

Spartacist -- American Committee of the Fourth International
(ACFI) Unity Negotiations

Second Session . . . 27 June 1965

Present: Spartacist: Robertson, Turner, Stoute (Henry for point 2)
Harper, Sec'y. ACFI: Wohlforth, Mazelis, Michael (alter-
nate for van Ronk)

Meeting convened at 8:20 p.m. Chairman: Mazelis

- Agenda:
1. Minutes
 2. Joint Statement on Elections
 3. Policy toward Progressive Labor
 4. Future discussions
 5. Announcements

1. Minutes: Minutes of 18 June were approved as corrected.

2. Joint Statement on Elections: Wohlforth: We are generally in agreement with the Spartacist draft and consider parts of it excellent, especially the point on Epton, but some small points we feel were formulated indefensibly, e.g., Epton's proposal for workers to review the actions of the police is a good one, but Epton raises it independent of the demand for self-defense. We also need a popular, agitational leaflet to rally people to vote for the SWP and PLP candidates, since the present draft is primarily a critical, propagandistic statement. This longer, critical statement after correction should be published in the Spartacist or Bulletin or both.

Disc: Turner, Mazelis, Henry, Stoute, Wohlforth, Stoute, Henry, Stoute, Mazelis, Robertson.

It was agreed that ACFI would prepare a draft of the popular leaflet for the next meeting. Spartacist agreed with the tenor of the ACFI criticisms of the present draft statement and an editing committee of Henry and Michael was appointed to iron out details and bring back a revised draft to the next meeting.

3. PL Policy: Robertson: For a bit of perspective, here is what we said about Progressive Labor while we were in the SWP.

"... PL is an aggressive, empirical, inexperienced, serious grouping aiming at present to build a leninist combat party on the basis of an overly primitive and excessively organizational approach." and "Thus PL is a heterogeneous, leftward moving formation of a broadly centrist character, having broken with Stalinism on a sound basis of working class struggle and having passed a serious test of loyalty to elementary principle over the Cuban crisis. But PL is quite without, indeed seems to deny the need for, a historical, theoretical or concretely internationalist

outlook. Without both recognizing the need for and achieving a Trotskyist clarity about the nature of the SU and of Stalinism, no formation (above all one formed as a breakaway from Stalinism) can acquire an authentic and durable revolutionary quality." (from 'Memorandum on the 'Progressive Labor' Group' by Harper, Nelson and Robertson, 6 January 1963).

We first became interested in PL when they took a hard line over the Cuba missile crisis. Some of our comrades were on the Cuba trip and others were in Harlem Defense Council until they were expelled for Trotskyism. We have had close relations with PL on the West Coast and in Chicago, and are on good terms with their Southern organizer. I would say that the leftward motion within PL seems to have stopped; however, with their organizational hardening up, information about them has become more difficult to obtain. Our present impression is that PL is not yet a resolved entity. Our most serious working relations had been in Harlem and were disrupted by the expulsion of our comrades. After that HOC has been organized and picked up others. The indigenous forces in HDC have remained ostentatiously friendly, and we have united front relations with them in Harlem. Now we seek to pressure PL through the May 2nd Movement (M2M), but our present contact with PL is much less than we would like. What we want from PL is similar to what we want from the SWP: there is an element in both groups that wants to build a revolutionary party in this country. We want to have a political clarification and confrontation with PL and have never been interested in merely picking up a member here or there. We want to see a deep split within the cadre. We want to see the formation of a large, effective propaganda group in this country, and PL can make a contribution to that. When you were in the SWP, out of party loyalty you denounced PL; then, coming to an awareness that they have something to offer, you went too far in the opposite direction, e.g., you passed out their leaflets calling for a boycott at the time of the last elections. What you are doing now seems proper. Some of your comrades have said that the most serious possible bar would be that it might disrupt your work in this area -- that is why we are very anxious to find out your policy on this question.

