

SOCIALIST ACTION  
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OPEN LETTER TO MEMBERS OF THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

Dear Comrades:

We are writing to inform you of the founding of Socialist Action, a public faction of the Socialist Workers Party, formed by party members undemocratically expelled by the SWP leadership since the 1981 convention. By our count, some thirty-nine comrades have been expelled from the party on trumped up charges, most of them in the last six months. The United Secretariat of the Fourth International at its meeting in late October branded these expulsions as politically motivated and not, as claimed by the Barnes leadership, based on violations of party discipline. It announced that these expelled party members, and those who resigned in reaction to this purge, retained their right to fraternal participation in the International on the same basis as that enjoyed by members of the SWP. In keeping with this decision, we have formed a national organization through which we can maintain our activity in U.S. politics, retain our right to participate in the internal life of the Fourth International within the limits prescribed by U.S. law, and seek a reversal of the undemocratic expulsions and a reunification with our comrades in the Socialist Workers Party.

We will include in future mailings several documents submitted by minority National Committee members to recent NC plenums which explain the principled political basis of our public faction. These include the "28 Theses on the American Socialist Revolution and the Building of the Revolutionary Party," the "Platform of the Bloc" (both from May 1983), and "New Norms vs. Old" written for the post-Oberlin plenum. These documents have not been published by the party majority leadership. And it appears, in light of the suspensions of the four minority National Committee members at Oberlin, the one-year postponement of the party convention, and the purge of the party ranks now underway, that if we do not take the step of circulating these materials to you, party members will be denied their democratic right to hear any point of view aside from that of the Political Committee majority.

The politics of this fight are plain enough. In the preconvention discussion of 1981, Steve Clark, speaking for the Political Committee majority, swore that the leadership remained committed to the Trotskyist movement and to Trotsky's ideas, particularly the theory of permanent revolution. (See Clark's article "Comrade Weinstein's Ultraleft Sectarian Misunderstanding of Leninism and the Permanent Revolution," SWP Discussion Bulletin, vol. 37, no. 9, June 1981, where to the question "Is

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there any rethinking going on in the PC concerning our view of the permanent revolution; that Trotsky was perhaps wrong after all?" (p. 19), Clark answered with an emphatic "No.")

The very day after the convention ended -- when the internal bulletin would be closed for two, and now three, years -- the leadership revealed that its affirmation was false. Barnes, Jenness, and Clark made reports to an expanded PC meeting revealing that they rejected Trotsky's basic strategic ideas. This led finally to the publication of Jack Barnes' article in the Fall 1983 issue of New International repudiating Trotsky's ideas and ridiculing the Fourth International as composed seventy to ninety percent of "irreformable sectarians" (p. 69).

At the October 1983 meeting of the United Secretariat, the SWP's fraternal representatives announced their intention to submit these views in writing to the pre-World Congress discussion, and also indicated that documents would be forthcoming revising sections of the Transitional Program. Yet there has been no democratic discussion of these proposed changes at any level of the party. While the leadership has instead systematically conducted a series of anti-Trotsky "Lenin classes," published a number of signed articles revising our long held positions on this and related subjects, and organized the past two Oberlin Educational Conferences to line up comrades in support of their "new" ideas, they have placed a virtual ban on any comrades who seek to defend our traditional positions and program.

In the last two years we have witnessed an increasingly rapid evolution away from Leninist positions by the Barnes majority. This was initiated by the revival of the old two-stage theory of revolution discarded by the Bolsheviks in 1917, which almost led to the destruction of the Bolshevik high command after the February revolution. To reimpose this concept on Lenin despite the diametrically opposite direction of all of his post-1917 writings, not to mention the whole body of Trotsky's writings in exile which confirm this point, can only be regarded as a deep programmatic concession to Stalinist presentations of Bolshevik history. This estimate is confirmed by the publication of the 1970 article by Carlos Rafael Rodriguez in the New International with an endorsement by Jack Barnes.

It may be that Rodriguez plays a benign role in the present day revolutionary Cuban government, but he was a member of the Stalinist Popular Socialist Party for more than thirty years before he became a supporter of Castro, and it is from these origins that the politics and specific arguments of his article come.

The politics implied historically in the rejection of Trotskyism and of Lenin's post-1917 writings are reflected in every aspect of the SWP's current world political line. Its

line, above all, lies in adapting to any government more or less in conflict with imperialism -- a two-class camp strategy much like that of the Marcyite Workers' World sect. There is no serious presentation in our press of the facts of repression of the socialist Left and of the working class in "anti-imperialist" states such as Iran, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. Even defense of Soviet political prisoners has disappeared from Intercontinental Press, as has any perspective of united action by anti-imperialist organizations in defense of the Polish working class.

