

POLITICAL COMMITTEE MINUTES NO. 5, March 17, 1966

Present: J. Barnes, DeBerry, Dobbs, Halstead, Hansen, Kerry, Shaw, Sheppard, Warde.

Visitors: Jones, B. Barnes, Horowitz.

Chairman: Halstead.

AGENDA:

1. Youth Convention
2. International
3. Internal Matters
4. Anti-war Movement
5. Organization Secretary Report

1. YOUTH CONVENTION

Report by Jones and B. Barnes on convention

Discussion: Dobbs, Shaw, J. Barnes

2. INTERNATIONAL

Report by Hansen

Discussion: Kerry, J. Barnes, Dobbs, Shaw, Warde, Sheppard

3. INTERNAL MATTERS

a. Shaw reported that on February 23 he wrote to Dave Dreiser as directed by the PC at its February 18 meeting, asking an explanation of his involvement in the circulation of the Kirk document. Dreiser replied in a letter dated March 3. On March 9 Dreiser sent a further letter to the PC announcing his resignation from the Party. Meanwhile the National Office had been made aware of a February 9 letter Dreiser wrote to Arne Swabeck concerning internal party matters.

Discussion: Kerry, J. Barnes, Dobbs.

Motion: To append to the minutes copies of Shaw's letter of February 23, to Dreiser, Dreiser's letters of March 3 and March 9 to PC and Dreiser's Feb. 9 letter to Swabeck.

Motion Carried

(See attachments 1, 2, 3, and 4)

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b. Shaw reported receipt of an unsigned communication closing with the typed legend, "Seattle Branch & National Supporters of K-K Tendency". The letter contains no signatures or other identification that would give it authenticity.

Discussion: Kerry, J. Barnes, Dobbs.

Motion: To reject this anonymous communication.

Motion Carried.

c. Shaw reported that to date no reply has been received from F. Powers to the February 23 request for an explanation of his involvement in the circulation of the Kirk document.

Discussion: Dobbs.

Motion: To send another letter to Powers instructing him to reply to the inquiry addressed to him on behalf of the PC.

Motion Carried.

4. ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

Report by J. Barnes

Supplementary report by Horowitz

Discussion: Halstead, Kerry, Dobbs, Warde, Sheppard, Hansen, Shaw.

5. ORGANIZATION SECRETARY REPORT

Shaw reported on Pennsylvania elections, letter from Newark on New Jersey election, policy meeting to be held with comrades in literature and publications departments.

MEETING ADJOURNED

Attachment # 1 to PC Minutes No. 5, March 17, 1966

February 23, 1966
New York, N.Y.

Dave Dreiser
Connecticut

Dear Comrade Dreiser,

Under date of Dec. 13, 1965, Comrade Kirk addressed a letter marked "Confidential" to the Political Committee opposing party policy in the anti-war movement. Copies of the letter were mimeographed in Seattle and circulated to various individuals inside and outside the party. The Plenum of the National Committee censured Comrade Kirk for his part in this violation of party discipline and warned him to cease and desist from any further violations. The Plenum also instructed the PC to investigate all the ramifications of the case.

The Plenum was informed that you sent a copy of the Kirk letter to Comrade Larry Trainor in Boston, with a covering note which read: "Dick asked me to make a copy of the enclosed and send it to you. You may have a copy from New York by this time, but didn't want to take a chance you might not see it."

In view of your action, as reported by Comrade Trainor, the PC has instructed me to direct the following questions to you: What explanation do you have for your reported action in sending a copy of the Kirk letter to Comrade Trainor? Did anyone else receive copies of the Kirk letter from you and if so, what were the circumstances?

Please let me have your reply to these questions at an early date.

Comradely,
S/ Ed Shaw
Organization Secretary

Attachment # 2 to PC Minutes No. 5, March 17, 1966

March 3, 1966

Ed Shaw
New York

Dear Ed,

Your letter of February 23 has caused me to reflect on the past and the present. Involved in the questions you raise are broader problems of personal morality than appear on the surface.

I don't feel called upon to use this occasion for a long political harangue on questions already discussed many times, but there are complexities which cannot be treated in a paragraph or two. You did not just ask for the facts of the situation which are known to you (there were really no secrets), but for an explanation and therefore you must bear with me a little while.

