

Report on the Situation in Seattle as of April 4, 1966

Kipp D. and I were in Seattle from March 31 to April 5. We attended the Northwest Regional Conference To End The War In Vietnam April 2-3, representing the Newsletter and The Militant, respectively, and conducted a rather extensive and very exhausting investigation into the situation in Seattle. Returning to San Francisco, we agreed that our experiences in Seattle were so strange, so unreal, really, that we doubted anyone would believe our story. It was as I remarked at the next branch meeting, "like a trip into the Never-Never-Land."

We were met at the airport by Frank Powers. On the way into the city Frank began to complain again about the dirty deal that Seattle had gotten on the Tabata Tour - that Los Angeles had sent them a blank tape, etc., the complaints we'd heard before. We answered them all. He wasn't satisfied. Finally I asked him what was his explanation for such alleged vicious and under-handed treatment of Seattle--sabotage, from his point of view? He answered that Tabata wasn't "allowed" to come to Seattle because Tabata agreed with the Seattle Tendency's position on the Negro question and the Colonial Revolution! We dropped the subject.

We told Frank that we were in Seattle for two reasons. One, to attend the Northwest Regional Conference to End the War in Vietnam. Two, to find out whether or not reports we had received that the Seattle Tendency was preparing to leave the SWP were true. He answered that the reports were true, that they'd been talking about it. His answer was casual, as if to say, "Doesn't everybody know this?"

We told Frank that we wanted to talk to Kirk and Kaye and several others, especially young comrades whom we knew. He said of course he'd help us, which he did.

As soon as we arrived at his house he picked up the telephone, dialed Mellina's number (a young Negro comrade) and handed the telephone to Kipp, who set up an appointment for the next day.

While Kipp was talking to Mellina, I talked to Frank. I was arguing that the SWP had taken a correct position on all major political questions, and had made correct tactical turns to intervene in the changing political scene -- regroupment, Fair Play for Cuba, development of Malcolm X position, anti-war movement. Frank gave a little, but counterposed that it was "accidental" that the SWP had made several correct political evaluations and tactical turns.

Kipp began to talk to Mark (Frank's teenage son) and a friend

of his, Bob, who later gave the High School Workshop report at the Regional Anti-War Conference. Bob told her, right off, that the Seattle Youth was dissolving right after the Conference. Kipp told me. I asked Frank. He said it was news to him, although he'd heard some such rumors. Bob is around PL. Later we ran into other non-members who repeated this story. Kipp observed "everyone knows it except us and the Youth N.O."

Thursday evening we spent six and one-half hours talking to Kirk and Kaye -- from 9 p.m. until 3:30 a.m.

I started by saying it had come to our attention that the Seattle branch was planning to disaffiliate: Was this true? And if it were true: Why?

Yes, they answered, it was true. They had been thinking about disaffiliating but they hadn't fully made up their minds.

Then both Kirk and Kaye related a long series of grievances dating from when Kirk first evolved his special position on the Negro Question up to the censure motion against Kirk passed by the February 1966 plenum.

We listened. I discussed such grievances as I knew something about, but they had everything so twisted that it was difficult.

On the censure question, when I pointed out that Kirk had abstained on the vote at the plenum and said he regretted the occurrence (the circulation of his document up north), Kaye hit the ceiling. She said that Kirk had "compromised" and didn't put up a fight. She said he should have demanded a trial, a confrontation with his accusers. Moreover, that Al the northern organizer, had not accused Kirk of anything. He had only sent the facts to his N.O. where charges had been concocted for factional reasons, by his N.O. and New York. It was a "factional frame-up" and the final straw. (Perhaps this was the final straw for Kaye -- but later other Seattle people told us the question of disaffiliation from the SWP was not now being discussed, that the decision to disaffiliation had been decided by a series of discussions which began immediately after Larry S. returned from the Washington Conference. Only the time was left open. On this question a common line of argument was advanced by almost everyone we talked to -- a line buttressed by a list of grievances going back to 1953 when Farrell Dobbs allegedly "organized the Cochranites against us, the majority." It was as if everyone had learned their lessons by rote from the same drill master.)

We then got to the subject of the Washington Conference and the anti-war movement. Fortunately, Kipp was present, a young leader in the anti-war movement who "was there." She took over and presented the facts concerning the Washington and Milwaukee Conferences and reported on subsequent developments which showed our line was correct and was producing results.

Kaye and Kirk rejected Kipp's report except for one point: they agreed that Larry S. had behaved irresponsibly at the Washington Conference. But they added "We take no responsibility for him; we don't have any control over him, and furthermore, he's crazy." I countered that Kirk had based his document submitted to the plenum on the "facts" supplied by this comrade whom they called "crazy" and "irresponsible," plus other "facts" taken from reports by our enemies, namely the C.P., Robertson and Wohlforth supporters, and PL. The answer was that the position of the Seattle Tendency had been arrived at "independently."

