

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > Russian Revolution > Leon Trotsky > **Reflections on the Trotsky Legacy Conference**

Reflections on the Trotsky Legacy Conference

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Contents

- [Conference Sessions](#)
- [Other Aspects of the Conferenc](#)
- [The Meaning of the Conference](#)

The Conference on the Legacy of Leon Trotsky and U.S. Trotskyism took place on July 25-27 at the Bronx campus of New York City's Fordham University. As one of the people who helped plan and organize the conference, I would like to offer a few reflections. In what follows I will avoid critical discussion of political perspectives – there were a variety of these presented at the conference – but not because I consider these unimportant. I have dealt with, and will deal with, such matters elsewhere (including my own presentation and remarks at the conference). But I want this to be a relative brief account that gives at least a general sense of what happened during these three days, offering basic information and bits of evaluation.

The conference was a success in more than one way.

- We were hoping for at least 100 participants. There were 110 formal registrants from 13 states in the U.S., plus others from Canada, Mexico, Venezuela, and Britain.

- We were hoping for a number of former members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Young Socialist Alliance (YSA). While I would have preferred at least 10 or 20 more than there were, around 40 or so former members of the SWP and YSA were in attendance, whose membership occurred at various times between 1960 and 1998, and whose perspectives on the experience varied.

- We were hoping that a number of participants would be thoughtful younger activists with some interest in the legacy of Leon Trotsky and U.S. Trotskyism. This turned out to be the case. These were primarily members of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), the Workers International League (WIL), Socialist Alternative, and Solidarity – all of whom engaged in the discussions in an open manner, with plenty of questions and ideas of their own, but without the “more-revolutionary-than-thou” attitude that afflicts some groups which happened to be in attendance.

- A self-description of the conference contained in the packets handed out to participants accurately describes what, in fact happened at the conference. “The conference’s purpose is to focus on the meaning and relevance of an important political experience, the development of the revolutionary socialist movement in the United States that was inspired by the ideas of Leon Trotsky. The conference will bring together veterans of that movement, along with critical-minded scholars, as well as students and other young people who have an interest (in many cases an activist engagement) in social movements. It will involve a serious exploration of the experience, the history, and the ideas of U.S. Trotskyism – including discussions of the relationship of all this to current world realities.”

- One of the hopes of the conference planning committee was stated in this way: "We look forward to a lively exchange of varying points of view at this conference - best accomplished, we feel, by proceeding in a way that is respectful of each other." For the most part, this hope was realized.
- There was some concern that the conference - although organized on a shoestring - would wrack up some debts, but in fact all bills were paid and there was a comfortable surplus.

Conference Sessions

The quality of the presentations and discussion varied. We were especially fortunate to have a fine presentation on James P. Cannon by the outstanding Canadian labor historian Bryan Palmer, author of an excellent and important biography of Cannon, plus moving and partly autobiographical presentation on the legacy of Leon Trotsky by Esteban Volkov, Trotsky's grandson.

An outstanding set of presentations, I thought, was provided by Kipp Dawson, Robin David, and Gus Horowitz, who focused on strengths of the SWP in the 1960s and 1970s. Another panel focused on an exploration of the weaknesses and decline of the SWP, with interesting presentations by myself, David Walters, and Linda Thompson - although the only one I was fully satisfied with was my own (no surprise there!). In both panels I would have liked to see a more thorough and searching discussion of the relevant issues. This was precluded by lack of time - which was one of the most serious problems of the conference, which I will come back to shortly.

Among the best sessions, I thought, were those on party-building and on the anti-war movement. The former was graced by three clear and thoughtful presentations by Tom Trottier of the WIL, Steve Bloom (speaking only for himself) of Solidarity, and Sharon Smith of the ISO. The presenters avoided the dismissiveness of party-building that afflicts some sectors of the Left, as well as the "we're-the-greatest" sectarianism all too prevalent among others. While there was some relating of the presentations to previous sessions examining the history of the SWP (Steve, as a former SWP member, naturally did this more than the others), all were primarily, and thoughtfully, very much engaged with current realities and future possibilities. On the anti-war panel, Gus Horowitz offered a succinct and inspiring overview of the role the SWP was able to play in the U.S. movement to end the war in Vietnam. This was followed by three truly excellent, richly informative presentations from on-the-ground activists who have been in the thick of the current struggle against the U.S. war in Iraq - Chris Gauvreau (who has been prominent in the National Assembly to End the Iraq War and Occupation), Tom Bias (who has been immersed in the vital work of a local anti-war coalition in New Jersey), and Leia Petty (who is an outstanding leader in the Campus Anti-War Network - CAN).

Revolutionary struggles in Latin America was the focus of one of the most ambitious panels. It began with the showing of a DVD excerpt from a rousing and optimistic presentation by Cuban Trotskyist Celia Hart, a more measured, somber assessment by the always-informative Gerry Foley, a detailed and valuable survey of current Cuban realities by Eloise Linger, and a very upbeat and fascinating intervention by a young revolutionary associated with the Venezuelan consulate, Martín Sanchez.

Two other ambitious panels were less successful in living up to their titles. One was "Permanent Revolution and the Evolution of World Realities Since the 1960s." ISO leader Ahmed Shawki offered a serious and energetically-presented set of reflections on the present conjuncture, conference coordinator Linda Thompson presented a wide-ranging discussion of feminism, and Victor Serge biographer Suzi Weissman gave us a sense of Serge's contributions to the revolutionary movement and aspects his perspective that have relevance for our own time. All of this was interesting (and the discussion was even more so), but there was hardly the serious evaluation of Trotsky's theory in the light of a deep analysis of the past five decades which the title seemed to promise. Similarly, the

session on "Social Movements and Class Struggle in the U.S." was the other session of which this was the case. It was graced by the absorbing autobiographical reflections of Kwame Somburu, as well as an extremely critical interpretation of U.S. Trotskyists' understanding (or lack of understanding) of Trotsky's Transitional Program by Marilyn Vogt-Downey; only trade unionist Dan Kaplan offered perspectives that was fully as contemporary as the session's title seemed to promise.

