the WSWS attest to the *dangers* of caving in to a “national resistance” perspective and to the urgent need for a genuinely Marxist perspective that fights for the *independent mobilization* of the Iraqi working class in the struggle against imperialism.

Sadr as Iraq’s vox populi

If we continue to follow the WSWS coverage on Iraq, we can see that the “national resistance” perspective was no anomaly. On April 12, 2004, the WSWS posted greetings by North to an SEP meeting in Australia that focused on the Sadrist uprising. In a couple of paragraphs in this text, the tensions between Marxist orthodoxy and the new perspective are apparent. While hailing the uprising, North declares that “admiration for the courage of the Iraqi people in the face of overwhelming odds does not blind us to the fact that the basic problems of political leadership in the working class—upon which the defeat of imperialism depends—remain unsolved.” This is entirely right but it is also directly at odds with the “national resistance” line espoused in the editorial board statements only days earlier. Rather than critically assessing those statements, however, North proceeds in the next paragraph to demonstrate that the IC leadership is indeed “blind” to “the basic problems of political leadership in the working class.” Alluding to the editorial board statements, North writes:

We have taken serious note of the appeal issued by al-Sadr to the people of the United States. This appeal must reflect a new awareness among the Iraqi masses that American imperialism is not a monolithic force, and that the United States is torn by internal social divisions. It also expresses a realization that the Iraqi people must seek support beyond the borders of their own country. This development in consciousness was already anticipated in the mass international anti-war demonstrations of February 2003, and provides fresh substantiation of the emergence of new and more favorable conditions for the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution.¹²

¹² *Greetings from David North to Australian SEP*: “A devastating blow to the myth of American invincibility”, WSWS, Apr. 12, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/apr2004/dn-a12.shtml>

Here North develops the theme of Sadr's supposed "political sophistication": the cleric's banal bit of anti-imperialist rhetoric is elevated to nothing less than a leap of political consciousness, "a new awareness among the Iraqi masses." And as in the editorial board statement, North is only able to make this claim credible by dressing up Sadr's paltry phrases, which are now presented as amounting to a recognition of the class nature of American society and even the need for international solidarity of the working class. It almost seems as if Sadr seems here to be well on his way to becoming a Marxist!

But what is noteworthy about these remarks is what they reveal about the method behind this adulation for Sadr. North writes that the cleric's appeal "must reflect" a new awareness in the masses: in other words, this notion of there having been some leap in political consciousness is speculation, impressionism. What is missing here is a *class analysis*, which is to say the essence of Marxism. As soon as we bring that into the picture, Sadr's rhetoric and even his uprising come sharply into focus as the maneuvering (i.e. posturing) of a bourgeois nationalist. Instead of embracing him, we should have been cautioning the working class not to be taken in by him.

But North's impressionism isn't some inadvertent error; it is rather the inevitable outcome of his objectivism, i.e. of the systematic downplaying of the significance of the *subjective* factor in revolutionary politics. And these remarks illustrate that objectivism yet again. Where did this "new awareness" of the Iraqi masses come from? Presumably from objective conditions. In fact their impact has been so extraordinary that they have transformed Sadr himself: the fact that North uses the cleric's pronouncements as a window into mass consciousness in effect makes Sadr out to be the *vox populi* of Iraq, the 'voice of the people'. To be sure, spontaneous consciousness can undergo considerable changes, but since Lenin's time Marxists have understood that it cannot *on its own* get beyond the barrier of bourgeois consciousness. But this cardinal truth – with all its implications for revolutionary practice – is what objectivism is constantly 'forgetting'.

As these remarks show, for North spontaneous consciousness is capable of some remarkable things – an understanding of the class nature of American society and the need for international working class solidarity. That is a good deal beyond what Lenin thought were the limits of spontaneous consciousness, i.e. trade unionism. Nor is this just an Iraqi phenomenon: as North goes on to say, a similar "development in consciousness" was already evident in the mass anti-war demonstrations a year earlier. The picture North paints here turns the traditional standpoint of Marxism on its head: it is not the party's intervention in the class struggle that raises the political consciousness of the masses but it is rather objective conditions which raise spontaneous consciousness to the point of creating "new and more favorable conditions" for building the party. One need only add here that three years later, it is sadly evident that North was as far off the mark about this "new awareness" as he was about Sadr. Both the Iraqi uprising and the global anti-war demonstrations were crippled precisely by a *lack of political consciousness* – which is why they were easily coopted, with Sadr using his working-class base as a bargaining chip to become a power-broker in a bourgeois government (and an active participant in the internecine butchery between Shiites and Sunnis that developed soon after), while the

anti-war movement was soon furnishing foot soldiers for John Kerry's pro-war presidential campaign.

Indeed, impressionism tends to have a particularly short shelf-life in the midst of a major crisis. Three days after North's pronouncement, the first hint creeps into WSWS coverage that there might be problems with Sadr as the Iraqi *vox populi*. The article, "US military prepares assault on Najaf and Fallujah" (April 15, 2004), notes that the main Shiite parties are putting pressure on Sadr to call off his uprising and that Sadr "is bowing to the pressure." He ordered "his militiamen to hand back police stations and strategic buildings in Najaf to Iraqi police," pledged loyalty to the Shiite religious leadership and "also declared his willingness to disband his militia and submit to being tried for murder in the future, under a 'legitimate and democratic government' established after the end of the US occupation." While the article exposes the opportunist motives of the main Shia parties (the Dawa party and SCIRI) in putting pressure on Sadr, it maintains a discrete silence about Sadr's readiness to bow to that pressure.¹³

The Canonization of Existing Relations

In any case, one would think that this development would call for some reevaluation of the "national resistance" line on Iraq, but there is no indication of that having happened. Six weeks later, in an exchange with a reader about Ralph Nader, WSWS staff writer Patrick Martin defended the resistance in glowing terms:

The Iraqi insurgents—the armed resistance fighters in Falluja, Najaf and other cities—are a genuine expression of popular anti-American and anti-colonial sentiment. They cannot be counterposed to the "mainstream" because they represent the mainstream. I would not press an analogy between the current situation in Iraq and the American Revolution except in this: I have no doubt that somewhere in the British Colonial Office in 1776 there was a strategist writing about the need to separate the "insurgents" at Concord and Lexington from the "mainstream Americans" who were loyal to their king. Such distinctions are characteristic of every colonial and counterrevolutionary war in history. The method is known as "divide and conquer."¹⁴

What is striking here is that in attacking the middle class liberal Nader, the Marxist Martin adopts the language of liberalism: his categories – insurgents, resistance fighters, mainstream, anti-American and anti-colonial sentiment – are all *devoid of any class content*. Where Nader sees a negative, Martin sees a positive, but the frame of reference is the same for both, and there is no place for the Iraqi working class anywhere in that frame. Once you are freed of the nagging problem of class, then all kinds of glorious parallels suggest themselves, as we saw earlier with the French resistance etc. Martin now enlists the shades of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, and one can almost see the fife and drum marching through the dusty streets of Najaf and Fallujah. But alas

¹³ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/apr2004/iraq-a15.shtml>

¹⁴ "An exchange on Nader, Kerry and the US war in Iraq", WSWS, June 1, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jun2004/nadr-j01.shtml>

the shade of Leon Trotsky, author of the theory of permanent revolution, is nowhere to be seen in this heroic scenario.

A more sophisticated defense of the “national resistance” perspective comes up in a series by WSWS editorial board member Peter Schwarz on “The politics of opportunism: the ‘radical left’ in France,” specifically in part 6, which deals with the Lutte Ouvriere (LO) organization. Schwarz says a good many correct things about LO, and it is worth quoting one point in particular before we get to what he has to say on Iraq. Schwarz is scathing about LO’s ‘workerism’, which entails being ‘close’ to the working class but never criticizing the unions or “raising an issue or standing on a principle that was not already in the air and more or less accepted by most workers.” To illustrate this, Schwarz quotes LO leader Arlette Laguiller: “We always put forward proposals that we think are in line with the relationship of forces and with what the working class is prepared to do in a given country.” Then Schwarz comments:

This formula amounts to the canonization of existing relations. An organization that restricts itself to those demands already accepted by the majority of workers is not revolutionary, but rather, in the strictest sense of the word, conservative. LO does not believe that a courageous, forward-looking perspective can ever find a response in the working class and thus change the objective situation. It invariably justifies its own inactivity and passivity with the alleged immaturity of the masses.¹⁵

This is entirely right. But only a few pages later, when Schwarz comes to the question of Iraq, he adopts the very approach he has just attacked Laguiller for.