On a world scale this line is an abrupt desertion of the perspective of defending proletarian democracy. It is not convincing even in that region where the party's course has the most to recommend it -- in Central America and the Caribbean, where nonbureaucratized revolutionary movements have led a resurgence of anti-capitalist struggle. The events in Grenada tell us that the failure to institutionalize workers' democracy is a deadly weakness for a revolution. This is true even where it occurs with the best intentions under a leadership that is close to the masses and not afflicted by special privileges as in the Soviet Bloc. The internecine warfare that left Maurice Bishop dead and the supporters of the revolution demoralized opened the door for the U.S. invasion.

The invasion was a criminal act. But the military coup within the revolution, a coup which flowed from the absence of institutions by which the Grenadian workers and peasants could elect and depose their leaders and thus resolve the conflict between Bishop and Coard democratically, did lasting damage to the cause of socialism, in Grenada and elsewhere. It does not fit neatly into the good guy-bad guy schema Barnes has used as his guide in world politics -- and in internal SWP politics -- since he broke with Trotsky's proletarian orientation, an orientation intrinsically tied to socialist democracy.

Organizationally, the Barnes reorientation could not help but have immediate consequences. One is the virtual cold split between the SWP and the Fourth International, marked by the withdrawal of a day-to-day party representative in Europe shortly after the 1981 party convention (another policy change that was never candidly put before the membership for approval). Within the party it meant getting rid of most of the older generation of Trotskyists, who could not reasonably be expected to accept this new line.

This campaign began before Barnes even knew who specifically was going to disagree. It was not based on a fight with a definite minority grouping. The first victims of the purge were Theodore Edwards (Edmund Kovacs) in Los Angeles and Asher Harer in San Francisco. They were used by Barnes to concoct the lie that the older generation had inexplicably become violent and irrational. This slander was later extended to Jimmy Kutcher, a sad target for such a preposterous accusation.

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Next we saw the campaign against "experts," much in the way that the Maoists during the Cultural Revolution in China raised the slogan "Better Red than Expert." Mao's slogan meant in practice much the same as did Barnes'. In the SWP we were told ad nauseum that we did not want any "experts" to tell us how to read Lenin. "Experts" was a code word for Trotskyists. Most of the veteran members of the party were explicitly excluded from teaching classes in the Lenin series. As in China this meant that the leadership did not have the facts on their side, and therefore preferred ignorant followers over informed ones. (We apologize if any comrade is offended here. The fact remains that the leadership took advantage of the party membership's lack of information, fostered by the leadership's own downgrading of education for a prolonged period before it launched its anti-Trotsky campaign.)

We are convinced that many revolutionists remain in the SWP. Despite the very sharp departures from Leninist program and organizational norms it is not excluded that a combination of resistance from the rank and file and important events in the world class struggle can depose the Barnes leadership and bring the SWP back to genuine participation in the world Trotskyist movement. What is needed now is an intransigent fight for the historic program of the party. Without this, there is little doubt that the SWP will be destroyed as a revolutionary organization.

Our intention is to wage this political fight as a public faction of the SWP. However, we do not believe that this struggle, as important as it is, can be the only, or even main preoccupation of serious revolutionaries. Those of us who have been placed outside the party will continue to advance the cause of revolutionary Marxism in the class struggle in the United States. Even though our forces are small, we believe that we can have some impact, particularly in comparison to the current work of the SWP. One of the central characteristics of the Barnes group has been an almost unbroken record of abstention from every aspect of political life in the U.S. for at least the last four years.

Part of the consolidation of an anti-Trotskyist leadership has required downgrading the membership's respect for alternative sources of information. This involved disparaging the SWP's own past as "semisectarian," derogating the tens of thousands of comrades of the Fourth International, many of whom have shown in life that they know how to build a party, and labeling almost all other Marxists and radical activists as "petty bourgeois." This treatment was used to isolate the party ranks from U.S. radical public opinion, which was uniformly denounced as capitulating to imperialist pressures. Thus the party withdrew systematically from women's liberation work, and it declared the antinuclear movement to be "pro-war" through a logic that defies analysis. The bureaucratization of the unions was used to preclude comrades from taking even the most minimal formal responsibilities in these basic organizations

of the working class.

