

# SPARTACIST



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## The SWP — A Strangled Party

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Reprint of pamphlet containing three letters and a speech  
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# Letters

## What Happened to Peter Fryer

London  
December 17, 1985

Editorial Board  
*Spartacist*  
New York, NY

Dear Comrades,

I have just read with great interest the account in your Winter 1985-86 issue of what you aptly term the "implosion" of Healyism. You include on page 27 some friendly and, I fear, unduly flattering references to me. I hope you have space for a few corrections and amplifications.

"Healy and Fryer had some kind of falling-out." In fact, after two and a half years' close daily work with Healy, I had reached the conclusion that he was a gangster and that I could no longer continue to associate with him. So I quit the Socialist Labour League, giving my reasons in an open letter to the members which was issued in the autumn of 1959.

No doubt it would have been better to stay in and fight. But I had been exhausted by the bitter struggle in the Communist Party—my expulsion and unsuccessful appeal—and the gruelling work of building *The Newsletter* and the SLL. I simply didn't have the stomach, or the energy, or the appetite for a further bitter fight against a further set of cynical and unscrupulous opponents. And, I frankly admit, I was more than a little afraid of Healy, whose favourite method with dissenters was, in those days, a knock on the door by him and his thugs at two o'clock in the morning.

But I didn't go to Portugal to run away from Healy. Nor

was I accompanied by my wife and my mother. I went with my then companion, Patricia McGowan Pinheiro, and our purpose was to write a book together. That book, *Oldest Ally: A Portrait of Salazar's Portugal*, was published in 1961.

I have never written a book with the title *The Anthropology of Sex Through the Ages*, or anything remotely resembling it. My books "on 'sex'" were the following: *Mrs Grundy: Studies in English Prudery* (1963); *The Birth Controllers* (1965), a social history of contraception; and *Private Case—Public Scandal* (1966), an attack on the censorship at that time practised in the British Museum Library.

James Robertson asks: "What happened to Peter Fryer?" I'll tell him. My most recent book, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, was published by Pluto Press in 1984. I am still working in the field of black history, and I have two projects in hand: a history of black people in the British Empire; and an anthology (which I am compiling in collaboration with Rozina Visram) of black writing in Britain since the eighteenth century.

In general, I think your account of the events of 1956-59 grossly overestimates my personal role and contribution. But, leaving that aside, the portrait of Healy that emerges is one instantly recognizable to all honest people who have ever had dealings with him.

Yours fraternally,  
Peter Fryer

*Spartacist* replies: We thank comrade Fryer for his information and comments regarding *Spartacist* No. 36-37, "Healyism Implodes."

English Edition

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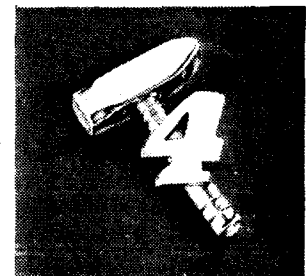
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# Letters

Meeting of miners' union officials from Follinsby Lodge (Wardley Colliery), County Durham, 1926. On banner from left, clockwise around Lenin: A.J. Cook, leader of 1926 miners strike; James Connolly, Irish revolutionary; Keir Hardie, founding leader of Independent Labour Party; George Harvey, De Leonist and the lodge secretary. Harvey also appears standing next to miners' union speaker.

David Douglass/Follinsby Lodge



## Founding British Communism—An Exchange

8/12/85  
Doncaster,  
Britain

Dear Comrades,

Might I just write and congratulate your piece "British Communism Aborted" (*Spartacist* Winter 1985-86). I was brought up in a Geordie pit community which like neighbouring Chopwell had the name of "Little Moscow" because of its militant and political traditions. One of the most outstanding leaders of the region was a man called George Harvey [see photo above] who like many of the very best of the British working class had to offer was a De Leonist and Industrial Unionist. I have been having discussions with some of your British comrades on the whole question of the S.L.P. and its history which even yet is not fully disclosed to say nothing of fully understood. I have passed on several references which I hope they will follow up in order to record and clarify the history of these comrades.

In my view it is no exaggeration to say that the S.L.P. and its respective Industrial Union groups left a profound impact on revolutionary traditions of particularly the English speaking continents Australia, America and Britain, as well as having a particular history among the different national groups of the USA.

On the question of Challinor's book on the S.L.P. I think it fair to say he comes closest to understanding the role and impact of the party, although he himself ignored it for years and was one of the infuriating crowd of petit bourgeois historians who refused to recognise the difference between Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism as such. It was not until after several small pamphlets and

papers had started to appear up and down the country at worker-historian and labour historian meetings that the truth jumped out and whacked Challinor in the face, it has been his hobby-horse ever since. One wonders if a similar process will ever lead him from the odious "state capitalist" formulae of which he is an advocate.

Although you question the use of the term British Bolshevism, when referring to the S.L.P. I don't believe we can be too tight in the definition. The S.L.P. was of the Bolshevik *type* in many ways. Take for example the strictly democratically centralised structure and dedicated role of the cadre: "The modern revolutionist knows... that a man is not superior to principle, that the principle is superior to man... He knows that if we do not go in a body and hang together we are bound to hang separate... you will see the revolutionist submit to the *will* of the majority, you will see him readiest to obey... you will never find the revolutionist putting himself above the organisation." De Leon, *Reform and Revolution*. This concept stands in contradistinction to the woolly and liberal and individualist structures of the Social Democratic parties etc. The same is true in the concept of the vanguard, and role of the cadre: "In all revolutionary movements, as in the storming of a fortress, the thing depends on the head of the column, upon that minority that is so intense in its convictions, so soundly based on its principles, so determined on its actions, that *it carries the masses with it* storms the breastworks and captures the fort. Such a column must be our Socialist organisation to the whole column of the American proletariat." *Ibid.*

Another point of course is that the S.L.P.ers in Britain  
*continued on page 51*

# George Breitman Dead: A Felt Loss

George Breitman, avowed Trotskyist for 51 years, died April 19 this year of heart failure at the age of 70. Though plagued incessantly by rheumatoid arthritis and other serious ailments for the past three decades, Breitman remained politically active until the last day of his final hospitalization. He is survived by his wife Dorothea, also a long-time member of the Trotskyist movement.

Breitman had been a member of the Socialist Workers Party until January 1984, when he was summarily expelled along with dozens of his comrades for opposing the SWP leadership's explicit repudiation of Trotskyism. (For an account of the purge as well as the text of Breitman's appeal of his expulsion, see the Spartacist pamphlet, "The Socialist Workers Party: An Obituary.") Following the mass purge, Breitman and his cothinkers publicly proclaimed the Fourth Internationalist Tendency, to fight for readmission to the SWP and, barring that, to try to win over the SWP ranks from the outside.

## The Last-Ditch Fight of the "Old Guard"

Breitman had not been noted for being a decisive politician in internal party factional struggles. SWP leader James P. Cannon made reference to this during the dispute with the Cochran-Clarke faction in the SWP:

"If you are going to be like Breitman and weigh everything on the finest scale, allow two points here and two there, you'll never be a political leader. You have to decide which is the *main* issue and which side you are on, and subordinate the others."

—"Internationalism and the SWP," 18 May 1953

But Breitman and his generation in the party provided a large chunk of the leading cadres who carried the SWP through the stagnant witchhunt years of the 1950s and well into the 1960s, past the point at which its revolutionary energies had been depleted. The SWP experienced accelerated degeneration in the early 1960s, centrally over Cuba, abandoning the perspective of permanent revolution and correspondingly the centrality of the working class and the necessity of building revolutionary parties in every country. Domestically, over the black struggle the SWP surrendered a revolutionary working-class perspective, abstaining from the crucial fight to win black militants away from the developing nationalist/separatist currents and recruit them to the party. In the same period, the SWP concretely abandoned defense of the Soviet Union. Breitman wound up an organic centrist in the classical sense: revolutionary in words, reformist in deeds. He could neither go backward to revolutionary communism, nor forward to Barnes' eclectic Stalinist reformism. He and his comrades now in the FIT came to view the 1960s and '70s as the golden years of the SWP, when it was practicing not very subtle class collaborationism, especially in its alliance with bourgeois liberals over the Vietnam War.



Even Cannon, then already out of the central administration of the party, grudgingly acquiesced to the SWP's slide into centrism and then reformism in the 1960s. But he fought to the end in the name of Trotsky and permanent revolution. And to Breitman's honor, so did he and most of the "old guard" who grew up politically in the revolutionary SWP. Very likely Joseph Hansen, the premier theoretician of Jack Barnes' SWP, but still one of Breitman's generation in the old guard and an accomplished factional fighter, would have strongly objected to ripping away the SWP's sagging Trotskyist façade. After Hansen's death in 1979, Barnes moved rapidly to implement his program to openly "junk the old Trotskyism." And George Breitman led his comrades in a last-ditch fight in defense of what was by then a pretty wretched caricature of Trotskyism.

## A Party Cadre

Born in 1916, Breitman grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. At 16, he left high school in the midst of the Depression and shortly came in contact with members of the Spartacus Youth League. In 1935, at age 19, he joined the SYL, then the youth group of the Workers Party of the U.S., the American Trotskyist organization at the time. Breitman joined the WP later that

year and was soon elected Newark organizer, and later the party's organizer for the North New Jersey district. At the time, there were four party branches in Newark alone. In the WP/SYL, Breitman first met Dorothea Katz. They were married in 1940.

Breitman also became a prominent leader in New Jersey in the late 1930s of the Workers Alliance of America, an organization of the unemployed with several thousand members in the state. He was elected state organization secretary of the Workers Alliance in 1936 and helped lead one of the few successful strikes against Roosevelt's Work Projects Administration, as well as a siege of the state capitol in Trenton by unemployed workers demanding increased benefits.

In 1936, the Trotskyists joined the Socialist Party seeking to influence a large leftward-moving section in its ranks (the "French turn"). Upon their expulsion a year and a half later, the left-wing SP branches met in Chicago on New Year's Eve, 1938 to found the Socialist Workers Party. Breitman was a delegate to the founding convention. At the second convention in 1939, he was first elected to the National Committee and remained a member until 1981. He also served on the Political Committee several times in the period from 1939 to 1954 and again from 1969 to 1978.

In September 1940, Breitman took over writing a weekly column in the party press, begun by C.L.R. James, called "The Negro Struggle." Following the government's indictment of 29 leading members of the SWP and Minneapolis Teamsters in 1941, he was asked to join the staff of the *Militant*. He was soon appointed editor and served in that post until 1943, writing under the pseudonyms Albert Parker and Philip Blake. It was around this time that Cannon remarked that Breitman "who, after all, is only a mere boy... is developing with leaps and bounds and gives promise of being a first-class Bolshevik leader" ("The Problem of Party Leadership," 1 November 1943).

In 1943, Breitman was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent to London and then France in 1944, following the Normandy invasion. After the war ended, he played a role in the "go home" movement among American soldiers, agitating, producing leaflets and helping organize demonstrations in Paris. Through the American expatriate Trotskyist and journalist Sherry Mangan, Breitman was able during the war to establish contact with European Trotskyists and attended clandestine meetings of the European Secretariat of the Fourth International from 1944 to 1946, and was one of two SWP delegates to the first postwar international conference of the FI, in March 1946. The conference was raided by the police on the third day, the Americans taken to the U.S. embassy and the rest of the delegates thrown in jail. After Breitman's abrupt departure, he was elected to the International Executive Committee at the final session, held in jail that night. Relating this episode in 1981, Breitman commented:

"...I think I would have declined the honor of being a member of the IEC.... And I would have told them that my plans were to return to the United States as quickly as possible, and never to leave it again."

—"Fourth International in World War II,"  
*Militant*, 29 May 1981

Upon his return, Breitman resumed editorship of the *Militant* until 1954. He spent the next 13 years as a party leader in Detroit, sent in to shore up the branch after the

defection of the majority of the branch in the rightist Cochran-Clarke split. Here Breitman established the Friday Night Socialist Forum as a party institution. It was also in Detroit, in the mid-1960s, that Breitman began to establish himself as an authority on Malcolm X, editing most of his published speeches. Breitman later wrote a book, *The Last Year of Malcolm X*, analyzing Malcolm X's break with the Black Muslims and his subsequent evolution until his assassination in 1965. Returning to New York in 1967, Breitman spent the following year in a hospital due to a new attack of arthritis.

### Editor of Trotsky and Cannon

Though he was often an organizer and public spokesman for the SWP, Breitman was best known as a writer and editor. Over the years, he wrote probably close to two thousand articles as well as numerous pamphlets, many concerning the fight against black oppression in the U.S. He was long recognized in the SWP as an authority on the black question. In the early 1960s, as part of the SWP's



As a young Trotskyist, George Breitman helped organize unemployed workers' occupation of state capitol in Trenton, New Jersey, 1936.

degeneration into centrism, Breitman's position espousing black nationalism was adopted over and against the program of revolutionary integrationism and the building of a black Trotskyist cadre advocated initially by Richard Fraser and then by the Revolutionary Tendency, precursor of the Spartacist League. Breitman became the SWP's main theoretician and spokesman on the black question.

The SL maintained serious and long-standing political differences with George Breitman. But comrade Breitman was the personification of the argument against ad hominem attacks. In 1969, unable to continue work as a printer, he became an editor with Pathfinder Press. It was in this last period of his life that Breitman undertook his most lasting and valuable work for the revolutionary movement. Soon after joining the Pathfinder staff, he initiated and assumed chief responsibility for the massive

*continued on page 53*

# The SWP— A Strangled Party

The American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) decisively shed the formal ideological connection to its once revolutionary past when National Secretary Jack Barnes explicitly denounced the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution in a speech at the convention of the party's youth organization on 31 December 1982. In the months preceding and following this speech, Barnes and his gang of fellow epigones ruthlessly purged the SWP of all opponents of the new line, including virtually every remaining long-time member of the party (see "Barnestown, U.S.A.," *Workers Vanguard* No. 320, 31 December 1982). The expelled oppositionists eventually constituted themselves into three separate organizations—Socialist Action (SA), Socialist Unity (SU) and the Fourth Internationalist Tendency (FIT)—with the older cadre tending to group around the FIT.

In February 1986 the FIT and SU (which latter has since merged with some Shachtmanite remnants to form a new reformist outfit dubbed "Solidarity") co-published the pamphlet, "Don't Strangle the Party," which we reprint in this issue. The pamphlet contains three letters and a speech by SWP founding leader James P. Cannon, all from his last years, plus an introduction by FIT leader George Breitman. Breitman's introduction purports to show, among other things, that the SWP's organizational practice remained unchanged from the founding of American Trotskyism in 1928 until far past Cannon's death in 1974—until Jack Barnes and his friends suddenly

changed the rules in 1980.

During our preparation of this review of the FIT/SU pamphlet, we were saddened to learn of the death of George Breitman on April 19 (see obituary, page 4). In bringing out Cannon's last known thoughts, feelings and opinions on a question with which he was pre-eminently familiar—the prerequisites for building a revolutionary Marxist party—comrade Breitman performed another valuable service for the Marxist movement.

*De mortuis nil nisi bonum.* Yet Breitman's view of the Barnes clique as a sudden aberration in a party with an otherwise unbroken revolutionary continuity is flat out wrong: the SWP is today a fundamentally reformist party and the roots of its degeneration go back much further than Breitman could admit or understand. The SWP opted for class collaborationism over class struggle 20 years ago when it subordinated a revolutionary program in order to build a popular-frontist coalition against the Vietnam War. The party's departure from erstwhile working-class politics began around 1960, using the Cuban Revolution as a springboard.

## Cold War Stagnation

The rapid degeneration of the once revolutionary SWP, going through centrism into reformism, necessarily had an evolution. The party had endured more than a decade of stagnation and isolation during the postwar McCarthy era. Concomitant with the emergence of the U.S. as the pre-eminent capitalist world power, the SWP recruited a substantial layer of proletarian militants, including many black workers, and then lost the bulk of them with the onset of the witchhunt. In the 1950s, the aging SWP cadre, seeing their role reduced essentially to a holding operation in the citadel of world imperialism, no doubt thought life was passing them by, as did the Cochranite wing which split from the party in 1953. The SWP correctly adopted a perspective of regroupment following the crisis in the Stalinist movement (the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Khrushchev revelations) and achieved some gains. But a tendency to "get rich quick" schemes led to opportunist bulges. In early 1957 the party adopted a fully principled and comprehensive 12-point program for regroupment, but this program remained a dead letter. Failing to find elements moving to the left out of the Communist Party (CP), the SWP briefly flirted with the rightward-moving Gatesite wing of the CP and then courted the *National Guardian* and the New York remnants of the Progressive Party with a "United Socialist Ticket" in the 1958 elections.

The SWP in the postwar period no longer understood the world very well. As the Second World War approached, Trotsky had understood the urgency of the crisis



Pathfinder Press

SWP leader James Cannon speaking at New York election rally, 1945. Under leadership of Farrell Dobbs (left) and Tom Kerry (center), SWP degenerated into reformism in the mid-1960s.

of revolutionary leadership. He correctly foresaw that world war would bring social convulsions and the possibility for proletarian revolutions, as the first inter-imperialist war had led to the Russian October. In 1938 the Trotskyists founded the Fourth International and Trotsky sought to gear its nascent sections up for the challenge. Trotsky predicted that successful proletarian revolutions against capitalism would also sweep away Stalinism, itself a product of a global stalemate between the isolated Soviet Union and world imperialism after the defeat, particularly in Germany, of the revolutionary wave.

However, the mainly tiny sections of the FI were in effect militarily defeated. Under conditions of great repression, the groups fragmented to carry out diverging policies, some of them quite heroic. Insulated in the U.S. from the carnage in Europe and the colonial countries, the SWP emerged from the war with its cadre intact. But internationally, virtually all the young and older cadres were killed by war and by fascist and Stalinist repression. Those would-be Trotskyists who after the war became the impressionistic leadership of the decimated FI were mainly youth who had learned their "Trotskyism" from books. Trotsky, himself murdered, did not live to see the restabilization of capitalism in Western Europe—with the active complicity of the Stalinist and other reformist parties whose participation in "national" governments was required to restabilize bourgeois rule in Italy and Greece and, to a lesser extent, in France and even Britain.

In exchange, in the countries of Eastern Europe where the smashing of the Nazi occupation by the Soviet Red Army had left rather a vacuum of power, the Russians retained control; a series of deformed workers states ensued by social transformations from the top down. Something different occurred in Yugoslavia when Tito's guerrilla bands (and later Mao's peasant army in China) brought about a deformed social revolution. In Yugoslavia and China, national Stalinist formations made revolutions in the interests of their own survival despite Moscow's counterrevolutionary line. In the absence of the proletariat in its own right as a contender for power, these revolutions have confirmed in the negative the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution, in that they were unable to establish any "middle" course or petty-bourgeois state—deformed workers states were consolidated.

In the postwar period, the SWP retreated into an increasingly formal "orthodoxy." They had a hard time for a couple of years trying to figure out how the deformed workers states in Eastern Europe had been created. The SWP and FI were disoriented by Tito's revolution, the first break in the formerly apparently monolithic Stalinist "camp"—the American party was quick to hail the Titoists as "left centrists." On the other hand the SWP took until 1955 to categorize Mao's China as a deformed workers state. That the party made opposite, symmetrical errors over these two qualitatively identical revolutions was a telling measure of its disorientation.

Then in 1959 Cannon himself was led into a brief flirtation with the Chinese regime which he had labeled Stalinist four years earlier. Cannon, along with several other Los Angeles National Committee (NC) members including Arne Swabeck, submitted resolutions on the question of the Chinese peasant communes in opposition to the Political Committee (PC) majority of Farrell Dobbs



Black Star

**Liberated prisoners in Havana street, 1 January 1959. Triumph of Castro's guerrilla army led to deformed workers state.**

and Murry Weiss. The Los Angeles resolutions came but a hair's breadth from declaring workers democracy to be alive and well in China. Cannon pulled back and Swabeck's position was smashed at a subsequent NC plenum. In this case, and in general, restorative forces (usually seen as Cannon) operated and the party program was kept within nominally orthodox limits. But over Cuba this restorative "spring" snapped.

In the case of both China and Yugoslavia the SWP eventually came to the correct position that the states which issued out of the revolutions were structurally identical to the end-product of the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution, where workers democracy had been usurped by a bureaucratic political counterrevolution. Trotskyists fight for the program of political revolution against the nationalistic bureaucratic caste. This was a program which Trotsky had laid out as necessary to open the road to socialist development in the case of the degenerated USSR:

"In any case, the bureaucracy can be removed only by a revolutionary force. And, as always, there will be fewer victims the more bold and decisive is the attack. To prepare this and stand at the head of the masses in a favorable historic situation—that is the task of the Soviet section of the Fourth International....

"The revolution which the bureaucracy is preparing against itself will not be social, like the October revolution of 1917. It is not a question this time of changing the economic foundations of society, of replacing certain forms of property with other forms....

"It is not a question of substituting one ruling clique for another, but of changing the very methods of administering the economy and guiding the culture of the country. Bureaucratic autocracy must give place to Soviet democracy. A restoration of the right of criticism, and a genuine freedom of elections, are necessary conditions for the further development of the country. This assumes a revival of freedom of Soviet parties, beginning with the party of Bolsheviks, and a resurrection of the trade unions. The bringing of democracy into industry means a radical

revision of plans in the interests of the toilers. Free discussion of economic problems will decrease the overhead expense of bureaucratic mistakes and zigzags. Expensive playthings—palaces of the Soviets, new theaters, show-off subways—will be crowded out in favor of workers' dwellings. 'Bourgeois norms of distribution' will be confined within the limits of strict necessity, and, in step with the growth of social wealth, will give way to socialist equality. Ranks will be immediately abolished. The tinsel of decorations will go into the melting pot. The youth will receive the opportunity to breathe freely, criticize, make mistakes, and grow up. Science and art will be freed of their chains. And, finally, foreign policy will return to the traditions of revolutionary internationalism."

—Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, 1936

## Cuba—The Acid Test

By 1960 the SWP was looking for something, and they found it in Cuba. Dropping the *qualitative* distinction between a deformed workers state and a healthy workers state, the SWP dropped its program on the need for a Trotskyist party leading the working class, in response to the Cuban Revolution, where a petty-bourgeois guerrilla formation overthrew the U.S.-supported Batista regime and nationalized large sections of the economy under imperialist pressure. The SWP took the fact that a social revolution had occurred in Cuba to mean that the Cuban leadership was on a par with that of the Bolshevik Revolution. Morris Stein spoke for a whole layer of the SWP when he proclaimed, at the 1961 convention, that the Cuban Revolution was the greatest thing since the Russian October. Hooray, they said, we've lived to see it. However much the FIT wants to deny it, they were part of an SWP which began to abandon Trotskyism in 1960, two decades before Barnes and his gang dotted the i's and crossed the t's.

In January 1961 the SWP NC adopted Joseph Hansen's "Theses on the Cuban Revolution" which declared that Cuba had "entered the transitional phase of a workers state, although one lacking as yet the forms of democratic proletarian rule." These theses were adopted following the explicit objections made in the document, "The Cuban



Militant

**Farrell Dobbs (right) visits Cuba, 1960. For SWP leadership, Fidel Castro's leadership was on a par with the Bolsheviks.**

Revolution and Marxist Theory," which three leaders of the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA)—Shane Mage, Jim Robertson and Tim Wohlforth—had submitted in August 1960 to oppose the party's tendency to characterize Cuba as a "workers state." It was at this plenum that the Revolutionary Tendency (RT—forerunner of the Spartacist League) was formed out of the opposition of Mage, Robertson and Wohlforth to the SWP's liquidationism over Cuba.

The RT's resolution, "The Cuban Revolution," submitted to the 1961 YSA Convention, was in sharp counterposition to the SWP majority not only in its analysis of the emerging deformed workers state in Cuba, and the necessity to oppose the growing bureaucratism, but fundamentally on the role of Trotskyists:

"The full victory of every modern revolution, the Cuban revolution included, requires the emergence in a leading role of a mass revolutionary-Marxist party. The small Trotskyist groups, in Cuba and elsewhere, have a vital role as the nucleus of such parties. They can fill this role only if they continually preserve their *political* independence and ability to act, and if they avoid the peril of yielding to non-Marxist and non-proletarian leaderships their own ideological responsibilities and the historic mission of the working class."

The minority's warning applied no less to the SWP itself. In abandoning the fight for a revolutionary Trotskyist party in Cuba, the SWP was well down the road to its own liquidation as a revolutionary instrument: a party whose leadership looked to alien class forces "only 90 miles away" didn't have a very good prognosis.

## The SWP Adopts Breitman's Black Nationalism

Lenin described centrists as "revolutionaries in word and reformists in deed"—a good capsule description of the SWP in the early 1960s. The SWP's rightward-moving centrism expressed itself not just over Cuba, but domestically as well. The Southern civil rights movement offered an excellent opportunity for the SWP to break out of isolation and intersect a new generation of plebeian black militants. Since 1955 there had been an ongoing discussion in the SWP on orientation to the civil rights movement. The two poles of the discussion were George Breitman, who advocated the demand of "self-determination" for the black masses, and Richard Kirk (Dick Fraser) who put forward a program of revolutionary integrationism. Throughout the 1950s the party continued to intervene in the struggle against black oppression with an integrationist perspective. Though the 1957 convention resolution, "The Class Struggle Road to Negro Equality," envisioned support to separatist demands "if they should reflect the mass will," it was adopted by the convention with significant reservations expressed on this question. But by 1963 the SWP leadership was ready to fully embrace Breitman's long-standing support to black nationalism, with the concomitant policy of abstention from the civil rights struggle—they were ready to become sideline cheerleaders for black radicals who would supposedly acquire revolutionary consciousness without the intervention of a revolutionary party. Richard Kirk was in full-blown opposition to the SWP leadership by this time, and his tendency, which otherwise advocated a weird brand of sectoralist politics, submitted a resolution to the 1963 convention upholding the program of revolutionary integrationism. The RT supported the Kirk resolution with





Wide World



Richard Kirk (Fraser) fought SWP call for troops to "protect" blacks. National Guard protected segregated Central High in Little Rock (above).

the following statement:

"I. Our support to the *basic line* of the 1963 Kirk-Kaye resolution, 'Revolutionary Integration,' is centered upon the following proposition:

"The Negro people are not a nation; rather they are an oppressed race-color caste, in the main comprising the most exploited layer of the American working class. From this condition the consequence has come that the Negro struggle for freedom has had, historically, the aim of integration into an equalitarian society.