Michael: No differences would seem to be present from what you have said. Basically I would say that there are many people in PL that are open to a Trotskyist viewpoint and to a line contrary to that of the leadership. In some convention articles people took a line contrary to that of the leadership on the Negro question, and many at the convention were sympathetic to this line, although not willing to openly express support. People not in the leadership are very open to Trotskyist ideas. For example, the

Gilly articles as long as they were not labelled Trotskyist were very impressive to these people. My experience has been that it is possible to make contact with a lot of people and to get our ideas across. One cannot at this point say exactly where the organization is going. 70-80 people in the organization are receiving the Bulletin, and it makes an impression on them.

Wohlforth: In looking back on our work it is easy to see and admit errors. We obviously made an error in our assessment of PL when we were in the SWP. At that time we didn't have enough information on them, nor the same perspective as we now have on how to build a movement. But looking over our work, I don't see how we could have foreseen what we have achieved, the basis of a Trotskyist group within PL, so that the struggle within that organization has been internalized. This of course required the sale of Challenge and distributing their literature. This is what the SLL comrades must do in the BLP. I feel that our tactics in the past are related to our tactics in the future, and any criticisms you have should be concrete. When you begin such a relationship you have to be more than merely pedagogic. We have been critical: we ran a series of 4 or 5 articles, including a complete analysis of the Trotskyist position on Maoism, and put out special supplements. We concentrated on issues on which there was struggle within the organization. The Negro question was a critical turning point -- the first time the international orientation of PL cut into what had been the healthiest side of their work. I think we made an impact at the convention -- not that our positions got many votes, but perhaps 30% of the delegates had some sympathy toward our position. This discussion is important because it concerns questions that will be raised again and again in our work in the U.S. -- how to intervene into centrist organizations.

Mazelis: What is implied in Tim's comments is that of course where we felt you to be in error was precisely that you didn't do what we attempted to do. It is not sufficient to approach them merely on an organization - to - organization basis (we felt you made some mistakes on that level, also). However, we felt you were able to achieve some success in your work on Epton defense. It clears the air to discuss these questions in the way Turner and Robertson did. We have no hesitation to confess our errors when such is the case. When we were in the SWP we had an inadequate understanding of the nature of PL. We needed more than the political statements of the leadership. They didn't have the orientation toward mass work that they have now. Our intervention in PL came at the right time and has followed developments. I would agree that the leftward motion is not continuing. We think it has passed a peak of a sort and that PL will stop attracting as it did.

Robertson: We aren't interested in flogging a dead horse -- just in getting a perspective. It doesn't seem that our differences now are that great. We were quite unhappily about the ban on dual membership. In one area they would have accepted an open, non-organized Trotskyist, but that was shelved in the course of events. We had had hopes for H., wanted her to stay in PL, but she wouldn't. What we thought was necessary at all costs was to avoid the organization of a premature caucus -- that is that the Stalinist wing of the leadership would react most violently, and harden all the cadres against us. We wanted to build a joint group in Harlem. It worked so well they had to throw us out. An outsider had to be sent in to do the job -- the indigenous people didn't understand. Now we don't have many toe holds in PL -- that is partly why we are intervening in the Free University. We never had as much interest in the Negro question in relation to PL as in relation to the SWP. It wasn't the decisive question for PL that it was for the SWP when the latter seized upon Black Nationalism as a way of eliminating the role of the party in a primary area in this country. If we Trotskyists in this country can unite, it will increase our gravitational pull on PL. We want quite a lot out of them but just now don't have such good tools to grasp.

Turner: There doesn't seem to be much of a difference.

Mazelis: Does the friendliness of the Harlem members extend to D. and V. too?

Robertson: Our fraction in Harlem CORE got through motions in defense of Epton and Anderson -- they know and appreciate this.