To put Schwarz’s remarks on Iraq into context, it needs to be kept in mind that the Naomi Klein-style adulation of Sadr that we noted earlier was quite typical in the middle class left. The British SWP/IS are good examples of this: they are uncritical defenders of the Islamist resistance, not just the Sadrists, and even the spiraling of sectarian violence from 2005 on has done nothing to alter that position. In defending this stance, party leader Chris Harman freely acknowledges that this means backing reactionary forces like the jihadists, but dismisses such concerns by declaring that “support for a movement for liberation should not depend on those who lead it at a particular point in time.” This is, to put it mildly, a prescription for opportunism since liberation movements in the 20th century have been betrayed time and again by their leaders. Genuine support for such movements would require a principled struggle to expose their misleaders and counter their bourgeois perspective with the standpoint of the permanent revolution, but this is the exact opposite of Harman’s notion of ‘support’. (Harman adds a further rationalization for his opportunist policy: “the Iraqi resistance indirectly aids all those who would be next in line if the US were not bogged down in Iraq. This includes forces such as Hizbollah in Lebanon, and also those in Venezuela and Bolivia who are beginning to struggle to turn the dream of ‘socialism in the 21st century’ into a reality.”¹⁶ This is the ‘global perspective’ that animates middle class radicalism, and it clearly has nothing to

¹⁵ Peter Schwarz, “The politics of opportunism: the ‘radical left’ in France”, Part Six, WSWS, May 26, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/may2004/pab6-m26.shtml>

¹⁶ Chris Harman, “Why Opposing Imperialism Means Supporting Resistance,” *Socialist Review*, Dec. 2006, <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=9912>

do with proletarian revolution. But Harman is certainly right about one thing – with that sort of perspective, it does indeed make eminent sense to support the Iraqi Islamists.)

The LO, by contrast, came out strongly against the Islamists. This isn't that surprising since the middle class radical milieu is hardly homogenous. While the Pabloites and IS orient themselves to the so-called 'anti-capitalist left' (i.e. the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, identity politics and environmentalism), the LO orients itself more towards syndicalist workers and left-talking union bureaucrats. For that reason, the LO is more concerned about maintaining the rhetoric of Marxist orthodoxy, which is crucial to its image of being more 'working class' and 'revolutionary' than its chief rival on the French 'extreme left', the Pabloite Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR). The politics of a group like LO consists in more or less neatly compartmentalizing its rhetorical adherence to Marxist principle from its 'canonizing of existing relations'. The trouble with Schwarz's criticism of LO's stand on Iraq, however, is that it is aimed at the former rather than at the latter. In other words, it is aimed at LO's defense, at least in its rhetoric, of the permanent revolution.¹⁷

Like the other WSWS writers, Schwarz sets up a simple dichotomy between imperialism and the resistance, referred to as "the resistance of the Iraqi population" and the "growing popular resistance," terms that exclude any reference to Islamism and are devoid of class content. Given such a dichotomy, it automatically follows that to attack the Islamists, as LO does, is to line up with imperialism:

While growing popular resistance has thrown the governments in Washington and London into a deep crisis, LO has denounced one of its symbols, the Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr, as the "worst enemy" of the Iraqi people. The policy of imperialism, LO wrote, was "to drive the masses into the arms of a reactionary Imam like al Sadr, i.e., their worst enemy." This same theme runs through all of LO's statements on this issue. The occupying powers and the resistance against it are equally condemned. The main accusation LO raises against the occupiers is invariably that they strengthen Islamic fundamentalism. One article states: "Whether or not the Western occupation is continued, the Iraqi masses risk being caught between two fronts—between the armed gangs of imperialism and its fundamentalist opponents."

¹⁷ To bolster his case, Schwarz contends that the LO's opposition to the Islamists in Iraq was of a piece with its support for the French law banning Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in public schools, but his argument isn't convincing. He claims that both positions are part of a trend by the LO to make "advances" towards the bourgeois state. While that is evident in relation to the headscarf law, where the LO was blatantly adapting to bourgeois public opinion, on Iraq the French state was actually opposed to the invasion (for its own imperialist reasons, needless to say) and anti-Americanism was (and still is) hugely popular in France, especially on the left. Thus if there was any mileage to be gained in terms of courting public opinion in France, it was from opposing the US occupation, not the Islamist resistance. Where Schwarz sees consistency between the two policies, there is instead the compartmentalization typical of revisionist outfits between gross opportunism in relation to the headscarf law and formal adherence to Marxist principle in relation to the Iraqi Islamists.

Reading this three years on, one is struck by the prescience, not of Schwarz and the WSWS, but of the perspective of permanent revolution, even when defended by a revisionist outfit like LO. The bitter truth is that the Iraqi masses have indeed ended up being “caught between two fronts – between the armed gangs of imperialism and its fundamentalist opponents.” And all those on the left – including the WSWS – who played the role of cheerleaders for the Islamists bear a measure of political responsibility for that.

To stack the deck in his favor, Schwarz presents the LO’s position as being to ‘equally condemn’ imperialism and the Islamists. Indeed, a few paragraphs later he is claiming that for the LO, “it makes no difference” if the occupation continues and that their stand “comes very close” to demanding “the replacement of the present occupying forces by UN troops.” One doesn’t have to hold a brief for the LO to see this as a crude distortion of their position. In fact they have been consistent in opposing the US occupation, and the only way Schwarz can make his case seem credible is by pulling quotes out of context. (Incidentally, while Schwarz claims, wrongly, that the LO was implicitly for UN troops replacing the US occupation force, he conveniently neglects the fact that Sadr had explicitly taken just such a position.)

Thus Schwarz tries to make much of the phrase “whether or not the Western occupation is continued,” but he ignores the next sentence in the original article: “And that [i.e. to be caught between the armed gangs of imperialism and its fundamentalist opponents] is all that this rotten imperialist system is capable of offering the masses of a country like Iraq.”¹⁸ Similarly, in the quote that called Sadr “the worst enemy” of the Iraqi masses, Schwarz leaves out the beginning of the sentence: “In the absence of a radical perspective that truly represents the interests of the lower classes, the policy of imperialism is perhaps in the process of driving the masses into the arms of a reactionary Imam like al Sadr, i.e., their worst enemy.”¹⁹

Read in context, these statements are not some backhanded defense of imperialism in the guise of giving ‘equal’ treatment to the imperialists and the Islamists, as Schwarz contends. Rather they are consistent with the principle of the political independence of the working class, i.e. a “perspective that truly represents the interests of the lower classes.” It has always been the apologists for bourgeois nationalism, notably the Stalinists and the Pabloites, who have condemned such a perspective as unrealistic or as amounting to support for imperialism. Now the WSWS partakes in the same sort of vilification of the perspective of permanent revolution.²⁰

¹⁸ “Irak- La montee de l’integrisme, sous-produit d’une sale guerre” *Lutte Ouvriere*, 2 April 2004 (<http://www.lutte-ouvriere-journal.org/?act=somm&num=1861>)

¹⁹ “Irak: l’occupation alimente l’escalade integriste” *Lutte Ouvriere*, 9 April 2004 (<http://www.lutte-ouvriere-journal.org/?act=somm&num=1862>).

²⁰ Frankly one finds more insight into Sadr’s politics in the LO press than anywhere in the WSWS. Here is an excerpt from an article posted by the LO tendency in Britain, *Workers’ Fight*, in July/August 2004:

Indeed, given that Sadr City was among the neighbourhoods which organised help for besieged Sunnis in Falluja, it may well be the case that, on the basis of the credit he has earned, al Sadr now seeks to emerge as a symbol of radical nationalism, with the aim of uniting all Iraqi Muslims behind his banner. This would be consistent with his announcement

But it is Schwarz's statements defending the WSWS "national resistance" perspective that are most revealing. He writes:

The Iraqi people have reacted to the criminal imperialist war by putting up heroic resistance to the occupation. In doing so, they have employed the ideological and political means at their disposal. Given the decades long despotic rule of the nationalist Baath regime and the treacherous role of the Iraqi Communist Party in supporting it, the domination of the most radical wing of the Shiite clerics comes as no surprise. LO's reaction to this development is not that of revolutionaries, but of frightened liberals. Revolutionaries support the Iraqi resistance, they call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the imperialist occupiers, they mobilize the international—including the American—working class for this aim, and in this way undermine the influence of the Islamists, whose position is, of necessity, inconsistent and half-hearted.

Trotsky had a great way of describing what Schwarz is advocating here: he called it "bowing before the accomplished fact." The masses, Schwarz informs us, "have employed the ideological and political means at their disposal." But for a Marxist the decisive question is what to do about this fact – does one bow before it and accommodate oneself to the domination of the masses by the Islamists, or does one resist it? Marxist politics begins from the objective needs of the working class (as North endlessly reminds us), and surely here we have a case where those needs are in the starkest contradiction to "the ideological and political means" at the disposal of the Iraqi masses. Yet precisely here the objectivist opts not for resistance but for adaptation! (In this respect, Schwarz's argument is identical to that of the SWP's Chris Harman: "support for a movement for liberation should not depend on those who lead it at a particular point in time" – or more accurately, at *any and every* "particular point in time.")

Like a clever salesman, however, Schwarz tries to dress up his shoddy product in the brightest "revolutionary" colors. You see, it is only "frightened liberals" who are against

that he intends to form a political party and will support [then interim premier] Allawi's government as long as its aim is to end foreign occupation of, and interference with the country. Of course, this changes nothing to the deeply reactionary nature of al Sadr's politics. But it means that the west's power game of playing Sunni against Shia may end up in failure. One of the consequences of the western occupation of Iraq may well be to allow Islamic fundamentalists like al-Sadr to grab the flag of Iraqi nationalism, thereby providing them with a social base they had never enjoyed before. If so, the US leaders will have no partners to bargain with other than the radical Islamic factions - exactly what they wanted to avoid. (*Class Struggle* #56, "Iraq – 'Democratic Process' or civil war?" <http://www.union-communiste.org/?EN-archp-show-2004-6-553-3087-x.html>)

The image of Sadr as maneuvering "to grab the flag of Iraqi nationalism" in order to expand his power base is exactly right, and stands in stark contrast to the vapid rhetoric of the WSWS. Also, the analysis of imperialism is more perceptive: far from being master manipulators, their 'divide-and-rule' tactics will finally blow up in their face even as they plunge Iraq into the nightmare of sectarian civil war. The point here isn't that the LO was possessed of any special brilliance; quite the contrary, their theoretical level is abysmally low. It is rather that insight into the political role of Sadr as a bourgeois nationalist-cum-fundamentalist was readily apparent to anyone maintaining even a formal adherence to the perspective of permanent revolution. The only reason the WSWS did not see this is because it was being *willfully blind*.

the Islamists dominating the Iraqi masses, as opposed to the presumably ‘fearless’ revolutionaries who capitulate to this domination. And if that topsy-turvy logic isn’t convincing, Schwarz has another argument up his sleeve: supporting Sadr and company is really just a way “to undermine the influence of the Islamists.” This is truly an Orwellian formulation – you undermine the Islamists by supporting them!