"II. Our minority is most concerned with the political conclusions stemming from the theoretical failures of the P.C.'s draft, 'Freedom Now.' This concern found expression in the recent individual discussion article, 'For Black Trotskyism.' The systematic abstentionism and the accompanying attitude of acquiescence which accepts as inevitable that 'ours is a white party,' are most profound threats to the revolutionary capacity of the party on the American scene."

The RT's one-page amendment to the perspectives document at the 1963 convention was dismissed by the SWP leadership as ridiculous and wildly adventurist because it demanded the party initiate modest trade-union work in a few carefully chosen places and seek some involvement in the mass civil rights struggles in the South:

"As regards the South today, we are witnessing from afar a great mass struggle for equality. Our separation from this arena is intolerable. The party should be prepared to expend significant material resources in overcoming our isolation from Southern struggles. In helping to build a revolutionary movement in the South, our forces should work directly with and through the developing left-wing formations in the movement there. A successful outcome to our action would lead to an historic breakthrough for the Trotskyist movement. Expressed organizationally, it would mean the creation of several party branches in the South for the first time—for example, in Atlanta, Birmingham or New Orleans."

Kirk had lost favor with the SWP leadership when he fought against the party's adoption in 1955, under Breitman's urging, of the slogan, "Federal Troops to Mississippi." Not only did this slogan pose a fundamental revision of the Marxist understanding of the nature of the bourgeois state, but it prompted the party to support Eisenhower's introduction of federal troops into Little

SWP

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1. RESOLUTION ON THE LITTLE ROCK CRISIS  
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Rock in 1957—the end result of which was the crushing of local black self-defense efforts. The policy of painting U.S. imperialist troops as reliable defenders of black people had engendered significant opposition within the party in the 1950s, but by 1964 the party adopted the grotesque campaign slogan, "Withdraw the Troops from Viet Nam and Send Them to Mississippi!" And this wasn't the only sign that in the SWP's mind the bourgeois state was no longer an instrument of class oppression. Following the November 1963 Kennedy assassination, SWP party administrator Farrell Dobbs sent a sniveling telegram of condolence to the widow of the imperialist chief who ordered the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba!

Despite the SWP's deepening reformist practice, the party remained committed to some kind of formal Trotskyism on paper. The leadership had the able services of Joseph Hansen to cover over the deviations with numerous caveats and paragraphs of ritual orthodoxy. Hansen was careful—you had to read between the lines to see the *real* line. This was important because it allowed the older cadre to carry out their opportunist appetites while still maintaining—often sincerely—the formal adherence to the revolutionary principles of their youth.

The SWP didn't have to look hard to find cothinkers for their revisionism on Cuba: they entered into negotiations to reunify with the International Secretariat (IS), which was led by one Michel Pablo. By 1951 Pablo, a leader of the devastated Fourth International (FI), had reacted to the postwar overturns of capitalism in Eastern Europe by claiming that the imminence of World War III would "force" the Stalinist parties to play a generally revolutionary role. Pablo's line demanded liquidationist conclusions: Trotskyist nuclei should dissolve into the Stalinist parties and become left pressure groups. This perspective of "deep entry" into the Stalinist parties led to the destruction of the FI.

From afar and in the face of an escalating witchhunt which hindered full international collaboration (it was a U.S. felony, for example, for an American Communist or ex-Communist to apply for a passport), Cannon had



Wide World

**Sit-in at Chattanooga, Tennessee lunch counter, 1960. RT fought for SWP to intervene in Southern civil rights movement.**

originally acquiesced to Pablo's blatant, and in some cases suicidal, revisionism. Only when the Cochran-Clarke faction emerged in support of Pablo in the U.S. did Cannon take up the fight. Yet Cannon had great difficulty in getting the central SWP cadre to go along with him against Cochran-Clarke. The New York leadership of Dobbs, Kerry, Hansen and Morris Stein only belatedly came over to Cannon and Los Angeles SWP leader Murry Weiss, and the internal disputes in the SWP of the mid-1950s reflected the reality of this heavily nuanced bloc.

Cannon's SWP did eventually raise the banner of orthodox Trotskyism, aligning itself with the former majority of the French Parti Communiste Internationaliste and with Gerry Healy's faction in the fragmented British Trotskyist movement to form the "International Committee of the Fourth International" (IC). But in the case of the Cuban Revolution the SWP adopted the fundamental premise of Pabloism and opted for looking toward some other, non-Leninist, non-proletarian force, to make the revolution. The SWP's line converged with that of Pablo. The RT opposed reunification and was in general political

## "The World Prospect for Socialism"

"The World Prospect for Socialism, Resolution on the International Situation," adopted at the 1961 conference of the British Socialist Labour League, predecessor of the Workers Revolutionary Party.

At the time of its publication, this document, an outstanding expression of the international Trotskyist program, helped to codify the opposition of the nascent Revolutionary Tendency to the rightward-moving centrism of the American Socialist Workers Party.

Available now from the Spartacist League of Britain, reproduced from *Labour Review*, Winter 1961.

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agreement with the IC majority led by Gerry Healy, who at that time espoused at least a literary defense of orthodox Trotskyism (see especially the 1961 document "The World Prospect for Socialism" of Healy's Socialist Labour League). The SWP voted for reunification with the Pabloites in 1963, giving birth to the United Secretariat (USec) which explicitly espoused a petty-bourgeois, guerrilla "road to socialism" in the colonial countries. The RT's resolution on the world movement, "Toward the Rebirth of the Fourth International," submitted to the SWP's 1963 convention, upheld the Leninist road:

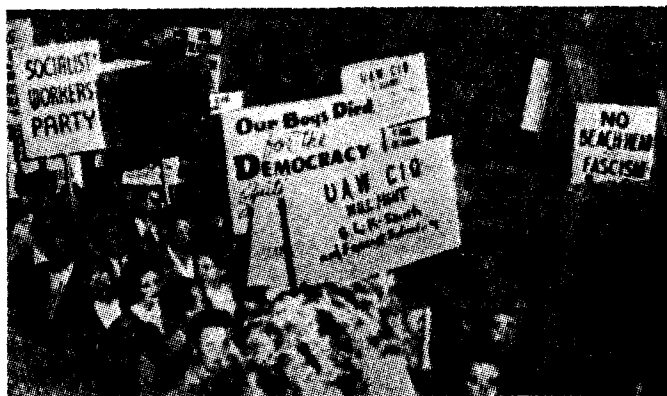
"Experience since the Second World War has demonstrated that peasant-based guerrilla warfare under petit-bourgeois leadership can in itself lead to nothing more than an anti-working-class bureaucratic regime. The creation of such regimes has come about under the conditions of decay of imperialism, the demoralization and disorientation caused by Stalinist betrayals, and the absence of revolutionary Marxist leadership of the working class. Colonial revolution can have an unequivocally progressive significance only under such leadership of the revolutionary proletariat. For Trotskyists to incorporate into their strategy revisionism on the *proletarian* leadership in the revolution is a profound negation of Marxism-Leninism no matter what pious wish may be concurrently expressed for 'building revolutionary Marxist parties in colonial countries.' Marxists must resolutely oppose any adventurist acceptance of the peasant-guerrilla road to socialism—historically akin to the Social Revolutionary program on tactics that Lenin fought. This alternative would be a suicidal course for the socialist goals of the movement, and perhaps physically for the adventurers."

### The Purge of the RT

The RT's fight against the SWP leadership's precipitous surrender of a working-class perspective occurred at a time when the SWP was seething with internal oppositions. We have already mentioned the Kirk-Kaye tendency, but there were others, totaling perhaps a third of the SWP's membership. Some were dissident branches, others were national tendencies but they all had one thing in common: in a few years they would find themselves outside of the SWP. In the early 1960s it certainly wasn't excluded in advance that the RT could win over a chunk of the cadre. Despite the leadership's right-centrism, the SWP had not lost all of its revolutionary juices. At the same time, the RT had few illusions on how long they would be allowed to carry out the fight inside the party. The tired, aging Dobbs was growing increasingly irritable at the presence of critics, and he had the majority.

The RT was dealt a real blow when the miserable Tim Wohlforth, acting as Gerry Healy's tool, provoked an unprincipled split in the tendency in 1962. Evidently the despicable Healy thought he still had a chance to keep the SWP in the IC, so he ordered the RT majority to recant their view that the SWP had become centrist. (Healy demanded the recantation despite his own July 1962 polemic against the SWP, "Trotskyism Betrayed.") When the majority of the RT refused, Wohlforth and his partner Philips split from the RT. This was a crime on two counts: it not only demoralized and drove away some tendency supporters, it also made the RT look like a bunch of unserious, juvenile, professional factionalists in the eyes of many SWP members.

Wohlforth's next service to Dobbs was to falsely accuse the RT of having a "split perspective" by selectively quoting



Militant



Workers Vanguard

**Anti-fascist mobilization: a revolutionary tradition. SWP contingent in labor mobilization of 20,000 against fascist Gerald L.K. Smith, Los Angeles, 1945 (left). Spartacist-initiated Labor/Black Mobilization to Stop the Klan in Washington, D.C., 27 November 1982 (right).**

from intra-tendency discussion drafts in a document submitted to the SWP internal bulletin. Dobbs, annoyed by the RT's having managed to elect two delegates to the 1963 convention, found Wohlforth's frame-up useful as a pretext. After a farcical Control Commission "investigation"—which only one elected member of the Control Commission, a hard majorityite, participated in—the outcome was hardly in doubt. In December 1963, five leaders of the RT were expelled for having a "hostile and disloyal attitude" toward the SWP. Dobbs summed up the majority's own attitude in his arrogant declaration to the New York branch that "the majority is the party."

Dobbs' purge of the RT had been preceded by numerous other organizational abuses—the bureaucratic removal of the YSA leadership, provocative factional raids into minority tendency meetings, and the like, all documented in the Spartacist League's *Marxist Bulletin* No. 4, Parts I and II. The RT consciously and deliberately abided by the then-existing SWP organizational rules, forcing Dobbs to change the statutes in order to justify his purge. Thus our abiding by the formal organizational rules pushed the Dobbsite majority to bring the rules into line with the evolving new rightward-moving political practices.

### The 1965 Organizational Resolution

According to Breitman's introduction, "the PC decided to submit a resolution on organizational principles to the

1965 convention...." But the PC didn't just "decide" out of the blue: the National Committee authorized the drafting of this resolution *in the same motion* which expelled the leading RTers. The resolution ("The Organizational Character of the Socialist Workers Party") was discussed and voted by the 1965 convention on *the same agenda point* which denied the expelled RT members even the right to appeal their expulsion. Fully one-third of the content of the 1965 organizational resolution is taken up with an *explicit* ex post facto justification of the RT's expulsion. Breitman ignores these overwhelming facts. The SWP leadership decided to codify its bureaucratic treatment of the RT: this is what organizationally consummated the strangling of the party.

Stripped of the jumbles of paragraphs taken here and there from past SWP organizational resolutions, Dobbs' document amounted to the destruction of the rights of any minority. Opposition to the majority line was equated with "disloyalty" to the party. In essence, the 1965 rules boil down to the following syllogism: (1) factions are permitted in the SWP; (2) factionalists are disloyal people; (3) disloyal people are expelled from the SWP. Needless to say, this document was to prove quite useful to Dobbs' successors.

A party dedicated to proletarian revolution must demand discipline in action from its members as well as provide a fully democratic internal life. This allows cohesiveness while insuring that the organization's line and tactics can be adjusted, in the light of past experience, to new situations. But when the party abandons a revolutionary program—as the SWP did around 1960—then the coupling between the two components of democratic centralism changes as well. When Dobbs purged the RT, it meant the eclipse of internal democracy by unbridled centralism. Indeed, the SWP after 1965 had tighter rules than the Bolsheviks during the Civil War.

That certainly wasn't the historic norm—before 1963 a disciplined minority such as the RT could easily have been tolerated and in fact become part of a new generation of party leadership. The Trotskyist movement in the U.S. had a long experience with internal oppositions, uneven to be sure, but nothing like the later monolithic conception of Dobbs. The "textbook" case was the 1939-1940 fight with the Shachtmanites, who wanted to abandon the military defense of the Soviet degenerated workers state. This was a fight on fundamental principles; but despite the positions

## Marxist Bulletin No. 4: Expulsion from the Socialist Workers Party

The *Marxist Bulletin* series was initiated by the just-expelled Revolutionary Tendency (RT) to make available the documents from the faction fight in the SWP.

*Marxist Bulletin* No. 4, parts I and II, documents the provocations, suspensions and finally expulsion by the SWP leadership of the RT in late 1963.

Price: \$1.25 (each part)

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Joseph Hansen

**Cadre of the revolutionary SWP, 1949. From left, Arne Swabeck, James Cannon, Rose Karsner, Sam Gordon, Oscar Coover, Carl Skoglund.**

of the minority, Cannon did not move organizationally until the political issues were fully brought out and the minority had de facto split. At other times the leadership had been hard, as in 1935 with the uncontrollable Oehlerites who issued their own bulletin and refused to stop fighting again after the party had made its decision to enter the Socialist Party's emerging left wing. In the mid-1940s on the other hand, in the case of the Goldman-Morrow group, the SWP leadership was very soft. Morrow was given a second chance to mend his ways even after he was caught openly giving verbal reports of SWP PC meetings to the Shachtmanites at a time when they were a significant opponent organization to the SWP.

Party case law, and its codification into resolutions, developed in the course of struggle, with the ups and downs of a living revolutionary movement. But the bottom line was that at each juncture, the party sought *revolutionary* solutions to the disputes—i.e., it stuck to its *program*. Centrally, it saw its task as constructing the revolutionary vanguard in the light of essential international and domestic experience. In that regard Cannon, as he points out repeatedly in the letters reprinted in "Don't Strangle the Party," had a great advantage—he was able to directly benefit from the example of the Bolshevik Revolution and from the *internationalism* of the Comintern in Lenin's time, as well as his later collaboration with Trotsky.

The material assembled in "Don't Strangle the Party" helps to round out Cannon's literary legacy and it sheds some light on what has been a very shadowy matter—friction in the preceding period between Cannon and Farrell Dobbs. Dobbs took over the day-to-day administration of the SWP when Cannon moved to Los Angeles in 1952. Cannon was rumored to be unhappy with the SWP's trajectory under Dobbs, who moved only very late to join the fight against the Pabloite revisionism of Cochran-Clarke. In the following period Cannon reportedly gave backhanded support to the grouping around Murry Weiss as against Dobbs and Tom Kerry. But by 1965, by Breitman's account, Cannon didn't even bother to raise his objections to the important, Dobbs-authored organizational resolution; by 1968 he had stopped writing to the party center at all.

Breitman buttresses his argument that the 1965 resolu-

tion meant no fundamental change in party democracy chiefly by what Cannon *didn't* say on the subject. But Cannon in his later years of semi-retirement got pretty shaky politically (e.g., his early support for Swabeck on China) and in 1965 he was 75 years old. This dimension has to be taken into account when discussing a resolution to which, by Breitman's own account, Cannon basically only acquiesced. While Cannon stood by, objecting once in a while as these letters show, the party he had led from its founding degenerated into a reformist, and correspondingly bureaucratic, shell.

### Into the Abyss

In 1965, the rising ferment over the escalating U.S. imperialist military involvement in Vietnam presented the SWP leadership with the "mass movement" which would provide a full outlet for their accumulated reformist appetites. The SWP's definitive overt leap from centrism to reformism came around the November 1965 antiwar conference in Washington, D.C., where the SWP attempted an (unsuccessful) organizational grab. In doing so, the SWP threw overboard the last remnants of class-struggle opposition to the war in favor of the reformist lie that a classless peace movement could stop the imperialist intervention in Vietnam. Richard Kirk, then still a member of the SWP NC, condemned the SWP's wretched role at the November conference in a letter to the PC dated 13 December 1965:

"Here the party and youth carried on an unprincipled, disruptive and politically reformist struggle against the entire left wing of the antiwar movement. They disrupted the conference around tertiary organizational demands and ended in isolation and national disgrace. They established an indelible and deserved record for political conservatism and dead-end factionalism."

Kirk had copies of his letter sent to his supporters on and off the NC, as well as to several majority supporters, including Larry Trainor. For this violation of "committee discipline" (which Cannon called a "non-existent law") Kirk was *censured* by the February 1966 NC plenum. Breitman says in his preface that the "whole question" of discipline was "dropped" at this plenum. But Kirk's criticisms, unlike Swabeck's, cut too close to the SWP's



Howort/Militant

Jack Barnes



Hart/Militant

Barry Sheppard



Stanton/Pathfinder Press

Mary-Alice Waters



Ostrosky/Militant

Larry Seigle



Workers Vanguard

Peter Camejo

actual reformist practice. After the censure of Kirk the SWP leadership opened up an "investigation" of the entire Kirk-Kaye tendency, sending the bully Asher Harer to Seattle where the Fraserites had the majority. This action precipitated the resignation of the entire tendency.

It is clear that Dobbs felt much earlier that taking political disputes outside the NC was a violation of "normal party procedures" warranting disciplinary action. In early 1962—four years before Cannon opposed disciplining Arne Swabeck—Dobbs went after Tim Wohlforth for violating this norm. This was before Wohlforth split the RT, and he was the only minorityite on the Political Committee. When the RT submitted a document signed by Wohlforth and another member of the NC, plus ten other well-known comrades, Wohlforth was treated to a real browbeating by Dobbs, as recorded in the minutes of the 11 April 1962 PC meeting.

The whole notion of "committee discipline" is hardly new, as Cannon notes in his 8 February 1966 letter. In the early American CP it was mostly honored in the breach. But breach of such a norm cannot become the occasion for disciplinary action in a revolutionary party, which must allow for free political discourse between its leading members and the rank and file if the party convention is to make an informed decision on the disputed issues. We note that even *Stalin's* guilt-ridden defense in *Pravda* did not invoke "committee discipline" against the Central Committee members who signed the Left Opposition's "Platform of the 46" in October 1923.

The SWP's qualitative descent into reformism occurred alongside the emergence of a new leadership configuration. Cannon was "promoted" to advisory status in 1965, and his agent Carl Feingold was eliminated forthwith. The Dobbs-Kerry leadership which had been administering the party since 1952 didn't last much longer—they were old and tired. The intermediate layer—40-year-olds like Nat Weinstein, Ed Shaw and Clifton DeBerry—were mediocre at very best. And the SWP had purged their layer of revolutionary-minded youth when they booted out the RT. So they were pretty much stuck with Barnes, Barry Sheppard, Doug and Linda Jenness, Larry Seigle, Mary-Alice Waters, Peter Camejo, et al. These were political animals of quite another sort—unlike even the lackluster 40-year-olds who at least had some experience with the old SWP and its trade-union work, the Barnesites had no organic connection to the party's revolutionary past. They had come to the SWP during the period of its centrist degeneration and were recruited from the petty-bourgeois student milieu. Further, their first taste of power came during the RT fight when Dobbs seized control of the YSA, and Barnes, Sheppard and Camejo were dropped into the youth leadership. The Barnes clique certainly didn't learn Trotskyist politics—but Dobbs did give them the tools to "deal" with oppositionists.

### The Barnesite Conspiracy

Early on the Barnesites had a sense of us vs. them regarding the older SWP cadre who retained at least a



Young Socialist

Reform vs. revolution: SWP slid into reformism with social-patriotic "Bring Our Boys Home" campaign. SWP leader Fred Halstead, 1967 (left). Spartacist fought for victory for Vietnamese Revolution, 1966 (right).



AP

sentimental attachment to Trotskyism, albeit diluted. Joseph Hansen was the quintessential old-timer—he had been Trotsky's personal secretary from 1937-1940 and the living link between Cannon and Trotsky. An able polemicist, Hansen was the SWP's principal international spokesman during and after the 1963 reunification with the Pabloites (in this role he had earned the psychotic enmity of Gerry Healy who later waged an international slander campaign against Hansen as an "accomplice" to the assassination of Trotsky and an agent of the GPU, FBI, etc.). Hansen had a real base of support among the cadre he had trained on the staff of the SWP's journal, *Intercontinental Press*. So Barnes & Co. simply eased the older cadre out of power by shunting them into "advisory" status on the party's leading committees. By the mid-1970s, the Barnesites had secured control and the advisory bodies were dissolved. Later, the Barnesites would gloat over how easily and adroitly they eased out the old-timers. Mary-Alice Waters in a May 1985 report to the SWP NC enthused:

"Because of the strengths of the party leadership, we made it through the decade of the 1970s and into the 1980s before any section of older cadres tried to claim the mantle of age to justify refusal to be disciplined.... The split that came to a head in 1982-83 was, in part, a split we had prevented year after year throughout the 1970s as we made the transition.... When some individuals who left the party last year tried to turn it into an 'old timers' revolt, it was too late...."

—SWP Information Bulletin No. 2, June 1985,  
quoted in FIT's *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*  
No. 22, September 1985

Hansen's death in early 1979 was very convenient for the Barnes clique: it rid them of a formidable potential internal opponent at a time when their leadership was more than a little vulnerable to attack. Party membership was on the wane—the antiwar movement from which the SWP had recruited significantly had long since petered out. Barnes' forays into other areas had been a disaster. "Consistent feminism" hadn't led to socialism—instead the SWP experienced the hardly unforeseeable redbaiting of its fraction in the bourgeois-feminist National Organization for Women. The much-vaunted "turn" to industry fared no better—it recruited next to no workers while simultaneously driving out many of the petty-bourgeois recruits from the 1960s and 1970s.



Pathfinder Press

**Joseph Hansen:  
an honest  
revisionist.**

The Barnesite epigones moved into high gear in 1980: they were the "secret factionalists" and they certainly were part of a conspiracy. The FIT is right on that score. The inside story of the SWP in the early 1980s is certainly one of corridor gossip, the lining up of traitors, the marking of those who didn't sneer at Trotsky in private. The Barnes gang engaged in provocations designed to push the old cadre into opposition—Doug Jenness' *Militant* articles attacking Trotsky's analysis of the Russian Revolution are an example. When Breitman, Steve Bloom, Frank Lovell, Nat Weinstein and Lynn Henderson timidly voiced their objections, Barnes & Co. framed them up and blackjacked them with the 1965 organizational rules—for which incidentally Breitman, Lovell and Weinstein had all voted. Those now grouped in the FIT, SU and SA were the victims of a calculated purge—it is very difficult to believe that the enormous, fine-print "List of Splitters" in the January 1984 *Party Organizer* hadn't been drawn up long, long before. In classic Stalinist fashion, Barnes first purged, then submitted the planned line change to the remaining faithful hand-raisers.

### The Two-Tier Conception of Party Membership

After reading "Don't Strangle the Party" one would believe that in the period after Swabek's expulsion the SWP was virtually opposition free—until the Barnes gang



Workers Vanguard

**Bulletin**

—29 June 1976



**Despicable Healyites smear SWP leaders as agents of GPU and FBI, echo Stalinist lie that Trotsky was "killed by his own people." Spartacist League (left) combats "Security and the Fourth International" slander campaign.**

suddenly decided to junk Trotskyism in 1980. But this is far from the case. The RT expulsion had not rid the SWP of all leftist elements and at least some of the recruits gained after 1965 believed that the SWP had something to do with revolutionary socialism.

In the early 1970s a myriad of often overlapping oppositions arose in the SWP—the Proletarian Orientation Tendency (POT), the Leninist Faction (LF), the Communist Tendency, the Revolutionary Internationalist Tendency (RIT), the Internationalist Tendency (IT)—and none of them got the kid-gloves treatment reserved for old-time NCers like Arne Swabeck (see “Memories of a 1970s SWP Oppositionist,” page 30). All of these oppositions consisted for the most part of relatively newer members and they were viewed as unruly kids who were disloyal and didn’t belong in the party anyway.

Breitman and the FIT do not see the systematic brutalization of every SWP opposition after 1963. Implicit in both Cannon’s material and the Breitman introduction is the actual two-tier conception of party membership which operated in the SWP from 1960 to 1980. There was, in fact, one set of rules for those people with standing—those who had been around and on the NC for a while—and quite another set for the people who hadn’t. Among the mass of oppositions in the 1963 SWP the RT was singled out for expulsion because its fight for the historic revolutionary program of the SWP was an extreme embarrassment to Dobbs.

In 1974 the SWP expelled 115 members of the Internationalist Tendency from the party and the YSA—the largest “split” in the SWP since 1953. At the time, the SWP was embroiled in a desultory faction fight with the Mandel-led tendency in the USec. One of the hot issues was guerrilla warfare, one of the points of unity in 1963. The SWP had abandoned its brief pro-guerrilla enthralling in favor of abject social-democratic reformism, but Mandel remained a vicarious “guerrilla,” and the IT supported him.

The United States government, in the form of the House Internal Security Subcommittee, targeted Mandel’s USec and the IT in particular as “terrorists.” To the Barnesites this was the kiss of death for the IT. The SWP’s “Watersuit” against the U.S. imperialist spy agencies’ decades-long surveillance of the SWP was then under way and the last thing Barnes wanted was a clot inside the SWP tainted with the suggestion of “terrorism.” So the IT was declared to be a “separate rival party” by PC *diktat* and summarily expelled—on the Fourth of July 1974! The SWP’s own internal bulletins on the purge (including a list of ITers’ pseudonyms) showed up in court as the showpiece of the SWP’s attempt to demonstrate its “respectability” before the bourgeoisie. The significance of this patriotic purge was not lost on the federal judge:

“There was never anything, in my view, beyond the most tenuous suggestion of a possible implication of violence in the United States.... In view of the ouster of the minority faction, I believe that tenuous suggestion has been basically eliminated.”

The IT was offered up to the government by Barnes & Co. on the specious hope that the federal court would recognize the SWP’s right to practice its weird brand of reformism without the interference, infiltration and intrusion of the FBI. Years later the judge has yet to announce his verdict, but the verdict of history is clear: Barnes’ SWP is a party which the U.S. capitalist class has

truly no reason to fear.