The result is that for four years the party has done little but self-generated activity such as Militant sales and election campaigns. This is a key reason for the steady demoralization and decline in the SWP membership, which has dropped from some 1700 four years ago to less than 1000 today. (Other groups on the Left are growing, both to the right and the left of the SWP, including the Communist Party, Democratic Socialists of America, and even the Morenoites, who in Los Angeles, the second-largest center of the SWP, have a branch as large as that of the party!)

Even in the one acceptable area for outside work, Central American and Caribbean anti-interventionism, the party has a very mixed record. Some branches, such as Pittsburgh, do good work -- although expelling two leading solidarity activists did not help. Other branches, such as Los Angeles, abstained for several years. The attempt to reestablish such work as a norm early this year around the World Front adventure proved to be quite damaging to the party. The SWP tried to walk in from the outside and virtually take over the solidarity movement, all on the basis of a mysterious "mandate" from Mexico that never materialized. The result was the arousal of deep suspicions against the party in radicals who had long been active while we had not. In the name of a proletarian orientation, the SWP has in practice abandoned the key struggle to build a broad-based, united front, anti-intervention movement. Leafletting a handful of co-workers has become a substitute for working with others to mobilize hundreds of thousands (the bulk of whom would be workers) against a U.S. war threat more immediate than ever.

Jack Barnes and the undeclared faction he leads allege that the expulsions have taken place because individuals no longer accept the discipline of the party. This is false. Never in the history of the Leninist movement in any healthy party have expulsions been carried out on grounds such as those used by the present SWP majority. In Pittsburgh, Dianne Feeley, a longtime leader of our women's liberation work and a former member of the National Committee, was expelled for participating in planning meetings for an International Women's Day action to which she had been assigned by the party. The excuse was given that the action was at odds with the party's line for the women's movement, but afterward the Militant praised the demonstration. Paul LeBlanc, Dianne's companion, was expelled because, although he agreed to accurately report Dianne's expulsion and not to defend her in public, he refused to agree to actively vilify his companion to nonmembers, saying correctly that this went beyond the obligation of upholding majority decisions.

On the Iron Range, former Pathfinder Press staff member Anne Teasdale Zukowski was expelled for declining to give a majority report to a YSA discussion. She refused to discuss,

with the YSAer who had approached her, any differences she had with the SWP majority. The YSAer lived with the party organizer and had attended plenum reports, so she knew very well that Anne was a supporter of the Fourth International majority and disagreed with the Barnes leadership. In no Leninist party has it been a requirement of membership that minority supporters falsify their own views by giving lengthy political reports for positions they do not agree with. That is a caricature of democratic centralism appropriate only to a monolithic organization, not a revolutionary party.

In San Francisco, Carol Seligman, a longtime leader of the party's women's liberation work, was expelled for asking a party member in the hearing of a YSAer if he had heard that Dianne Feeley had been expelled (Dianne was the comrade's former stepmother). Surely once a comrade is expelled, the mere fact of the expulsion is then public knowledge, since they are no longer a party member!

Also in San Francisco, Roland Sheppard was expelled for inactivity despite the fact that he had been playing a leadership role in an ongoing (and ultimately successful) strike. What better method could have been used to sour workers to an organization which ostensibly strives to be their vanguard!

In Los Angeles, five veteran members of the party, including Les Evens, former editor of the International Socialist Review, and Leo Frumkin, a leader of the party's antiwar work in the 1970's, were expelled for an alleged conspiracy to boycott activity and finances with the aim of destroying the party. Evans was completely unemployed, not receiving unemployment compensation, and attending night school as a condition for changing jobs from a non-targeted industrial job to student-teaching work. The majority had to argue that he had boycotted finances not by withholding money, but because he had quit his job to go to school and had hence placed himself in a position where he did not have any money. Such an objection, of course, would not have applied if the comrade involved had had plenty of money to begin with. Thus the argument of the trial committee rested on a class bias which should be intolerable in a workers' organization.

Recently in Washington, D.C., Jay Fisher was expelled. He had worked a double shift and dozed off during a forum afterward. Called to account by a zealous leadership, he defensively joked that he had only slept through the parts he disagreed with. That cost him his membership in the party.