Wohlforth: The political questions within an organization are the life of the organization. If we looked at PL abstractly we would have posed internally other questions relating to Maoism, the colonial revolution, etc. These questions can be hammered home with individuals but don't have the impact as did the Negro question where many felt the working class orientation of PL was being threatened. It is difficult for Spartacist comrades to see questions as we do because they are not as deeply involved in PL as we are. If we had unified last fall we could have made a much greater impact. Because of our consistent work we have been able to develop supporters within PL, at the expense of doing as much public work as Spartacist was able to do; but we felt this was necessary. We would strengthen this work if we could because PL has not yet reached a definite turning point. We want to reach their ghetto and trade union members.

Robertson: Do you think we did right with the Harlem Organizing

Committee? We have offered PL help with their election campaign, which will be one more way of bringing our forces into contact with them. Our present orientation toward M2M is an open one and we will do more. It is easy to have united fronts with them in Harlem. HDC does not have all that much of a mass orientation anyway. When we entered HDC we were foregoing some important direct mass work, but we felt it was worth it.

Michael: The position of the PL leadership is that Trotskyism is counter-revolutionary and that it functions to disrupt revolutionary movements. But this is by no means the feeling of people in the organization at large. There is a lot of confusion. Denunciation of Trotskyism was stricken from their convention resolution as a question demanding discussion. It is difficult for a PL member to look at our stuff in the Bulletin and then say we are attempting to destroy their organization. I think things will stay open for awhile. There is a gap between the leadership and the rank-and-file on questions like this.

Mazelis: On HOC, what I have seen looks quite positive, but we are not aware of the details. What we see now is positive. The only thing is that we would stress the importance of a continuing orientation toward the Harlem PLers themselves. On the question that has been raised at one level or another, i.e., should the orientation be toward the organization as a whole or toward picking up people? Our work in PL was not a raiding operation. We have followed the development of the central leadership and participated in give and take with them, for example over the Negro question.

Wohlforth: On the relationship of PL work to our whole work -- we see that the essential need at the present time is for the theoretical development of those that wish to become revolutionary Marxists, people who want to be and feel themselves to be Marxists but who are actually empiricists as is PL and the best of the SWP. The essential character of the movement today is excessive emphasis on activity in struggle and deep hostility to theory to guide this struggle. Our intervention is always aimed at bringing theoretical clarity and development. This must be done from the outside. There are several thousand people who have rejected the Democratic and Republican parties, the CP and the SWP and who want to build something new. Because of the existence of these people, our essential task is to work with them and develop them. We must be wary of counterposing ourselves to these people rather than being their theoretical arm. We must be careful that we are not just one more competing organization. We must be the ones who bring theory to the revolutionaries, the conscious people among the revolutionaries. Therefore we give more emphasis to

working in organizations than to setting ourselves up as a separate organization. This should be the orientation of any group this side of 1,000. I have been feeling for some time and the British have been feeling for some time that the next step in the political and theoretical development in the Trotskyist movement must be a conscious understanding of how we seek to go about building the American movement -- the American Question. We have therefore been asked and have been considering preparing for the International discussion a resolution on the American question, and we feel the Spartacist comrades should do the same thing. This would be the best way to clarify agreement or disagreement on our tasks. I feel this is the way we should function. One final point: I feel we have made very good progress on the discussion on how we might work together toward PL. Because we have shown so much agreement we could go ahead and in a concrete way work on the basis of this agreement. We are not going to have meaningful functioning in any arena if we have two groups opposing each other in military formation. Meaningful collaboration necessitates that at the same time that we see agreement we work together concretely to bring about better relationships between our two groups.

Turner: Your approach on not counterposing organizations but becoming the theoretical arm -- what is your feeling toward HOC? Is this a counterposed organization, or do you feel that this organization can also function in Harlem?

Wohlforth: The situation is so mixed up in the Negro movement that I would say you did the right thing. If CORE, OAAU, etc., had anything to offer, I would say you were premature. But you are dealing in a vacuum. It is the only thing you could do. I think it was a good idea and would work out well in this area, though the same approach might not work out elsewhere.