In the “Watersuit” trial, the SWP underscored its vindictive hatred for the remnants of the leftist IT when, in 1981, it slandered ex-ITer Hedda Garza as a government fink, based on an FBI claim that Garza had met privately with a government attorney. The SWP aggressively retailed this disgraceful lie in the *Militant* and tried to silence the few who protested inside the SWP by making the ludicrous claim that “district attorneys don’t lie.” The Spartacist League protested this gratuitous slander of a socialist comrade in our detailed press coverage of the “Watersuit” (see especially “Reformism on Trial,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 286, 31 July 1981). Our press documented the SWP’s reformist assurances that the party’s legalism was in no way “contravened” by anything Lenin or Trotsky might have written, the suggestions that Nicaraguan pluralism or even American “checks and balances” rather than the Russian Revolution were the SWP’s model, the vicious slander of Garza solely because she used to sometimes hang around with USec leaders. We protested the violation of SWP members’ rights, facilitated by the panicky incompetence of the SWP, which in a touching display of faith in the government handed over party members’ names and international comrades’ pseudonyms, then turned around and in response to demands for financial information claimed the party had destroyed its own financial records. We wrote that the “Watersuit” fully displayed not only the SWP’s quirky reformist politics but the organizational consequences of having driven out of party influence the experienced cadres who, despite the political erosion, would still have known how to competently administer a legal case. The same lack was evident again in the SWP’s initial public non-response to the dangerous Gelfand suit (where a Healyite agent appealed to the government to intervene in the SWP’s internal life to restore him to membership), which the SWP treated like a guilty secret until the SL press exposed the Healyites’ organization-busting gambit and called for anti-sectarian support to the SWP against Gelfand.

Cannon’s 1966 speech refers to the SWP’s “capacity to attract the young” as a sign of its vitality. But from 1963 on, the SWP under Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry (and later

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under Barnes & Co.) systematically purged those youth who thought they were joining some kind of revolutionary Trotskyist party. The Spartacist League won some of these elements out of the RIT, LF and IT on the basis of the Trotskyist program for which it had fought since its inception as the RT. By 1980 all that was left of the revolutionary SWP was its initials—and those few old-timers whom Barnes expelled when he repudiated Trotskyism.

We wonder whether the concern Cannon expresses in his letter to Reba Hansen about “any possible proposal to weaken the constitutional provision about the absolute right of suspended or expelled members to appeal to the convention” reflected support to SWP PC member George Weissman’s fight to hear the RT’s appeal at the 1965 convention. Weissman’s motion to give the RT members time to present their case was only narrowly defeated by a vote of 32 to 24. In any case the attempt to uphold the RT’s formal rights to appeal in 1965 was a gesture. While every oppositional current in the SWP had opposed the expulsion, the majority of the cadre—including Weissman and Cannon—supported it. Weissman, who wrote a powerful protest against his own expulsion from the SWP, was a member of the FIT at the time of his death last year (see our obituary in *Workers Vanguard* No. 382, 28 June 1985).

Yet the letters and speech in “Don’t Strangle the Party” carry the clear implication that Cannon didn’t much like where the SWP was going in the mid-1960s. We mentioned earlier the rumored friction between Cannon and Dobbs. We have to say here that Dobbs and Tom Kerry, after groping around, *groomed* Barnes and his cohorts as their replacements. Breitman says nothing about that. Cannon’s last letters certainly strongly support our contention that the SWP’s renunciation of Trotskyism didn’t just fall from the skies in 1982. We recall that by the 1981 SWP

convention Tom Kerry was screaming in impotent rage at Barnes and his crew of hacks. How much did Kerry reflect the views of his former partner, Dobbs? It’s hard to tell. In a democratic party the disputes are all in the internal bulletins. In the bureaucratic post-1963 SWP the real stuff of party internal life happened behind the scenes.

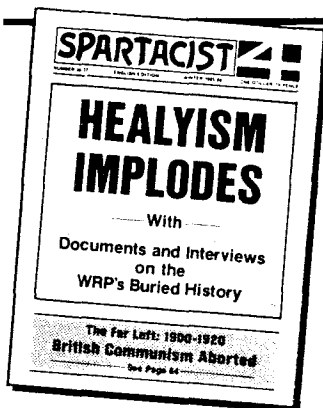
### FIT—Blinded by Centrism

After their expulsions, the veteran comrades of the ex-SWP milieu found themselves unceremoniously ejected from the party’s public events and slandered as “disrupters.” Indignant at being deprived of their democratic rights as members of the socialist public, by a party to which many had devoted decades of service, the FIT protested publicly, including claiming that this was the first time in the SWP’s history that people had been excluded from its “public” events because of their political views. Yet the FIT knows different. Indeed, in the mid-70s, FIT leader Frank Lovell had prevented the SWP San Francisco branch from excluding Spartacists from a Militant Forum. Informed that the exclusion of Spartacists was standard SWP policy, Lovell retorted that after all his years of addressing democratically organized public meetings he wasn’t about to start excluding people now. This defense of workers democracy should be a source of pride for Lovell and the FIT, but instead they are constrained to forget it since the incident points clearly to the decisive break in the SWP’s revolutionary continuity having occurred much earlier than the FIT is willing to look. The FIT’s view that Barnes’ party remained the revolutionary SWP until very lately in fact plays into the hands of currents among the ex-SWP oppositionists like Alan Wald, who uses atrocities of Barnes’ party over two decades to buttress his case that Trotskyism itself has failed and should be dumped in favor of regroupments with “state capitalist” formations.

## SPARTACIST

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George Lavan Weissman (left) and George Breitman (right), veteran Trotskyists expelled from SWP in 1984.

no credit

no credit

The omissions in Breitman's introduction are not the result of cynicism or willful disingenuousness. Breitman and the FIT literally can't see what happened to the SWP because they are blinded by their centrist politics. They long for a return to the SWP of the 1960s and 1970s, when their popular-frontist antiwar work garnered a wave of recruits and Joe Hansen wrote so beautifully, proving that the SWP's support to Castro was consistent with this or that Comintern resolution. To anyone who at the time doubted the SWP's attachment to Trotsky, the old-timers could proudly point to the party's efforts in collecting, editing and publishing Trotsky's and Cannon's writings.

Breitman certainly deserves central credit in that effort, the results of which today educationally arm the members of the Spartacist tendency. Yet it was Breitman himself who proposed dropping the SWP's designation as "Trotskyist" in a letter to the NC dated 6 April 1965:

"On the whole, the label 'Trotskyist' is a handicap, not an asset. To new people it gives the impression that we are some kind of cult, creating unnecessary obstacles to reaching them with our program, especially rebellious youth who are suspicious of cults."

This proposal was a resurrection of one made by Cannon in 1951, but Cannon scrapped it during the Cochran-Clarke fight when the *minority* came out with the slogan, "Junk the Old Trotskyism." Breitman was undoubtedly more comfortable with Cannon's 1951 rightist flinch than with other thoughts of Cannon. Cannon never excluded the possibility that the American workers would bypass a reformist labor party dominated by the conservative trade-union tops and come directly to revolutionary consciousness in the heat of struggle. Such an idea is literally inconceivable to both today's SWP and the FIT.

The FIT sees the crux of the problem in Barnes' supposedly "new" orientation to Castroism, beginning in 1979. As we have shown, the SWP's decisive adaptation to Castro began much earlier than that. But something did happen in 1979—the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua. This prompted Barnes to offer the idiotic thought that the SWP could make the big time internationally by cutting a deal with Managua. All that allegedly stood in the way was the old baggage of Trotskyism and its aged centrist supporters still in the SWP. And the Barnesites weren't part of the "old guard" who tacitly understood, however

wrongly, that the 1965 organizational rules wouldn't be used against *them*.

Breitman's failure to associate himself with a revolutionary program left him incapable of effectively combating the Barnesite epigones during his brief internal opposition, or even understanding his subsequent expulsion. His tragic end—kicked out of the party which he had loyally served for close to half a century—is reminiscent of others who, lacking a sufficient program, couldn't understand what hit them. Leopold Trepper, the heroic Polish Communist who led the Soviet intelligence network in Nazi-occupied Belgium and France during World War II, spoke movingly as one of the many who saw the flame of Bolshevik Revolution smothered by Stalin:

"Today, the Trotskyites have a right to accuse those who once howled along with the wolves. Let them not forget, however, that they had the enormous advantage over us of having a coherent political system capable of replacing Stalinism. They had something to cling to in the midst of their profound distress at seeing the revolution betrayed. They did not 'confess,' for they knew that their confession would serve neither the party nor socialism."

—*The Great Game*, 1977

Breitman noted that, in opposing disciplinary action against Swabeck, Cannon may have looked "a little farther ahead than most of the NC members." Cannon also foretold the possibility that the SWP would not be capable of meeting its revolutionary obligations:

"We know that our party, as at present constituted, is not ordained. We are human, and therefore capable of error and of failure. But if we fail; if we ossify into sectarianism, or degenerate along the lines of opportunism, or succumb to the pressures of our times and let history pass us by—it would simply mean that others, picking up the program and taking hold of the thread of Marxist continuity, would have to create another party of the same type as the SWP."

—"Concluding Speech at the May Plenum,"

31 May 1953

Cannon clung to the SWP through its degeneration, but the Revolutionary Tendency took hold of the thread of Marxist continuity, based on the heritage of Cannon and the revolutionary SWP. As opposed to the sentimental looking-back, with centrist blinders, of the FIT, we look forward with the confidence that we are the continuators of revolutionary Marxism in the United States, and internationally. ■

# “Don’t Strangle the Party”

*We reprint here in full the pamphlet “Don’t Strangle the Party,” published jointly by the Fourth Internationalist Tendency and Socialist Unity in February 1986. It contains*

*three letters and a talk by James P. Cannon, founding leader of American Trotskyism, and an introduction and footnotes by George Breitman.*

## Introduction

**By George Breitman**

On April 8, 1983, a membership meeting of the Bay Area District of the Socialist Workers Party (from branches in San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose) was held in San Jose to hear a report on the latest three in a series of expulsions being engineered by the SWP “central leadership team” headed by Jack Barnes. During the discussion period, Asher Harer, a veteran party member from San Francisco, made some comments about the newly-announced “organizational norm” prohibiting SWP members from communicating with members of other branches under pain of expulsion. Harer said that if James P. Cannon, the principal founder of the SWP, were alive today, he could not exist in the SWP. Cannon often communicated directly with members in other branches, on all sorts of questions, and Harer said he had a file of Cannon letters to prove it.

Harer was answered by Clifton DeBerry, a member of the national Control Commission, a former member of the National Committee, and a former presidential candidate, who said: “If James P. Cannon wrote such letters today, he would be expelled.” DeBerry added that the SWP is a “more disciplined” party today than in Cannon’s time. Some NC members who supported the new norms were also present, but none differentiated themselves from what DeBerry had said.

DeBerry’s remarks were not repeated in written form, then or later, but they were very revealing. For more than a year the SWP leadership had been accusing oppositionists in the NC of violating the party’s organizational principles (“norms”), which the leadership allegedly was trying to maintain and defend. And now DeBerry had blurted out the truth: Even the founder of the party would have been ousted as “undisciplined” if he had lived to 1983 and tried to function in accord with the organizational norms that prevailed in the party from its founding in 1938 to his death in 1974. Since these norms had never been changed in Cannon’s time, or later, they were being violated all right—not by the oppositionists but by the leadership itself, which was reinterpreting them and giving them a new content without ever formally discussing or formally changing them.

In the following year the SWP leadership expelled all known or suspected oppositionists, dissidents, or critics. The real reason they were expelled was that they had political differences with or doubts about the leadership’s new orientation toward Castroism and away from Trotskyism, and that the leadership was afraid to debate this orientation with them in front of the SWP membership. The ostensible reason given by the leadership was that

the expelled members had in various ways violated the party’s traditional organizational principles, especially the 1965 resolution on “The Organizational Character of the Socialist Workers Party.”

The present pamphlet consists of three letters and the text of a talk by Cannon in 1966 and 1967, which prove conclusively that Cannon did not share the current SWP leadership’s interpretation of the 1965 resolution. The real tradition of the SWP on democratic centralism is different than the present leadership makes it out to be. Like Trotsky, Cannon is a witness against the revisionist political and organizational policies of the Barnes group.

Cannon was 75 years old and living in Los Angeles in 1965. He was national chairman of the party but no longer responsible for its day-to-day activity, which was handled by the Political Committee and national secretary Farrell Dobbs from the party center in New York. When the PC decided to submit a resolution on organizational principles to the 1965 convention, it chose a committee of Dobbs, George Novack, and Cannon to prepare a draft. Dobbs wrote it and Novack edited it. A copy was sent to Cannon, who sent it back without comment. He thought the draft was poorly written and too ambiguous on certain key points, but did not undertake to amend or redraft it. He did not attend the 1965 convention, which adopted the resolution by a vote of 51 to 8.

In 1968 Cannon discontinued direct correspondence with the party center in New York. But before that happened, he wrote and said some things in 1966 and 1967 which showed that he disagreed with PC members who were interpreting the 1965 resolution as a signal to “tighten” or “centralize” the party, which he believed could only damage it, perhaps fatally.

### 1. Don’t Try to Enforce a Nonexistent Law

Cannon’s letter of February 8, 1966, had the following background: Arne Swabeck, a party founder and NC member, had been trying for seven years to convert the SWP from Trotskyism to Maoism. Despite repeated efforts before and during SWP national conventions in 1959, 1961, 1963, and 1965, his small group made little headway among the members. Increasingly he and his group began to ignore the normal channels for discussion in the party, and to communicate their ideas to selected members by mail. This led to demands by Larry Trainor, an NC member in Boston, for disciplinary action against Swabeck and his ally in the NC, Richard Fraser. Through a circular letter for the PC Tom Kerry announced that the matter would be taken up at a plenum of the NC to be held at the end of February.

Cannon's letter was addressed to the supporters of the NC majority tendency (which excluded the supporters of the Swabek and Fraser-Clara Kaye tendencies, etc.). Cannon tried to convince the majority that political discussion and education were the answer to the minority tendencies, not disciplinary action. "There is absolutely *no party law or precedent for such action*," he said, "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*.... It would be too bad if the SWP suddenly decided to get tougher than the Communist Party [of the 1920s] and try to enforce *a nonexistent law*—which can't be enforced without creating all kinds of discontent and disruption." (Emphasis added)

This was written five months after the adoption of the 1965 resolution. It demonstrates that Cannon saw nothing in that resolution that could be cited as "party law or precedent" for the kind of disciplinary action taken by the Barnes leadership in the 1980s.

The February 1966 meeting of the NC found Cannon's arguments convincing. They did not want to conduct, for "the first time" in the party's history, the experiment of trying to enforce "a nonexistent law." So the whole question was dropped—until after Cannon's death.

## 2. Reasons for the Survival of the SWP and for Its New Vitality in the 1960s

Cannon's September 6, 1966, talk was one of "my last speeches before I fell into retirement, so to speak," he said shortly before his death. It was given to a Labor Day weekend educational conference at a camp near San Francisco, and it was obviously intended primarily for members of the SWP and YSA, rather than for the general public. The form of this talk was that of a discussion about the history of the SWP and the FI, which Cannon used to express his thinking about the problems facing the SWP in 1966, its strengths and weaknesses, the pressures it was feeling, and the lessons from the past that it could learn for the present and the future. Although the talk was couched mainly in historical terms, experienced listeners understood that Cannon was saying, "I think we have some serious problems now and we'd better think about how to handle them." The SWP leadership never printed this talk (which was transcribed from a taped recording and edited by Evelyn Sell 18 years later, after her expulsion from the SWP as an oppositionist, and was printed in the *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, No. 14, December 1984).

Cannon's main concern here was that some SWP and YSA leaders were not sufficiently resisting and opposing the harmful influences of the "New Left" to which they were subjected in the antiwar and student movements. Some "younger comrades," he said quite openly, gave him the impression that they had not fully assimilated the cardinal principle of internationalism. His stress on the SWP as "revolutionary continuators" was directed not only against the New Left but against those in the SWP and YSA who disregarded this factor or thought it insignificant. His demand for polemics with opponent tendencies ("the mark of a revolutionary party") stemmed from his conviction that there was a reluctance among SWP and YSA leaders to openly explain their differences with the New Left. Similarly with most of the talk—it was not just a criticism of the New Left but of party and YSA members

who he thought were defaulting on the theoretical and educational struggle against New Leftism.

But Cannon did not fail also to raise the questions about party democracy that had been on his mind during the previous two or more years. He began by touching on the "flexible democracy" that had enabled the party to survive historically: "We never tried to settle differences of opinion by suppression. Free discussion—not every day in the week but at stated regular times, with full guarantees for the minority—is a necessary condition for the health and strength of an organization such as ours." It never occurred to him to add that any of this had been superseded by the 1965 resolution.

Continuing, he noted that factionalism can get out of hand or become unprincipled. "But on the other hand," he said, "if a party can live year after year without any factional disturbances, it may not be a sign of *health*—it may be a sign that the party's *asleep*; that it's not a real live party. In a live party you have differences, differences of appraisal, and so on. But that's a sign of life." The present SWP leaders hardly ever say things like that any more; and even when they do, they mean something different than Cannon meant.

## 3. A Trend in the Wrong Direction

In 1966 some SWP members raised the question of codifying parts of the 1965 resolution through amendments to the party's constitution at the next national convention. A PC-appointed constitution committee (Reba Hansen, Harry Ring, Jean Simon [Tussey]) began, in consultation with national organization secretary Ed Shaw, to consider proposed changes for the constitution, including one to alter the way the national Control Commission was elected and functioned.

In his response (reprinted from *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, No. 8, June 1984), Cannon was quite disturbed by this proposal, especially because he saw it as part of a dangerous trend: "As far as I can see all the new moves and proposals to monkey with the Constitution which has served the party so well in the past, with the aim of 'tightening' centralization, represent a trend in the wrong direction at the present time. The party (and the YSA) is too 'tight' already, and if we go much further along this line we can run the risk of strangling the party to death."

Most of Cannon's letter was an explanation of why the party would be better off if the Control Commission remained an "independent" or "separate" body elected by the national convention as a whole than it would be as a mere subcommittee of the NC. But he also seized the opportunity to assert the necessity to "practice what we preach" about existing constitutional provisions "to protect every party member against possible abuse of authority by the National Committee." There was nothing ambiguous about his position:

"In the present political climate and with the present changing composition of the party, democratic centralism must be applied flexibly. At least ninety percent of the emphasis should be placed on the democratic side and not on any crackpot schemes to 'streamline' the party to the point where questions are unwelcomed and criticism and discussion stifled. That is a prescription to kill the party...."

Cannon clearly did not feel that the 1965 resolution justified or authorized the kind of undemocratic changes

that the “centralizing” Barnes leadership made in the name of the 1965 document in the 1970s and 1980s. Cannon’s letter was effective—none of the proposals he warned against were recommended by the constitution committee or adopted at the 1967 convention.

#### 4. The SWP’s Great Tradition

The Arne Swabeck case came up again in 1967, when both an SWP national convention and an FI world congress were scheduled. By then Swabeck had lost all hope in the SWP and the FI. Instead of trying once more to convince their members, he publicly attacked the SWP’s policies in a letter to a hostile political group in England (the Healyites). For this deliberate violation of discipline, the PC asked the NC to suspend him from membership pending the coming convention.

Cannon had no sympathy whatever for Swabeck’s politics or organizational practices, but he felt it would be “awkward” to begin the preconvention and pre-world congress discussions by suspending the one articulate critic of the party’s positions and actions. He therefore urged that Swabeck’s provocations be handled by publishing Swabeck’s letters together with a comprehensive political answer to them. This “subordination of disciplinary measures to the bigger aims of political education”—which he called a continuation of the party’s great tradition—had always served the party well in the past, he argued, and in the Swabeck case would “better serve the education of the new generation of the party and the consolidation of party opinion” than would the proposed suspension.

Most members of the NC disagreed with Cannon. They felt Swabeck’s violation of discipline was too flagrant to be ignored, and they felt that he already had been answered politically over and over again, so that disciplinary action in this case would not represent any rupture with the SWP’s great tradition. The NC suspended Swabeck, who continued to attack the SWP publicly, and soon after he was expelled. The differences in this case between the NC majority and Cannon were tactical, and it is possible to see the logic and merits in both their positions. But perhaps Cannon was looking a little farther ahead than most of the NC members.

Swabeck had so discredited himself, Cannon told the PC, that the immediate effect of the party’s reaction to the new provocation would not be very great whether he was suspended or not. “But the long range effect on the political education of the party, and its preparation to cope with old problems in new forms, can be very great indeed.” It is clear from this that Cannon was concerned with something

bigger than the fate of Swabeck; that he was trying to alert the party to dangers that transcended the issue of whether or not to suspend Swabeck prior to the convention; that he feared mistakes on this issue could have damaging long range effects on the party, its political education, and its ability to fulfill its revolutionary mission.

The Swabeck case was soon forgotten, but the dangers that worried Cannon are worth recalling today, after the SWP leadership, in a brutal break with the party’s tradition of subordinating disciplinary measures to political discussion and clarification, expelled and in other ways drove out any and all members who were suspected of having oppositional views (whether they were articulate or not). The SWP leadership “justified” this purge by accusing the expellees of being disrupters and splitters who, “like Swabeck,” were outside the party only because of their own indiscipline and disloyalty. But everybody in the SWP knows that most of the expellees fought to remain in the party, unlike Swabeck, and are still fighting to be reinstated, also unlike Swabeck. Most members of the FI know this, too, because at their world congress in February 1985, they voted overwhelmingly to demand the reinstatement of the purged members. The fight for the SWP’s tradition continues, but the SWP leadership is fighting on the other side.

In May 1983, a month after the Harer-DeBerry exchange in San Jose, the NC held a plenum in New York where oppositionists contrasted Cannon’s positions on democratic centralism with those of the Barnes group. Barnes finally took the floor and said, “It looks as though we are going to have to rescue Cannon from these people the same way we rescued Trotsky from the sectarians.” Barnes had “rescued” Trotsky at a YSA convention on December 31, 1982, in a talk entitled “Their Trotsky and Ours” (*New International*, Fall 1983). It was rather a unique kind of rescue since in this talk Barnes tried to demolish Trotsky and most of his work as sectarian and harmful. A similar “rescue” of Cannon would mean a wholesale re-evaluation of his work and his place in the history of the SWP and the FI. Even as Barnes uttered this promise or threat, a dossier was being compiled that would “prove” Cannon had been a “Stalinophobe” in the 1930s and 1940s, etc. Whether or not such material will be published, it stands to reason that the Barnes group will have to differentiate itself from Cannon and Cannonism more and more as it proceeds further away from them politically and organizationally. The antidote includes an objective reading of Cannon’s writings, of which there are fortunately many in print.

May 1985

## Don’t Try to Enforce a Nonexistent Law

February 8, 1966  
For NC Majority Only  
To the Secretariat

Dear Comrades:

I feel rather uneasy about the circular letter from Tom [Kerry] dated Jan. 28, enclosing a copy of Larry T[rainor]’s

letter of Jan. 15 and Arne [Swabeck]’s letter of January 7 addressed to Larry and his letter of Dec. 14 addressed to Rosemary and Doug [Gordon], and also the circular of Al A. announcing his decision to join the PLP [Progressive Labor Party] (which I had already seen locally).

The Swabeck letter and the [Clara] Kaye document, which I had previously received, make serious criticisms of

the party and youth actions at the Washington Thanksgiving Conference,<sup>1</sup> 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. 15 suggesting disciplinary action, and Tom's letter of Jan. 28 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 [Richard Fraser] 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.

\* \* \*

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 assorted 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 [Grandizo] Munis blasted our conduct at the trial as lacking in "proud valor," capitulating to legalism, and all

<sup>1</sup> An antiwar convention and demonstration at the White House were held in Washington, D.C., Nov. 25-28, 1965, under the sponsorship of the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam. The convention was marked by heated controversy between radical and liberal forces, which led to disputes over antiwar policy inside the SWP. Cannon's views about the conference, given in a December 1965 speech in Los Angeles, were published in *International Socialist Review*, October 1974, and reprinted in the Education for Socialists Bulletin, "Revolutionary Strategy in the Antiwar Movement," April 1975, pp. 12-17.

<sup>2</sup> In *Defense of Marxism* by Leon Trotsky and *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* by Cannon (Pathfinder Press, 1973 and 1972) answer the positions of the minority group in the SWP, led by Max Shachtman, Martin Abern and James Burnham, which split away in 1940 after a bitter factional struggle.

other crimes and dirty tricks. I answered Munis by taking up his criticisms point by point and answering them without equivocation or evasion. Munis's 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> The circumstances surrounding these speeches have 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 [Mike] Bartell and Manny Trbovitch 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. 28.

Fraternally,  
James P. Cannon

## Reasons for the Survival of the SWP and for Its New Vitality in the 1960s

[September 6, 1966]

The party that we represent here had its origin 38 years ago next month when I and Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, all members of the National Committee of the Communist Party, were expelled because we insisted upon supporting Trotsky and the Russian Opposition in the international discussion. It seems remarkable, in view of the death rate of organizations that we have noted over the years, that this party still shows signs of youth. That is the hallmark of a living movement: its capacity to attract the young. Many attempts at creating different kinds of radical organizations have foundered, withered away, over that problem. The old-timers stuck around but new blood

didn't come in. The organizations, one by one, either died or just withered away on the vine (which is probably a worse fate than death).

In my opinion, there are certain reasons for the survival of our movement and for the indications of a new surge of

<sup>3</sup> Pathfinder Press's 1973 edition of *Socialism on Trial*, Cannon's testimony at the 1941 Minneapolis trial, also contains "Defense Policy in the Minneapolis Trial" as an appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Cannon's two speeches at the SWP NC plenum in February 1948, analyzing the new Progressive Party led by Henry Wallace and proposing that the SWP run its first presidential campaign that year, are reprinted in the *Education for Socialists Bulletin*, "Aspects of Socialist Election Policy," March 1971, pp. 21-34.

vitality in it. I'll enumerate some of the more important reasons which account for this.

### Internationalism and the SWP

First of all, and above all, we recognized 38 years ago that in the modern world it is impossible to organize a revolutionary party in one country. All the problems of the different nations of the world are so intertwined today that they cannot be solved with a national policy alone. The latest to experience the truth of that dictum is Lyndon B. Johnson. He's trying to solve the problems of American foreign policy with Texas-style arm-twisting politics. It does not work. We decided we would be internationalists first, last, and all the time, and that we would not try to build a purely American party with American ideas—because American ideas are very scarce in the realm of creative politics. By becoming part of an international movement, and thereby participating in international *collaboration*, and getting the benefit of the ideas and experiences of others in other countries—as well as contributing our ideas to them—that we would have a better chance to create a viable revolutionary movement in this country.

I think that holds true today more than ever. A party that is not internationalist is out of date very sadly and is doomed utterly. I don't know if our younger comrades have fully assimilated that basic, fundamental first idea or not. I have the impression at times that they understand it rather perfunctorily, take it for granted, rather than understand it in its essence: that internationalism means, above all, *international collaboration*. The affairs, the difficulties, the disputes of every party in the Fourth International must be our concern—as our problems must be their concern. It's not only our right but our *duty* to participate in all the discussions that arise throughout the International, as well as it is their right and their duty to take part in our discussions and disputes.