We then got a lecture on how the Seattle branch was the "most democratic in the SWP and paid the most attention to theory". And, therefore, developed "independent thinkers." When we asked whether or not the rumor that the Seattle youth was going to dissolve were true, Kaye answered that the Seattle Tendency Youth acted in "complete independence," and most of the time she "didn't know what they were doing." We later concluded that this was to a great extent true, and that, moreover, everyone in the Seattle Tendency pretty much did and said what the spirit move, with small regard to the elected leadership.

On the other hand, although later Kaye denied that she had seen the call for a "new revolutionary socialist youth organization" before it was issued April 2 at the Northwest Regional Conference, she didn't deny she agreed with it.

Kaye became very upset with Kipp and I at the conference when we insisted that the "Call for a New Revolutionary Socialist Youth Organization" amounted to a resignation from the party and/or youth by those who had signed the call. Such contradictory behavior gave us the impression that our presence in Seattle had upset their timetable. It is my opinion that if we had not confronted them politically and publicly disassociated ourselves at the time of the regional Anti-War Conference, they might have continued to discuss the question for another six months. Also, the arrival of Tom and Deborah helped push them along. Several Seattle members told us that they were "in no hurry to leave." They were surprised that Kipp and I -- considered "reasonable comrades" -- took such a hard line and didn't want to stick

around to discuss for another week or so. I, for one, am reasonable only when dealing with reasonable people, but none were to be found in the old Seattle branch.

At first Kaye and Kirk (especially Kaye) attempted to turn all questions into a discussion of the "Dobbs-Kerry regime." When I rejected this as a "demonological approach to politics," they then said no, it wasn't just a question of Dobbs and Kerry, but that indeed, the entire majority was ossified in its politics, bureaucratic and undemocratic in its dealing with intra-party minorities. Now just about every SWP leader, from Cannon to Vernon to Barnes was given his lumps -- nor was Harer forgotten. The conversation degenerated rapidly, to continue was pointless. I decided to try to get back to political questions. I told Clara and Dick, "Okay, so let us say that every one of your complaints could have some basis in fact. Still, is it possible that such a large number of organizational beefs could exist except that there are deep political differences, perhaps irreconcilable from your point of view?"

Then we discussed political questions for a time.

The Negro question: The original sin according to Kirk, was committed by Trotsky when, during discussions with American comrades, he said American Negroes should have the right of self-determination. This was an adaptation to the C.P.'s "black nation" program. And from this all evil flowed. The 1948 resolution had formalized the error and the SWP program presently was "separatist" and a capitulation to the most reactionary black nationalists.

The war in Vietnam: Kirk and Kaye hold the SWP program is reformist, not revolutionary, and that the Seattle Tendency's program as set forth in Kirk's document submitted to the last plenum was correct. I commented that their line carried out organizationally was a regroupment line -- a regroupment with opponents of the SWP. And I asked who are you going to regroup with; the castoffs from the SWP -- the dropouts -- Progressive Labor? They answered, no, to all these questions. In regard to P.L., however, they both said that unfortunately it was too late -- two months too late -- that we should have fused with P.L. before it took its recent opportunist turn (one wing now looks toward coalition politics). Kipp asked, "If we'd have fused with P.L. do you think we could have saved it?" The answer was "yes", and on second thought, "perhaps."

(In my opinion the Seattle Tendency orients more toward Healy than P.L. Besides, P.L. wouldn't have them, and they know it. Incidentally, Mellina told us that at the time of the last SWP

convention she was taken to St. Paul to meet with Hank Schultz and "several people who had left the Party." Schultz met with Healy in Canada last year. At the present time there is only one Healyite in Seattle, a very confused young man. There are perhaps five P.L.'ers.)

Somehow we got back to organizational grievances. I got exasperated finally and demanded, "What do you want? You've exercised your democratic rights and you still can do so. Perhaps majority comrades have sometimes been rude and perhaps worse but it appears to me that this isn't the question. It is politics, not organization, that underlies all this. Perhaps your politics are incompatible with SWP membership; perhaps you can no longer abide democratic centralism."

Kirk answered, "You won't let us live in the SWP with our politics." Kaye seconded him adding that they would discuss the question of disaffiliation at a special meeting Monday, April 4, that we were invited to attend, also Tom and Deborah, if they arrived in time, "to present the majority's point of view." We said we'd think about it.