In New York City, Jimmy Kutcher, the party's "legless veteran," who successfully fought the McCarthyite witch-hunt in the 1950s when they tried to fire him from his job in the Veteran's Administration for his socialist ideas, fell victim to the Barnes witch-hunt and was recently expelled from the party. Jimmy was falsely accused of striking a woman comrade with his cane -- actually Jimmy, since he lost his legs in

World War II, has been in the habit of giving people a light tap to let them know that he is behind them and trying to get by. The woman comrade denied that Jimmy had struck her. The branch rushed the trial through while Jimmy was out of town and not present to defend himself. They settled there for a censure, then demanded that Jimmy come in for an interrogation. Frightened, he requested a copy of the report made against him. This was promised, but the promise never kept. While trying to reach an agreement on this matter, Jimmy was expelled for allegedly refusing to meet with the trial body.

Walter Lippman in Los Angeles had a private discussion with a party member in the headquarters after a forum. No one claimed that any nonparty person had heard anything Walter had said, only that it was conceivable that they might have done so -- not giving either Walter or the majority comrade to whom he was speaking the credit that they would have stopped their discussion if anyone had sought to listen in. The branch found Walter guilty of indiscipline but refused to expel him. Overturning the branch majority took the convening of the State Committee and the personal intervention of Barry Sheppard.

This list could be expanded to virtually every one of the more than thirty expellees, one charge being as flimsy as the next. It is crystal clear, and this was the decision of the United Secretariat, that these comrades have been expelled for their ideas and not for acts that could reasonably be called violations of party discipline. For this reason the United Secretariat does not recognize the validity of these patently political expulsions.

We of Socialist Action have but two conditions for re-joining the SWP. The Political Committee must reverse the expulsions of the last two years, and must restore the democratic norms of a Leninist party, particularly the right of rank and file members to form tendency and faction caucuses. We must never again have the sorry spectacle of comrades such as Harry DeBoer, Jake Cooper, and Gillian Furst expelled from the party for forming a faction.

In the meantime, Socialist Action will maintain fractions in areas of mass work, including the trade unions and the antiwar movement. We are actively participating in defending the striking Greyhound workers and their union in the best traditions of the SWP only a short time ago. We will publish a newspaper, pamphlets, and a theoretical magazine. We will engage in public forums and classes, and recruit new members on the basis of their agreement with the program of the Fourth International.

We are aware that many party members agree with our criticisms of the party leadership, and do not wish to see the SWP leave the Trotskyist movement. We urge you to fight for these ideas inside the SWP, to struggle to win back the democratic norms that once characterized the party, to demand that

we be readmitted to the organization, and to call for a full discussion and convention to freely debate the "new" ideas that are wrenching the SWP away from its genuine continuity with Leninism.

We urge comrades who are expelled in the future to join us. Do not allow the experience in the SWP to drive you away from the revolutionary movement. We have watched as seven hundred or more party members left the SWP in the past few years. The overwhelming majority of these comrades were majority supporters who felt uneasy about one or another aspect of the party's activity but who could not fully express what troubled them. Only recently has the party leadership's hidden agenda begun to be fully revealed. But this has led to the emergence of an opposition committed to defend the proletarian program and traditions of the Socialist Workers Party.

Comrade should note from the list appended to this letter that virtually all of those expelled from the party on political grounds in the last two years have adhered to Socialist Action and did not leave politics as did many of the majority supporters who left the party during the same period.

The construction of a mass revolutionary party in the United States remains a pre-condition for real human progress in our epoch. The bureaucratic purge of SWP oppositionists, coupled with the wholesale assault on the party's program, is an important setback for the revolutionary movement, a setback which you can be certain that Socialist Action is committed to reversing.

Comradely,

JEFF MACKLER and

NAT WEINSTEIN  
for Socialist Action

EXPELLEES WHO HAVE JOINED SOCIALIST ACTION

Steve Ashby	Tybie Genecin	Andy Pollack
Steve Bloom	Norine Gutekanst	Shirley Pasholk
(Suspended by NC)	Mojgan Hariri-Vijeh	Pat Quinn
Glenn Campbell	Lynn Henderson	David Rossi
Dave Cooper	(Suspended by NC)	Karen Shieve
Jake Cooper	Mary Henderson	Carole Seligman
Larry Cooperman	Don Harmon	Roland Sheppard
Rod Estvan	Mike Kramer	Shannon Sheppard
Les Evans	Jimmy Kutcher	Nat Weinstein
Dianne Feeley	Paul LeBlanc	(Suspended by NC)
Carl Finamore	Bill Leumer	Sylvia Weinstein
Jay Fisher	Walter Lippman	Anne Teasdale Zukowski
Leo Frumkin	Frank Lovell	Ann Menasche
Sheavy Geldman	(Suspended by NC)	
Milt Genecin	Don Mahoney	