### Our Revolutionary Continuity

The second reason that I would give for the durability of this party of ours is the fact that we did not pretend to have a new revelation. We were not these "men from nowhere" whom you see running around the campuses and other places today saying, "We've got to start from scratch. Everything that happened in the past is out the window." On the contrary, we solemnly based ourselves on the *continuity* of the revolutionary movement. On being expelled from the Communist Party, we did not become anticommunist. On the contrary, we said we are the true representatives of the best traditions of the Communist Party. If you read current literature, you'll see that we are the only ones who defend the first ten years of American communism. The official leaders of the Communist Party don't want to talk about it at all. Yet those were ten rich and fruitful years which we had *behind us* when we started the Trotskyist movement in this country. Before that, some of us had about ten years of experience in the IWW and Socialist Party, and in various class struggle activities around the country. We said that we were the heirs of the IWW and the Socialist Party—all that was good and valid and revolutionary in them. We honor the Knights of Labor

and the Haymarket martyrs. We're not Johnny-come-latelys at all. We're *continuator*s.

We even go back further than that. We go back to the "Communist Manifesto" of 1848, and to Marx and Engels, the authors of that document, and their other writings. We go back to the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917. We go back to Lenin and Trotsky, and to the struggle of the Left Opposition in the Russian Soviet party and in the Comintern.

We said, "We are the *continuator*s." And we really were. We were in dead earnest about it and we were very active from the very beginning. This is one of the marks of a group, however small, that has confidence in itself. We engaged in polemics against all other pretenders to leadership of the American working class: first of all the Stalinists, and the reformist Social Democrats, and the labor skates, and anybody else who had some quack medicine to cure the troubles of working people. Polemics are the mark of a revolutionary party. A party that is "too nice" to engage in what some call "bickering," "criticizing," is too damn nice to live very long in the whirlpool of politics.

Politics is even worse than baseball, in that respect. Leo Durocher, who had a bad reputation but who carried the New York Giants to a championship of the National League and then to the world championship over the Cleveland Indians, explained this fact in the title of an article he wrote, "Nice Guys Finish Last." That's true in politics as well as in baseball.

If we disagree with other people, we have to say so! We have to make it clear *why* we disagree so that inquiring young people, looking for an organization to represent their aspirations and ideals, will know the difference between one party and another. Nothing is worse than muddying up differences when they concern fundamental questions.

### Working Class Orientation

Another reason for the survival of our movement through the early hard period was our *orientation*. Being Marxists, our orientation was always toward the working class and to the working class organizations. It never entered our minds in those days to think you could overthrow capitalism over the head of the working class. Marxism had taught us that the great service capitalism has rendered to humanity has been to increase the productivity of society and, at the same time, to create a working class which would have the interest and the power to overthrow capitalism. In creating this million-headed wage-working class, Marx said: capitalism has created its own gravediggers. We saw it as the task of revolutionists to orient our activity, our agitation, and our propaganda to the working class of this country.

### Putting Theory into Action

Another reason for our exceptional durability was that we did not merely study the books and learn the formulas. Many people have done that—and that's all they've done, and they might as well have stayed home. Trotsky remarked more than once, in the early days, about some people who play with ideas in our international movement.

He said: they have understood all the formulas and they can repeat them by rote, but they haven't got them in their flesh and blood, so it doesn't count. When you get the formulas of Marxism in your flesh and blood that means you have an *irresistible* impulse and drive to *put theory into action*.

As Engels said to the sectarian socialists in the United States in the nineteenth century: our theory is not a dogma but a guide to action. One who studies the theory of Marxism and doesn't do anything to try to put it into action among the working class might as well have stayed in bed. We were not that type. We came out of the experiences of the past, but we were activists as well as students of Marxism.

### The Capacity to Learn

One more reason for our survival: one factor working in our favor was our *modesty*. Modesty is the precondition for learning. If you know it all to start with, you can't learn any more. We were brought to the painful realization in 1928 that there were a lot of things we didn't know—after all of our experiences and study. New problems and new complications which had arisen in the Soviet Union and in the international movement required that we *go to school again*. And to go to school with the best teachers: the leaders of the Russian Revolution. After twenty years of experience in the American movement and in the Comintern, we put ourselves to school and tried to learn from the great leaders who had made the only successful revolution in the history of the working class.

We had to learn, also, how to *think*—and to take time to think. We believed in a party of disciplined action but disciplined activity alone does not characterize only the revolutionist. Other groups, such as the fascists, have that quality. The Stalinists have disciplined action. Disciplined action directed by clear thinking distinguishes the revolutionary Marxist party. Thinking is a form of action. In the early days of our movement we had a great deal of discussion—not all of it pleasant to hear, but out of which came some clarification. We had to learn to be patient and listen and, out of the discussion, to formulate our policy and our program.

Those were the qualities of our movement in the first years of our almost total isolation that enabled us to survive. We had confidence in the American working class and we oriented toward it. When the American working class began to move in the mid-thirties, we had formulated our program of action, and we were in the midst of the class, and we began to grow—in some years, we grew rather rapidly.

### Internal Democracy Within the SWP

Not the least of our reasons for remaining alive for 38 years, and growing a little, and now being in a position to capitalize on new opportunities, was the flexible democracy of our party. We never tried to settle differences of opinion by suppression. Free discussion—not every day in the week but at stated regular times, with full guarantees for the minority—is a necessary condition for the health and strength of an organization such as ours.

There's no guarantee that factionalism won't get out of

hand. I don't want to be an advocate of factionalism—unless anybody picks on me and runs the party the wrong way and doesn't want to give me a chance to protest about it! The general experience of the international movement has shown that excesses of factionalism can be very dangerous and destructive to a party. In my book, *The First Ten Years of American Communism*,<sup>5</sup> I put all the necessary emphasis on the negative side of the factional struggles which became unprincipled. But on the other hand, if a party can live year after year without any factional disturbances, it may not be a sign of *health*—it may be a sign that the party's *asleep*; that it's not a real live party. In a live party, you have differences, differences of appraisal, and so on. But that's a sign of life.

### The New Left of the 1960s

You have now a new phenomenon in the American radical movement which I hear is called "The New Left." This is a broad title given to an assemblage of people who state they don't like the situation the way it is and something ought to be done about it—but we musn't take anything from the experiences of the past; nothing from the "Old Left" or any of its ideas or traditions are any good. What's the future going to be? "Well, that's not so clear either. Let's think about that." What do you do now? "I don't know. Something ought to be done." That's a fair description of this amorphous New Left which is written about so much and with which we have to contend.

We know where we come from. We intend to maintain our continuity. We know that we are part of the world, and that we have to belong to an international movement and get the benefits of association and discussion with cothinkers throughout the world. We have a definite orientation whereas the New Left says the working class is dead. The working class was crossed off by the wiseacres in the twenties. There was a long boom in the 1920s. The workers not only didn't gain any victories, they lost ground. The trade unions actually declined in number. In all the basic industries, where you now see great flourishing industrial unions—the auto workers, aircraft, steel, rubber, electrical, transportation, maritime—the unions did not exist, just a scattering here and there. There were company unions in all these big basic industries, run by the bosses' stooges. The workers were entitled to belong to these company unions as long as they did what the stooges told them to do. It took a semi-revolutionary uprising in the mid-thirties to break that up and install real unions.

There were a lot of wiseacres who crossed off the American working class and said, "That's Marx's fundamental mistake. He thinks the working class can make a revolution and emancipate itself. And he's dead wrong! Just look at them!" They didn't say who would make the revolution if the workers didn't do it—just like the New Leftists today don't give us any precise description of what power will transform society.

People who said such things in the 1920s were proved to be wrong, and those who say the same things about the working class today will be proved to be wrong. We will maintain our orientation toward the working class and to

<sup>5</sup> Reprinted by Pathfinder Press, 1973.



its organized section in particular. I hope that our party and our youth movement will not only continue but will intensify and develop its capacity for polemics against all pretenders to leadership of the coming radicalization of the American workers.

Above all, I hope our party and our youth movement will continue to learn and to grow. That's the condition for survival as a revolutionary party. I don't merely get impatient with Johnny-come-latelys who just arrived from nowhere and announce that they know it all, I get impatient even with old-timers who think they have nothing more to learn. The world is changing. New problems arise, new complexities, new complications confront the revolutionary movement at every step. The condition for effective political leadership is that the leaders themselves continue to learn and to grow. That means: not to lose their modesty altogether.

### The Importance of the Individual

I'd like to add one more point. The question is raised very often, "What can one person do?" The urgency of the situation in the world is pretty widely recognized outside of our ranks. The urgency of the whole social problem has been magnified a million times by the development of nuclear weapons, and by the capacity of these inventions

and discoveries to destroy all life on earth. Not merely a single city like Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but capable of destroying all life on earth. And it's in the hands of reckless and irresponsible people. It's got to be taken away from them, and it cannot be done otherwise except by revolution.

What can one single person do in this terribly urgent situation? I heard a program on television a short while ago: an interview with Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, former pacifist, fighter against nuclear war. He's not a revolutionary Marxist but is an absolutely dedicated opponent of nuclear war and a prophet of the calamity such a war will bring. He was asked, "What are the chances, in your opinion, of preventing a nuclear war that might destroy all life on earth?" He said, "The odds are four-to-six against us." He was then asked, "How would you raise the odds of being able to prevent a nuclear war?" He answered, "I don't know anything to do except keep on fighting to try to change the odds."

Now suppose as a result of all the protests and the activity of ourselves and other people, we change the odds to fifty-fifty. Then you have a scale, evenly balanced, where just a feather can tip it one way or another. If a situation such as that exists—which, in my opinion, is just about the state of affairs in the world today—one person's activity in the revolutionary movement might make the difference.

## A Trend in the Wrong Direction

Copies to:  
Ed Shaw, New York  
Jean Simon, Cleveland

November 12, 1966

Reba Hansen  
New York, N.Y.

Dear Reba:

This answers your letter of November 2 with which you enclosed a copy of Jean Simon's letter of October 12. I was surprised and concerned by Jean's proposals to change the constitutional provisions providing for an independent Control Commission elected by the convention, and making it a mere subcommittee of the NC, which would mean in effect a subcommittee of the PC. This would be the *de facto* liquidation of the Control Commission as it was originally conceived.

As far as I can see all the new moves and proposals to monkey with the Constitution which has served the party so well in the past, with the aim of "tightening" centralization, represent a trend in the wrong direction at the present time. The party (and the YSA) is too "tight" already, and if we go much further along this line we can run the risk of strangling the party to death.

\* \* \*

As I recall it, the proposal to establish a Control Commission, separately elected by the convention, originated at the Plenum and Active Workers' Conference in the fall of 1940, following the assassination of the Old Man. The assassin, as you will recall, gained access to the

household in Coyoacan through his relations with a party member.<sup>6</sup> The Political Committee was then, as it always will be if it functions properly, too busy with political and organizational problems to take time for investigations and security checks on individuals.

It was agreed that we need a special body to take care of this work, to investigate rumors and charges and present its findings and recommendations to the National Committee.

If party security was one side of the functions of the Control Commission, the other side—no less important—was to provide the maximum assurance that any individual party member, accused or rumored to be unworthy of party membership, could be assured of the fullest investigation and a fair hearing or trial. It was thought that this double purpose could best be served by a body separately elected by the convention, and composed of members of long standing, especially respected by the party for their fairness as well as their devotion.

I can recall instances where the Control Commission served the party well in both aspects of this dual function. In one case a member of the Seamen's fraction was expelled by the Los Angeles Branch after charges were brought against him by two members of the National Committee of that time. The expelled member appealed to the National Committee and the case was turned over to the Control Commission for investigation. The Control Commission, on which as I recall Dobbs was then the PC representative,

<sup>6</sup> Leon Trotsky, "the Old Man," was assassinated in Mexico in August 1940 by an agent of the Soviet secret police who pretended to be a sympathizer of the Fourth International.

investigated the whole case, found that the charges lacked substantial proof and recommended the reinstatement of the expelled member. This was done.

In another case, a rumor circulated by the Shachtmanites and others outside the party against the integrity of a National Office secretarial worker was thoroughly investigated by the Control Commission which, after taking stenographic testimony from all available sources, declared the rumors unfounded and cleared the accused party member to continue her work. There were other cases in which charges were found after investigation to be substantiated and appropriate action recommended.

All these experiences speak convincingly of the need for a separate Control Commission of highly respected comrades to make thorough investigations of every case, without being influenced by personal or partisan prejudice, or pressure from any source, and whose sole function is to examine each case from all sides fairly and justly and report its findings and recommendations. This is the best way, not only to protect the security of the party, but also to respect the rights of the accused in every case.

As far as I know, the only criticism that can properly be made of the Control Commission in recent times is that it has not always functioned in this way with all its members participating, either by presence or correspondence, in all proceedings—and convincing the party that its investigation was thorough and that its findings and recommendations were fair and just.

\* \* \*

It should be pointed out also that the idea of a Control Commission separately constituted by the convention didn't really originate with us. Like almost everything else we know about the party organizational principles and functions, it came from the Russian Bolsheviks. The Russian party had a separate Control Commission. It might also be pointed out that after the revolution the new government established courts. It provided also for independent trade unions which, as Lenin pointed out in one of the controversies, had the duty even to defend the rights of its members against the government. Of course, all that was changed later when all power was concentrated in the party secretariat, and all the presumably independent institutions were converted into rubber stamps. But we don't want to move in that direction. The

forms and methods of the Lenin-Trotsky time are a better guide for us.

\* \* \*

I am particularly concerned about any possible proposal to weaken the constitutional provision about the absolute right of suspended or expelled members to appeal to the convention. That is clearly and plainly a provision to protect every party member against possible abuse of authority by the National Committee. It should not be abrogated or diluted just to show that we are so damn revolutionary that we make no concessions to "bourgeois concepts of checks and balances." The well-known Bill of Rights is a check and balance which I hope will be incorporated, in large part at least, in the Constitution of the Workers Republic in this country. Our constitutional provision for the right of appeal is also a "check and balance." It can help to recommend our party to revolutionary workers as a genuinely democratic organization which guarantees rights as well as imposing responsibilities, and thus make it more appealing to them.

I believe that these considerations have more weight now than ever before in the 38-year history of our party. In the present political climate and with the present changing composition of the party, democratic centralism must be applied flexibly. At least ninety percent of the emphasis should be placed on the democratic side and not on any crackpot schemes to "streamline" the party to the point where questions are unwelcomed and criticism and discussion stifled. That is a prescription to kill the party before it gets a chance to show how it can handle and assimilate an expanding membership of new young people, who don't know it all to start with, but have to learn and grow in the course of explication and discussion in a free, democratic atmosphere.

Trotsky once remarked in a polemic against Stalinism that even in the period of the Civil War discussion in the party was "boiling like a spring." Those words and others like it written by Trotsky, in his first attack against Stalinism in *The New Course*, ought to be explained now once again to the new young recruits in our party. And the best way to explain such decisive things is to practice what we preach.

Yours fraternally,  
James P. Cannon

## The SWP's Great Tradition

June 27, 1967  
To the Political Committee  
New York, New York

Dear Comrades:

I am opposed to the motion adopted by the Political Committee recommending the immediate suspension of Comrade Swabeck.

As you have been previously informed, I favor a different approach to the problem raised by Swabeck's letter to

[Gerry] Healy. I explained my views to Art Sharon during his brief visit here, and I presume that he communicated it to you. Also, Joel [Britton] showed me a copy of his letter to the National Office in which he reported the discussion which took place at a meeting of the NC members here.

I consider it rather unfortunate that these divergent views were not incorporated in the PC minutes of the meeting which decided to recommend the suspension of Swabeck—so that the other members of the National Committee would have a chance to consider and discuss

them before casting their vote on the ballot sent to them together with the PC minutes.

My approach to the problem can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Since Swabeck's letter to Healy deals with two questions of great world importance—Chinese developments and our policy and tactics in the struggle against the Vietnam War—which are now properly up for discussion in the international movement as well as in our party, any action of a disciplinary nature which we may propose should be closely coordinated with international comrades, particularly the comrades in England, and carried out in agreement with them.

2. Since we are just now opening up our preconvention discussion, where the questions raised by Swabeck will properly have their place on the agenda, it would be rather awkward to begin the discussion by suspending the one articulate critic of the party's positions and actions. A more effective procedure, in my opinion, should be simply to publish Swabeck's letters (to Healy and Dobbs) with comprehensive and detailed answers.

If past experience is any guide, the education of the new generations of the party and the consolidation of party opinion would be better served by this procedure. Examples in favor of this subordination of disciplinary

measures to the bigger aims of political education have been richly documented in the published records of the fight against the petty-bourgeois opposition in 1939-40, and in the internal discussion bulletins dealing with the Goldman-Morrow affair in 1944-5-6.<sup>7</sup>

3. In the course of discussion, during a number of years of opposition to party policy, Swabeck has managed to isolate himself to the point where the immediate effect of the party's reaction to this new provocation will not be very great one way or the other. But the long range effect on the political education of the party, and its preparation to cope with old problems in new forms, can be very great indeed.

It is most important that our party members, and the international movement, see the leadership once again in continuation of its great tradition—acting with cool deliberation to serve our larger political aims without personal favoritism or hostility.

Fraternally,  
James P. Cannon

<sup>7</sup> Cannon's letters and speeches about the oppositional group in the SWP led by Felix Morrow and Albert Goldman are printed in his books *Letters from Prison* and *The Struggle for Socialism in the "American Century"* (Pathfinder Press, 1973 and 1977).

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# Memories of a 1960s SWP Oppositionist

While preparing our review of "Don't Strangle the Party," the Spartacist Editorial Board received the following letter from comrade Al Nelson, who was a young member of the Revolutionary Tendency (RT) of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Comrade Nelson's letter has been edited for publication.

When I joined the SWP in February 1962 the New York organizer, Carl Feingold, cautioned me that I had a "major difference" with the SWP (the nature of the Cuban Revolution) and that of course I would not be expected to speak in public or do other work where Cuba was involved. This projected RT supporters as second-class members and implied an inability to abide by discipline. The SWP soon moved to keep known RT supporters in the youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), out of the SWP. When Dave K. was kept out of the SWP, the reason cited was that he was not "active enough." Jim Robertson, a leader of the RT, was a member of the New York local Executive Committee later in 1962 and he objected to this policy.

When I joined the YSA in the fall of 1961 there was a general policy of social ostracism toward minority supporters that extended to brand-new YSA members, who were lined up against the minority immediately—they were warned to avoid us. The leadership, especially the more factionally-crazed New York YSA leadership, tried as much as possible to prevent RT members from working in public arenas. We were criticized as "free agents" when we took part in pickets or demonstrations without "consultation" with the branch leadership. RT supporter Roger A. was eventually expelled in February 1964 for taking part in picketing the Greek Queen because, in so doing, he "consciously and arrogantly violate[d] party discipline." Shirley Stoute, a black RT member, was forbidden to work in the civil rights movement in the South in the summer of 1962. She then received a personal invitation from SNCC leader James Forman, which the SWP could not refuse. Shirley and Steve Fox went to the South, followed by Pete Camejo and Ken Schulman specifically to spy on Shirley and report back to New York.

Shirley was eventually told to return to New York for a YSA National Committee (NC) plenum in September 1962. Then she was told that she *could not* return to the South and was under discipline not to reveal the reasons why to SNCC! She was merely to send for her belongings.

On 28 January 1963, in an obvious factional provocation, two young members of the majority "raided" a private RT discussion meeting. I made an informal protest the next day to the National Organization Secretary Tom Kerry, who seemed surprised. But the PC decided to cover for Carl Feingold, who had engineered the raid, and on 2 February 1963 passed a motion by Dobbs and Kerry endorsing Kerry's statement at the New York branch meeting that the RT was violating party discussion procedures by having meetings at all before the formal pre-conference discussion period. Thus the majority leadership eliminated the distinction between *private* and *party* discussion. In response we wrote, "For the Right of Organized Tendencies to Exist Within the Party."

Wohlforth published accusations against us as splitters in the party discussion bulletin in June 1963; two days later

we replied to his lies with "Discipline and Truth," submitting it just under the bulletin deadline. Nearly *one-third* of the SWP was in political opposition on the eve of the 1963 convention. Barry Sheppard, Camejo and others predicted gleefully that the ax would fall on the RT at the convention. We heard later that Myra Tanner Weiss warned Cannon not to expel us at the convention or she would go public. Tom Kerry denounced us on the floor of the convention for being "disloyal." This was cited later as evidence of "suspicion" to warrant our expulsions. Robertson was kept off the National Committee and the Political Committee, which became basically majority bodies.

The Control Commission convened in August, following the convention, to investigate Wohlforth's charges against us. All RT supporters in New York were called for tape-recorded interrogations. Robertson, Mage, White, Harper and Ireland were suspended by the PC in October and

**Revolutionary Tendency comrades, purged from SWP solely for their ideas, published first issue of Spartacist in early 1964. SWP leader dubbed RT "enemy of the party" after expelled comrades sold numerous copies of Spartacist outside SWP branch meeting.**



expelled at an NC plenum in December for "disloyal conduct" though no violations of discipline were alleged or proved.

On 9 January 1964, a plenum report centering on the expulsions was made to the New York branch. The report included some self-criticism on the public positions of the SWP when Kennedy was killed—these were called "errors in formulation." The expulsions were described as a big step, aimed *not only* at the Robertson tendency. "Wild" branch meetings were cited. "Loyalty" to the party was now to be a prerequisite for party membership. The expulsions were intended to affirm what kind of party the SWP was. This internal situation was allowed to develop so long, the report said, because the SWP was just coming out of isolation—it had become lax. Now the party was making a turn; no more leaning over backwards. It was time to tighten up.

When Doug Gorden (Swabeckite) denounced the "frame-up charges" from the floor, Nat Weinstein, the New York organizer, said that the party would no longer permit the NC to be attacked in that way. He said this was a final warning and proposed that Doug be *censured* by the Executive Committee—reaffirming Dobbs' statement that "the majority is the party." Various minorities objected

during the discussion. In his summary remarks Weinstein stated that this was an "information report" and that NC decisions could not be changed until the next convention.

On 20 February 1964, the first issue of *Spartacist* was sold outside the Thursday night New York branch meeting by Jim Robertson. It seemed that nearly everyone in the meeting was reading a copy. A furious Weinstein took the floor and stated that with the publication of *Spartacist* the Robertson group had become an "enemy of the party" and that no collaboration by any party member with Spartacist would be permitted, nor would any *expression of sympathy* for their ideas be tolerated (this "sympathy for ideas" clause was deleted from the later formal charges against the remaining RT supporters). Sympathizers of those expelled were to be viewed with suspicion and closely scrutinized. They would be "on trial."

Weinstein's report was put to a vote: 31 were for, 5 against (all RT supporters) and 6 abstained (that was the Weissites and Swabeck supporters). Following the vote Weinstein declared that he wanted to know *why* these comrades voted against, and said that there would be an investigation.

As I recall, this was a particularly hysterical meeting. After the meeting adjourned various comrades were screaming at each other. Fred Halstead was screaming at me, "If you don't like it why don't you just leave!!" To which I and others would reply, "No! You'd like that. We intend to stay and continue to fight for our positions."

In general, the tenor in the New York SWP branch meetings after the report on the December expulsions was "love it or leave it." But we acted as model members, doing more than our share of the work, paying dues promptly, etc. It drove them mad.

On 25 February 1964 I and the other four RT supporters received a formal notice of charges *based on our vote* against Weinstein's report. We were notified that the trial was set for March 2. The "trial" was conducted by an expanded New York branch Executive Committee composed entirely of majority supporters. On March 5 the conclusions of this all-majority "trial body" were reported to the branch by Nat Weinstein. He tried to insist that the expulsions were "absolutely not for ideas." We expel people for *acts*, he claimed, and then cited three "acts": the intra-tendency discussion document cited by Wohlforth; our vote against Weinstein's report to the branch; the

publication of attacks on the SWP (i.e., *Spartacist*) and the "approval" of this by the remaining RTers.

There were about 60 people at this meeting, a large turnout. The Weissites were particularly incensed. Myra Weiss gave an eloquent speech in defense of the right of organized tendencies to exist. She defended the publication of *Spartacist*, blamed the majority for the whole situation, and admitted that *she* had given her PC motion against RT expulsions (reprinted in *Spartacist* No. 1) to the leading RTers when they were still party members. She intended to vote "No" on Weinstein's report. A number of majority speakers warned Myra to stay out of this and go back to the PC where she belonged.

Tim Wohlforth was at this meeting. He said he opposed expulsion for ideas—and then went on to declare that the RT's ideas were "alien," that we were "destroying Trotskyism," and attacked us for accepting support for our democratic rights in the party from the Weissites and Swabeckites.

The vote to expel the five of us was: 44 for, 14 against with one abstention and one not voting. These expulsions cleaned the RT out of the SWP in New York. However, seven RTers including some of those just expelled from the SWP were still members of the New York YSA. Some of us were very visible active Spartacists and all of us were open supporters of Spartacist views. We worked with Progressive Labor (PL) and in the Congress of Racial Equality (rent strike work). RT member Shirley Stoute was on the YSA NC and a member of the SWP in Philadelphia.

This situation in the YSA wasn't going to last long. But the dual membership was permitted by a provision (which Jim Robertson had opposed at the founding YSA convention) that permitted YSAers to be members of "any adult socialist party." Barry Sheppard was YSA national chairman and Peter Camejo was the national secretary. Jack Barnes was New York YSA organizer. A lovely crew.

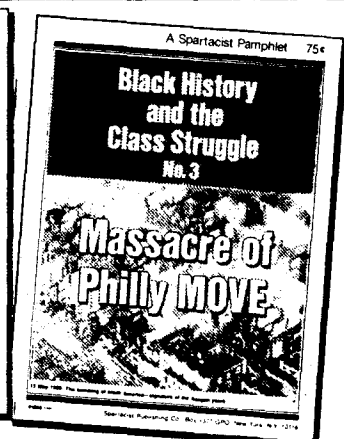
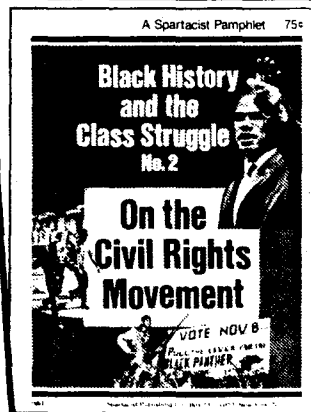
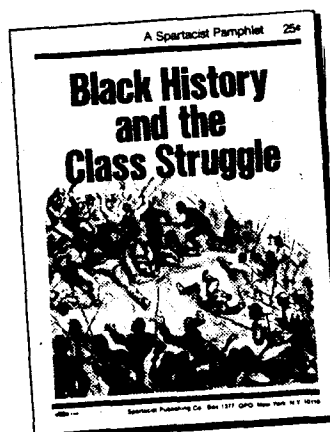
Their method of seeking our expulsion was very clumsy. On 2 May 1964 several of us were part of a joint defense guard with PL for a demonstration. The YSA was nominally taking part in this. Before the march Barry Sheppard approached three of us to carry YSA signs. We declined, stating that we already had assignments as Spartacist supporters on the defense guard.