Indeed it comes as something of a shock to read the phrase – “undermine the influence of the Islamists” – in the WSWS. Where else has there been even the suggestion that this is what revolutionaries should do? Up to now Sadr was routinely presented in the WSWS as the heroic leader of a movement in the tradition of the French resistance against the Nazis, to say nothing of the parallels to the American Revolution, and on top of that he was praised for his “political sophistication” in terms that made him out to be the voice of the Iraqi people. And Schwarz adds his own bit to this nauseating cheerleading for the Shiite cleric, referring to him as a “symbol” of the resistance. Is this how revolutionaries act “to undermine the influence of the Islamists”? One is tempted to say: with ‘enemies’ like that, who needs friends?

But even if one were to take Schwarz at his word about wanting to “undermine” the Islamists, his policy is still the opposite of what a revolutionary policy should be. Schwarz here advocates precisely “the canonization of existing relations” that he rightly attacked the LO for earlier. For him the grip of the Islamists over the masses is a ‘given’, and it would seem that there is nothing revolutionaries can do about it – that is, apart from supporting the Islamists and thereby helping to strengthen their grip! Recall what Schwarz said earlier: “LO does not believe that a courageous, forward-looking perspective can ever find a response in the working class and thus change the objective situation. It invariably justifies its own inactivity and passivity with the alleged immaturity of the masses.” This fully applies to the WSWS policy on Iraq. There is never any mention of the Iraqi working class, let alone any sense that “a courageous, forward-looking perspective” – i.e. the permanent revolution – could ever find a response among the masses.

Even Schwarz’s paradigm for how the Islamists are going to be undermined is indicative of this standpoint of “inactivity and passivity.” The Islamists will be caught out by their own actions, i.e. by being “inconsistent and half-hearted” in fighting imperialism, while the ‘fearless’ revolutionaries will contribute nothing to the enlightenment of the masses except for their continued support of the Islamists. It obviously never occurred to Schwarz that once the Islamists lose their credibility, so do their cheerleaders. Why would the masses place any confidence in a party that has done nothing to fight for the political independence of the working class and has instead boosted illusions in bourgeois nationalists who have ultimately betrayed them?

But such questions are meaningless to an objectivist. And this is the crux of the matter: this shameful abandonment of the permanent revolution in Iraq is above all symptomatic of the deadening effect of objectivism. What it demonstrates is that objectivism is not about acknowledging objective facts but about *prostrating* oneself before them. Which is

why objectivism is a travesty of Marxism, no matter how much it mimics Marxist rhetoric.

The Heritage no Longer Defended

To fully appreciate the significance of this cave-in to Iraqi bourgeois nationalism by the WSWS, we need to place it in the context of the history of Trotskyism. And one cannot do better in this regard than to quote from a document co-authored by North himself: *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973-1985*. This was the 1986 balance sheet on the degeneration and collapse of the British WRP, and it stands alongside Cannon's Open Letter of 1953 and the SLL's *Opportunism and Empiricism* as essential statements that mark watershed moments in the history of Trotskyism.²¹ The second of this document's three parts is entitled "The Permanent Revolution Betrayed", and it is almost an understatement to say that its relevance to the present discussion leaps off the page.

In charting the metamorphosis of the WRP leadership into crass apologists for bourgeois nationalist regimes, especially in the Middle East, North and his co-authors go back to the 1962-63 split in the International Committee, where again capitulation to bourgeois nationalism played a crucial role, this time in the form of the American SWP's embrace of Castroism. North quotes at length from a report by Cliff Slaughter in the aftermath of the SWP split, and these quotes amount to a damning indictment: the Slaughter of 1963 demonstrates the principles that Slaughter (and Healy and Banda) betrayed from the mid-70s on. But the irony is that these quotes now also serve as an indictment of North's policy on Iraq. Let us hear what Slaughter had to say in 1963:

In the backward countries, fighting to resolve the crisis of leadership means fighting for the construction of *proletarian* parties, with the aim of proletarian dictatorship. It is especially necessary to stress the proletarian character of the leadership in countries with a large petty-bourgeoisie or peasantry. On this question, the revisionists take the opposite road to Lenin and Trotsky, justifying their capitulation to petty-bourgeois, nationalist leaderships by speculation about a new type of peasantry. In recent years, the Pabloites have declared that the character of the new states in Africa will be determined by the social character and decisions of the *elite* which occupies state power, rather than by the class struggle as we have understood it.²²

Nothing could be clearer: the crux of Marxist policy in countries like Iraq is "the construction of *proletarian* parties" and "it is especially necessary to stress the proletarian character of the leadership" in such countries. Equally clear is that this is completely irreconcilable with the WSWS's embrace of Sadr and the perspective of "national resistance."

²¹ The fact that this document has never been posted on the WSWS says something about the attitude of the IC towards its own history, consistent with the disregard for theory we discussed earlier.

²² *How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973-1985* in *Fourth International*, v. 13, n. 1, Summer 1986, p. 45. Slaughter's report ("Report on the International Situation made to the International Conference of Trotskyists by C. Slaughter, September 1963") is reprinted in *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, v. 4, pp. 186-221. This passage is on p. 188.

Cannon and Hansen rationalized their capitulation to bourgeois nationalism by claiming that Castro, Guevara et al. were “natural Marxists,” but Slaughter exposed this for the objectivist distortion of Marxism that it was:

In all this it is indicated that without conscious theory men will respond to ‘objective forces’ and arrive at the path of Marxism. This is a clear abandonment of the Transitional Programme, with its stress on the decisive question of resolving the *subjective* problems of the world revolution.²³

While the WSWS never went so far as to anoint Sadr a “natural Marxist,” there is a distinct echo of this in its praise for the “political sophistication” of the Shiite cleric. Similarly, the WSWS conjures up a “new awareness” out of objective forces, and though this may not bring the masses quite to “the path of Marxism,” it certainly does take them beyond the limits of spontaneous consciousness. In other words, though the IC of today hasn’t gone as far down this road as Cannon and Hansen (or Healy, Banda and Slaughter), the objectivist tendency of the WSWS’s political line is unmistakable. Finally, it is a little startling to see “resolving the *subjective* problems of the world revolution” characterized as the “decisive question” in the Transitional Program, given that North has turned any mention of the subjective or subjectivity virtually into a heresy. When was the last time an article or lecture was devoted to the topic of “The Subjective Problems of the World Revolution”?

Needless to say, the issue for Slaughter (and Trotsky) was not the mechanical counterposing of subjective to objective, as North continually presents the matter, but rather their dialectical interrelationship, which objectivism entirely ignores. Indeed, in the next paragraph of his report, Slaughter elaborates on precisely this point:

It is in this sense that the fight for dialectics *is* the fight to build the world party in every country. Neither can succeed without the other. Dialectical materialism will only be understood and developed in the struggle to build the party against all enemies. The party can be built only if there is a *conscious* fight for dialectical materialism against the ideas of other classes. It is on revolutionary theory that the ability of the party to win the political independence of the working class is based.²⁴

The stark contrast between the standpoint expressed in these remarks – “the fight for dialectics *is* the fight to build the world party” – and what the IC is today hardly needs comment. But what is noteworthy here is the prescience of these statements, written over 40 years ago. Slaughter contended that you could only sustain the fight for “the political independence of the working class” on the basis of “revolutionary theory,” i.e. the “*conscious* fight for dialectical materialism.” And what is the WSWS record on Iraq if not a negative confirmation of that? For two decades the IC leadership has done no work on dialectical philosophy and now this abnegation of its theoretical responsibilities has brought about a shameful cave-in to bourgeois nationalism.

²³ *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, v. 4, p. 193. Also *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism*, *ibid*.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

As one reads through the middle part of *How the WRP Party Betrayed Trotskyism* one is above all struck by how debased the WRP leadership's capitulation to bourgeois nationalism became. One of the most shameful episodes involved the Baathist regime in Iraq, with the WRP press endorsing the regime's execution of members of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) in the winter of 1978-79, a monstrous position unprecedented in the history of Trotskyism. Given that awful precedent, one would think that if ever there were a country where the International Committee would be inured to the blandishments of bourgeois nationalism, Iraq would be it.