Sort of in closing I asked them what were they going to do after they left. Were they going to build Trotskyism (their brand) in one city? And did they realize that after they left they would automatically become political opponents of the party and youth? What kind of organization were they going to set up? These questions disturbed them. Finally Kaye answered (in a most friendly manner), "We will continue to uphold the banner of Trotskyism in the city of Seattle." I answered that she should disabuse herself of that idea and added that the SWP would undertake the job. I reminded them that we had faced such situations before, told them that Tom and Deborah were already on their way and others would be sent in to rebuild the party and the youth on the basis of the Party program.

Both were taken aback by the vehemence of my statement. Kirk said, "So now you'll send people into Seattle. Why didn't you send someone in when we asked for help?" I answered, "I was not aware of any such requests, but that all this was now immaterial: You have made up your minds to leave and I doubt if anything would stop you."

It was obvious to me they had not thought the question through as serious politicians. Kaye in particular, seemed to think that everything would go on as before, only without the

restraint of SWP membership. It was "Never-Never Land."

By this time it was past 3 a.m. We talked a bit more. We were invited to stay overnight and make the Kirk-Kaye residence our center while in Seattle, but we declined and Dick drove us back to Frank's.

Next morning we recapitulated the previous evening and discussed our next move. We borrowed a car and went looking for young comrades to talk with. Frank had given us all the addresses asked for. Certainly, the intent was to convince us that the Seattle Tendency was solid, no chinks in the wall. We talked to several younger comrades and I think at least two are salvageable.

We talked to Mellina, John S., Larry S., Lee M., and later to Melba, an old-timer. Kipp talked separately to several youth, including Larry G. and Mellina again, in company with Tom and Deborah. Except in the cases of Mellina and Larry G. we encountered a solid front -- the same grievances repeated as if by rote, the same politics with some strange individual twists and the same soft regroupment approach to opponent organizations.

This story will be illustrative: When I asked Lee M., "What do you intend to do, build your special brand of Trotskyism in one city?" she answered, "We haven't thought it through that far, we just know we want to leave." When I pointed out that after they left we would rebuild the Seattle branch, she seemed surprised but answered politely, "That will be all right. We feel closer to the SWP than to anyone else -- we'll regroup with you."

Melba, faced with the same questions, gave much the same answers, with one addition; that she is very ill and perhaps in the future wouldn't have to go to so many meetings. She was very friendly.

Another comrade responded to these questions with his own: "What do you think will become of the Seattle Tendency?" "You will disappear," I answered. He thought for a while, and then, evidently impressed by the ring of assurance in my voice, asked, "How soon?"

The rank and file of the Seattle Tendency want to be friends with all radicals, in my opinion, and the leaders want to be friendly with everyone except the "bureaucratic" leadership of the SWP. A desire for "a friendlier atmosphere in the

radical community" was expressed by several. Who's opposed to this? But the SWP's hard "single-issue" line in the anti-war movement is "disruptive" and "splits the left and makes enemies."

All of them, when pressured, admit that it is their politics that can't live in the SWP, that they want to get loose so they can apply their political line. The stories about the "Dobbs-Kerry regime" are pretty horrendous -- and probably some of them are true. Right is seldom altogether on one side. But behind the Seattle Tendency's many organizational beefs always was politics -- a "political explanation."

For example: "The Robertsonites were driven out of the party because they agreed with Kirk on the Negro question. Tabata wasn't allowed to come to Seattle because he agreed with Kirk on the Negro Question and the Colonial revolution." (A persecution complex shows itself here. Why? It's too long a story to tell now.)

Although there appeared to be general agreement on things past, there was no such unanimity on the question of what to do now. Indeed, there was almost a complete lack of understanding as to how a political program should be applied and great confusion on the question of a transition program for the anti-war movement. One example: At the Anti-War Conference, Kipp and Mellina took opposite positions on "single-issue" vs. "multi-issue." Afterward, Mellina told Kipp she liked her speech and agreed with her. Obviously she just didn't understand the differences. In general, we found the level of political education in the Seattle Tendency very low. This of course says more about the leadership than the rank and file.

Also, gossip is in the air. The very evening we arrived we were told that one of their leaders was an incurable alcoholic. True or false? Very unimportant. But this gossip atmosphere pervades the organization: gossip seems more important than politics. Actually the group resembles a big symbiotic family -- a cult family. Nobody seems to particularly like anyone else -- but they all stick together.

We were discussing with Frank the question of minimal membership requirements in the San Francisco branch: attendance, level of activity, sustainer, etc. Frank laughed and said Seattle had no such standards. He referred to one member reputed to be a professional gambler, but said they wouldn't drop him because the party is his only contact with reality, that he couldn't make it without the party, he might crack up.