Several days later we received notification of charges that we had "deliberately violated discipline" by refusing

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assignments given out the morning of May 2 at a YSA meeting (not true). A trial before the NY YSA local was scheduled for May 30. In addition, as an NC member, I would be tried by the National Executive Committee (NEC) following the local trial. It was all very contrived—individual acts of indiscipline. Nothing to do with political purges in the SWP of course!

Before the trial I wrote up and mimeoed a “Trial Circular” which blew their case out of the water. This was distributed to the local members, many of whom were very new. It gave a history of the origins of the RT and the political expulsions from the SWP. It denounced the fraudulent charges against us as part of a continuing attempt to turn the YSA into an instrument of the SWP majority in violation of the historical norms of youth-party relations as described by the SWP itself (see Murry Weiss’ letter in *Marxist Bulletin* No. 7, “The Leninist Position on Youth-Party Relations”).

A number of new members objected to the proceedings and wanted to know if what was in the “Circular” was true. It wasn’t going over. Barnes got up and denounced the circular itself for claiming that the YSA was controlled by the SWP. He said the circular was a “fink” document and these people are “objective agents” of the FBI! Then the despicable Freddy Mazelis—Wohlforth’s lieutenant—

came to the rescue of the majority leadership. He proceeded to offer a rationale for political expulsions, arguing that since we had major differences with the SWP and YSA there was no way we could be disciplined members of the YSA. The expulsions carried.

On 5 September 1964 we appealed to a YSA NC plenum. The plenum upheld our expulsions and furthermore expelled five other RTers including Shirley Stoute. The only “charges” against the five new expellees was their “support to Spartacist.” It was simply a summary political expulsion of a whole group. Shirley was criticized for going to Cuba “without permission”! Following the plenum Shirley had to return to Philadelphia, where Dobbs had instructed the SWP branch to put her on trial (the “charges” are in *Spartacist* No. 3). She was expelled. It bothers me that after all these years comrade Breitman cannot admit the truth: that the expulsions of the RT marked *the* crossroads for the SWP; that it was wrong to have gone along with all this crap. After all, in defending our tendency we defended *Breitman’s* rights too, then and in the future. The majority is *not* the party! Democratic centralism is the organizational method of the revolutionary (insurrectionary) party. It serves only the *revolutionary program*. And there’s the rub.

—Originally dated 18 March 1986

## Memories of a 1970s SWP Oppositionist

*While preparing our review of “Don’t Strangle the Party,” the Spartacist Editorial Board received the following letter from comrade Sam H., a former member of the Leninist Faction of the Socialist Workers Party, now a supporter of the Spartacist League. Comrade Sam’s letter has been edited for publication.*

I became a contact of the SWP in 1969 during my four-year hitch in the Air Force, and joined the Madison Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) in June 1970, one month after I was discharged. My decision to join was based on reading Cannon’s *Socialism on Trial*, a selected works by Trotsky, and on my understanding of the Minneapolis Teamster strikes in 1934. The Madison YSA was a left-talking Mandelite [i.e., followers of United Secretariat leader Ernest Mandel] branch that was essentially led by the Proletarian Orientation Tendency (POT).

So while I thought I was joining the SWP of 1938 I began wondering why there were no trade-union fractions. Why was I one of the few union members in the local organization? I began pressing the branch leaders on this and one day I was led into one of their apartments to read the POT’s 1969 document, “On Sending Young Comrades into the Trade Unions.” I then realized that there was an impending faction fight inside the SWP and I quickly sided with the POT.

The 1971 SWP Convention turned out to be the POT’s only coordinated fight and I’m sorry I wasn’t there. The pre-conference discussion produced 30 or more bulletins and my most vivid memory from the returning Madison delegates was Barry Sheppard’s admonition at the end of the convention. The POT delegates were roundly defeated vote-wise. Since 1961 the party members functioned as a

fraction within the youth so Sheppard’s admonition at the final session was, “And there will be no wrecking job in the youth, comrades!”

Sheppard was calling POT supporters to task: they had better obey the party statutes or else. The POT challenged the party’s orientation but had no counterposed political program, so their intervention suffered dramatically. The POT essentially agreed with the SWP majority’s resolutions on the antiwar movement, black question, feminism, etc. So they were politically disarmed from engaging in political combat with the reformist Barnes clique.

The Mandelite POT was never a programmatically counterposed faction. They saw themselves as a dissident “tendency”—loyal, but with differences. I remember the first internal class I gave was on “democratic centralism.” The POT leaders who helped me to prepare this class were in political solidarity with the 1965 org rules [“The Organizational Character of the Socialist Workers Party”] and the RT expulsion. The Spartacist League (SL) was not in Madison at that time so I had never seen us in action before. I dutifully repeated the common SWP refrain that the “Robertsonites” were expelled for “double-recruiting” and the Madison YSA branch simply accepted this as orthodox SWP history.

The POT leaders never challenged these 1965 org rules so they were condemned to live under them. We actually believed that you only discuss major political questions for three months every two years (the pre-conference discussion period). We skirted this in Madison on a number of occasions but I remember attending branch meetings in Chicago where, whenever a well-intentioned POTer would raise tactical differences with the SWP’s wretched pacifist line on the Vietnam War, a majorityite hack would quickly

take the floor and say, "This discussion is taking on the character of a pre-conference discussion and this is not the proper time nor place for this." I heard this over and over again!

The bottom line is that the POT leadership thought we could bring the reformist SWP line to the working class and that would make a difference. So while bemoaning the Barnes leadership's undemocratic functioning they never challenged the political program that the organizational abuses flowed from. The American POT was an example of the wretched Mandelites' refusal to build any serious opposition to Barnes' SWP.

How rotten the POT was became clear to me at the 1971 Houston YSA Convention. I was one of the few pro-POT delegates, elected by the Milwaukee YSA. The big issue at the convention was the removal of a POT YSAer from the youth National Committee. It was clear that this guy was being dumped because the Barnesites were starting to clean house in the youth. This was one of the rare periods that you could raise differences, but the POT was acting in complete accord with Sheppard's warning against monkeying around with the youth. Not only was I instructed not to raise political differences on the convention floor but I was also instructed *not* to fight the purge on the basis of the comrade's political views. I was given the unenviable task of taking the floor and simply asserting that the Nominating Commission had not provided a convincing enough case that this comrade's functioning had gone downhill. I did place the POT YSAer's name in nomination and was later congratulated by POTers as being the first person to ever challenge a YSA nominating slate. I don't know if that's true; I certainly

didn't feel proud. I felt that we ducked the political fight on the right of minorities to exist and maintain their political views. Luckily for me the SL had a table up at the convention so I got to read *Workers Vanguard* and took home with me a collection of *Marxist Bulletins*. It was my first contact with the SL.

On the last day of the convention I did get to talk to a comrade from Boston who couldn't help but notice how pissed off I was at the POT. This became my first contact with the developing Leninist Faction (LF) which I quickly joined. The history of the LF is well documented in *Spartacist* No. 21. My resignation letter from the LF (co-signed by Dave E., Pam E. and Tom T.) appeared in *Workers Vanguard* No. 14.

Reading "Don't Strangle the Party" and thinking about this letter has certainly jogged my memory and put these events in a clearer light. In the POT we had to put up with discussion only three months every two years regardless of what was happening in the world. A tendency was a "temporary" formation that was supposed to disband after you got your ass kicked at a convention. Factions were disloyal. To be an oppositionist during this time you had to deal with a good dose of paranoia and get nothing but crap from the Barnes leadership. When I returned from the Houston YSA Convention a Barnesite hack was virtually sitting on the doorstep ordering the local Executive Committee (all of whom were POT supporters) to pack their bags and leave town. Branches like Milwaukee were destroyed while Barnes supporters were moved around the country to achieve mechanical branch majorities.

—Originally dated 19 April 1986

## The Spartacist League Makes Available the Polemics of Its Opponents on the Left

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"He who takes somebody's word for it is a hopeless idiot who can be dispensed of with a simple gesture of the hand."

—V.I. Lenin

#### Bulletin No. 1 March 1975, \$3.00 (58 pages)

- Reprint of "Spartacist League: Anatomy of a Sect"  
—From an "Education for Socialists" bulletin (June 1974) nominally published by the Canadian Revolutionary Marxist Group in the interests of its American cothinkers, the Internationalist Tendency
- Reprint of the Spartacist League's critique "Mandelites Falsify History to Attack SL"  
—From *Workers Vanguard* No. 59, 3 January 1975

#### Bulletin No. 2 April 1975, \$1.75 (34 pages)

- Reprint of "The Fall of Allende and the Triumph of the Chilean Counterrevolution—the Spartacist League and the Strategy of Abstentionist Putschism"  
—Originally published by The Communist Internationalist Group, November 1973
- Preface: Letter to Spartacist League Central Office from Comrade Small, 12 February 1974

#### Bulletin No. 3 August 1975, \$2.75 (95 pages)

- Reprint of "What is Spartacist?", by Tim Wohlforth, Second Edition (June 1973)
- Reprint of "The Wohlforth League: Counterfeit Trotskyists"  
—From *Spartacist* No. 17-18, August-September 1970
- Reprint of "The Workers League and the International Committee: A Statement by Tim Wohlforth,"  
11 January 1975
- Reprint of "Confessions of a 'Renegade': Wohlforth Terminated"  
—From *Workers Vanguard* No. 61, 31 January 1975

#### Bulletin No. 4 Winter 1986, \$1.00 (32 pages)

- 1917, *Journal of the Bolshevik Tendency*, No. 1  
First issue of the publication of the Bolshevik Tendency, formerly "External Tendency of the Spartacist League," includes "I Liked Gerry Healy...: The Robertson School of Party Building" and "SL's Cop-Baiting Celebrity: 'Powerful Testimony'... to the Police"

# James P. Cannon

James P. Cannon was a founding member of the American Communist Party (CP) and one of its principal leaders in the 1920s. He was a delegate to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (CI) in 1922. As a delegate to the Sixth CI Congress in 1928, he read and was won to Trotsky's critique of the CI program (published as "The Draft Program of the Communist International—A Criticism of Fundamentals"). Expelled from the American CP in 1928, Cannon was a founding Trotskyist and the principal leader of U.S. Trotskyism until the 1950s when he retired from direct administration of the Socialist Workers Party. Cannon died on 21 August 1974. He was still a supporter of the SWP which had for a decade been a reformist shell, although retaining the allegiance of many veterans from its revolutionary days.

On 27 August 1974, our party held a memorial meeting for James Cannon. Only a few of those in the hall had ever known Cannon; the Spartacist League had been organizationally separated from the SWP since the SWP expelled the Revolutionary Tendency in 1963-64. The main presentation at the memorial meeting was given by Jim Robertson, who was the SL's national chairman. His critical evaluation of the American Trotskyist movement under Cannon's leadership has never been published before, largely because of the personal and anecdotal character of his talk. Many of the stories are composite hearsay. But now that the publication of "Don't Strangle the Party" as well as the implosion of the British-based Healy tendency have focused attention on the question of the degeneration of the SWP, we are publishing the edited transcript of comrade Robertson's remarks in this issue of *Spartacist*.

In this presentation, considerable reference is made to the acquisition of documents of the formerly shadowy fight which prefigured the Cannon-Shachtman split of 1939-40. Recently, except for some Shachtman material, this



James P. Cannon in 1938.

Monad Press

documentation became broadly available in the latest volume of Cannon's selected works, *The Communist League of America 1932-34*, published by Pathfinder Press.

## James P. Cannon Memorial Meeting: 27 August 1974

We have had a bittersweet response to Jim Cannon for a long time, and so when he died we had a false—but real—feeling of loss. The loss took place a long time ago, but it was still incorporated in the living body of the man that is no more. I don't have any thesis to propound tonight but I will argue that he does belong to us, not to the SWP. And he obviously knew pretty well long before he died, not that he belonged to us, but that he did *not* belong to the SWP.

What I want to present to you tonight is what the historians call oral history. I was told these things by senior comrades of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Workers Party (WP) who were in a position to know directly the various observations, anecdotes and characterizations. There is an inevitable slippage in the absence of documentation. But I believe it to be true. I believe it to be true not only in general, but precisely.

There is always a problem of generations in their understanding. I was raised in the WP (at the age of most of you) with the proposition that Jim Cannon was a supreme cliquist, the meanest tiger in the bureaucratic jungle (and the phrase "bureaucratic jungle" is a standard phrase from the Shachtmanite movement). Then I joined the SWP and found that it was inconceivable from every aspect that Cannon could have been a cliquist. He was a hard and lonely man. And I wondered why.

Here's an anecdote. Bill Farrell, who was the organizer in San Francisco during the Shachtman fight, had occasion as a seaman to do an important courier mission. He came thousands of miles under a very difficult period, walked into comrade Cannon's office and said: Here's the stuff. Cannon said: All right, thank you, go. No backslapping, no glass of whiskey, no nothing. Cannon was an aloof man.



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Left to right:  
Martin Abern,  
James Cannon,  
Max Shachtman.  
They were  
expelled from  
U.S. Communist  
Party for  
Trotskyism on  
27 October 1928.

Art Sharon, who was the first SWP member of the United Secretariat, a very senior guy, always used to say, "James Perfidious Cannon." And Sharon was a hard Cannonite! He was an old bosun turned construction site chief.

And I wondered why. You'll find a clue in some of Cannon's writings. The Cannon faction in the Communist Party (CP) was not the *Cannon* faction, it was not the Cannon/Shachtman faction; it was the Cannon/*Dunne* faction. Dunne (William Dunne, Bill Dunne) stood a little less in stature than Cannon but was a strong independent leader, a figure of the American CP in the 1920s. They were very close collaborators: Cannon being the political leader, Dunne being the trade unionist. They were very close personally. Bill and Margaret Dunne and Jim and Rose Cannon shared an apartment in New York (they call them "communes" today I think but the reason was the same: cheap rent). They were very close. There were also a lot of other Dunne boys, about five of them. But Bill Dunne had the misfortune to be on Comintern assignment in Outer Mongolia when the Trotskyist split came in the United States. So he stayed with the CP. That was Cannon's last best friend so far as I know. He didn't have any other friends after that; he became personally entirely family-oriented.

Cannon had been through a lot of political battles already. As I trust all of you know, he'd been an ardent young Wobbly—looked to Vincent St. John—in the best revolutionary syndicalist section of the IWW. Then he went through all the factional brawls in the CP and wasn't destroyed. I just don't think he made any more friends after that. I think he probably felt that political friendships were too impermanent, and he stuck with his family.

The idea of this guy as a cliquist is absurd! In fact, the human dimension of the founding cadre of American Trotskyism was added by Martin Abern. Martin Abern was not a cliquist in the way that we know the word "cliquist." He happened to be a very warm, sympathetic human being, an effective organizer, and deeply repelled by the cold, aloof Cannon. You want some of the testimony? The SWP's *Education for Socialists* series published "The Abern Clique" in which Joseph Hansen, a young Abernite, recounts how he was won over by this cold, aloof, impersonal James P. Cannon on the basis of the *issues*. I

think that Cannon, out of personal hurt, bent the stick the other way and genuinely was not accessible in understanding the personal side of politics, the personal needs of comrades. So those needs, which we all carry, tended to become the monopoly of the Abern/Shachtman group. The warmth and geniality of the Abern/Shachtman group were not artificial; they actually did service a part of the needs of the membership. This in turn assisted in laying the basis for a certain *dual power* situation in the American Trotskyist movement for ten years.

So why do we talk about Cannon? Comrade Cannon for a number of decades in his prime evidently had "merely" one capacity, which has been sneered at, in a fundamental article by Shachtman which I'll get to later, and extravagantly by all kinds of mice like Tim Wohlforth and every sort of wisacre (Wohlforth by his own modest admission is the first American Marxist). All that comrade



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Leon Trotsky, reading American Trotskyist newspaper *The Militant*, in Prinkipo, Turkey, where he lived in exile 1929 to 1931. Close collaboration between Trotsky and Cannon endured until Trotsky's assassination in 1940.



Labor Defender Photos

Cannon in 1928. Right, 1927 demonstration of 20,000 in Union Square, New York, protesting frame-up of Italian anarchist workers Sacco and Vanzetti, was led by International Labor Defense, CP's united-front class-struggle defense organization.

Cannon could do—and it was not a personal capacity but was evolved out of his times and out of his battles—was to be the successful strategist and leader of a proletarian revolution in North America! That was what he was. That was his strength and that's why we memorialize him now.

I don't know much about his early history. Let me talk a bit about his wife. Rose Karsner was a very strong individual and seems to fit the stereotype of the hidden history of women. You will hardly find a documentary track of her record. She was a pretty tough cookie and played a major role: there was obviously always a significant political collaborative relationship between Rose Karsner and Jim Cannon. It was manifestly there.

Near the end I saw it myself. It was the last time I ever saw Cannon, and Rose had come in from listening to that horrible woman who wrote something about how Shakespeare was a Marxist: Annette Rubenstein. Rubenstein was on tour and Rose drew the assignment to go. She came back while I was sitting there talking with old Jim. She walked in, a sprightly little creature, kind of like a sparrow, and said "Garbage! Disgusting! Stalinist!" Just laid it all over the old man.

They did not come together when they were young. Rose Karsner had been David Karsner's wife. He was an early biographer of Debs. They had had at least one child. She came to work in the International Labor Defense (ILD) that Cannon was running, and rapidly became assistant director. I do know that when Cannon was out of town she reported to the PolCom on behalf of the ILD.

About Cannon's kids. One of them died quite miserably and tragically. This is a piece of party history that will sound very strange in terms of the SWP of today—like an act of idiot adventurism. Those who say that the SWP during the period of the Second World War was not trying to be internationalist ought to think on this. The SWP knew that the Russian political revolution was very important.

We had many party seamen in those days; some went on the Murmansk run. Comrade Bill is old enough to know what that meant—whole convoys were dispersed and you lasted 30 seconds in the water. Take a look at that book *Maritime* by Frederick J. Lang (Frank Lovell) and you'll see how many seaman comrades were lost in the war. One of them was Cannon's kid [son-in-law Edward Parker].

## LABOR DEFENDER

# Free Sacco and Vanzetti!

By James P. Cannon.

## BUILDING THE I.L.D.

By ROSE KARSNER.



James Cannon and Rose Karsner collaborated in ILD, 1925-28. Cannon was national secretary and Karsner wrote regular column "Building the I.L.D." in monthly Labor Defender.

I knew a party comrade [Barney Cohen] (he was in the U.S. Navy) out of the Boston branch. Murmansk convoys were made up on the East Coast, final assembly was in Boston. Then they would make the big jump, around North Cape (where they'd die) and then to Murmansk in north Russia. Finally the branch insurrected as the convoy was assembling—they went in and pulled all of the party comrades off that convoy (which of course was shot to pieces). That insurrection taught the party leadership something: that this was a mechanical thing that was using up the party members.

I want to talk about a couple of myths or rumors about Cannon. They say he drank . . . (I got an awful lot of this in the Shachtmanite organization, believe me.) Well he drank all right. But he wasn't an alcoholic, he was a drunkard. He'd go off the wagon once in a while on a big bender. Rose used to track him all across the country. She was really worried when he left town. He'd make promises; she'd try to monitor him. She exercised a lot of control and tried to suppress it. I don't know about the earlier drinking, but one of the last bouts he ever had (and he quit long before he died) was I think in about 1955. He hit San Francisco on one of the last tours he ever made. They had stashed him in a hotel but the old boy got loose, and he laid one on. They found him, and the organizer (a nice woman, Francis James, a Weissite) was really angry. They started pouring coffee into him, denouncing him, saying they were going to phone New York and have his ass before the National Committee. How could he do such a thing? Well, they got him pretty sobered up (they thought) and brought him into the meeting. The SWP had little affectations in those days, so they had Nora Roberts and a couple of other little girls running around collecting money from the audience. Cannon gave what was apparently a magnificent speech, and the baskets of money came forward. And he started taking the money and throwing the bills all over the stage!

Rose found out about it, of course, and I think that was the last time he ever broke loose on tour. Seriously. And you see what I mean about anecdotes. This story is testified to by four or five comrades that were present at that incident, but it's still oral history. It really happened (that's why I'm taking the trouble to tell it to you) but I don't think one can put this in an obituary. I guess Cannon was under a lot of pressure and that this was a safety valve.

By the way, Rose was a militant socialist feminist of the 1910s and 1920s. "Feminist" meant something else then—among other things was that marriage was an abomination: it was bowing down and putting on chains before a man and before the state. So Rose would never marry, and she and Cannon were never married until they got very old and were told that if they were to get Social Security in retirement they'd have to get married. They were in their sixties when they went through the legal ceremony—and then, to her utter disgust—they found out that an affidavit instead of this odious act would have done it! But I have to regretfully report to you that they died as man and wife.

The main source—virtually the only source that I know of—for all anti-Cannon material comes out of an article that Max Shachtman wrote in the January-February 1954 issue of *New International* ("25 Years of American Trotskyism"—Part I of a two-part appraisal). In order to set Cannon up for the attack, Shachtman had to acknowledge as a precondition that Cannon was *the finest*



Pathfinder Press

### Rose Karsner and Jim Cannon.

*communist politician ever produced in this country.* Having explained the importance of the target, Max then went to work on demolishing the target. And everything that Wohlforth and others have written against Cannon is drawn straight out of that article! Nobody wants to acknowledge that, because the author and the circumstances aren't too creditable.

Shachtman only wrote part one, carrying the story through 1940, and we waited for a long time but he never could write part two. The reason was that it was already pretty late and he was getting ready to liquidate the International Socialist League (ISL) and to acknowledge that there was no systematic and principled basis for a centrism that stood between the revolutionary Marxism of Trotsky and the social democracy. He'd arrived at that conclusion, so he just could not write a history going beyond 1940. But he tried to do the job on Cannon—did a pretty good job, too, everybody has borrowed from it.

But there is a problem here and I want to talk about it a little bit. Most of life is contradictory and equivocal. It's not written in black and white but in shades of grey—which at the same time possess *qualitative* decisiveness. And it's that combination—that everything is in shades of grey and at the same time behind the shades of grey lie fundamental truth and falsity—which is one of the hardest things in historical interpretation. It is necessary to grasp this in order to arrive at the answer of what to do today.

It is unfortunate that there are not many more of the historical materials of Russian Menshevism available, so that the comrades could be treated to just how plausible, how often correct, how sensible, the Mensheviks were (on many occasions) as against the Bolsheviks. What we have handed down to us instead is a version of "revealed truth" as from the Bible: Lenin said such and such, Martov said such and such; obviously Lenin was right and Martov was wrong. That *is* the fundamental truth. But if you had been there then, comrades, it would not have been so obvious, and over particulars Martov would have been right! And Trotsky, then a Menshevik, would have been right on

## On the Importance of Arming a New Generation

"... I think that the work in which I am engaged now, despite its extremely insufficient and fragmentary nature, is the most important work of my life—more important than 1917, more important than the period of the Civil War or any other.

"For the sake of clarity I would put it this way. Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place—on the condition that Lenin was present and in command....

"Thus I cannot speak of the 'indispensability' of my work, even about the period from 1917 to 1921. But now my work is 'indispensable' in the full sense of the word. There is no arrogance in this claim at all. The collapse of the two Internationals has posed a problem which none of the leaders of these Internationals is at all equipped to solve. The vicissitudes of my personal fate have confronted me with this problem and armed me with important experience in dealing with it. There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third

International. And I am in a complete agreement with Lenin (or rather Turgenev) that the worst vice is to be more than 55 years old! I need at least about five more years of uninterrupted work to ensure the succession."

—Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Diary in Exile*,  
25 March 1935

\* \* \*

"I also remember the words Trotsky wrote in his *Diary in Exile*, when he was in Norway and he was bound hand and foot and he was not in good health and he was 55 years old.... He said: I must live another five years to prepare the succession. I've often thought of those words [and] that that is the supreme duty of the leaders—to prepare the succession. And some of us went about it consciously, I especially. One man can't do it all, as quite a few nuts think they can. One man can't live forever and his greatest contribution is to prepare others to take his place."

—James P. Cannon, Interview with Harry Ring,  
13 February 1974

certain key political questions too. That is the problem of historical interpretation: it is not a religious act, to find an essential purity which because it is essential must therefore be total. If the comrades learn nothing else from their reading and their study, they should learn that. Because when faction fights break out around us, there's going to be so much truth on both sides that if you resort to either accepting secondary grounds as your basic determinant of action, or if you resort to the ultimate philistinism: "Well, there's truth on both sides, and where there's smoke there's fire"—then you had better give up and start trying to sell used cars.

So there's a problem with contradictory, equivocal phenomena, and Cannon was contradictory. Cannon had an abiding failure. He became the principal individual authority responsible for the world Trotskyist movement in August 1940 and basically didn't do anything about it (though the SWP was internationalist and willing to commit energy, lives). I think the reason was pretty simple: Cannon felt he was not good enough to be a world leader of the Marxist movement, and he was right.

He had just come back from France. We secured a particularly rare internal SWP bulletin containing Cannon's report on his trip to France in 1939. The trip, it is clear, was a catastrophe. Cannon didn't know French; the French leaders ignored him. He saw that the situation was going utterly to hell. He had at his fingertips a mass of experience in how to function—nobody would listen. Cannon spent six months in France while Shachtman, Burnham and Abern were doing the job back home. The trip was a failure: Cannon found that he could not work internationally. That was in 1939—then came the big fight in '40.

And then suddenly he was supposed to be the principal political leader, moreover under conditions in which the

world, as a result of the Second World War, was desperately segmented. So he backed away from the role, temporized during the war. As soon as Michel Pablo, Pierre Frank and Ernest Mandel came along and claimed they knew how to do it—claimed they had the language capacity, the knowledge, the science, the savoir-faire (poor old Jim; he's just an ex-train worker from the Midwest)—Cannon said all right, these guys will do it. They don't have any experience; they don't know anything; they're arrogant. (There's a phrase that the fancy sociologists in colleges like to use—and when I had to fight Shachtmanite right-wingers I learned plenty of these sociological jargon/mystification words—called "hubris." And among other qualities good and bad, Pablo sure had hubris!)