The document speaks of the "obscene adulation" that the WRP showered on Saddam Hussein, who came to power in the summer of 1979, and it gives an example of Hussein's "phony" rhetoric which the WRP broadcast uncritically: Hussein promises that he "shall fight oppression everywhere, support right everywhere, support the poor everywhere [and] fight exploitation everywhere."²⁵ But reading this in light of the present discussion, it is evident that Hussein's rhetoric shows as much (or rather as little) "political sophistication" as the statement of Sadr's hailed by the WSWS editorial board, and no doubt somewhere in the yellowing files of the *Newsline* one can find an 'analysis' that proves that Hussein's rhetoric is "a direct appeal to the objective common interest between the Iraqi masses and American [or make that British] working class." To be sure, the admiration for Sadr in the WSWS is in a minor key compared to the WRP's craven kowtowing to Hussein, but it is nevertheless the same tune.

Another parallel between the politics of the IC today and the politics it denounced in 1986 comes up in relation to the WRP's line on Zimbabwe. WRP leader Michael Banda in particular is attacked for turning armed struggle into a "political abstraction [that] served as a bridge for justifying the program of the Popular Front in the underdeveloped countries." North focuses on a passage from a WRP resolution that offered support for the nationalist leaders Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo "in so far as [they] continue the armed struggle against [the apartheid regime of Ian] Smith and reject a constitutional compromise." North denounces this formulation as a "complete violation of Marxist principles", going on to declare: "Rather than stating clearly that the Zimbabwean bourgeoisie is incapable of securing genuine national independence and that it will prosecute the armed struggle only within the limits of its class interests, the document hitched the fate of the working class to the policies of the bourgeoisie."²⁶ All one needs to do is change Zimbabwean bourgeoisie to Iraqi Islamists, and this becomes a damning criticism of the WSWS line on Iraq.

Moreover, one can well imagine Banda trying to justify his opportunism with the same line of argument used by Schwarz: we support the Zimbabwean nationalists/Iraqi Islamists only in so far as they resist imperialism, and in this way we "undermine" their influence because their resistance is "of necessity, inconsistent and half-hearted." In 1986, North (and his co-author Schwarz) saw this argument for what it was – a "hoax" that amounted to "a denial of the responsibility of the Trotskyist movement to fight for the political organization of the working class independently of the native bourgeoisie

²⁵ *How the WRP Party Betrayed Trotskyism*, p. 57.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 48.

and prior to the latter's inevitable betrayal of the anti-imperialist struggle."²⁷ It is a measure of how much the IC leadership has abandoned its own history that it now perpetrates the same sort of hoax in relation to Iraq.

Ignoring Mistakes and Making Them Worse

As we have already seen, the WSWS persisted with its support for Sadr even though there were warning signs about his eventual betrayal only days after the WSWS embraced him. Typical of the WSWS coverage is a June 1, 2004 news story reporting on a truce between Sadr's Mahdi Army militia and the US occupation forces in Najaf. The truce is painted in glowing terms as a major victory for Sadr, who is quoted without comment as declaring: "I will not obey the occupation. Never." A tone of unabashed enthusiasm for Sadr and for Iraqi nationalism pervades the report. We are told, "Sadr has used the main Kufa mosque to deliver regular sermons and speeches calling on Iraqis from all religious and ethnic groups to unite together to fight against the US occupation. He has also issued appeals to the American people to support the Iraqi struggle." In the next paragraph we hear: "The last eight weeks have boosted the standing and authority of Sadr among the Iraqi masses. A recent poll carried out by the Iraq Centre for Research and Strategic Studies found he registered 68 percent support, up from just a few percent before April." This is reported without even a hint that this level of support for a bourgeois nationalist Shiite cleric might not be such a wonderful thing.

On the contrary, a little later the article is enthusing that,

It may, however, be too late for deals and manoeuvres by the occupation forces to prevent Sadr's movement emerging as the central political voice of Iraq's majority Shiite population. A supporter of Sadr, Sheik Ahmed Shibani, told the *Los Angeles Times*: "Iraqis now feel there is only one enemy against them—the Americans. It has caused the rise of one Shiite leadership."²⁸

This quote from a Sadrist Sheik was the perfect expression of the perspective of "national resistance" and – what should be evident to any Marxist – of its utterly fraudulent character. The "rise of one Shiite leadership" was not a step forward for the Iraqi working class but a dangerous trap in its way. The WSWS, however, was blind to such concerns, as it basked in Sadr's nationalist glow. And the breathless speculation about it being "too late for deals and manoeuvres" to prevent Sadr's ascendancy was simply inane, since his ascendancy guaranteed that there would be other "deals and manoeuvres" in defense of his *bourgeois* class interests. This article was a crass piece of propaganda for bourgeois nationalism. It is worth noting that on the same day this article was posted, the WSWS also ran Patrick Martin's commentary that compared the Sadrist uprising to the battles of the American Revolution. Put these pieces together and you get a picture of shameless pandering to bourgeois nationalism, very much in the WRP mold.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "US makes tactical retreat before Iraqi uprising", WSWS, June 1, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jun2004/sadr-j01.shtml>

Nothing much changed in the WSWS position on Sadr for a year and a half, even though his uprisings were quickly wrapped up and he began to wield power inside the interim government set up by the occupation regime. As late as August 2005, the WSWS was still reporting favorably on Sadr, boosting his credentials and those of other nationalists for opposing the Iraqi draft constitution that was up for a vote in a national referendum in December. (For example, there is the article, “Shiite factions clash as opposition mounts to the draft Iraqi constitution” from Aug. 26, 2005, which reports favorably on Sadr’s pronouncements against the constitution and quotes another Shiite cleric from Baghdad, who characterizes the fight over the constitution this way: “Followers of the occupation and the government of the occupation want the constitution, and Iraqi nationalists including Shia and Sunni do not want it.”²⁹ Needless to say, this quote is run without comment, much less criticism. On Apr. 11, 2005, an article on demonstrations organized by the Sadrist against the US occupation reported on some of the Sadrist banners - “Yes for Islam, yes for Iraq. No to occupation, no to terrorism” – and the demonstrators’ chants – “No, no to the Americans. Yes, yes to Islam.” The only comment from the WSWS was: “A number of the Iraqi police on duty raised their fists in a sign of solidarity.”³⁰ This solidarity between the police and the Sadrists would eventually play a key role in the formation of Shiite death squads.)

It was only in October 2005 that the WSWS political line on Sadr finally changed. Suddenly the website’s writers discovered that Sadr was a bourgeois nationalist and that he couldn’t be trusted. What brought about this reversal was Sadr’s refusal to call for a no vote in the constitutional referendum, opting instead for an abstentionist position. There was nothing surprising about this to anyone who had examined Sadr’s politics from the standpoint of his class position. He was continuing to do what he had always done, which is to “posture” as a militant to maintain his working class base in Baghdad while maneuvering to get a bigger share of power for his wing of the Shia bourgeois elite. His mini-uprisings were as much a maneuver in this respect as his abstentionist position on the referendum or his later role as kingmaker in the Iraqi parliament. But for those like the WSWS, who had abandoned an orientation to the Iraqi working class, Sadr’s later maneuvers created serious problems since it became increasingly untenable to go on portraying him as the hero of “national resistance.” After all, romanticized images of the French underground get a little tarnished when the hero is behaving like a Vichy collaborator.

The change of line is first evident in an October 13, 2005 article, “Moqtada al-Sadr refuses to call for a no vote on Iraqi constitution”.³¹ Sadr’s abstentionist position is described as “a direct service to both the Bush administration and the wing of the Shiite establishment that has openly collaborated with the US occupation of Iraq since the 2003 invasion.” Beyond the immediate news about Sadr’s abstentionism, the article is an attempt to settle accounts with him politically and for this purpose it brings in some historical material on the origin of the Sadrist movement and the politics of the different

²⁹ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/aug2005/iraq-a26.shtml>

³⁰ “Baghdad protest demands an end to US occupation of Iraq”, WSWS, Apr. 11, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/apr2005/iraq-a11.shtml>

³¹ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/sadr-o13.shtml>

Shia parties in Iraq. This part of the article begins by stating, “The gradual coming together of the Sadrists with the other Shiite fundamentalist parties is not accidental.” This is true, but to anyone relying solely on the WSWS for their information, this would have come as a complete surprise.

The writer, James Cogan, goes on to note the deeply reactionary history that all these tendencies share, including Sadr’s: their primary focus has been “to combat the influence of socialist and pan-Arab nationalist ideas among Iraqi Shiites, which undermined their allegiance to the clergy,” and Sadr’s uncle “authored works denouncing Marxism and advocating the establishment of a Shiite-dominated Islamic state in Iraq.” Their hostility to Marxism and the working class didn’t stop at words: “In 1963, Da’awa supported the massacre of thousands of members of the Stalinist Communist Party by the military and Baath Party death squads.” Charting the divisions and maneuvering within the Shiite camp both in relation to Saddam’s regime and the US occupation, Cogan concludes:

The Sadrists exemplify, however, the incapacity of any layer of the bourgeoisie or petty-bourgeoisie in Iraq, even the seemingly most radical, to conduct any consistent struggle against imperialism. Their opposition to both the Baath regime and the US occupation reflected the social interests of a stratum of the Shiite elite that was marginalised. Having secured a place within the framework of the occupation, Sadr and the upper echelons of his movement are increasingly antagonistic toward the opposition of their working class supporters to the nightmarish conditions the US invasion has produced.