First let me ask you if you think my sending Dick's letter to Larry was supposed to be clandestine? Or the note I sent with it? I have made some naive judgements, and perhaps I was naive in not anticipating that my action would be regarded as an infraction. But, in my flightiest moment I did not imagine that Larry was in the remotest sense a sympathizer of Kirk, or anything other than a loyal supporter of the majority. I knew anything I sent him would not be private. You have not discovered anything that was supposed to be secret.

I have always been seriously concerned with the internal affairs of the party, partly by inclination and partly due to restriction due to being fired from industry and blacklisted. But, if you want to charge me with being a factionalist it will have to be on the basis of my support of majority causes.

In the Cochran fight I played an active role in the branch and in correspondence. I visited another branch that was sharply divided on the question of the expulsion and spent a week in rounds of visiting and meetings cementing support for the party position. I spoke publically extensively and often used the public platform to elaborate the lessons of that struggle.

I played a similar role in the fight with the Vernites. Again in 1963, in the fight with the Healy supporters, I led the fight which won the branch for support of the majority, although I was at that time a supporter of Kirk who had his own resolution on the Negro question up for consideration.

I supported Kirk's resolution, but I subordinated my support

to what I felt was the more pressing question. The branch organizer was with Wohlforth, a situation which confronted me with a problem which I resolved by conducting the struggle around the need to prevent his taking the branch into Wohlforth's camp.

In all of these situations I felt free to communicate with others either in conversation or by correspondence with absolutely no concern whether it was convention time, pre-convention, between conventions or what not. How else could one develop his own thinking in relation to others or check ones conclusions?

Although I have supported the Kirk tendency for over 15 years, I have always played a minor role in his support. I have spoken on the Negro question publically and internally, but usually on aspects peripheral to the main differences. I spoke to the NY branch during the original debate on the "Troops" slogan, and I spoke to the 1963 convention in support of the Kirk resolution.

In 1965 I attended the convention as a visitor and would have had ample opportunity to spend my time in the corridors button-holing people, but I played a passive role of observation. This was not for lack of faith in Kirk's position, but because I had been inactive for a long time and I felt one ought to keep his "politiking" in line with his activity.

Now, since the 1965 convention I have received exactly one letter from Kirk, namely, a copy of his letter to the PC with a request to forward a copy to Larry. Was this wrong? I believe Kirk has the right to advise his supporters of his thinking on questions as they arise. But, you will say, this was a confidential document. Well, if Kirk had sent a separate letter to his supporters it would have said exactly the same thing. The content of the letter, and the intent of the act would be identical. Our trouble is we are too damn open. It must be apparent, if secrecy had been the intent a better job could have been done!

The party ought to be less concerned about searching out little infractions which don't exist, particularly when concerned with the policy followed recently on the peace question.

The turn on this question came in the middle of the pre-convention discussion and was not embodied in the majority resolution. That is all right. If the need arises the leadership can recommend a shift in line or activity anytime. But, in the past when this happened too late to allow a full pre-convention discussion,

post convention discussion was permitted. Refer to the Negro discussion following the 1948 and 1957 conventions.

Not only was this not done, but the policy actually followed at the Washington conference was developed after the convention. Right or wrong, discussion ought to be encouraged in such circumstances, not stifled.

The Washington policy was so disasterously wrong that I would have felt justified in making some efforts to affect the situation, organize opposition, but I didn't out of deference to my restricted situation.

But, I sent Dick's letter to Larry. Presumably he would have received a copy anyway. I'm sure no one would accuse us of trying to wean Larry away from the majority; he has known us a long time and has never given us the slightest gesture of support. However, it is not impossible that he might find something to think about in what Kirk had to say, or that members of the PC might also. Otherwise, why try to communicate with anyone anytime? You might have more cause for concern if we had circulated a private letter making private accusations. Kirk has been quite candid.

Anyway that is the explanation. There has been no infraction. If I be wrong in this matter, then I have a 23 year record of over-zealous support of majority causes. In answer to your other question, I showed the letter also to Carl locally. He is a supporter of Kirk and my action requires no other explanation.

The fact is it requires no explanation at all. I have answered your questions completely and freely because I want to show I have no reservations to do so. Your investigation is unjustified and I protest it.

The other side of the coin is that you of the majority come to us with unclean hands. I refer to the shocking denial of minority rights at the convention in your total disregard of the right of representation on leading committees. It is your obligation to the party as well as to the minority to insure that such representation is proportional to strength. I refer to your restrictions against both the Kirk and Chinese minorities, and especially to your removal of Clara.