Other Aspects of the Conference

I must confess that I attended only one of the workshops - the one on the anti-war movement today, which provided a framework for an excellent discussion. I was unable to attend others (some of which sounded very interesting to me) only partly because I had to attend to conference logistical issues. There was also the fact that I really needed a bit of a break from listening to speakers, and really wanted to have the opportunity to talk one-on-one with people, which is always important to me at events like this. I am told that some of the workshops were quite good, although at least two failed due to lack of attendance, and one (on electoral action) was overwhelmed by sectarian speechifying.

It seems to me that it might have been better to have fewer workshops. Perhaps only two timeslots for workshops, instead of three, would have been a wiser decision. Perhaps one less plenary session would also have made sense. Such changes would have allowed more time for discussion in the plenary sessions, and more time for informal one-on-one and small-group discussions. There is always the temptation - in organizing such conferences as these - to pack more in than will comfortably fit. Sometimes "less is more."

Overall, my feeling (and I believe the feeling of most others in attendance) was quite positive about what happened. I was especially pleased with some of what might be called "cultural" features of the conference. I think the conference poster (there were plenty of copies for sale) was beautiful, offering a rare, later destroyed, revolutionary mural (with Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Rakovsky, plus a cluster of U.S. Trotskyists) that Diego Rivera made in 1933. There was a magnificent banner of Trotsky made by contemporary muralist Mike Alewitz especially for this conference. There was a wealth of literature, especially thanks to a table set up by Haymarket Books, which had not only Haymarket titles, but also other Marxist classics and contemporary works from other publishers, and a good sampling of authors from the old SWP and the Fourth International. This was supplemented with literature tables from the magazine *Revolutionary History*, Socialist Action, the Workers International League, Socialist Alternative, the Freedom Socialist Party, the News and Letters Committee, the Bolshevik Tendency, the League for a Revolutionary Party, the Spartacist League, and the Internationalist Committee.

Another fine cultural component involved the first U.S. showing of the fine 90-minute documentary "Trotsky y Mexico" recently made for Mexican television, and now available with English subtitles. (Copies were on sale at the conference for \$20.)

For that matter, there was actual film-making in progress as the conference was taking place. Lindy Laub - who has both Hollywood and academic credentials - was on hand to show a somewhat fragmented but fascinating "trailer" made by the late David Weiss, longtime U.S. Trotskyist and film-maker. She appealed for support in finishing David's massive project of creating a full-length documentary biography of Trotsky. While David had already accumulated an immense quantity of filmed interviews (including with such people as George Novack, James P. Cannon, James T. Farrell, C. L. R. James, and many, many more), Lindy was busy shooting more up-to-date footage as well.

In addition, all of the plenary sessions were filmed by a generous film-maker named Joe Friendly - all

of which has been turned into over 30 DVDs. These will be deposited with Tamiment Library (and probably other archives specializing in the U.S. labor and radical movements) for the use of future scholars. There are plans to produce a DVD with conference highlights.

Also under the heading of “culture” was a Saturday evening party, enhanced by the DJ skills of Asi Somburu and a guest jazz saxophone performance by Asi’s father (and conference speaker) Kwame Somburu.

Other cultural elements that found their way into the conference were the recently-published novel *The Sweetest Dream* by veteran Trotskyist and conference participant Lillian Pollack, and a new book of poetry by conference planning committee member and speaker Steve Bloom.

The Meaning of the Conference

One of the most important features of the conference, in my opinion, was the interplay between older veterans and younger activists that we envisioned as a central aspect of the conference. The substantial and exemplary participation of the ISO helped to ensure the realization of this goal, as did the involvement of young activists from other groups, which we sought by building into the program speakers from the WIL and Socialist Alternative. It should be noted that in addition to the ISO, formal endorsements were extended to the conference from Socialist Action (which had a number of key speakers at the conference) and the Freedom Socialist Party.

While the conference was not a “regroupment” effort or an effort meant to help establish a new political group, there were pulls and tugs and tensions within the planning committee on this matter. Some of the comrades may want to explore possibilities in that direction, and others most definitely do not. I think all want to see ongoing interactions and discussions of one kind or another, and common projects involving at least some of those who engaged in the conference. I think there is general agreement, for example, that it would be good to give whatever support we can to the Trotsky documentary that film-maker Lindy Laub is working on.

A new committee flowing out of the conference is in formation, an entity that will not include some of us (including myself) who have seen the conference, basically, as a “one-shot deal.” I imagine the committee will do such things as setting up a web site, continuing a discussion list, and perhaps more.

Speaking for myself, I intend to work closely with comrades in several of the groups that were involved in the conference. I hope to join one of them in the foreseeable future – but after that I still intend to keep working with good comrades of various groups (as well as with some who are not in a group). I believe the conference has helped to preserve and pass on some of the memories and lessons and ideas associated with U.S. Trotskyism, and that this can be usefully absorbed into the ongoing efforts to develop revolutionary socialist cadres who will be engaged in the struggles of today and tomorrow.

There is no revolutionary party worthy of the name that exists in the United States. But there is a need for one – to help the working-class majority move forward to create the socialist democracy and cooperative commonwealth in which many of us believe. I think there is the possibility for such a party coming into being. It may be that this conference stands as a modest contribution to the process that could generate such an outcome.