

FOR N.C. MAJORITY ONLY

February 8, 1966

TO THE SECRETARIAT

Dear Comrades:

I feel rather uneasy about the circular letter from Tom dated Jan. 28th, enclosing a copy of Larry T.'s letter of Jan. 15th, and Arne's letter of January 7th addressed to Larry and his letter of Dec. 14th addressed to Rosemary and Doug, and also the circular of Al A. announcing his decision to join the PLP (which I had already seen locally).

The Swabeck letter and the Kaye document, which I had previously received, make serious criticisms of the Party and Youth actions at the Washington Thanksgiving Conference, and make a number of other serious, and even fundamental, criticisms of party policy and action in general.

The problem, as I see it, is how to deal effectively with these challenges and how to aid the education of the party and the Youth in the process -- in the light of our tradition and experience over a period of more than thirty-seven years since the Left Opposition in this country began its work under the guidance of Trotsky. One might well include the first ten years of American communism before that, from which I, at least, learned and remember a lot from doing things the wrong way.

Larry's letter of Jan. 15th suggesting disciplinary action, and Tom's letter of Jan. 28th informing us that the Political Committee has put the question of discipline on the Plenum agenda, are, in my opinion, the wrong way.

Probably the hardest lesson I had to learn from Trotsky, after ten years of bad schooling through the Communist Party faction fights, was to let organizational questions wait until the political questions at issue were fully clarified, not only in the National Committee but also in the ranks of the Party. It is no exaggeration, but the full and final truth, that our party owes its very existence today to the fact that some of us learned this hard lesson and learned also how to apply it in practice.

From that point of view, in my opinion, the impending Plenum should be conceived of as a school for the education and clarification of the party on the political issues involved in the new disputes, most of which grew out of earlier disputes with some new trimmings and absurdities.

This aim will be best served if the attacks and criticisms are answered point by point in an atmosphere free from poisonous personal recriminations and venomous threats of organization discipline. Our young comrades need above all to learn; and this is the best, in fact the only way, for them to learn what they need to know about the new disputes. They don't know it all yet. The fact that some of them probably think they already know everything, only makes it more advisable to turn the Plenum sessions into a school with questions and answers freely and patiently passed back and forth.

The classic example for all time, in this matter of conducting political disputes for the education of the cadres, is set forth in the two books which grew out of the fundamental conflict with the petty bourgeois opposition in 1939-40. I think these books, twenty-six years after, are still fresh and alive because they attempt to answer and clarify all important questions involved in the dispute, and leave discipline and organizational measures aside for later consideration.

Compared to the systematic, organized violation of normal disciplinary regulations and procedures committed by the petty bourgeois opposition in that fight, the irregularities of Kirk and Swabek resemble juvenile pranks. Nevertheless, Trotsky insisted from the beginning that all proposals, or even talk or threats of disciplinary action be left aside until the political disputes were clarified and settled. The Party was reborn and reeducated in that historic struggle, and equipped to stand up in the hard days that were to follow, precisely because that policy was followed.

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As for disciplinary action suggested in Larry's letter, and at least intimated in the action of the Political Committee in putting this matter on the agenda of the Plenum -- I don't even think we have much of a case in the present instance. Are we going to discipline two members of the National Committee for circulating their criticisms outside the Committee itself? There is absolutely no party law or precedent for such action, and we will run into all kinds of trouble in the party ranks, and the International, if we try this kind of experiment for the first time.

We have always thought proper and responsible procedure required that Party leaders confine their differences and criticisms within the National Committee until a full discussion could be had at a Plenum, and a discussion in the Party formally

authorized. But it never worked with irresponsible people and it never will; and this kind of trouble can't be cured by discipline.

In the first five years of the Left Opposition, Shachtman and Abern took every dispute in the committee, large or small, into the New York Branch -- with unlimited discussion and denunciation of the committee majority by an assented collection of articulate screwballs who would make the present critics of the Party policy from one end of the country to the other, appear in comparison as well mannered pupils in a Sunday School. There was nothing to do about it but fight it out. Any kind of disciplinary action would have provoked a split which couldn't be explained and justified before the radical public.