In few of these more serious matters your current censure of Kirk and investigation of his supporters is not only unjustified, it is petty and in poor taste.

Comradely regards,
s/ David Dreiser

Attachment # 3 to PC Minutes No. 5, March 17, 1966

March 9, 1966

Political Committee
New York

Comrades:

This is my letter of resignation. It will be brief.

I decided to leave some weeks ago but faced a problem of evaluation. My inclination was to resign solely on grounds of inactivity. It is amply apparent that without any differences, I ought after such a long time either find a road to making an active contribution even if limited, or drop out.

However, such action would imply that I remain a sympathizer and would by omission hide the degree of my differences. On the other hand, in my situation it would be pretentious to leave with a big political statement.

First I sat down to formulate my estimation of the party's course for the last 20 years. That is noted elsewhere, but let me make a summary conclusion.

Trotsky and Cannon set out to create a certain kind of party, politically and organizationally. Anyone who joined in the old days was trained in that conception.

But, gradually over the years, without a fight or a revised official estimation, the party no longer aims to play the same role. The party is antagonistic to the conception. Cannon knows it. Of all the old leadership Weiss was the one most devoted to Cannon's conception. He certainly knows it went wrong. Most of all, you know it, and have different aims and conceptions.

I decided that in some form I ought to resign with enough of a statement to let you know where I stand. Then your investigation started with Ed's letter to me of Feb. 23. If I used that occasion to resign, it might imply that I was doing so since I got "caught with the goods" because of a couple of pieces of private correspondence.

I answered without resigning to make it clear that I have not the remotest concern with what you have found out, and with the further intention to follow immediately with this letter.

Comradely,
s/ David Dreiser

February 9, 1966

Dear Arne:

I recently photocopied 50 copies of Al A's statement to the SWP as assistance to Doug and Rosemary in giving it the broadest possible circulation. D&R have sent me copies of Al's original proposal to the Chinese tendency, your reply and their reply. They did not send me this correspondence until after Al's resignation. Therefore, I assume you will not regard my access to this material as any breach of confidence on the part of D&R. In any event the distinction between the Chinese tendency and that of Fraser-Kaye has been negligible since the convention -- we are all in one boat.

You know that Seattle and their supporters here plan an early exodus. I write to urge you to join the move and in a way to reply to your letter in answer to Al's proposal.

The Political Question:

The SWP leadership has not conducted a serious polemic with an internal opponent since the Pablo dispute in 1953, 13 years ago. Since that time two seriously motivated tendencies have developed and attempted to correct basic errors in line.

Fraser attempted a basic line of inquiry into the Negro question which actually began long before 1953 and has been answered only with abuse. On the surface, a more serious effort was made to answer Swabeck-Liang, but the answer was always doctrine, not inquiry. Each of these two tendencies regarded the party for many years as basically correct on other questions than its own one of special interest, and to this extent, both were short-sighted.

The Chinese question today is what the Russian question was in the '30s, the key international question and the test of all radical parties. On the other hand, the Negro question is the basic and most important domestic question. It is to the American Revolution what the peasant problem was to China. I repeat a thought I wrote to you earlier. A revolution does not proceed in a given country on the basis of the general laws of capitalism, but on concrete and peculiar characteristics. The Negro question is the key peculiarity of US capitalism and will prove its nemesis. A radical party wrong on this question shall not make a revolution here.

It is not correct to say the SWP has degenerated on these two questions; it was never right in the first place and its tendentious wrong views have contributed greatly to its degeneration in other matters where it had a great history and a right to existence.

What are the prospects for the regeneration for which you look?

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Very poor, indeed. One ought to set some kind of standard to judge. One cannot demand that the objective situation develop within a certain time span, but one can and ought to demand that a party correct serious errors within a reasonable time, or look twice at the basic character of the organization. The Fraser tendency is over 15 years old. In 1950, would we have been unnecessarily impatient had we said tentatively that some change ought to be expected within 10 to 15 years or else it is hopeless???

The first contact with the outside world that the SWP-YSA has had in years is in the peace movement. The Washington conference was an indication of how they let events act as a corrective. No, they are infected with a Messiah complex always associated with the substitution of immutable doctrine for thinking and sensitivity to events.