This is all certainly true, but it is also in one important respect politically dishonest. It fails to address an obvious question: ***why did it take the WSWS 18 months to acknowledge that Sadr was a bourgeois nationalist who would betray the Iraqi workers?*** The history of the Sadrists was no less reactionary in April 2004 than in October 2005. And to supporters of the theory of Permanent Revolution (to say nothing of the writers of *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism*), it should have been evident right from the start that the Sadrists were incapable of conducting “any consistent struggle against imperialism” and that their opposition to the occupation “reflected the social interests of a stratum of the Shiite elite that was marginalized.” It is utter nonsense to suppose that all this ‘suddenly’ became clear only when Sadr opted for an abstentionist line on the referendum. What was needed here was a settling of accounts not just with Sadr but also with the WSWS’s own capitulation to bourgeois nationalism. This isn’t just a quibble over the need for a *mea culpa*. What is at stake here is the political *miseducation* of party members and of the working class, and a Marxist leadership would set the highest priority on correcting such an error and probing its underlying causes.

But no such accounting ever took place. The fact that this article, which announced an important shift in the party’s political line, was presented as a routine news report by a staff writer, is noteworthy in itself. Why no editorial board statement? Why not have a leading figure like North or Schwarz weigh in on such a major issue? This already suggests a dubious motive behind this sudden bout of honesty about Sadr – i.e. that what was really going on here was an exercise in *damage control*. This suspicion is heightened by the following statement: “Sadr’s position on the referendum is a clear retreat from

appeals in the aftermath of the US invasion for the unity of all Iraqis against the occupation. After calling for national armed resistance to the US forces on two occasions in 2004, the Sadrist leadership is adopting a similar policy to that pursued by Da'awa and SCIRI—exploiting the occupation to leverage greater privilege for a layer of the Shiite elite.”

What is this if not a *continuing defense* of the perspective of “national resistance”? If only Sadr had gone on calling for “the unity of all Iraqis against the occupation,” then presumably everything would have been all right. *In other words, Sadr’s problem wasn’t that he was a bourgeois nationalist but rather that he wasn’t nationalist enough!* The fact that this article took for granted that “the unity of all Iraqis against the occupation” is something that Marxists endorse is indicative of the disorientation brought about by the WSWS line on Iraq. Even after finally acknowledging the class interests that Sadr represents, the WSWS was still refusing to orient itself towards the Iraqi working class and to fight for the perspective of the permanent revolution. Instead, what these remarks indicated was that the adaptation to bourgeois nationalism would continue.

But this would now have to be an adaptation to ‘Sadrism without Sadr’, so to speak. The 18 months in which the WSWS boosted Sadr were now a bad memory, best forgotten about. In the world of pragmatic politics this is known as ‘moving on’, and if we follow WSWS coverage of Iraq, it is evident that this is indeed what happened. In the report on Iraq to the International Editorial Board meeting in January 2006, there is no mention of the WSWS record of supporting Sadr. The few references to the Shiite cleric are merely factual statements about his uprisings having been contained. When it finally comes to the WSWS’s own perspective, the report (given by Cogan) adopts an orthodox tone:

And we must be clear: the aim of those heading the armed resistance in Iraq is not liberation. Its leaders are predominantly representatives of the Sunni Arab elite who are seeking to use the guerilla war to pressure Washington to make a deal with them. In exchange for official positions and prestige in a US puppet state, they would be more than prepared to collaborate with the American military against their Iraqi rivals and, above all, against the Iraqi people. The interests of the Iraqi working class—of all ethnic and religious backgrounds—are being subordinated to various bourgeois cliques that have demonstrated, throughout the twentieth century, their venality and their incapacity to conduct any genuine struggle against imperialism.³²

Immediately one notices here the singling out of the “Sunni Arab elite” – what about the Shiite elite? Are they any less reactionary, any less interested in a deal with imperialism? And one might well wonder whether this obvious omission isn’t symptomatic of a political guilty conscience. We are told that “we must be clear” that “the aim of those heading the armed resistance in Iraq is not liberation,” but the WSWS record on this

³² “*WSWS International Editorial Board Meeting – The consequences of the US-led war against Iraq*”, Mar. 3, 2006: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/jcre-m03.shtml>

question has been anything but clear. And the final statement – about the subordination of the interests of the working class to bourgeois cliques whose venality and treachery have been plainly evident throughout the last century – is a damning indictment of the WSWS itself for turning its back on these lessons. But of course there isn't a hint of that anywhere in this report: the fact that the WSWS had been operating as a left cover for one of these bourgeois cliques during a crucial period in the struggle against the US occupation is swept under the rug. Read in this light, what this statement really says is: “We must be clear” ... that we are ‘moving on’.

Sadrism without Sadr

If we fast forward to 2007, the year began with the ghastly images of Saddam Hussein's hanging. The WSWS rightly denounced the execution as a “sectarian lynching” (Jan. 3, 2007)³³, but what is significant for the present discussion is that the lynch mob in question came from none other than Sadr's Mahdi Army militia. The article also notes that, “For nearly a year, Sunni Muslims, Christians, secular Iraqis and others targeted by Shiite death squads have been hunted down, tortured and murdered.” In a later report (Mar. 10, 2007), this reference to Shiite death squads is amplified: “The focus of the Mahdi Army over the past year has been a vicious civil war against Sunni Muslim opponents of the US occupation and Shiite rule. The militia is alleged to be directing many of the Shiite death squads that are carrying out sectarian killing and evictions against the Sunni population of the city.”³⁴ Obviously these are horrific facts, but in relation to the WSWS record on Iraq, they are the bitter harvest of an opportunist policy: the “national resistance” heroes of 2004/5 have become the lynch mobs and death squads of 2006/7.

But there is no evidence from recent WSWS coverage that any lessons have been learned. The adaptation to bourgeois nationalism continues³⁵, albeit now with a line that is critical

³³ “Saddam Hussein execution: A sectarian lynching”, WSWS, Jan. 3, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/jan2007/sadh-j03.shtml>

³⁴ “US military begins operations in Baghdad's Sadr City”, WSWS, Mar. 10, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/mar2007/sadr-m10.shtml>

³⁵ An example of how the WSWS continues to function as an apologist for bourgeois nationalism is the following potted history of Iraq:

It is true, of course, that the division within Islam between Sunni and Shiite goes back more than 1,000 years. But this division, however deep-rooted, never became the basis for mass sectarian violence under the Ottoman Empire, British colonial rule or Iraq's 70 years of semi-independence. Sunnis and Shiites lived together in the same neighborhoods in Baghdad and other parts of the country and frequently intermarried. It was only under the impact of ever-increasing US pressure—war, followed by 12 years of economic blockade, followed by invasion and occupation—that Iraqi society disintegrated along the fault lines of religion, ethnic group and tribe. (“Blaming the Iraqis: A new cover-up for American militarism”, Feb. 10, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/feb2007/iraq-f10.shtml>.)

The context here is an attack on conservative pundits like Charles Krauthammer of *The Washington Post* who try to foist the blame for the sectarian violence on the Iraqis themselves rather than on the American occupation. But the WSWS writer Patrick Martin, (whose comparison of the Iraqi resistance to the American Revolution we cited earlier), ends up sounding more like a liberal apologist for bourgeois

of Sadr. But in the absence of an orientation to the political independence of the working class, even this criticism of Sadr only deepens the confusion. In a report on Iraq to an SEP membership meeting in Australia in January of this year, Cogan declares:

The surge of troops [planned by Bush Administration] is aimed at provoking a confrontation and conducting a pre-emptive strike against Shiite militias that could rise up again against US forces. While the Sadrism leadership is desperately seeking to keep their supporters in check, they are discrediting themselves in the process *and will not be able to restrain an explosive anti-imperialist response indefinitely, especially in the event of a war with Iran* (emphasis added).³⁶

Here we have ‘Sadrism without Sadr’: the masses will break free from the restraints of the Islamists in “an explosive anti-imperialist response.” It is obvious that this anticipated explosion will have nothing to do with the intervention of the revolutionary party, which means that it will have nothing to do with a development of political consciousness in the Iraqi working class. On the contrary, the scenario is an objectivist daydream: it will be objective conditions, specifically a war with Iran, that will break the stranglehold of the Islamists over the masses.

(It is certainly true that a US war with Iran would have cataclysmic consequences in the region, but it isn’t clear that those consequences would automatically benefit the working class in Iraq. It is quite possible that the anger of the masses could be channeled as much into sectarian violence – i.e. against Sunnis – as into opposition to imperialism, particularly in the event of an intervention by the Saudi, Syrian or Turkish regimes. The point is that war with Iran is not a *deus ex machina* that can overcome the difficult problems of the fight for political consciousness in the working class. Those who have given up on that fight often seek salvation in catastrophes, the most notorious example being the line of German Stalinism in the early 30s – First Hitler, then us.)

And typically this is a daydream spun out of impressionism. The evidence Cogan offers to back it up is a *New York Times* article, specifically a quote inside it from “a Sadr City shopkeeper, who observed with contempt that the Sadrism leaders were not resisting the US incursions into the area because they were worried about their ‘Italian shoes.’” Based

nationalism than a revolutionary Marxist. The truth is that Saddam’s regime was notorious for brutal persecution of both the Kurds and the Shiites. By some estimates, 200,000 Kurds were butchered by the Baathists during the 1980s and as many as 300,000 Shiites were murdered, first in a massive exercise in ethnic cleansing in the late 1980s and then in a bloody retribution for a failed Shiite uprising after the Gulf War in 1991. If this does not constitute “mass sectarian violence,” then the term has no meaning. A Marxist response to reactionaries like Krauthammer would have exposed the crimes of US imperialism without whitewashing the crimes of Iraqi bourgeois nationalism. Indeed, in respect to sectarian violence, the crucial point that needed to be made was that Bush is very much following in Saddam’s footsteps. It also needed to be said that if the US policy of divide-and-rule has succeeded, it is because of the willing involvement of both the Sunni and Shiite bourgeois elites in resorting to sectarian violence to further their own class interests.