To my recollection there has never been a time in our thirty-seven-year history when a critical opposition waited very long to circulate their ideas outside the Committee ranks, despite our explanation that such conduct was improper and irresponsible. We educated and hardened our cadre over the years and decades by meeting all critics and opponents politically and educating those who were educable.

I will add to the previously cited examples of the fight with the petty bourgeois opposition two minor examples.

1. Right after our trial in Minneapolis in 1941 the well-known Munis blasted our conduct at the trial as lacking in "proud valor", capitulating to legalism, and all other crimes and dirty tricks. I answered Munis by taking up his criticisms point by point and answering them without equivocation or evasion. Munis' letter and my answer, some of you will remember, was published in a pamphlet on "Defense Policy In The Minneapolis Trial", so that all party members and others who might be interested could hear both sides and judge for themselves.

That pamphlet was published twenty-four years ago, and I personally have never since heard a peep out of anybody in criticism of our conduct at the trial. On the contrary, my testimony "Socialism On Trial" has been printed and reprinted a number of times in a number of editions and, as I understand it, has always been the most popular pamphlet of the Party.

2. I notice that the YSA has just recently published, in an internal discussion bulletin, my two speeches at the 1948 Plenum on the Wallace Progressive Party and our 1948 Election Campaign. The circumstances surrounding these speeches has pertinence to the impending Plenum.

No sooner had the Wallace candidacy been announced on a Progressive Party ticket than Swabeck in Chicago, consulting with himself, decided that this was the long-awaited Labor Party and that we had to jump into it with both feet. Without waiting for the Plenum, or even for the Political Committee, to discuss the question and formulate a position, he hastily lined up Bartell and Manny Turbovitch and the local executive committee and from that, quick as a wink, the entire Chicago Branch to support the candidacy of Wallace and get into the Progressive Party on the ground floor. There was also strong sympathy for this policy in Los Angeles, Buffalo, Youngstown, and other branches of the Party. The discussion at the Plenum should be studied in light of these circumstances.

My two speeches were devoted, from beginning to end, to a political analysis of the problem and a point by point answer to every objection raised by Swabeck and other critics. It is worth noting, by those who are willing to learn from past experiences, that Swabeck's irresponsible action and violation of what Larry refers to as "committee discipline" were not mentioned once.

There was a reason for the omission, although such conduct was just as much an irritation then as now. The reason for the omission was that we wanted to devote all attention at the Plenum to the fundamental political problems involved and the political lessons to be learned from the dispute. My speeches, as well as remarks of other comrades at the Plenum, had the result of convincing the great majority present and even shaking the confidence of the opponents in their own position. By the time we got to the National Convention a few months later, the Party was solidly united and convinced that the nomination of our own ticket in 1948 was the correct thing to do.

Committee "discipline" follows from conviction and a sense of responsibility; it cannot be imposed by Party law or threats. I have said before that in more than thirty-seven years of our independent history we have never tried to enforce such discipline. There was such a law, however, or at least a mutual understanding to this effect, in the Communist Party during the period of my incubation there. But what was the result in practice?

Formally, all discussion and happenings in the Political Committee and in the Plenum were secrets sealed with seven seals. In practice before any meeting was twenty-four hours old the partisans of the different factions had full reports on secret "onion skin" paper circulated throughout the Party. Even the ultra-discipline of the Communist Party never disciplined anybody for these surreptitious operations.

It would be too bad if the SWP suddenly decided to get tougher than the Communist Party and try to enforce a nonexistent law -- which can't be enforced without creating all kinds of discontent and disruption, to say nothing of blurring the serious political disputes which have to be discussed and clarified for the education of the Party ranks.

I would like copies of this letter to be made available to National Committee members who received Tom's letter of Jan. 28th.

Fraternally,

S/ James P. Cannon