So Cannon backed off, and we're stuck with the job. He stuck us with it doubly. Because he was a lot better than we are—and when I say "he" I mean not only Cannon personally but the immediate working crew that made up the "Cannon regime" (horrible word: for 20 years every Shachtmanite thrilled with horror at the image of the jackbooted, anti-intellectual, vicious Cannon regime).

Well there was a Cannon regime, and they were doing the best they could. But they didn't accept the international challenge, and yet it is an obligation. Yes, if you know that you don't know anything, go patiently, quietly, perseveringly; struggle with the greatest patience and attention for international collaborators. We have to go that way, not back off and wait in national isolation for somebody else to come forward and say, "I can do it," and then we say, "all right; we'll give you our authority." We have to persist; we have to intervene.

That was Cannon's abiding failure. And then he did it to us a second time, in the 1952-53 period. The party got all geared up in 1945-46: it was growing like crazy; it survived the Smith Act convictions; recruited a thousand workers,

**U.S. government convicted 18 SWP and Minneapolis Teamster leaders under Smith Act for opposing imperialist war policies.**

**Fifteen on way to jail, December 1943 (from left): Cooper, Palmquist, Hamel (face hidden), Hansen, DeBoer, Geldman, Hudson, Carlson, Morrow, Dobbs, Goldman, Skoglund, Coover, Cannon, Dunne.**

Pathfinder Press



black and white—the first black Trotskyist cadre—hundreds of white steel workers, auto workers both black and white. And so they said, “Whoopee,” and Cannon wrote *The Coming American Revolution*. It was an affirmation of the power of the proletariat, but already it had faults—I’ll give you three right off the bat: it ignored racial divisiveness; it ignored the existence of the Communist Party; and it ignored the rest of the world outside the United States! Allowing only for these three criticisms, it was really great. Really. That’s called an equivocal position. Ardent SWPers sworn to protect their heritage no matter what will say it was a perfect set of theses; if you run into somebody who says Cannon never did nothing right they’ll say it was an abomination.

It had a strength: it was an affirmation of the power of the proletariat in America. That stands out, like a beacon. At the same time it was badly politically flawed, and the reaction which would have come anyhow was perhaps intensified by the weaknesses in the document. “Cannon promised us this and that, and now we’re losing all our members and we’re getting cynical; we’ve got to find a shortcut, and besides the Stalinists do exist”—you got the phenomenon of American Pabloism, which is not exactly the same thing as European Pabloism.

Cannon was a good faction fighter. I recommend to you comrades to go and read either Theodore Draper’s *American Communism and Soviet Russia* or Cannon’s *The First Ten Years of American Communism* on the faction Cannon put together in 1923-1924. He got six thousand Finnish farmers, two internecine warring factions of the Jewish Federation, more mutually hostile trade unionists, disgruntled elements in the other factions—and he put it all together and made it go. Well, he did the same thing in 1952-53, and it was a catastrophic mistake. The Cochranites attacked on two fronts: they attacked Trotskyism as a political program and they attacked the existence of an independent SWP organization. We had about a hundred young comrades under Murry and Myra Weiss, mainly in Los Angeles, in the party at the time. And they still had some spunk and steam. So the Cannon/Weiss faction was formed of those who wanted to defend the party program. Go and read what Murry Weiss wrote in the *Militant* in the

summer of 1953 on the East German uprising: Hurray, the proletariat raises its fist. The need now is for a Leninist party to consummate the political revolution and lay the foundation for the revolution against capitalist imperialism! Very good, very correct. You can also read what the Cochranites had to say: Hurray, the Russian bureaucracy is liberalizing itself. In the same paper, sometimes on facing pages.

But the Cochranites also proposed to liquidate the independent party organization, which meant to attack the wages and pensions of Farrell Dobbs, Tom Kerry, Hansen, and a bunch of other fellows who were perfectly content to let the European Pabloites do anything they wanted, or to pursue any political line in this country, as long as it was going to be pursued from the organizational framework of the SWP. (And this isn’t just a venal question of needing operations which the party would pay for, pensions and the like. The organization was their whole life.) They had become politically blunted but were not prepared to



Minnesota Historical Society

**Trotskyist leadership guided historic victory in Minneapolis general strike. “Battle of Deputies Run,” 21-22 May 1934.**

organizationally liquidate.

So the political revisionism and organizational liquidationism of the American Pabloites brought together in response a common faction, which was a *bloc* inside the SWP, of Cannon and Dobbs. The deal was made to get rid of the Cochranites and restore the prior peace in the party. That was wrong. Cannon said at the end of the fight that he had feared he might have to start all over again with a hundred kids. Oh how I wish he *had* started again with just the Cannon/Weiss faction; he would have done our job for us. (The Weissites of course were destroyed in the course of the ensuing clique wars.) So that's the second thing Cannon did to us.

It took Dobbs 25 years to get rid of Cannon! It wasn't until 1965 that finally they got the old man off the National Committee—kicked him upstairs to emeritus (consultative) status. Then with the greatest of satisfaction Dobbs called Carl Feingold into his office—Carl Feingold (currently of the International Socialists) being the personal representative and spy of old Jim and in the center—and said: Carl, you're a member of the National Committee and the Political Committee; get out of here, I never want to see you again—because Cannon was off the Committee.

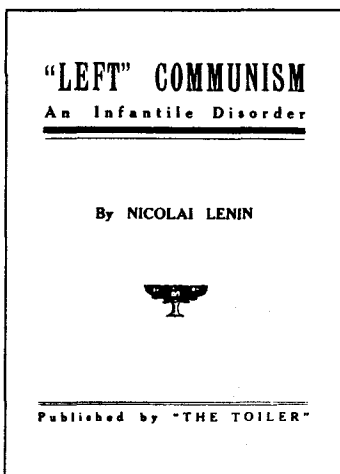
But by then Dobbs was a very shaky old man; he aged faster than Jim did. I traveled a bit with Dobbs in 1960 and he'd gone grey in the face; he was tired, exhausted, couldn't cut it. But that goes into the later history of the SWP and how they finally ended up with Barnes (having tried some of the more feeble-minded party leaders of my acquaintance in the middle of the 1960s).

So Dobbs never got satisfaction—he never really got to be the party leader. For 25 years they kept him in the wings; Cannon would keep going out to L.A. saying: This is it; I give up; I understand, younger men must take over—and then something would happen and Cannon would get on the phone again. So I don't think Dobbs had a very happy life.

Dobbs was never a political leader. That raises an interesting point, by the way, about the kind of leader that Cannon was. He was a political leader *not* a trade unionist.



Progress Publishers



V.I. Lenin in 1920, year he wrote "Left-Wing" Communism—An Infantile Disorder. Cannon was editor of Communist journal The Toiler, which published early edition of pamphlet.

If you read the Shachtman stuff you'll think he was a trade unionist; he wasn't. He was the *communist* political leader that the party trade unionists had confidence in and looked to—so long as they wanted, themselves, to be communists. That was the core of his link with the Dunne boys and the rest of that gang in Minneapolis, and Tom Kerry, and the ones that were deep into the Sailors Union of the Pacific out on the West Coast, and Bert Cochran and the gang that was working in the UAW. Trade unionists—those were the ones. And they trusted him; they looked to Cannon because they thought he was trying to build a workers party. (And they weren't too sure about Max—he made too many jokes.)

In that connection, one of the particularly malicious things that Shachtman did to Cannon in that article was to suggest that part of being a trade unionist, as everybody knows, is to be an idiot, a goon and inarticulate. Suggesting that Cannon was "just" a trade unionist was a way of saying that Cannon couldn't think or write; you'll find a big section about how Cannon never wrote anything. But Cannon was a very good journalist. They made a kind of prize collection which you should read; it's called *Notebook of an Agitator*, and if you want to see the kind of stuff that *Workers Vanguard* ought to be trying to get, that stuff is it. It's very clear. It's the hardest thing in the world, comrades, to write correctly and simply, because to write correctly tends to involve complex sentences with complex words. Cannon was also, in his polemical material, an extremely precise and effective political writer—very powerful. He tried to retain a popular quality about his writing.

But if I had to describe Cannon as anything, he was in his life, until he became a very old man, a Leninist. Leninism meant something precious for him. To us it is "received doctrine" and that's what I was attacking a little bit: there's a weakness in received doctrine, namely it's just received doctrine. But comrade Cannon had struggled with all the problems that Leninism answered. As a young man he was a syndicalist and he had to fight the questions of maximalism/minimalism, possibilism/impossibilism, parliamentarianism/anti-parliamentarianism—all these questions. For him, *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* was a revelation, because it showed him how you could be both *right* and *smart* at the same time. Leninism bridged that gap.

When Cannon embraced Leninism it was as a brand new thing: out of the peculiar alchemy of the combined developments in tsarist Russia there came this doctrine that answered the impasses of the workers movement in the west. That was the contemporary meaning of Leninism for that generation. Cannon had been a syndicalist and not a parliamentarian. I think it was Trotsky who said that when we founded the communist movement the best we got came from the syndicalists. Because you see, there was a choice: the social democrats would rather be smart than right, and the syndicalists would rather have been right than smart. There's a gut question there, and the Communist International got more mileage out of those who came over from the syndicalist movement than from the social democracy.

If Cannon was a cold aloof guy he was also obviously fundamentally very sentimental. Have you read what Cannon has written on Martin Abern? Cannon said: Martin Abern has spent ten years struggling against the

Cannon regime. But they'd also had a long time together in the 1920s. In 1949 Martin Abern died and Cannon turned up drunk and crying at his funeral. Cannon came because he'd known him for too many decades. Marty Abern was not a bad man, and he was not a calculating cliquist. I really don't see that, and you won't either if you read the material. I think he tended to put personal relations above political ones and to be deeply committed to personal relations. Of course, that makes the most terrible, desperate, effective kind of cliquist—you know, the one who really believes in it, who's not just a cynical maneuverer, but who really subordinates political to personal considerations.

Now if there's anything that has been a significant historical acquisition for the Spartacist League it is getting the Communist League of America (CLA) bulletins for the first five years. It had been for a long time clear to me that I could never try to finish the history of American Trotskyism without looking into the Cannon vs. Shachtman fight of the early 1930s—the first big wracking fight. Even the documents that are now available to you all, namely Trotsky's letters that appear in the Collected Works series, that they're now bringing out, were completely unknown when I was a young comrade. Now we've got the bulletins.

If you read that stuff, in an inchoate way, without a clear programmatic basis, it was a prefiguring, an anticipation, of the 1940 fight. They fought like hell, and Trotsky said: Stop it! You're killing yourselves; it's not clear what is going on. Then what happened was *Shachtman went over*. Just Shachtman. The Shachtmanite faction remained in opposition: Glotzer (Gates), Abern, the youth. And there was a dual power situation, but so long as the Shachtman/Cannon regime held, Shachtman was able to neutralize his ex-supporters. There was another deal that was made too: The hardest of the Cannonites was Hugo Oehler. He didn't buy the deal and went out. So the party ran under conditions which I cannot imagine how Cannon put up with, the tension of always buying time, of always dickering, of always negotiating. Finally in 1939 the fundamental programmatic issues, under the pressure of the war and anti-Communism, seized each faction. And it blew up. It was stunning to find out that the American Trotskyist movement in the 1930s—in a sense, at the top—never really existed. It was always an uneasy truce.

That's why one should go and read documents. Not just mindlessly, but in order to answer the questions which more broad historical considerations should raise.

One likes to make one's personal reminiscences too. This was the finest communist that America has produced, and he died. I had four contacts with him. He sent me a letter one time. It was the only letter he ever sent a member of the YSA.

1902 Hyperion  
Los Angeles 27, Calif.  
Feb. 11, 1960

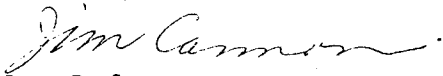
Jim Robertson,  
New York, N.Y.

Dear Jim:

I noticed that your East Coast campus tour will take you to Brown University on February 18. When you get there, I wish you would look up Professor Philip Taft and say hello for me.

Phil is an old friend of mine from early days. You probably know him as a labor historian who has recently published a widely acclaimed volume on the history of the A.F. of L. from Gompers to the merger. But you probably don't know that he has a still greater distinction. He was a young wobbly. And a first class one too—highly esteemed by all who knew him in those days.

Fraternally,



James P. Cannon

JPC: jh

**Jim Robertson was a leader of the SWP's youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance, when he received this letter from James P. Cannon in 1960.**

By the way, there's a point: our faction in the SWP were never soreheads. We liked the party leadership fine. Tom Kerry, Farrell Dobbs, Joe Hansen, Jim Cannon, George Weissman, the rest of the gang—there were a lot of things wrong; we were pretty clear-eyed about them. But there were a lot of things right about them too. Our faction worked in the SWP. We made a political choice and we knew what it meant. Wohlforth didn't make it in the SWP, you better know that. They didn't like him, didn't trust him.

So I got this letter from Cannon. It was a nice letter. It asked me to bring his personal greetings to a professor at Brown University, a historian of the American Federation of Labor, who he said did something much more important in his youth: he was a fine Wobbly and we worked together and I wonder if you would tell him, give him my personal greetings. I thought that was a *very* nice commission.

Got to know Cannon pretty well in 1958 I guess. The SWP was giving me the red carpet treatment. It was nice to get the red carpet treatment. So there was a West Coast summer camp and by "accident" we shared common quarters with Jim and Rose Cannon. So I had a long chance to talk with the old man. And it was good. He thought he was going blind then. He had cataracts and was about to have an operation which they might botch. So he was furiously, desperately sitting there with his pipe and strong tea (because he was on the wagon by then) reading, for what he thought might be the last time in his life. What

## James Cannon on Revolutionary Continuity

"On the basis of a long historical experience, it can be written down as a law that revolutionary cadres, who revolt against their social environment and organize parties to lead a revolution, can—if the revolution is too long delayed—themselves degenerate under the continuing influences and pressures of this same environment....

"But the same historical experience also shows that there are exceptions to this law too. The exceptions are the Marxists who remain Marxists, the revolutionists who remain faithful to the banner. The basic ideas of Marxism, upon which alone a revolutionary party can be constructed, are continuous in their application and have been for a hundred years. The ideas of Marxism, which create revolutionary parties, are stronger than the parties they create, and never fail to survive their downfall. They never fail to find representatives in the old organizations to lead the work of reconstruction."

—James P. Cannon,  
Introduction to *The First Ten Years  
of American Communism* (1962)

book? *The Revolution Betrayed*. He was trying to commit it to memory, the whole book. I liked him. I don't think he liked me. He thought I was a wise-ass smart student. But I liked him.

And then just after we had a YSA Convention up in Detroit over New Year's, we came back driving and we went out to the desert to see Cannon to make a personal report. He already had the "real" report from that little rat, Feingold, who was at the Convention too. We got to see Cannon in the desert and that was very useful, because in the WP/ISL we had always heard the myth: Cannon's stepchildren are very rich and Cannon lives out in the Southern California desert in a marble palace. Alas, he lived in a little bitty motel room. And the reason he lived out in the desert was, his wife had a case of arrested TB and had to have a very dry, warm climate. There they were cooped up in the winter period under these extremely meager, crowded conditions. So if you ever run into the myth of Cannon's marble palace—I was there. We're living better right now.

And the last time I ever saw him, we were in opposition and it was a kind of formal meeting. I was coming through on tour in L.A. for the youth org. At the same time I knew my throat had been cut, Cannon knew my throat had been cut; only Wohlforth didn't know that his throat had been cut. So I went and made the formal meeting with comrade Cannon. We agreed mutually without saying anything not to talk about the active political questions. And I sat around and had three or four hours with him, chatting. (That's when Rose came in halfway through, having gone to see this awful Annette Rubenstein.) Just for what it's worth, those are my personal reminiscences of comrade Cannon, and they have no bearing on the politics and the

main course of his career because I only knew him at the very end.

I said that I thought he didn't like the SWP very much and here's the reason why. In 1965 I had a talk with the Seattle leadership of the SWP—the Fraserites—who had just been thrown out or quit, and they mentioned that Cannon had broken loose in the West Coast summer camp and before two hundred people he denounced black nationalism in favor of class unity. Now, he did it from the right. It wasn't very good. At that point some members of the SWP were playing with—it sounds so funny today—something called the "Triple Revolution": poverty's been abolished, war's been abolished, racism's been abolished by new technology. Now there's been this triple revolution, what are we going to do next? Doesn't that sound absurd today? But it's a fancy idea and Cannon was kind of drawn into it.

But he was also violently an anti-nationalist of all sorts. Go and look in his *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, his article called "The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement" and you'll see that he thought there was only one thing: a proletarian revolution. And so the combination of his quietism as a very old man and his fundamental instinct for a class solution... he blew up and denounced the party line in front of two hundred people. Jack Barnes, coming through Seattle, said: Well, we may have to take disciplinary action against Jim Cannon. He can't get away with this sort of thing. But by then he was truly quite old; there was no question of any other kind of struggle. The SWP was what he had to cling to, and he chose to ride it down to the end. At the same time he was old, he was feeble, and his wife had died—and she meant a lot to him. So I think probably Cannon was glad to die. There wasn't much left for him. He was used up.

So there you have it. And the problem is that the story is a pretty common human story—namely, that he went from being a revolutionist to being an acquiescent supporter, lending his authority to a party that had become counterrevolutionary (and that's the meaning of the SWP). And that's kind of sad. Yet in balance it is our task, not to ignore the last ten years, but to pay a great deal of attention to the first fifty years too.

I'll give you an example. George Plekhanov was the founder of Russian Marxism, a brilliant propagandist—not theoretician, he wasn't that good—but a brilliant propagandist. He wrote the books that trained the generation of Lenin. He tried several times to go over from Menshevism to Bolshevism, and kept falling back. He played a despicable role in the First World War in defense of tsarism. At the end he died in 1919 and he never lifted a finger against the Russian Revolution. He said: The Russian workers have made a terrible mistake but it is their choice and I will not oppose them on behalf of the bourgeoisie. A *contradictory* figure. But anybody who thinks that we should erase a George Plekhanov, or a Jim Cannon, from the heritage of Marxism only has a Wohlforthite theological conception (not even a real one: see, there is theology, which represents simply fundamental oversimplification). It's a falsification as well as a theological viewpoint. And that's all really that I have to say. I suppose it comes down to this: that when finally life was extinguished in the old man's body, I felt a little bit more an orphan. ■



## Paris, 30 November - 1 December 1985

# Proceedings: Eighth Plenum of the International Executive Committee

We print below edited proceedings of the Eighth Plenum of the International Executive Committee of the international Spartacist tendency held in Paris in autumn 1985. The IEC is the highest body of the international between international conferences and is elected by those conferences. This meeting was associated with a series of national gatherings, starting with a plenum of the Spartacist League/U.S. in summer 1985, attended by most of the SL/U.S. membership (and much of the British leadership); conferences of the Spartacist League of Britain (SL/B) and the Ligue Trotskyste de France (LTF) were held shortly after the IEC meeting. An international bulletin prepared for the meeting contained wide-ranging discussion and reports on the national sections, including a report by the head of the Lankan section. Internal bulletins of the French, British and American sections also helped to lay out the controversies in the various sections.

### ATTENDANCE:

The meeting was attended by more than half the full members of the International Executive Committee. Other attendees included: the functional head of the Lega Trotskista d'Italia; members of the Trotskistische Liga Deutschlands; several Spartacist League of Britain Central Committee members with friends; SL/U.S. members including most of the staff of the International Secretariat (I.S., resident executive body of the IEC) and members of the West Coast branches and the *Workers Vanguard* editorial board; Spartacist League/Australia and New Zealand members who had recently gone through South Asia; the entire Central Committee of the Ligue Trotskyste de France (LTF); the Paris I.S. treasurer; comrades with special interest in South Asia or Africa and comrades returning from a trip to the Soviet Union.

### SESSION I, 30 November

Meeting called for: 14:00

Meeting convened: 14:22

Chair: Kelter

Secretary: Reux

Translation: Hector, Meyer (English to French)

Speaking times are no more than five minutes except as noted.

### AGENDA:

1. Organization of Meeting
2. General Report
  - a. General Report/Ostensibly Revolutionary Organizations
  - b. Trotskistische Liga Deutschlands
  - c. South Asia

3. France/LTF
4. Britain
  - a. Spartacist League of Britain
  - b. Healyite Implosion
5. IEC Business
6. South Africa
7. Quadrilingual *Spartacist*
8. World War Two and the "Proletarian Military Policy"
9. USSR Trip
10. International Conference

### 1. ORGANIZATION OF MEETING.

Report by Kelter (9 mins.)

Motion: To accept the proposed attendance.

*passed*

Motion: To adopt the proposed agenda.

*passed*

### 2. GENERAL REPORT.

#### a) GENERAL REPORT/OSTENSIBLY REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATIONS.

Report by Kelter (20 mins.)

While in Reagan's America and Thatcher's Britain the reactionary climate, the domestic concomitant to the anti-Soviet war preparations by the imperialists, is already of some years' duration, the rightward shift is quite international. This is not a good period.

The tendency has experienced a few modest successes as well as some failures. Membership statistics, section by section, and average sales statistics for each section were presented. An international tendency of under 400 communists must keep a sense of modesty and sobriety in order to train and educate comrades, rationally deploy its forces and maintain the focus necessary to aggressively exploit real opportunities, like the Healy split, internationally.

Our previous opponents on the left internationally are not doing very well. The last year has seen accelerated decomposition of the "United Secretariat of the Fourth International" (Usec) centering on the Russian question. In France the LCR has a restless "state capitalist" majority. The Australian Socialist Workers Party disassociated itself from the Usec and, even surpassing the American SWP, explicitly renounced Trotskyism, complete with a denunciation of Trotsky's call for the Fourth International. It has become a pro-Stalinist and rather sinister outfit. The German GIM is planning fusion with an ex-Maoist group, the KPD (agreeing that although the two organizations have different analyses, they are on the same side of the barricades *against* the Soviet Union), and has broken its links to the Usec (individuals may affiliate).

A majority of the British USec split from Mandel's supporters and are now buried even more deeply in the Labour Party. There is now the real possibility of a centrist regroupment of some of the many who, over the past decade, have split or been expelled from the various pseudo-Trotskyist groups in Britain. While such a development would be unstable, it would present an obstacle to revolutionary regroupment.

A quick look during the IEC meeting at the other ostensibly international Trotskyist currents testified to pretty serious decomposition. The Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI, formerly OCI) of Pierre Lambert has moved so far in the direction of "CIA socialism" that its trade-union functionaries in Force Ouvrière have just been exposed as on the receiving end of CIA handouts. The International Workers League of Argentine adventurer Nahuel Moreno has frittered away most of the momentum generated some years ago when they led a fair-sized split out of the USec. They went in and out of the OCI, and today apparently have as many "sympathizing" sections in each country as there are locals or half-locals. In Bolivia, Guillermo Lora is reportedly expelling right and left many long-time locals from his POR, including in the mining districts. Michel Varga was expelled by the Vargaites; and the Posadas group without Posadas (who died several years ago) is a non sequitur. What brought this point home most sharply was the discussion around the implosion of the Healy organization.

Despite this general decomposition, only the iSt's American section, the Spartacist League, is now generally acknowledged as *the* Trotskyist party in its own country. Given that our tendency has not qualitatively grown at the expense of the decomposing fake-Trotskyists and that we have not fused with some section of cadre drawn from the historic forces of the Trotskyist movement, lending the iSt a broader authority among would-be revolutionaries, we do not relish our observation that we are increasingly and strangely alone on the field of ostensible Trotskyists, although we will vigorously pursue the resultant opportunities.

#### b) TROTZKISTISCHE LIGA DEUTSCHLANDS.

Report by Pflanz (10 mins.)

The perspective of maintaining a cadre of professional revolutionaries motivated the decision of the International Secretariat, endorsed by an open CC plenum of the Troztkistische Liga Deutschlands, to transfer the preponderant majority of the German comrades to work in other sections for approximately one year. The comrades of the TLD have struggled for the last five or six years to politically reorient in the face of the ominous resurgence of German nationalism. The current balance sheet of this attempt to come to grips with German reality is negative. The IEC felt that an intolerable point had been reached when, like the rest of the German left, the TLD found reason to abstain from taking part in the Jewish-organized protests against Reagan's obscene visit to the SS graves at Bitburg.

But unlike the USec's Ernest Mandel, who cynically told a 1978 GIM conference that regarding the future of the section, "one can only pray" (*Spartacist* [English edition] No. 27-28, Winter 1979-80), we appreciate that the years of

experience of the members of the TLD should not be squandered. Working in other more politically stable groups and above all seeing German reality from the *outside* should allow us to reconstitute a re-internationalized German section at the end of the year's sabbatical. It is necessary to accelerate the process of dispersal so that the section may sooner reconstitute itself on a new basis. This IEC meeting agreed that the German-language *Spartacist* would be the instrument to "politically protect, preserve and extend our German section during the period of its calculated disarray."

*Discussion:* Andrews, Brian.

#### c) SOUTH ASIA.

Report by Harrison (10 mins. plus 3 mins. extension)

*Discussion:* Phelan.

*Meeting recessed* to look at *Spartacist* No. 36-37 (English edition), "Healyism Implodes," just arrived, brought by comrades from New York. (15:20)

*Meeting reconvened* (15:32)

*Discussion* (continued): Andrews, Carroll, Allan, Kelter, Markow, Tivu, Andrews, Ladanyi.

#### SUMMARY OF REPORT AND DISCUSSION

The government-instigated anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983 were a watershed which split the island in two and initiated a period of bloodletting against the Tamils which still continues. Thousands were killed and a couple of hundred thousand Tamils were driven to exile in India. The remaining Tamils in the South mostly fled to the North and East of the island. A government campaign to simply wipe out the Tamils in the East, and, when that is completed, regain control in the North which is now completely cut off and in the control of the Tamil nationalists, has resulted in thousands more dead. The article in *Workers Vanguard* No. 381 still stands up well.

In May 1985, at Anuradhapura, a revered center of pilgrimage for the Buddhist Sinhalese in central Sri Lanka, gunmen reportedly opened fire on crowds at a bus station and a holy site, killing scores of people. This act of indiscriminate terror, regardless of the true perpetrator, resulted in a wave of "retaliatory" Sinhalese communal violence and was a critical turning point for the Tamil nationalist movement. Following the subsequent explicit political defense of indiscriminate terror by many of the Tamil nationalist groups, the movement has degenerated. Bloody battles among the groups have led to some loss of authority among the Tamil masses. A central political task of the section is to polemicize against this bloodthirsty nationalism in the context of defense of the Tamils.