Unfortunately, you are probably mistaken that there is no room for the SWP to compete with the SP in the field of safe radicalism. Dried up sects have shown a remarkable capacity for unaccountable longevity. With continued degeneration, they can stay in business for many years to come.

The Organization Question:

My personal view is that the party never observed Bolshevik organizational principles. I always subscribed to Cannon's view of the combat party acting as one and not allowing internal disputes to hamper work, but I think we were wrong in the old days in always regarding any minority view as heresy and dangerous. Of course, the attitude looked better in those days when the party was in fact correct, but the habit of thought tended to make a cult out of the leadership and make it progressively more difficult for the ranks to initiate corrections where necessary.

I believe Cannon did the party a great disservice when he admonished Weiss and others to bury differences in the interest of a unified leadership. That started the demise of the Weiss group. The Dobbs machine was able to use the good faith of Murry and Myra to destroy them when they couldn't find an arena in which to fight. With the Weisses gone, there was no restraining hand in the center to prevent the wholesale suppression of democratic procedure which followed.

By the way, I believe that Murry will "end the comedy" of his lingering membership in the next period.

The Bolsheviks were never as hardnosed as we in matters of internal differences, even in critical days, let alone in the restricted

years of preparation. But even the limited democracy that was our tradition is stone cold dead and is not coming back. There isn't a serious note of protest from the few critics in the majority ranks. It will become more, not less difficult to effect a regeneration.

The Tactical Question

Let us presume that your perspective of a regeneration is possible. How can we best facilitate a change? By staying in and continuing to write unread documents every two years and talk to deaf ears? Dick is right that the SWP hangs together by using you and him as scapegoats. Left to their own devices, further centrifugal tendencies will occur. More people will either break away, which is good, or may revolt and fight. Frankly, I don't think so, but our staying will in any event not help such a process.

If the past two year wave of expulsions is followed by a wave of resignations, then some people may become aware of the crisis around them. The larger the wave the better. If that doesn't shake them up, would it have done any good to stay in???

Arne, I believe it is not instructive, except negatively, to compare our situation with that of the Left Opposition before 1933. The Communist movement differed from the SWP in three rather important respects. 1. It had lead a successful revolution. 2. It held state power thus demanding that its opponents propose a political revolution if they were to build anew, and 3. It had a mass following. The SWP falls somewhat short of meeting these conditions.

A mass movement can make numerous errors before it loses its following, and before it is correct to abandon it. Our view was always that the small vanguard party could afford to make no mistakes. It must be right on all questions at all times. That is its excuse for existence. It must correct ideologically the errors of the degenerated mass organizations. There is no virtue in being small, but if for a time you can't grow, then being right is sort of a minimum requirement.

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What can one say of a vanguard party that is dead wrong on the most important international and national questions, has been so for many years, doesn't have a democratic procedure for corrections, has little contact with the mass movement, and can't learn from the little contact it does have???

The Personal Question

All movements are made up of human material. It is time to ask, who represents, not just controls the party. Whose party is it? It is Dobb's party. His only serious competition is not from the minority but from the middle class and ambitious youth leadership. It just isn't the party of your tradition, though it has organizational continuity and some of the same people.

Speaking of people, I was surprised at the off-hand and shoddy way you treat Doug and Rosemary after their carefully considered and painful decision to resign. It is especially cruel to condemn your own cothinkers and supporters at a time when they are operating alone in a hostile branch that is forcing them to support a sell-out line. Ought they to have raised no protest in the branch? To do so demanded a price, expulsion or resignation. Those are the facts of life in the NY branch. You might at least have given them the benefit of the doubt of having to make a decision in the heat of battle. I feel they could judge best what had to be done at the time.

You are part of the original generation of revolutionaries which has preserved the continuity of radical thought and action for over 40 years. It is not easy to abandon the organizational form that continuity has taken for many years, but to continue now is to make the same kind of fetish out of the SWP that the majority does.

It is perhaps too much to expect of history to permit a small cadre organization to exist without decline, correcting itself as needed, through a quarter century of adverse times and no growth. The Bolsheviks never faced that particular problem. From 1905 to 1917 were black years, but there were only 12 of them. In the SWP already a second generation is aging.

It is a tribute to Trotsky's genius that the movement was able to live as long as it did without serious mishap, after his death. The present leadership has expended the capital of that tradition and ruthlessly destroyed it. The pages cannot be turned back.

Comradely regards,

David Dreiser