³⁶ “The implications in Iraq of Bush’s military ‘surge’”, WSWS, Feb. 15, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/feb2007/iraq-fl5.shtml>

on the evidence of this shopkeeper, Cogan concludes that “*ordinary Shiites* already believe the Sadrists are more concerned with holding on to the privileges they have gained from the occupation than with honouring their populist pledges to prevent Iraq being turned into an American colony” (emphasis added).

Thus the complaint of a shopkeeper becomes the window into the consciousness of “ordinary Shiites”! What has this got to do with Marxism? This is the stalest of bourgeois journalistic clichés – the ‘man in the street’. It tells us nothing about the state of consciousness of the working class. One might add that it used to be a commonplace in the Trotskyist movement that there is no such thing as “anti-imperialism” outside of the struggle for socialism. It was always Stalinists, revisionists and of course nationalists who embraced the term and turned it into a magical hybrid, immune from the ‘partisan’ politics of class warfare, but Trotskyists fought to expose that as a fraud. The debasement of language here testifies to the debasement of Marxism, i.e. to the disorientation bred by the WSWS line on Iraq.

Of course the rift between the Sadrists and their working class base is an important development, but the way to exploit that rift is not to call for a more consistently ‘anti-imperialist’ version of Sadrism, one where the Sadrists “honour their populist pledges” to fight the US occupation to the satisfaction of shopkeepers. What is needed is a complete break with bourgeois nationalism and the advancement of a socialist perspective by the working class as the only viable way out of the morass that the US invasion has plunged Iraq into. Without that, the fracturing of the Sadrist movement will not automatically produce a progressive development within the masses. The anger and frustration with the Sadrist leadership could easily be diverted into more sectarian violence. Indeed, only a couple of weeks after giving his report, Cogan penned another article which suggests that this is indeed what is happening: “Hundreds of militiamen are believed to have already broken away from the Mahdi Army and are blamed for both attacks on US forces and much of the sectarian violence that is wracking Baghdad.”³⁷

One might add that under these conditions, spinning daydreams about an “explosive anti-imperialist response” borders on adventurism: it would provoke a bloodbath for the Sadrist workers to enter into an armed confrontation with the US forces, either without any leadership or led by dissident elements within the Sadrist movement, and such an outcome would only strengthen the grip of the Islamists, to say nothing of imperialism. *Iraqi workers don’t need more ‘explosions’ and more armed conflict – they need more political clarity!* And they can only get that from the Marxist movement, provided that Marxists haven’t themselves abandoned their principles.

Turning a Blind Eye to the Iraqi Working Class

Perhaps the most damning aspect of WSWS coverage on Iraq is what it hasn’t covered – the Iraqi working class. Judging from the WSWS, the only workers in Iraq are all in Sadr’s Mahdi Army. About workers in the Sunni or Kurdish areas, we hear next to

³⁷ “Huge bomb blast in Baghdad inflames sectarian tensions,” WSWS, Feb. 6, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/feb2007/bomb-f06.shtml>

nothing. And might there not be some workers who aren't completely overwhelmed by the various religious and ethnic divisions and who actually define themselves in class terms? You wouldn't know such workers existed by reading the WWS.

In fact there is a labor movement in Iraq that has engaged in a remarkable number of struggles, given the conditions under which it is operating. One of the most militant unions in the country is the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) in Basra. Commonly known as the Basra Oil Union, it organized oil workers in the Southern Oil Company shortly after the invasion, and defied the occupation authorities by staging a three day strike in August 2003 to win workers a living wage and to force the removal of the American company KBR, a subsidiary of Dick Cheney's company Halliburton, from oil installations in the region. The union has staged other walkouts since then calling for the removal of Baathists from management. Its most recent strike action, in August 2006, involved 700 workers in Basra and Nasiriyah demanding overtime pay and for salaries to be paid on time. In October 2005, it set up the Federation of Oil Unions of Iraq, which now represents 23,000 workers, uniting the work force of all the major oil production companies in the southern region of the country. It opposes the US occupation, supports resistance to it but also condemns sectarian terrorism. Recently it has been involved in protesting the proposed new oil law that would effectively hand over control of Iraqi oil to US and multinational oil companies.

For obvious reasons the oil industry plays a pivotal role in the class struggle in Iraq, but it is by no means the only sector where workers have been organizing. Metalworkers and hotel workers in Baghdad and rail workers have been involved in pay disputes, with the rail workers winning equal pay for men and women. Electrical utilities, particularly in Basra, have been hotbeds of union activity. Teachers have organized nationally and been involved in strike action. As well, according to one report: "In April [2005], the port workers union, supported by the oil workers and others, blockaded the port of Zubair, and forced out the Danish shipping giant Maersk, which took over the terminals at the start of the occupation. In mid-2004, the U.S. multinational Stevedoring Services of America was also forced out of the port of Um Qasr."³⁸

Put these facts together and you have a picture of an upsurge in workers' struggles, again all the more remarkable given that this was taking place in the context of a foreign military occupation and after decades of ruthless repression by Saddam's regime. And the actions against US and European corporate vultures like KBR and Maersk amounted to a working class offensive against the occupation. Here were the beginnings of a way forward, the beginnings of the working class striving to provide its own way out of the morass of occupation and sectarian divisions. Of course these could only be beginnings, given the limitations of spontaneous consciousness and the role of the labor bureaucracy (which we will get to shortly), but this is where the intervention of the Marxist movement becomes indispensable, through the analysis of these struggles that only it can provide.

³⁸ David Bacon, "Between Soldiers and Bombs", Aug. 2, 2005, *Foreign Policy in Focus*.
<http://fpif.org/fpiftext/177>

Instead, blinded by its “national resistance” perspective, the WSWS paid no attention to this upsurge of the Iraqi working class. So far as one can tell from a perusal of the WSWS archives, there was not a single report posted on any of these struggles. It is hard to understate what this says about the political disorientation of the IC. The self-serving rhetoric of a Shiite cleric is touted by the WSWS, and slogans boosting Islam and even the complaints of a shopkeeper are deemed worthy of attention as indications of mass consciousness – ***but the struggles of Iraqi workers are completely blacked out!***

This upsurge of labor struggles also sheds important light on the evolution of Iraqi politics. Most of these struggles took place in the first two years of the occupation, i.e. 2003-2005, but 2005 is also when sectarian violence began to dominate the political landscape in Iraq. This strongly suggests that not only were the US imperialists trying to pit Sunni against Shiite, but it was also in the class interests of both the US occupiers *and* the Sunni and Shiite elites to use sectarian violence to head off a potential threat from the working class. Thus it is probably not coincidental that 2005 saw a sharp rise in anti-union violence, with three union officials assassinated in the first two months of the year, along with the kidnapping of two other union leaders and the uncovering of a plot to kidnap and murder union leaders in Basra. The Basra oil workers leader, Hassan Juma’a, stated that he expected to be attacked himself and accused remnants of the Mukhabharat, Saddam’s secret police, of being responsible for the killings. “They seem to be able to operate freely,” he noted, obviously implying that they did so with the cooperation of the US occupation authorities.³⁹ Again, none of this was ever reported in the WSWS.⁴⁰

Just as the struggles of the Iraqi workers have been ignored, so too the history of the working class has been given scant attention. That history is bound up with the Iraqi Communist Party, which in the middle of the 20th century was the largest Communist Party in the Arab world. Some of that history was discussed in a series the WSWS carried in March 2004 which we cited earlier (“The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy”, especially parts one and two, Mar. 12-13, 2004⁴¹), but since then the only references the WSWS ever makes to the ICP are in passing, claiming that it is a discredited force and that most workers have shifted their allegiance to Sadr and his Mahdi Army. While it is true that areas like the Sadr City suburb of Baghdad that were once ICP strongholds have gone over to the Sadrists, the ICP still retains a considerable base of support, primarily through its influence in the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), which by 2005 was claiming 200,000 members. But even if this weren’t the case and the ICP had no substantial support, a thorough understanding of the pernicious role

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ It is still an open question as to who was responsible for killing the union officials. All three were from the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), including its international secretary, Hadi Saleh. The IFTU is associated with the Iraqi Communist Party, which at the time held two ministerial posts in the interim regime of Ayad Allawi and was backing the Jan. 30, 2005 national elections, which the Sunni resistance in particular was strongly opposed to. It is quite possible that these killings were, at least in part, an attack on perceived collaborators with the occupation, though the singling out of trade union officials suggests that these ‘hits’ were also intended to intimidate the labor movement. Marxists had an obligation first of all to condemn these killings and also to explain their implications, including an examination of the politics of Iraqi Stalinism. The WSWS did neither.