The woman and Tamil questions figure heavily in the political differentiation in Sri Lanka. In general, and particularly in relation to the plantation workers, the left in Lanka has ignored them or taken a chauvinist position. We, however, have grown on the basis of our Leninist stand on these questions. Now links with the North are broken and political work is very difficult.

Insufficient progress has been made toward the goal stressed at the last IEC meeting centered on publishing translations of Trotskyist materials into several languages. We particularly want to produce our *Declaration of Principles* in the relevant languages bound together.

In India, where many Lankan Tamil militants have fled,

the groups have politically turned right, toward confidence in Rajiv Gandhi's India and the murderous logic of their nationalist politics: defense of indefensible communalist slaughter and turf warfare between the groups. Politically they are treacherous, anti-socialist and anti-working class.

Trade-union questions have been a subject of debate in the Sri Lankan section. There, almost every political party, no matter how small or insignificant, has its "own" union. We stand counterposed to this "normal" union functioning in Sri Lanka and seek to extend our political influence broadly throughout the working class.

As Trotsky said: because of the nature of the bourgeois state, political parties almost everywhere are all the same in their formal structure and we fight for political clarity and organizational differentiation on the basis of program. But the labor movement, the economic movement of the working people, deeply reflects the particularities of historical development and is not commensurable from country to country. We stand for unity of the working class at the point of production through trade unions.

Our Sri Lankan section is a crucial extension of the tendency into the ex-colonial countries and a step toward the fulfillment of the commitment expressed by the 1979 conference to overcoming the overwhelming disproportion of the English-speaking sections in the tendency.

### 3. FRANCE/LTF.

Report by Altman (20 mins. plus 9 mins. extension)

*Discussion:* Stevensen, Pflanz, Emilio, Gerbier, Ramirez, Kelter, Meyer, Carroll, Welch, Kitson, Jones.

*Summary:* Altman (10 mins.)

#### SUMMARY OF REPORT AND DISCUSSION

France is in the period of the death agony of the popular front which has dominated political life in France for over seven years. Now the left is facing a "crisis of expectations."

Mitterrand's "Socialist" government has paved the way for the most reactionary period—massive layoffs and anti-immigrant terror—that France has seen since the Algerian war. Its policies have given the green light to the fascists who have become a strong political force in France today. None of our cadres has before experienced a period of deep reaction; we need to be cautious without adopting a policy of caution. The rest of the left is just running for cover. We must be prepared to recruit out of the current situation, where we are not simply swimming against the stream but can reach some of the disenchanting elements.

The recruitment by the European sections of African, West Indian, Asian, Kurdish and North African Spartacists is an important harbinger of the construction of the proletarian vanguard parties which are also the tribune of all the oppressed. There can be no neutrality on the race question, and one of our tasks is to expose those workerist tendencies, like the Militant group in Britain and Lutte Ouvrière in France, for whom no "real" worker can be "really" racist and who look the other way while the poison of racism seeps into the working class. Our propaganda should also stress that a positive future for the immigrants in France can come about only through *integration*, linking their fight for democratic rights—voting, housing, language—to the revolutionary proletarian movement of the country. Arab nationalism or other variants of

nationalism represent a dead end for immigrants.

Much of our recruitment in France has come from a layer of young, political members of Lutte Ouvrière who have experienced the demise of the popular front. There will be some sorting out in the process of training and educating them.

In France the trade-union question is dominated by the fact that the small percentage of industrialized workers who are actually unionized are further divided inside every plant by the existence of party-affiliated "political" unions. Our small toehold in the unions has provided an invaluable window into the current mentality of the Stalinist-led section of the working class. The workers are wary of engaging in losing battles; but they are willing to engage and have fought bitter, militant, defensive struggles.

*Announcement* (Kelter): A sample of the new SL/U.S. party membership card is available for examination.

*Meeting recessed:* 17:13

*Meeting reconvened:* 17:31

### 4. BRITAIN.

#### a) SPARTACIST LEAGUE OF BRITAIN.

Report by Bride (20 mins.)

The excellent propaganda and energetic solidarity work of the British section during the year-long social explosion of the miners strike have won us respect and allegiance in a number of mining areas around the country. The SL/B is attempting to construct *Workers Hammer* study circles in the various areas where we have contacts, to deepen and politically broaden our relations with these veterans of the most important class struggle in Europe in the last decade and to maintain the basis for future common actions.

Several important regroupments over the last eight years forged the SL/B. Recently there has been a not entirely unwelcome wave of quits of a cranky, peevish layer of the organization. The apparatus remains very weak. Frequently, inappropriate people are in posts when they could be making an important contribution elsewhere. However, the intervention in the miners strike has had the positive effect internally of coalescing a more collective leadership core, facilitating collaboration with the international leadership.

#### b) HEALYITE IMPLOSION.

Report by Andrews (13 mins.)

The Healy organization does not have much future. The Healy/Redgrave wing is not viable and the Banda/Slaughter wing is in some trouble. They are plagued by dissent and the great majority of them will probably recede in the direction of the Labour Party.

Our initial desire many years ago to engage in international political combat was spurred by our desire to settle with the Healy tendency. Today, Healyism has been shattered and we had a little to do with it. There is evidence that we vastly underrated our importance in the 1966 London Conference. Healy and Lambert were having tensions. Healy appeared particularly paranoid, drunken and brutal in the summer of 1966 after the American fusion fell through.

The Socialist Labour League's 1961 resolution "The World Prospect for Socialism" codified for the American opposition, the Revolutionary Tendency of the Socialist

Workers Party, the attractive force of the then Healy organization, which had just founded the SLL. We should circulate this document today among the Healyites. After 1967, a series of major programmatic points of difference between us and the Healy organization opened up and our regroupment work shifted to the USec which became our predominant opponent. Now, with the strong tendencies toward dissolution of the USec, we are in the perhaps unfortunate situation of lacking a tight focus on a single international competitor on the Trotskyist-pretending left.

We crashed out this *Spartacist* No. 36-37 in order to settle a historic international score. It is not only a reckoning with Healyism but a record of our own history. We should seek to produce much of the material in the other language editions of *Spartacist*.

*Discussion:* Kelter (6 mins.), Stevensen, Heriot, Kent, Jones, McGloughlin (7 mins.), Carroll (9 mins.), Markow, Gerbier, Altman (6 mins.), Ramirez (10 mins.), Stevens, Strasberg, Ladanyi, Emilio (6 mins.), Pflanz, Petersen, Allan (7 mins.).

Summary: Bride (3 mins.)

Summary: Andrews (3 mins.)

*Announcements.*

*Meeting recessed:* 19:41

## SESSION II, 1 December

*Meeting called for:* 14:00

*Meeting convened:* 14:21

Chair: Kelter

Secretary: Reux

Translation: Hector, Meyer (English to French)

### AGENDA:

1. IEC Business
2. South Africa
3. Quadrilingual *Spartacist*
4. World War Two and the "Proletarian Military Policy"
5. USSR Trip
6. International Conference

*Motion:* To adopt the proposed agenda.

*passed*

### 1. IEC BUSINESS.

Report by Kelter

*Motion:* To approve the minutes of IEC No. 7, Hamburg, 29-30 August 1984.

*passed*

Not voting: 1

*Motion:* To confirm the IEC poll of 11 May 1985 accepting Pflanz unanimously as a member of the I.S.

*passed*

### 2. SOUTH AFRICA.

[The presentations and discussion on this point were reflected in *Workers Vanguard* articles "For a Bolshevik Party! South Africa: Black Union Federation Launched" in *WV* No. 393, 13 December 1985 and "For a Bolshevik Party in South Africa! Smash Apartheid! For Workers Revolution!" in *WV* No. 395, 17 January 1986.]

Report by Ezra (10 mins. plus 6 mins. extension)

Report by Andrews (11 mins.)

*Discussion:* Emilio (7 mins.), Strasberg, Ramirez, Stevensen, Altman, Andrews.

Summary: Ezra (2 mins.)

Summary: Andrews (5 mins.)

### SUMMARY OF REPORTS AND DISCUSSION

For the last one and a half to two years there has been a rising level of protest involving most layers of the black population—students, workers, petty bourgeoisie. Police repression has increased accordingly, now extending to the banning of journalists from areas of strife. The *WV* article "South Africa: Razor's Edge" (*WV* No. 376, 5 April 1985) accurately predicted the situation. There has been some realignment both among the black trade unions and political organizations as the resistance to apartheid has escalated.

The youth organization in the U.S. got into an argument a couple of years ago: "Does the permanent revolution apply in Chile and in South Africa?" This is a scholastic argument. Internal social relations and industrial development are two of the elements of combined and uneven development, leading straight to the program of permanent revolution. Chile has the internal social relations of a normal capitalist country but is very weak, dealing in raw materials and completely at the mercy of the world market. South Africa, a powerful junior partner of world imperialism and regional power, has a very substantial industrial development but the internal relations are profoundly racially divided in the framework of the most savage economic and political repression of the large majority of the population.

The divestment slogan taken to its limit, together with the policy of "make the townships ungovernable," are part of the black radicals' current "strategy of chaos," as we have termed it. In contrast, examine Lenin's policy in the summer of 1917. The Bolsheviks were winning over a growing section of the army and the large majority of the proletariat while the bourgeois government was discredited and very weak. Lenin wrote a pamphlet—"The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It"—about economic production and food supplies and how the working people should defend themselves against the forces of capitalist reaction and imperialism. But Lenin had a *party*. In South Africa, the restless masses are very far from now having an instrument for taking power.

A policy of chaos would desperately inconvenience the South African rulers for a while, but the thoroughness of the residential segregation leaves the black masses acutely vulnerable to savage reprisals. Recall the example of the Paris Commune. In 1871, the bourgeoisie fled and let Paris starve. While paying tribute to the heroism of the Parisian working masses, Marx insisted that it was necessary to seize the basic elements of the national economy from the bourgeoisie. The Paris Commune was a sort of one-city version of the policy of chaos for South Africa, where the black townships have been deliberately developed as self-contained units.

There are two advantageous conditions right now for revolutionary struggle: one actual and one potential. The actual one is that the rulers in South Africa are evidently in a state of some disarray, demoralization and confusion.

They lack a commanding leadership and are polarized, with a section being to the right of the regime. Then there is the potential solution. Control by the political police in the interior of non-white communities is shattered. The country is in enormous political ferment. It is necessary to advocate and assist in the building of communist nuclei. For many black militants, communism is a word only vaguely understood. But they know that it stands in total opposition to hated apartheid capitalism. Revolutionaries must make programmatically concrete what communism means. Out of this present time of troubles there can emerge the foundations of a Bolshevik party, prepared at the next turn to take power in this reasonably industrialized country. The economy of a South African workers state would clearly be capable of satisfying the social needs of the overwhelming bulk of the population.

In contrast to this, the policy of the ANC is a policy of power sharing, the organic incorporation of sections of the black petty bourgeoisie into the South African ruling class. This has two defects: it is undesirable and it is utopian. South African capitalism rests on the superexploitation of black labor.

The permanent boycott of South African goods is another form of the policy of chaos. In practice, it means: let the blacks starve. Twenty million black people may starve, but foreign liberals would have clean hands.

It is a mistake to disparage reforms put forward by the Afrikaner ruling class for limited democratic demands that are short of winning one man, one vote. The proposals to repeal sex laws, for example, necessarily would compromise residential laws. The struggle to break down the geographical segregation of the black masses in enclaves is a key to successful social and military struggle.

**3. QUADRILINGUAL SPARTACIST.**

Report by Andrews (11 mins.)

To the degree that the International Executive Committee of the iSt has a concrete embodiment, it is in the quadrilingual *Spartacist*, published in English, French, German and Spanish. No other tendency with such few forces has managed to maintain four different language organs, admittedly woefully infrequent, of the IEC, which are real tools of international extension of hard programmatic clarity. The IEC controls this organ and indeed, if it did not, we would be a federation of local publications, the Second International before 1914.

*Discussion:* Ladanyi, Kent, Carroll, Gerbier, Altman, Kelter, Pflanz, Strasberg, Brian, Petersen.

*Summary:* Andrews (1 1/2 mins.)

*Motion:* To appoint comrade Robertson editor of the English edition of *Spartacist* with the intention of increasing the frequency of this organ of the IEC.

*Amendment (Andrews):* and particularly in the light of the foregoing discussion.

*passed*

*Meeting recessed:* 16:02

*Meeting reconvened:* 16:27

**4. WORLD WAR TWO AND THE "PROLETARIAN MILITARY POLICY."**

Report by Andrews (10 mins.)

Report by Gerbier (7 mins.)

*Discussion:* Carroll, Ramirez, Paulson, Emilio, Pflanz, Markow.

*Summary:* Andrews (2 1/2 mins.)

*Summary:* Gerbier (1 min.)

*Motion (Andrews):* That the IEC re-endorse the 1934 document "War and the Fourth International."

*passed*

[See accompanying article "The Trotskyists in World War Two," page 46 and document excerpts page 49.]

**5. USSR TRIP.**

Report by Henry and Miller (52 mins.)

**6. INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE.**

Report by Kelter

Since the 1979 conference, we note that the extension of the tendency has been simply linear. No qualitative setbacks or advances require the early convening of a second international conference. It is to be noted that the IEC, elected seven years ago, has maintained an essential continuity as a working leadership body, sharing common preoccupations—historical, organizational, programmatic, tactical—and a common dedication to political clarification and debate within the framework of democratic centralism.

*Announcements.*

The meeting ended with the singing of the *Internationale*.

*Meeting adjourned:* 18:25 ■

**International Spartacist Tendency Directory**

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<b>Spartacist League/Britain</b> .....	Spartacist Publications PO Box 185 London, WC1H 8JE England
<b>Trotzkistische Liga Deutschlands</b> .....	Postfach 16 07 14 6000 Frankfurt/Main 1 West Germany
<b>Lega Trotskista d'Italia</b> .....	Walter Fidacaro C.P. 1591 20101 Milano, Italy
<b>Spartacist League/U.S.</b> .....	Spartacist League Box 1377 GPO New York, NY 10116 USA
<b>Trotskyist League of Canada</b> .....	Trotskyist League Box 7198, Station A Toronto, Ontario M5W 1X8, Canada
<b>Spartacist League of Australia/New Zealand</b> .....	Spartacist League GPO Box 3473 Sydney, NSW, 2001 Australia

# Trotskyists in World War Two

This article was prepared for publication from remarks made at the meeting of the International Executive Committee of the ISt, held in Paris 30 November-1 December 1985. See meeting proceedings on page 41.

By Pierre Vert

An extremely rich, though somber, discussion on the activity of the international Trotskyist movement during World War II was provoked by an article by Pierre Broué, "Trotsky et les trotskystes face à la deuxième guerre mondiale" ("Trotsky and the Trotskyists Confront World War II") in issue No. 23 (September 1985) of *Cahiers Léon Trotsky*. Comrades noted that this review, published by intellectuals associated with Pierre Lambert's deeply reformist PCI (Parti Communiste Internationaliste, formerly Organisation Communiste Internationaliste [OCI]), is probably the most provocative publication in the world today for archival and historical research on the Trotskyist movement.

Broué presents a critical analysis of the Proletarian Military Policy, advocated by Trotsky just before he was murdered, along with a discussion of the national question in the occupied countries and of the participation of Trotskyists in the Stalinist-dominated Resistance. Broué argues against the view that Trotsky was sliding toward social defensism of the "allies" against the hideous barbarism of the Nazis. Rather, his argument implies that Trotsky was the first Pabloite. To Broué, Trotsky's 1940

call for "militarization" of the anti-fascist, proletarian masses amounts to the liquidation of the revolutionary vanguard party into the "mass movement," a policy actually developed and carried out by Michel Pablo. Moreover, Broué complains that the Fourth International did not take to heart Trotsky's "militarization" policy. Broué summarizes:

"The question that we wanted to raise here is not an academic question. During World War Two, were the Trotskyist organizations, members as well as leaders, victims of an objective situation, which in any case was beyond them, and could they have done no better than they did, that is: to survive, round out the human material they had already recruited and save their honor as internationalists by maintaining through thick and thin the political work of 'fraternizing' with German workers in uniform? If that is so, it would then be well to admit that with his 1940 analysis of the necessity for militarization and his perspective for building the revolutionary party in the short term and beginning the struggle for power, Trotsky was totally cut off, not only from world political reality, but from the reality of his own organization. In that case, Trotsky was deluding himself about the possibility of a breakthrough when the Fourth International was in fact doomed to a long period of impotently 'swimming against the stream,' in the face of the 'Stalinist hold on the masses.' But one could assume the opposite: that the Trotskyist organizations, both the ranks and the leadership, were part and parcel of this and were at least partly responsible for their own failures. In this case one might think, reasoning from the premises of Trotsky's 1940 analysis, that World War Two developed a mass movement based on national and social resistance which the Stalinists took pains to derail and caused to be crushed, as in the Greek example—and that the Trotskyists, having proved incapable of integrating themselves, were unable to either aid or to exploit it, and even perhaps to simply understand the concrete nature of the period they were living through."

Broué, while addressing very real questions, is nonetheless mainly waging a veiled polemic against what he calls party-building by "incantation"—a retrospective justification of the Lambert group's recent dissolution into the "Mouvement pour un parti des travailleurs" ("Movement for a Workers Party"), which explicitly harks back to the pre-Leninist conceptions of the "party of the whole class" of the Second International. The MPPT is a collection of anti-communist social democrats backed by sectors of the Force Ouvrière trade-union federation, a union created with CIA funds in 1947 and still on Reagan's payroll.

## Trotsky on Militarization

In the U.S., the Proletarian Military Policy (PMP) was a misdirected attempt to turn the appetite of the American working class to fight fascism into a revolutionary perspective of overthrowing its "own" imperialist state. The central proposition of the PMP was a call for trade-



Heroic Brest Trotskyists built cell in German army, distributed *Arbeiter und Soldat*. Gestapo arrested cell members October 1943; German members were shot, others also killed or sent to concentration camps.

union control of the compulsory military training being instituted by the state. But "workers control of the bourgeois state," if other than a routine social-democratic government, has only been an episode in an immediately revolutionary, dual power struggle. The workers army Trotsky wrote of must be forged under conditions of class battles and revolutionary crisis—dual power—through independent workers militias and the splitting of the bourgeois armed forces.

The call for the PMP was in fact soon shelved, but not until after Max Shachtman subjected it to a devastating polemic, "Working-Class Policy in War and Peace," in the January 1941 issue of *New Internationalist*. On this point the left-centrist Shachtman, at the beginning of his 18-year slide toward State Department socialism, was correct against the SWP.

But if Trotsky's 1939-40 writings do reveal an apocalyptic vision of the war which led him to see the need to develop some strategy to fairly immediately win over the army, it is necessary to emphasize that the PMP was nonetheless directed toward the mass organizations of the U.S. working class.

For Broué, "proletarian mobilization" quickly becomes "militarization" pure and simple. For example, he lauds the decision of Ch'en Tu-hsiu, the historic leader of Chinese Trotskyism, to become the political adviser of a division of the bourgeois nationalist *Kuomintang's* army. It's not an accident that after this adventure in 1937, Ch'en Tu-hsiu advocated the building of a "Third Force" between the CP and the Kuomintang on a purely bourgeois-democratic program, turned to defensism on the Allied side in the war and abandoned defense of the USSR, which he no longer considered a workers state. Before his death in 1942 Ch'en Tu-hsiu broke all ties with the Fourth International.

Broué never once distinguishes between workers militias, petty-bourgeois guerrilla formations (such as that of Tito whose seizure of power created a *deformed* workers state) and guerrilla formations under the discipline of a bourgeois general staff, as in the case of the French Resistance. This permits him to generalize from the Greek example, which followed a completely different trajectory from that of France or Italy. Despite popular-frontist capitulation, the Stalinist-controlled guerrilla army was



Militant

**Greek resistance fighters in Athens' seaport Piraeus after they were attacked by British troops, December 1944. Greek Trotskyists warned of imperialist British aims; for this hundreds were murdered by Stalinists.**

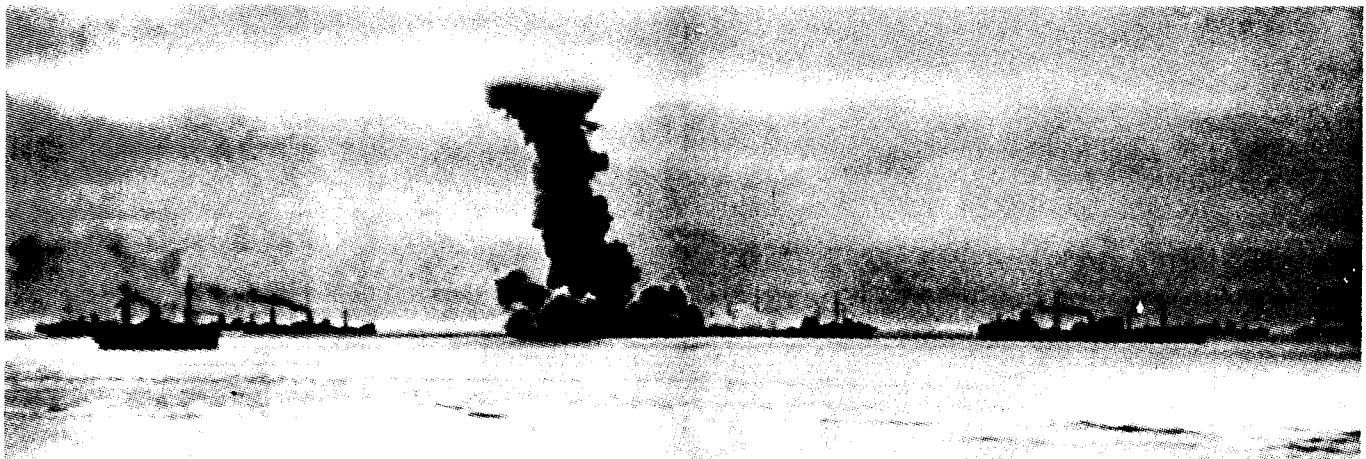
headed toward an inevitable confrontation with the British-backed monarchy after the withdrawal of the Nazi occupation forces. This would have posed, as in Yugoslavia, the possibility of a deformed workers state if the Stalinists had won. Of course, Broué is not interested in this aspect of the question (the Lambertist tendency, to which he belongs, took 20 years to discover that Cuba was, in fact, not capitalist).

Broué cites a 1943 document from the fragmented Greek Trotskyist movement which warns, "The Anglo-Americans will come to hand state power back to the bourgeoisie. The exploited will only have traded one yoke for another." Hundreds of Greek Trotskyists were murdered by the Stalinists for telling the truth about the designs of the imperialist Allies. Yet for Broué:

"If this was indeed as it was, it is clear that the Greek Trotskyists, by contenting themselves with negative prophecies and not enrolling in the mass movement, would have condemned themselves to death."

This shows clearly enough where Broué wants to go, which is not at all where Trotsky, whatever the faults of his PMP, wanted to go.

Consideration of these questions among the comrades of



Scherschel/Life

**At least seven SWP merchant men were killed during WWII, some on the Murmansk run. Freighter hit by German torpedo near Murmansk (above). High casualty rates led SWP Political Committee to stop party members from participating in Murmansk convoys, late 1942.**

the IEC provoked a discussion of the national question and in what sense it was posed in fully formed, bourgeois industrial nations overrun by a particularly savage imperialist conqueror like the Nazis. The question that interested our cadres very specifically was "what is to be done" by a Marxist propaganda group, an organic part of the proletariat, in the face of cataclysms like WWII when, at least initially, the winds of chauvinism blow strongly against us. As one comrade noted:

"There's a very big difference between being a propaganda group and a mass party. Very big indeed. If you are a mass party you not only must fight but you *can* fight and you can win. In major agitational struggles. If you're a few dozen or a few hundred people, you'd better hold your cadres...."

"The Bolsheviks were not, after 1905, a little propaganda group. They were a contending party for power. And because you can read their manifestos it does not make you the equal of them. They had the bulk of the industrial proletariat of their country."

The sobriety of the discussion derived from the fact that the tactics and strategy being debated were factors of life and death to our comrades 45 years ago. A French comrade said:

"The party was destroyed. There were a few people who remained during that long period—because it was very long, you know, five years in those kinds of circumstances is very long. A lot of people were killed, destroyed. A lot of people were not prepared at all for these kinds of issues. A lot of people wavered."

### Trotskyist Heritage

It is very difficult to draw a balance sheet, but some acts we embrace as part of our heritage. One of the most well-known and heroic attempts at revolutionary defeatist fraternization was the distribution by a French Trotskyist cell in Brest of the paper *Arbeiter und Soldat*. This operation was aimed at German naval personnel, the children of communist and socialist workers. The American SWP lost merchant marine comrades who had been on the dangerous supply run to Murmansk. And on the West Coast of the United States, American dockers and seamen tossed cigarette packs containing Trotsky's "Letter to Russian Workers" in Russian onto Soviet freighters that came in from Vladivostok. Before Togliatti retook control of the Italian CP in 1943, American Trotskyist seamen were acclaimed by CP crowds in Naples, then in the throes

**Vietnamese independence fighters jailed and executed by French colonial troops in late 1945 after Trotskyists led Saigon insurrection. Inset: Vietnamese Trotskyist martyr Ta Thu Thau.**



Quatrième Internationale

Keystone

of a mass uprising against the Nazis. At the IEC meeting, a comrade from Italy explained:

"So you have this completely paradoxical situation where the most important resistance group in the left in the city of Rome was a semi-Trotskyist grouping.... Mussolini had come too early [for the CP base to have been thoroughly Stalinized]—in Rome you would have CP members going around and writing on the walls "Long Live Lenin! Long Live Trotsky! Long Live Stalin!" There was no sense that there had been a split.... [The group] Red Flag had the majority of the working-class elements in the resistance and they were an eclectic group, but they didn't have cadre, they didn't have a clear program, so that could be taken over by the CP at one point."

And we stand on the work of the Vietnamese Trotskyists. As one comrade put it:

"They [the Vietnamese Trotskyists] knew what to do. They waited until 1945 in Saigon and Hanoi. That was the time to move... when the British and then later also the French army came in. And we were killed for that. But not to be killed stupidly by Stalinist assassins in Greece [1943-1944] and in Spain in 1937 and '38. And I think that Trotsky became overwhelmed by the horrors of Nazi totalitarianism and, without a qualitative capitulation to victory or defense between the interimperialist powers, he wanted an overly forward policy which would have and in fact did destroy our cadres in the hands of Michel Pablo."