Robertson: We did not seek HOC but it was thrust upon us. We still have a fraction in Harlem CORE. On being the theoretical arm of the movement and not counterposing organizations -- as soon as you act, as soon as there is concrete expression of a line, there has to be an organizational form, and sometimes this form gets in the way. If you gain size, you draw people around, you give classes, etc. We are co-equally interested in work concerning other organizations and their political development, and also in building our own organization. It is not a simple process to build a large propaganda group that can begin to intervene in a meaningful way. We must win over to the Trotskyist movement whole chunks of other organizations while carrying on the work of the Spartacist organization (or any other Trotskyist organization).

Even if there were no broader significance to our mass work, it has a exemplary quality: "See what we will do when we have more." Secondly, such work gives familiarity and experience to our members. In trade union work, we have been inching our way toward building an industrial fraction, but a big white collar fraction on the other hand is dropping into our lap. On PL we differ in details but these differences are within a recognized common approach. We believe that a close political agreement exists between our groups such that unity is possible and desirable; but without your admitting this we don't see how we can take our relationship beyond united fronts. You have not yet even agreed that we are qualitatively closer to you and should seek unification than you are for example to Workers World, etc. Without your agreement that there is a principled political basis for unity how can we press forward organizationally? On preparing a document on the American question for the information of the British, it will be up to our organization to decide as we are currently straining to get out our convention documents.

Wohlforth: We feel that common work will facilitate the unification process just as common discussion on all levels will. A bar to that work and those discussions hinders the unification process. My own opinion is that we will come to the conclusion that while disagreements may exist it is not a bar to unification. We don't understand this military to military sort of thing. Contact between our groups will break down barriers to unification which may exist among members or leaders. I would hate to see common work bypassed for this discussion process, for this will take awhile.

Robertson: We don't see the necessity for a long delay in unification. We have in our briefcase all the steps to bring about unification. As far as joint collaboration without this agreement, there has never been a unity without proceeding as we are proceeding now. The representatives on this committee speak for their organizations. In negotiating unity you proceed organization-to-organization. We will go through the discussion here, though we already feel a sufficient basis for unity exists. Some of our comrades don't want unity, but every single comrade agrees that unity is necessary anyway, and they feel that if the unification stumbling block is that we must get your agreement that unity is permissible. How can we do anything else?

Turner: The more we talk the less reason there seems to be for a division between our groups. Tonight's discussion shows how close we are politically. It would seem that it necessitates recognition from your group that all the discussion thus far shows that every reason for unity exists. With the opportunities

that exist, our combined organization could achieve a qualitative acceleration in our work, using our resources and talents in a combined way resulting in more and better output on all levels. It is necessary at this point before beginning close collaboration that we get this agreement that the political basis for unity exists. We can get no less from you before proceeding.

Wohlforth: I don't think we are demanding too much in wanting to see first the documents on which your organization will go forward from your conference. I feel strongly that when we do see these documents that the formulations therein will not in themselves be a bar to unity. We need to see the documents, but don't anticipate that they will include such material as to bar unity. It is not necessarily critical if you do not write an American document, but it would be good if you could.

4. Future Discussions: It was decided to discuss next Wohlforth's history project "The Struggle for Marxism in the U.S." This topic will cover all aspects of the SWP, including our own 1962 split, current SWP groupings and convention perspectives, etc.

5. Announcements:

- (a) Joint Social: leaflet copy is ready. Groups will share profits. There will be a literature table.
- (b) Reactions to possible unity: Robertson announced he had received two responses to the possibility of unity between our groups from non-members of either group. Malcolm Bruce expressed great joy at the prospect; Bill Winnick also strongly favors unity.
- (c) Next meeting: Holiday next weekend interferes; next meeting set for Friday, 9 July.
- (d) Minutes: because of the delay in meeting again, it was agreed to circulate draft minutes beforehand, if unanimity is found for their approval, to proceed to mimeograph them in advance of the next meeting.

Meeting adjourned at 10:10 p.m.

These minutes approved at meeting of 9 July 1965