⁴¹<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/mar2004/iraq-m12.shtml> and <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/mar2004/iraq-m13.shtml>

of Iraqi Stalinism would be essential for a Trotskyist movement ever to emerge in Iraq. Indeed, coming to grips with the history of Iraqi Stalinism would be far more important in terms of finding a road to the Shia workers now backing Sadr than poring over Sadr's own self-serving pronouncements.⁴²

The outstanding feature of that history is prostration to bourgeois nationalism, which one could trace from the 1930s on. (This isn't the place for such a discussion, but one thing that should be said is that the ICP, like most of the other Communist parties in the Middle East, was blighted from birth by the degeneration of the Communist International under Stalin. But this makes it all the more important to bring the history of Trotskyism to bear in the Iraqi context, above all the record of struggle for the permanent revolution – the very thing the WSWS has abandoned.) During the Saddam years, the Stalinists offered their support to the regime, only to be subjected to brutal repression. After the US invasion, the ICP held ministerial posts in the interim regime set up under the occupation and supported the January 2005 national elections, which is to say that they extended class collaboration into collaboration with the occupation (which of course didn't prevent them from being subjected to attacks and arrests by the occupation forces).

A key objective of the IFTU has been to establish itself as the officially sanctioned union federation in the country, which amounts to getting the 'franchise' as the government's designated corporatist partner. To this end, it merged in September 2005 with the remnants of the Baathist union federations (allies, in other words, of the very forces that were probably behind the assassination of some the Stalinist union leaders only months earlier, to say nothing of the wholesale repression the party suffered under Saddam) to form the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFWI). This conforms to an established pattern of the Stalinists groveling before nationalist and/or imperialist forces, only to be kicked in the teeth for their efforts. The Stalinists have also sought to establish themselves as a secular opposition to religious sectarianism and to the balkanization of Iraq (promoted by the main Shiite parties), and this is likely what accounts for whatever political credibility they have left. Their perspective, however, is thoroughly nationalist and counter-revolutionary, their proclaimed goal being "a unified democratic Iraq," i.e. a bourgeois democracy, which in the context of Iraqi history is nothing more than a reactionary pipedream.

Nothing establishes the counter-revolutionary role of Iraqi Stalinism more clearly than their collaboration with the occupation. To this day, the ICP refuses to call for an immediate withdrawal of US forces,⁴³ justifying this gross betrayal by playing on the legitimate fears that many workers have of the sectarian militias (but conveniently downplaying how the occupation has fostered sectarian violence). But the Stalinists aren't alone in this respect: the occupation has exposed the political bankruptcy of every wing of the labor bureaucracy, including its more supposedly radical factions. Notable in

⁴² The essential text here is the thousand-page plus *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (1978) by the Palestinian-American historian Hanna Batatu, which contains a detailed history of the ICP up to the time of Saddam's takeover.

⁴³ "Q&A about Iraq –Iraqi Communist Party viewpoint", an interview with an ICP central committee member, *People's Weekly World*, posted Nov. 30, 2006, <http://www.pww.org/article/articleview/10226/1/349/>

this regard is a Maoist tendency, the Worker-Communist Party, that has set up its own Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq (FWCUI), which has been active in organizing unemployed workers and presents itself as a militant alternative to the main union federation. Though the FWCUI has taken a much stronger stand against the occupation, calling for the US troops to leave at once, it wants those troops replaced by UN forces, a stand which exposes the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Maoists as a sham.⁴⁴ (Again, it should be noted that in this respect, the Maoists are no worse than the Sadrists, who have also repeatedly called for UN ‘peacekeepers’ to replace the US occupation forces.)

Then there is the Basra oil worker’s union, the GUOE. It has also taken a strong stand against the occupation, but it has adopted a regionalist perspective, which became evident in a one-day strike of 15,000 workers that the union called in July 2005 to demand that more oil revenue remain in the Basra region.⁴⁵ This action was explicitly in support of demands put forward by the local Basra governor, who in turn was expressing the standpoint of the leading Shiite factions that want to balkanize the country and set up an oil-rich Shiite enclave in the southern region. This regionalist perspective is as much of a dead-end for the working class as bourgeois nationalism, turning workers into pawns of the various competing bourgeois factions.⁴⁶

The onset of globalization has exposed the political bankruptcy of traditional labor organizations everywhere, and it is evident that the Iraqi labor movement is no exception in this regard. If there is anything distinctive in Iraq, it is the fact that for decades any manifestation of working class opposition was brutally suppressed by the Baathists, so that when that regime collapsed because of the US invasion, all the pent-up pressure was released in a surge of labor activism. Nor should it come as a surprise that the form this activism took was trade unionism or that Iraqi workers (to borrow a phrase from the WSWS) “employed the ideological and political means at their disposal,” in this case unions and the traditional parties of the left.

But it should have been of great significance to the Marxist movement that the crisis created by the US occupation brought about an explicitly *class response* by important sections of Iraqi workers that was distinct from the bourgeois nationalist and Islamist demagoguery of the Sadrists. That response was both a confirmation of the theory of permanent revolution and an opportunity for Marxists to make a potentially powerful intervention. None of the factions within the labor bureaucracy are capable of fighting for the political independence of the working class; all of them have lined up with one or another camp of the bourgeoisie, and even with the US occupation in the case of the

⁴⁴ “Between Soldiers and Bombs,” see n. 42.

⁴⁵ “Iraqi Oil Workers Hold 24-Hour Strike – Oil Exports Shut Down”, a statement by the Basra Oil Workers, posted on *Znet*, July 22, 2005.
<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=15&ItemID=8352>

⁴⁶ Much the same seems to be the case in the Kurdish region in the north, where the official labor movement is even more strongly aligned with ethnic nationalism. The Kurdish elites, like their Shiite counterparts, are pushing for a ‘federalism’ that is a thinly veiled balkanization of the country. While the Shiite bourgeois elites want a free hand to exploit the oil in the Basra area, the Kurdish elites want exclusive access to the oil in the Kirkuk region.

Stalinists. A consistent fight for that political independence, i.e. for a socialist solution to the crisis in Iraq, would cut through the tangle of nationalist, Islamist and ethnic claptrap, and thus become a pole of attraction for workers, intellectuals and youth opposed both to the brutality of the US occupation and the gangsterism of the militias.

But it is impossible to fight for a revolutionary line in the working class if one has become a mouthpiece for nationalist claptrap. The WSWS paid no attention to the struggles of the Iraqi workers because it became a proponent of so-called “national resistance.” But to ignore the working class means to abandon any effort to build a revolutionary party. And so ***there has never been a single article on the WSWS devoted to the call for the building of a Trotskyist party in Iraq or the spelling out of what such a party would stand for.*** Nothing expresses the WSWS’s abandonment of the permanent revolution more clearly than this. Capitulating to bourgeois nationalism is a black hole that blots out both the working class and Marxism.

Epilogue: Mr. North goes to Dublin

There are well-known precedents for what happens to Trotskyist parties who support bourgeois nationalism: this is often the first step to a wholesale accommodation to middle class public opinion. This was the case with the American SWP in the 60s (via its backing for Castroism in Cuba) and the WRP in the 70s and 80s (via its craven embrace of bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East). And the reason for this is readily apparent: the abandonment of a proletarian orientation in a colonial or semi-colonial country becomes the first step in abandoning such an orientation altogether. In this regard, having a look at a speech delivered by North in Dublin can serve as an epilogue to the examination of the WSWS record on Iraq that we have offered here, because this speech is a small but telling indication of the political trajectory the IC is on.⁴⁷

Let us set the scene. We are at the Philosophical Society of Trinity College and it is mid-October 2004. North is participating in an annual debate the society sponsors on American foreign policy, and this year’s topic is “This House Believes that America is Still the World’s Peacekeeper.” Besides North, there are three other speakers opposing the proposition – an Irish senator, the foreign editor of the *Independent* newspaper in Britain, and Chris Marsden of the British SEP. What makes this interesting is that it is a relatively infrequent occasion on which North is addressing a non-party audience and is sharing a platform with what one can safely assume are social democrats and/or liberals. In other words, this is one of those occasions where we get to see the ‘public face’ of the party outside its own milieu.

Now, it should be readily apparent in such circumstances that a key responsibility of a Marxist, especially someone as experienced as North, is to do what he can to distinguish the standpoint of revolutionary socialism from that of liberalism. This doesn’t mean that one has to be heavy-handed about it, stridently spouting slogans in the manner of sects like Spartacist. Nonetheless, the job for a Marxist in such a debate and before such an

⁴⁷ “WSWS Chairman David North denounces Iraq war at Dublin debate”, WSWS, Oct. 15, 2004, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/oct2004/deba-o15.shtml>

audience is not only to score points against the pro-imperialist side but also to make evident that liberals and socialists aren't all 'on the same side' either. And it would seem that there was no external reason why this shouldn't have been possible: there is no indication in the WSWS report that the debaters were under any restrictions as to content, and time clearly wasn't an issue since the text of North's remarks runs to nearly 2000 words.

And yet the remarkable thing about North's speech is that it is completely stripped of anything that is identifiably Marxist. There is not a single mention of Marx or Marxism, of Trotsky, of socialism or of revolution. The only political authority who gets a positive mention is Lincoln, which is hardly designed to distinguish a socialist from a liberal. Perhaps most significantly, there is no mention of the SEP, of the International Committee or the WSWS. This omission is particularly noteworthy because this debate was taking place three weeks before the 2004 US elections, in which the SEP was running a presidential candidate. Surely that fact – i.e. that a socialist candidate was running on an anti-war platform – had direct relevance to a debate about the role of US foreign policy. But bringing that up would have necessarily underscored the differences between revolutionary socialists and liberals, who were backing the pro-war candidacy of John Kerry. And clearly North was going out of his way in this speech *not* to do that.⁴⁸

The bulk of North's remarks concern international law as it applies to the Bush administration's doctrine of pre-emptive war. North charts the history of war guilt as a criminal offense, focusing on the precedent of the Nuremberg trials of the Nazis after the Second World War. He digs into this history with evident relish, and one cannot help noticing a contrast between the tone of this speech – freed, as it were, from the 'burden' of having to defend Marxism – and the more ponderous style and inflated language that often afflicts North's orthodox pronouncements. It is as if one were listening to a passionately liberal legal historian.