Monday night, April 4, we attended the Seattle branch meeting. Clara Kaye had mobilized the Seattle Tendency. Eighteen were present -- including three youth not in the SWP. One member, Mellina, was working and could not attend. Only three party members present were under 30 years of age.

Kaye opened the meeting by declaring it to be a "tendency meeting," i.e., a caucus, and therefore the transfer of Tom L. and Deborah to the Seattle branch could not be taken up.

Then Kaye asked the meeting, "How many of you saw Asher's 'Academy Prize-winning performance' at the Conference?" Several, including me, held up their hands. Everyone chuckled at Kaye's humorous way of disposing of that disagreeable scene.

(The Seattle Tendency -- working with P.L. -- had staged the Northwest Conference to End the War in Vietnam. Larry S. used the conference as a forum to announce the call for "a new revolutionary socialist youth organization." Both P.L. and the Tendency had advanced their own multi-issue program as the program for the anti-war movement. Larry S., speaking as party and youth member, had again advocated the program of "driving the G.I.'s into the China Sea." We decided to publicly disassociate The Militant, the party and youth from the Seattle "party" and "youth." I took the floor at the final plenary session of the conference, disassociated, and then lambasted both the Seattle Tendency and P.L. for their sectarian nonsense, and explained our transitional approach to building a mass anti-war movement. Well received. Applauded. This was the "performance" that Kaye referred to. See "Report on Conference.")

Kaye then proceeded to read a very long resolution of disaffiliation. The floor was open for discussion. Tom, Kipp and I spoke very briefly. (We had agreed not to say anything that might impede quick passage of the resolution. We had abandoned all hope for the Tendency.) Tom told them they were cutting themselves off from the mainstream of revolutionary politics and demanding the hall and everything in it, as SWP property. Kipp spoke to the youth. I said that we held the leadership, not the ranks, responsible for the degeneration of the Seattle Branch and that later, if some found they'd been took, their applications for re-entry into the SWP would be considered in a friendly manner.

Kaye answered Tom L. with an offer to negotiate.

Now just about every member spoke -- at length. Each told the story of his political life -- why he joined the SWP and why he was leaving. Tom remarked that it resembled a mass confessional.

Melba said the SWP destroys women leaders, so Seattle had to leave before Clara Kaye was destroyed. She cited the cases of Myra Weiss and Frances James.

Bob Patrick said the slogan "Bring the Troops Home" was reformist and that we had done a bad thing to push this slogan at the Conference. "We don't want the troops brought home," he cried. "If they were brought home now they'd be used to oppress the American Workers! Let them stay in Vietman until the American working class is revolutionized!"

Patrick had certainly carried the line too far. Yet he was listened to respectfully and even received a bit of applause. Both Frank Powers and Kirk spoke after Patrick, but neither contradicted Patrick's outrageous statements. This evidently, was a display of Seattle's "democracy in action" that we'd been told about.

Kirk's speech went as follows: For fifteen years he had been an "activist." He was considered a valuable comrade. Then he "stumbled upon the theoretical ideas that could make the SWP into the party of the American Revolution." (Exact quote) He began to develop into a worker-intellectual. He began to write documents. Soon he found that he was "confronting a party leadership steeped in the ideology that all the fundamental problems in theory had already been solved by Trotsky" and therefore "all that the party had to do was organize the revolution." (Kirk's emphasis) He then went back to Trotsky's original mistake on the Negro question, when Trotsky "accepted separation as a legitimate aim of the Negro revolution in the U.S." (The Seattle people consistently equated nationalism with separatism. For this reason they object to the Malcolm X series in the Militant.)

Kirk then spoke of the SWP's wrong positions on colonial revolution, Vietnam and the anti-war movement. He ended with this interesting point: The SWP had consistently moved away from genuine Trotskyism to the point that the majority had become an ossified cult and Seattle remained as the center of revolutionary socialism in the United States!

Kirk's final point was that the Seattle Tendency was doing the SWP a favor by leaving. "The majority leadership has used

us as a whipping boy for 15 years. In this way it has kept the lid on the party and kept down criticism. Perhaps with us out of the way there will be more democracy and more criticism."

One Don G. (YSA) took the floor. He was unsteady on his feet. He was very emotional. "You must be destitute and hungry and suffer before you can understand the problem of the American workers. I doubt if more than three people in this room have been destitute -- so how can you understand?"

The meeting ended after eleven o'clock. I recalled Jim Cannon's remark that if he ever got to heaven it would be as a reward for all the meetings he'd sat through.

A vote was taken. Seventeen for disaffiliation. One abstention -- Larry G.

S/ Asher