The domain of such a historian is not the class struggle but the struggle for 'justice'. And this results in some formulations that are striking departures from Marxism. For example, there is this paragraph:

In the nineteenth century, von Clausewitz's dictum that war was, in essence, politics conducted by other means guided the diplomacy and military policies of the great powers. But in the aftermath of World War I, the transformation of Europe into a slaughterhouse could not be described as simply another form of politics. The concept of war guilt emerged: that governments could be held responsible and accountable for waging aggressive war. The resort to war in pursuit of strategic geopolitical and economic objectives—that is, for reasons other than self-defense defined in the strictest sense of the term—began to be seen in international law as a crime that could not be justified on the basis of traditional and conventional "reasons of state."

⁴⁸ It is curious that though Chris Marsden is listed as one of the debaters, we never learn what he had to say. It would be interesting to know whether his remarks were as sanitized of any references to Marxism as North's. But even if they weren't, it was North's speech, not Marsden's, that the WSWS editors chose to highlight in their coverage of this debate.

One would think from reading this that von Clausewitz's dictum was passé. Nothing could be further from the truth, particularly in light of the Iraq war, which is manifestly a case of "politics by other means". North 'forgets' to mention that it wasn't only the great powers who guided themselves by this dictum but also the great Marxists. And it is rubbish – or rather liberalism – to claim that somehow the quantity of casualties canceled out this essential quality of war, that because millions had died in the First World War, this meant that war "could not be described as simply another form of politics" any longer. This was never Lenin's view or Trotsky's: everything they understood about imperialist war was rooted in the Clausewitz dictum. And that is why they repeatedly denounced the whole apparatus of international law and governance that emerged after the war as a sham designed to hoodwink the working class, because you could never separate war from politics, and the notion that one could rid the world of war under capitalism was a reactionary pipedream.

North will no doubt claim that he was simply presenting the issue from the point of view of international legal opinion, but as a Marxist he also had an obligation to explain to his listeners to what extent these opinions had any *political* validity. North never does this, there isn't a single qualification that he makes to these opinions. On the contrary, he clearly speaks as a supporter of these international legal arrangements. Thus he describes the 1928 Kellogg-Briand treaty for the renunciation of war as a "major step toward the criminalization of aggressive war," whose only fault was that it didn't make violations a punishable offense. You would never know from this that Trotsky heaped scorn on this treaty time and again and lambasted Stalin for signing the Soviet Union on to it.

"The Kellogg Pact," Trotsky wrote in 1930, "is an imperialist noose for the weaker states. And the Soviet government adhered to the pact as an instrument of peace. This, in reality, is a sowing of illusions, an inadmissible smearing over of contradictions, an outright deception of the workers in the spirit of social democracy."⁴⁹ Two years later he described the Kellogg Pact as "a complete fraud whose purpose is to 'justify' only such wars as correspond to American interests."⁵⁰ There is nothing that has happened since Trotsky's day that calls for a revision of these views of bourgeois international justice; on the contrary, they are as right on the money now as they were seven decades ago. What North is doing in this speech is precisely what Trotsky attacked as "an inadmissible smearing over of contradictions," i.e. of *class* contradictions, and the purpose for doing that is to kowtow to liberalism.

(Of course North is perfectly well aware of Trotsky's opinions of bourgeois international 'justice'. And when not addressing liberals, the WSWS often rightly denounces institutions like the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague, whose prosecution of Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic was a blatant case of 'victors' justice'. But that makes North's performance in Dublin all the more telling: he donned the wig of bourgeois legalism to hide his Marxist 'horns'.)

⁴⁹ Leon Trotsky, "World Unemployment and the Soviet Five Year Plan," Aug. 21, 1930, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1930*, p. 360.

⁵⁰ Leon Trotsky, "Declaration to the Antiwar Congress at Amsterdam," July 25, 1932 in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932*, p. 154.

For a liberal the crimes of imperialism are the fault of ‘evil’ people doing bad things, and this moralistic fiction is embedded in the body of bourgeois international law. What this does is to obscure the *systemic* nature of war, i.e. that capitalism breeds war and that war is inescapable under capitalism. It puts the focus instead on individual leaders, and the fight against war becomes a matter of bringing those leaders to justice. It should go without saying that those who perpetrate imperialist war are criminals and deserve to be punished, but to imagine that war crimes trials will do anything to prevent future wars is nothing more than the “sowing of illusions.” From today’s vantage point what is most noteworthy about the Nuremberg Trials that North sets so much store by is how dramatic a failure they have been in doing anything to prevent war.

But in this speech North chooses to buy into this liberal fiction. He lays great stress on the fact that the criminal actions of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz et al., are a rupture with legal precedent.

The promulgation of the doctrine of pre-emptive war in September 2002 and its implementation in March 2003 with the launching of an aggressive war against Iraq represents nothing less than the unequivocal repudiation by the United States of the legal principles that were enforced against the Nazi ringleaders at Nuremberg and, therefore, the criminalization, in the full and most profound legal sense of the word, of American foreign policy.

Here the kowtowing to liberalism in the form of harping on bourgeois legal standards leads to an egregious distortion of history, one which makes it seem as if the “criminalization” of American foreign policy began with Bush. No doubt Henry Kissinger would be pleased to learn that the carpet-bombing of Cambodia and Laos or the butchering of the Chilean working class do not constitute war crimes “in the full and most profound legal sense.” The truth is that America was engaging in aggressive war in Korea only a few short years after it signed on to the Nuremberg protocols and it has never stopped, the most obvious case being Vietnam, along with covert wars and wars-by-proxy too numerous to mention. Once again this underscores the fraudulent nature of bourgeois international law, whose primary purpose, as Trotsky said, is “to ‘justify’ only such wars as correspond to American interests.” And every American president of the last century, and particularly every one since the end of the Second World War, has engaged in such wars and is, before the bar of *proletarian* justice, a war criminal. The Bush administration was only repudiating in words what had been repudiated in deeds countless times before. The truth is that for an American president to be a war criminal is the political *norm* under capitalism, irrespective of the lip service that is (or isn’t) paid to bourgeois standards of justice.

Of course the more openly aggressive stance expressed in the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war is significant, but in a social and political sense, not a legalistic one. Globalization, the steep decline in American economic power and the fact that there is no longer another superpower to keep American imperialism in check – all of this has fueled a new upsurge of American militarism. These underlying conditions are what a Marxist analysis of American foreign policy would have focused on, and the point of such an

analysis would have been to make the case that the fight against war is now, more than ever, inseparable from the fight for socialism.

North envisions a day “when legal proceedings on the Iraq war are finally held,” but he gives no indication that the struggles of the working class will have anything to do with bringing that day about. As we noted earlier, he doesn’t even mention the election campaign his party was then engaged in, a campaign waged against the war criminals he was denouncing. And he finishes with an appeal to “humanity”, the perfect liberal abstraction, declaring that “humanity must not tolerate the reversion to imperialist barbarism of which the invasion of Iraq by the United States is a terrible omen.” As to *how* “humanity” is to go about doing this, North maintains a discrete silence.

North’s Dublin speech was given six months after the WSWS began cheerleading the “national resistance” in Iraq, and both express the same political malaise, the same “inadmissible smearing over of contradictions.” In Iraq this took the form of caving in to bourgeois nationalism; in Dublin it took the form of kowtowing to liberalism. To be a revolutionary socialist has always meant having to swim against the stream, having to rub people the wrong way, having to be the one jarring voice in the chorus of middle class ‘reasonableness’. There was nothing jarring or ‘unreasonable’ in North’s speech, there was nothing that would challenge or upset the liberal views of an audience of students and academics. This was a speech of someone not only eager to be understood but also eager to be accepted. But that acceptance comes at a cost of blunting one’s revolutionary edge.

Members and supporters of the International Committee need to think long and hard about what the WSWS record on Iraq means. This cannot be written off as a minor lapse in judgment. Let us recall the quote from the WSWS we cited at the start of this section: “Harsh times have this painful but salutary effect: organizations and individuals are tested. Whatever is false, unresolved or unprincipled inevitably reveals itself.” What the test of Iraq has revealed about the WSWS is that its commitment to the permanent revolution – i.e. to the fight for the political independence of the working class – could not withstand a major political crisis. Obviously this commitment wasn’t abandoned intentionally: the WSWS editorial board didn’t take a vote to renounce the permanent revolution in Iraq. But good intentions aren’t the point here, since everyone knows where they can lead. What the WSWS record on Iraq has brought out are much deeper problems, which make themselves felt, as it were, below the level of intentions. These are the problems that Trotsky warned about in *In Defense of Marxism*, above all the dangers posed by pragmatic methods of political work. The IC leadership has ignored those lessons for two decades and the consequences of that neglect are now before us. It is these problems of Marxist philosophy that we will examine in the following section.

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