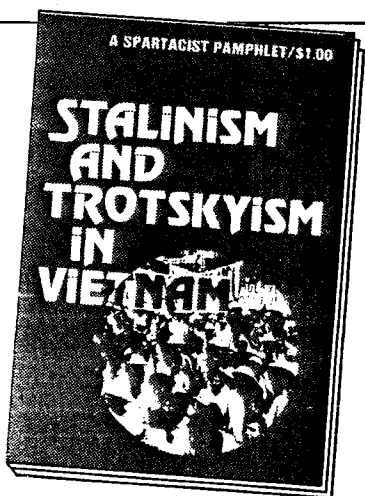
The IEC meeting voted to re-endorse the 1934 document "War and the Fourth International."

We are a tendency which is very much preoccupied by the question of continuity with our revolutionary forebears. And we do understand that if the successive American sections—Cannon's revolutionary SWP and now the Spartacist League/U.S.—have had to make an enormous contribution to the reconstruction of the continuity of the international communist movement, one of the reasons is that more than a hundred senior European and Asian cadres were killed in the period from 1937-1946 at the hands of the fascists and the Stalinists. ■

### Stalinism and Trotskyism in Vietnam

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# “War and the Fourth International”

*Hitler's 1933 seizure of power was a devastating defeat for the world proletariat. Stalin's Third International, no less than the social-democratic Second International, allowed fascism to triumph unopposed by Western Europe's most powerful working class. This betrayal led exiled Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky and his cothinkers to call for a new International. "War and the Fourth*

*International," written by Trotsky and adopted by the International Trotskyist League, was published 10 June 1934, under the shadow of approaching world war. It stands as a powerful reaffirmation of the revolutionary proletarian program against fascism and war. We print below short excerpts from this resolution from Trotsky's Writings [1933-34].*

The catastrophic commercial, industrial, agrarian and financial crisis, the break in international economic ties, the decline of the productive forces of humanity, the unbearable sharpening of class and international contradictions mark the twilight of capitalism and fully confirm the Leninist characterization of our epoch as one of *wars and revolutions*.

The war of 1914-18 officially ushered in a new epoch. Its most important political events up to now have been: the conquest of power by the Russian proletariat in 1917 and the smashing of the German proletariat in the year 1933. The terrible calamities of the peoples in all parts of the world and even the more terrible dangers that tomorrow holds in store result from the fact that the revolution of 1917 did not find victorious development on the European and world arena.

Inside the individual countries, the historic blind alley of capitalism expresses itself in chronic unemployment, in the lowering of the living standards of the workers, in the ruination of the peasantry and the town petty bourgeoisie, in the decomposition and decay of the parliamentary state, in the monstrous poisoning of the people by "social" and "national" demagoguery in face of an actual liquidation of social reforms, of the pushing aside and replacement of old ruling parties by a naked military-police apparatus (*Bonapartism*, of capitalist decline), in the growth of fascism, in its conquering power and smashing of each and every proletarian organization.

On the world arena, the same processes are washing away the last remnants of stability in international relations, driving every conflict between the states to the very edge of the knife, laying bare the futility of pacifist attempts, giving rise to the growth of armaments on a new and higher technical basis and thus leading to a new imperialist war. Fascism is its most consistent artificer and organizer.

On the other hand, the exposure of the thoroughly reactionary, putrefied and robber nature of modern capitalism, the destruction of democracy, reformism and pacifism, the urgent and burning need of the proletariat to find a safe path away from imminent disaster put the international revolution on the agenda with renewed force. Only the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the insurgent proletariat can save humanity from a new, devastating slaughter of the peoples.

## Preparation for a New War

1. The same causes, inseparable from modern capitalism, that brought about the last imperialist war have now reached infinitely greater tension than in the middle of 1914. The fear of the consequences of a new war is the only

factor that fetters the will of imperialism. But the efficacy of this brake is limited. The stress of inner contradictions pushes one country after another on the road to fascism, which, in its turn, cannot maintain power except by preparing international explosions. All governments fear war. But none of the governments has any freedom of choice. Without a proletarian revolution, a new world war is inevitable.

\* \* \*

## The USSR and Imperialist War

7. Taken on a historic scale, the antagonism between world imperialism and the Soviet Union is infinitely deeper than the antagonisms that set individual capitalist countries in opposition to each other. But the class contradiction between the workers' state and the capitalist states varies in acuteness depending upon the evolution of the workers' state and upon the changes in the world situation. The monstrous development of Soviet bureaucratism and the difficult conditions of existence of the toiling masses have drastically decreased the attractive power of the USSR with regard to the working class of the world. The heavy defeats of the Comintern and the national-pacifist foreign policy of the Soviet government in their turn could not but diminish the apprehensions of the world bourgeoisie. Finally, the new sharpening of internal contradictions of the capitalist world forces the governments of Europe and America to approach the USSR at this stage not from the point of view of the principal question, capitalism or socialism, but from the point of view of the conjunctural role of the Soviet state in the struggle of the imperialist powers. Nonaggression pacts, the recognition of the USSR by the Washington government, etc., are manifestations of this international situation. Hitler's persistent efforts to legalize the rearming of Germany by pointing to the "Eastern danger" find no response as yet, especially on the part of France and its satellites, precisely because the revolutionary danger of communism, despite the terrible crisis, has lost its acuteness. *The diplomatic successes of the Soviet Union* are, therefore, to be attributed, at least in a large measure, to the extreme weakening of the international revolution.

8. It would be a fatal mistake, however, to consider the armed intervention against the Soviet Union as entirely off the agenda. If the conjunctural relations have become less sharp, there remain in full force the contradictions of social systems. The continual decline of capitalism will drive the bourgeois governments to radical decisions. Every big war, irrespective of its initial motives, must pose squarely the question of military intervention against the USSR in

order to transfuse fresh blood into the sclerotic veins of capitalism....

*Defense of the Soviet Union* from the blows of the capitalist enemies, irrespective of the circumstances and immediate causes of the conflict, is the elementary and imperative duty of every honest labor organization.

\* \* \*

### The National Question and Imperialist War

14. The working class is not indifferent to its *nation*. On the contrary, it is just because history places the fate of the nation into its hands that the working class refuses to entrust the work of national freedom and independence to imperialism, which "saves" the nation only to subject it on the morrow to new mortal dangers for the sake of the interests of an insignificant minority of exploiters.

15. Having used the nation for its development, capitalism has nowhere, in no single corner of the world, solved fully the national problem. The borders of the Europe of Versailles are carved out of the living body of the nations. The idea of recarving capitalist Europe to make state boundaries coincide with national boundaries is the sheerest kind of utopia. No government will cede an inch of its ground by peaceful means. A new war would carve Europe anew in accordance with the war map and not in correspondence to the boundaries of nations. The task of complete national determination and peaceful cooperation of all peoples of Europe can be solved only on the basis of the economic unification of Europe, purged of bourgeois rule. The slogan of the *United States of Europe* is a slogan not only for the salvation of the Balkan and Danubian peoples but for the salvation of the peoples of Germany and France as well.

\* \* \*

### The USSR and Imperialist Combinations

43. In the existing situation, an *alliance of the USSR with an imperialist state* or with one imperialist combination against another, in case of war, cannot at all be considered as excluded. Under the pressure of circumstances, a temporary alliance of this kind may become an iron necessity, without ceasing, however, because of it, to be of the greatest danger both to the USSR and to the world revolution.

The international proletariat will not decline to defend the USSR even if the latter should find itself forced into a military alliance with some imperialists against others. But in this case, even more than in any other, the international proletariat must safeguard its complete political independence from Soviet diplomacy and, thereby, also from the bureaucracy of the Third International.

44. Remaining the determined and devoted defender of the workers' state in the struggle with imperialism, the international proletariat will not, however, become an ally of the imperialist allies of the USSR. The proletariat of a capitalist country that finds itself in an alliance with the USSR must retain fully and completely its irreconcilable *hostility to the imperialist government of its own country*. In this sense, its policy will not differ from that of the proletariat in a country fighting against the USSR. But in the nature of practical actions, considerable differences

may arise depending on the concrete war situation. For instance, it would be absurd and criminal in case of war between the USSR and Japan for the American proletariat to sabotage the sending of American munition to the USSR. But the proletariat of a country fighting against the USSR would be absolutely obliged to resort to actions of this sort—strikes, sabotage, etc.

45. Intransigent proletarian opposition to the imperialist ally of the USSR must develop, on the one hand, on the basis of international class policy, on the other, on the basis of the imperialist aims of the given government, the treacherous character of this "alliance," its speculation on capitalist overturn in the USSR, etc. The policy of a proletarian party in an "allied" as well as an enemy imperialist country should therefore be directed towards the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the seizure of power. Only in this way can a *real alliance with the USSR* be created and the first workers' state be saved from disaster.

\* \* \*

### "Defeatism" and Imperialist War

58. In those cases where it is a question of conflict between capitalist countries, the proletariat of any one of them refuses categorically to sacrifice its historic interests, which in the final analysis coincide with the interests of the nation and humanity, for the sake of the military victory of the bourgeoisie. Lenin's formula, "*defeat is the lesser evil*," means not defeat of one's country is the lesser evil as compared with the defeat of the enemy country but that a military defeat resulting from the growth of the revolutionary movement is infinitely more beneficial to the proletariat and to the whole people than military victory assured by "civil peace." Karl Liebknecht gave an unsurpassed formula of proletarian policy in time of war: "The chief enemy of the people is in its own country." The victorious proletarian revolution not only will rectify the evils caused by defeat but also will create the final guarantee against future wars and defeats. This dialectical attitude toward war is the most important element of revolutionary training and therefore also of the struggle against war.

59. *The transformation of imperialist war into civil war* is that general strategic task to which the whole work of a proletarian party during war should be subordinated....

\* \* \*

### The Fourth International and War

85. ... Even if at the beginning of a new war the true revolutionists should again find themselves in a small minority, we cannot doubt for a single moment that this time the shift of the masses to the road of revolution will occur much faster, more decisively and relentlessly than during the first imperialist war. A new wave of insurrections can and must become victorious in the whole capitalist world.

It is indisputable at any rate that in our epoch only that organization that bases itself on international principles and enters into the ranks of the world party of the proletariat can root itself in the national soil. *The struggle against war means now the struggle for the Fourth International!* ■

## Exchange...

(continued from page 3)

called THEMSELVES "Bolsheviks" after the Russian Revolution, in articles and speeches they declared themselves as British Bolsheviks. When I went around some of my old neighbours asking them to tell me more about this legendary George Harvey I was always assured "He was what thou calls a BOLSHEVIST." Whatever the formal arrangements and problems one can see both in the USA and in Britain that the S.L.P. was seen as the best hope for humankind, until the Russian Revolution, then people simply merged the two ideas seeing no contradiction in them. My old lodge banner carries a picture of two De Leonists with Lenin in central place surrounded by the Soviet star and hammer and sickle. Incidentally the only miners lodge in Britain to carry a portrait of James Connolly besplendid in Citizen Army uniform. While it is true poor old Keir Hardie looks (and probably feels) somewhat out of place, he was included as a compromise to the Social Dem's whereas the others including A. J. Cook were put forward by the same Geordie Bolsheviks. There would have been in any case hardly a personality clash between Lenin and De Leon since the latter died in 1914, leaving the cream of the British left still looking abroad for inspiration and finding it in Lenin. The gross reluctance of the S.L.P. to join with others in the formation of the British C.P. was not any rejection of Lenin or even of the Soviet party's leading role, it was a mortal fear and undying hatred for some of the factions they were going to have to get into bed with *here*. It is true to say of course that after a distinguished class history such as they had had, kicking over the traces and starting off again must have been hard. Walter Kendall (*Revolutionary Movement in Britain*) describes the move from De Leon simply: "After the Russian Revolution Lenin for a time replaced De Leon as the party's ideological leader, whilst the Bolshevik party usurped the role formerly played by the Socialist Labour Party of the United States." (Incidentally while the Soviet Bolsheviks had adopted the hammer and sickle as their symbol the Socialist Labour Parties worldwide had chosen the hammer, not unlike the British Spartacists' symbol on their paper).

I would say comrades that overall your article is constructive and does not as others have done try and

denigrate the work of the S.L.P. or the mettle of its members some of whom still stand as giants in the struggle against capitalism. However it cannot be said, as you have done, that the S.L.P. was "parochial"; history contradicts such a statement. From its inception the British S.L.P. looked overseas for its leaders, all of whom, initially at least were non British, almost all of its heroes were men who had travelled the world and supported revolutionary struggles in the four corners. Many of the early members were or had been seamen and frequently emerged in distant lands in the heart of some workers rebellion or another. Look to the S.L.P. organ THE SOCIALIST where you will find international features very much a part of the party's educational function. Subsequently the members looked to Lenin and the Soviet Union for inspiration, as many did in the USA, from which two leading figures are buried in the Kremlin (Big Bill Haywood and John Reed). The Industrial Union of Britain members called themselves British Wobblies, Wobbly being an easy way for the many non English speaking members of the U.S. Wobblies to say I.W.W. None of these are signs of a parochial party.

Another matter we must strictly define is the difference between the Syndicalist and Industrial Unionist concepts, read almost any "Labour" history book and the authors will show their complete ignorance of the different philosophies at work. In a nutshell the Syndicalists are invariably Anarchists who believe in the organisation of society without the state, the Industrial Unionists recognise the role of the revolutionary party in the process to *state* power for the working class, albeit a state built upon workers committees and councils (soviets). As you say De Leon described this concept before Lenin (Lenin does briefly acknowledge this fact in what I believe is his one and only mention of De Leon).

In conclusion comrades I thought your article was thought provoking and balanced and gave a well earned historical compliment to the men and women of the S.L.P. and the Industrial Unions even if it was, true to your tendency, a critical one.

Revolutionary Greetings,  
David Douglass  
Yorkshire Area Executive Committee  
National Union Mineworkers  
Delegate, Hatfield Main Colliery

*Spartacist replies:* Comrade Douglass' much appreciated photo and accompanying explanation in his letter are powerful testimony to the deep roots the British Socialist Labour Party (SLP) managed to sink among some of the more militant and class-conscious sections of the working class. Yet despite this the SLP in its majority was unable to make the leap to join the new revolutionary Communist International and consequently shortly disappeared.

Above all this was a result of the SLP's incapacity to transcend its De Leonism. Challinor makes a virtue of the SLP's De Leonist weaknesses and lays responsibility for the SLP's failure to affiliate to the new Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) to the Russians and above all Lenin. Here is the link between Challinor's social-democratic anti-Sovietism and his otherwise interesting and fruitful book on the SLP.

In other words Challinor's book is a search for a

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Diego Rivera

Detail from mural by Diego Rivera shows Daniel De Leon holding book by Karl Marx; above him, to right, Eugene V. Debs, early American socialist leader.

“native,” non- and anti-Soviet justification for the economist trade-union policies and superficially anti-Labour Party stance of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which he supports. In fact, in practice the SWP becomes a mere appendage of the Labour Party at election time, and during the recent heroic miners strike played a scab role.

De Leon was a pre-Leninist revolutionary Social Democrat, the foremost fighter against opportunism among pre-World War I socialists in the U.S. As comrade Douglass' quotes amply demonstrate, De Leon rejected the orthodox Kautskyite position of a party of the whole class, encompassing reformists and revolutionists alike.

The question of De Leonism is dealt with at length in an excellent article entitled “The SLP vs. Leninism—Part I: Was De Leon a De Leonist?” published in *Workers Vanguard* No. 192, 10 February 1978. The article notes:

“De Leon's concept of industrial unionism was an attempt, influenced by syndicalism, to break away from a purely parliamentary strategy of the struggle for socialism. In so doing he anticipated certain important Leninist theses: that the capitalist state apparatus cannot be transformed into an organ of socialist administration, and that the workers must govern on the basis of their organization as a proletariat rather than as an atomized electorate. Lenin was more than willing to acknowledge De Leon's foresight on these questions. In several discussions with Americans, among them John Reed and SLP'er Boris Reinstein, Lenin observed that De Leon had anticipated one of the central elements of the soviet system (workers councils).”

The above article also points out that while De Leon anticipated the *form* of a proletarian government, his pronouncements were abstract, compatible either with the dictatorship of the proletariat or with syndicalism. De Leon viewed socialist industrial unionism not simply as the form of proletarian government, but as a *strategy* for the overthrow of capitalism. Along with other Marxists in the Second International he tended to blur the distinction

between the dictatorship of the proletariat and socialism.

While De Leon rejected the Kautskyite party of the whole class, his schema relegated the party to an electoralist and propagandist role. For De Leon a revolutionary situation begins with the electoral victory of the SLP. It was the job of the socialist industrial unions to enforce this proletarian mandate by seizing the means of production, and “locking out” the capitalist class. Once the capitalists were so vanquished, De Leon saw no further role for the party. De Leon's illusions about the possibility for an essentially peaceful transition to socialism grew out of his political experiences in electoral politics and his underestimation of the state...a version of American exceptionalism.

In the hands of his followers, particularly in Britain, De Leon's socialist industrial unionism was given a syndicalist interpretation. Examination of the practical activities of the British SLP in the unions shows them to be by and large indistinguishable from those of the syndicalists or the left wing of the British Socialist Party. De Leonism provided no guide to action. Aside from their role in “locking out” the capitalist class, trade unions were viewed as passive receptacles for propaganda by the party and assigned no role in the political struggle against capitalism.

Thus although De Leon foreshadowed important aspects of Leninism, his conceptions were also in many ways far removed from Bolshevism. Lenin at the beginning of his “*Left-Wing*” *Communism* remarked: “Would it not be better if the salutations addressed to the Soviets and the Bolsheviks were *more frequently* accompanied by a *profound analysis* of the reasons *why* the Bolsheviks have been able to build up the discipline needed by the revolutionary proletariat?” The SLP response to the October Revolution was parochial in the very specific sense

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that it failed to grasp the international significance of the October Revolution and instead saw it as a vindication of the principles of De Leonism.

The Bolshevik Party was forged in the furnace of the tsarist empire as an instrument of struggle for proletarian power. As Lenin noted, again in *"Left-Wing" Communism*, the Bolsheviks went through 15 years of "rapid and varied succession of different forms of the movement—legal and illegal, peaceful and stormy, underground and open, local circles and mass movements, and parliamentary and terrorist forms. In no other country has there been concentrated, in so brief a period, such a wealth of forms, shades, and methods of struggle of *all* classes of modern society, a struggle which, owing to the backwardness of the country and the severity of the tsarist yoke, matured with exceptional rapidity, and assimilated most eagerly and successfully the appropriate 'last word' of American and European political experience."

The historical peculiarities of tsarist Russia, its combined and uneven development, placed the question of power before all classes. Tsarism as a mode of rule was a hideous living anachronism at least from the time of the Crimean War. For would-be revolutionists of all stripes the question of power was directly posed. This is to be contrasted with the situations in Britain and America where long traditions of parliamentarism rendered the question of power remote in the views of the Second International. Imperialism and the ensuing imperialist war destroyed the Second International as a revolutionary force and ushered in the epoch of war and revolution. By its program and deeds, Bolshevism justly claimed the mantle of revolutionary Marxism in the imperialist epoch.

Following World War I there was a burning need to forge a Communist Party in Britain affiliated to the newly proclaimed Communist International. The bulk of the British SLP ultimately rejected the struggle to forge such a party because they did not want to abandon their De Leonism. The bed they were invited to enter had its boundaries clearly demarcated by the program of the Communist International. Those boundaries were to be maintained and made more secure by political struggle.

At the Second Congress of the Communist International, Gallacher denounced the British Socialist Party (biggest component of the just-proclaimed CPGB) as "hopelessly reformist." In reply Lenin remarked: "But the general tenor and content of all the resolutions we have adopted here show with absolute clarity that we demand a change, in this spirit, in the tactics of the British Socialist Party; the only correct tactics of Gallacher's friends will consist in their joining the Communist Party without delay, so as to modify its tactics in the spirit of the resolutions adopted here" ("Speech on Affiliation to the British Labour Party," 6 August 1920). The failure of the majority of the SLP to shed the ideological baggage of De Leonism and find their way to the Communist International was to the detriment of the embryonic CPGB, contributing to its stillbirth.

Trotskyists hail Daniel De Leon for his struggle against social-democratic revisionism and his very real contributions to revolutionary Marxism. But Bolshevism, culminating in the October Revolution, carried Marxism to a new and incomparably higher plane—solving many of the problems and dilemmas previously confronting Marxists at the beginning of the imperialist epoch. ■

## George Breitman...

(continued from page 5)

project of collecting, editing and publishing the writings of Leon Trotsky from the years of his final exile, 1929-40. Despite serious medical afflictions, Breitman carried through this work to completion, producing a 14-volume series over the next ten years. During this same period, he edited a number of other collections of Trotsky's writings, including *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* and *The Spanish Revolution, 1931-39*. And in 1982, when Jack Barnes was already dropping the ax on the heads of the oppositionists, Breitman managed to produce *The Founding of the Socialist Workers Party*, making accessible the resolutions as well as delegate lists and voting records from the first two conventions of the party. In 1981, he estimated that altogether he had been responsible for 60 books, as editor, co-editor or consulting editor. And certainly he played a crucial role in assuring the publication of the series of posthumous writings and speeches of James P. Cannon, especially the last volume published by Pathfinder, *The Communist League of America, 1932-34*, which Breitman was chiefly responsible for preparing, but which the SWP published only after he was expelled and without crediting his work on the book.

During the last two years of his life, we were fortunate enough to have been able to establish some fraternal collaboration with comrade Breitman in pursuit of common archival and publishing interests. We exchanged missing documents from our respective archival collections, for example. We shared a common devotion to compiling full and accurate sets of leading committee minutes from the time of the formation of the Communist League of America and minutes of the International Secretariat and International Executive Committee of the Fourth International.

More importantly, Breitman pushed, assisted, advised and inspired us to undertake to assemble and publish more of the writings and speeches of James P. Cannon. We fully intend to push on with this endeavor.

One ought to be able to collaborate with others for specific purposes even when those involved don't otherwise agree, as, for example, the Trotskyists did in the 1930s in the Dewey Commission, working to refute the slanders of the Moscow Trials. There are too few people in the world who share our and George Breitman's concern for documenting the full and authentic history of world Trotskyism.

Now another, and almost the last, living link to our political past has slipped away. George Breitman was personally a dedicated and admirable man. He simply drifted into the centrism which made him blind to the decay of the SWP and its organizational consequences until much too late. We could not but admire his tenacity and evident sincerity in seeking to uphold the banner of Trotskyism, as he understood it, against the SWP's now explicit revisionism. Through his dedication to preserving the legacy of Leon Trotsky and James P. Cannon, George Breitman performed an inestimable service to present and future communists. We are deeply grateful for our too brief association with comrade Breitman, and we mourn his passing. ■

## Healyite Diaspora...

(continued from page 56)

Trotskyism on the Russian question, as evidenced by the letter from Bob Archer reprinted on page 55. In the same vein, the Australian CL wrote to the Melbourne Spartacist branch that: "not only is your position on these issues wrong, (Poland, the USSR and Afghanistan) but you do not exhibit a serious desire to analyse these questions from the standpoint of the interests of the international working class." To them, clearly, the Trotskyist defense of the Soviet Union has nothing to do with the "interests of the international working class."

The North-dominated IC can aptly be labeled "Healyism without Healy": they deny everything and renounce nothing. Only those who long for a new Healy could accept North's claim that he and his wing of the "IC" somehow remained aloof and pure from the corrupt political deals that Healy consummated with despotic Middle Eastern regimes—the deals evidently used to finance the huge deficits run up by the "daily press" of a party without members. The sterile and fake "mass" press of the British WRP was for endless years the *sine qua non* of existence and the main source of pride for their "international."

The Northites also proudly uphold the multi-year Healyite "Security and the Fourth International" slander campaign which claimed that central leaders of the U.S. Socialist Workers Party (SWP), including back in Trotsky's time, were actually long-time agents of the capitalist and Stalinist secret police. Indeed, North won his political spurs by being Healy's main accomplice in retailing the Stalinist lie that Trotsky was killed by his "own people." North, whose own origins are shadowy, took over the WL when Freddie Mazelis, briefly the WL leader after Healy's purge of Tim Wohlforth, penned a couple of polemics against the SWP which apparently showed insufficient enthusiasm for Healy's new creative contribution to "Marxism": namely, that the SWP's degeneration was simply the work of conscious government agents in its top leadership.

When Workers League agent Alan Gelfand was expelled from the SWP, he sued the party in federal court in 1979, citing Healy's slanders to "prove" that the FBI controlled the SWP. He demanded the court reinstate him as an SWP member. Thus Gelfand, vigorously supported by North

### WORKERS VANGUARD

20 May 1977, 27 April 1979



As agents for Libyan despot Qaddafi, Healyites crossed the class line in blood. Workers Vanguard exposed WRP's Libyan connection, denounced Healyites' fronting for execution of Iraqi Communists.



Workers Vanguard



Workers Press

**Dubious hack David ("proud to be a Healyite") North was installed as WL leader to spearhead "Security and the Fourth International" frame-up campaign. Left: Spartacists picket Healy/North slanderfest, May 1979.**

and financed by Healy, demanded that the U.S. government should regulate the internal life of the SWP, all in the name of "democracy," of course. Since the Healyite implosion, North has denounced Banda/Slaughter for having finally disavowed both the Gelfand provocation and the use of the capitalist courts against leftists. North is hell-bent to continue the combination of fake "dialectics" gobbledygook and paranoid "security" fetishism which taken together were Healy's well worked out system of mystification and intimidation of the hapless membership.

With the lid off, recriminations are flying, but no one is coming too clean on the various scandals. The Banda/Slaughterites have now reversed themselves, claiming that Healy never had mercenary relations with bourgeois regimes after all, while North says Arab gold was taken but only by Healy and his British WRP. Meanwhile the Australian Bandaitees say the Northites there were on the take. At a recent public meeting the Northite Australian SLL admitted that it had printed *The Bell of Saigon*, an exile organ of the fascistic Vietnamese thugs who have been physically attacking leftist and labor meetings. This link with *The Bell of Saigon* was justified, they say, as part of a turn by the SLL toward "commercial enterprise, commercial print work."

The anti-Sovietism of all wings of the fractured Healyite tendency mandates their continued support to counterrevolutionary Polish Solidarność, preventing any wing of the Healyites from renouncing the British WRP's redbaiting set-up of miners' leader Arthur Scargill in 1983 on the very eve of the miners strike, the militant class confrontation which was the overwhelming fact of British political life for one bitter year. Just before the Blackpool Trades Union Congress dominated by the anti-communist, anti-strike labor "statesmen," the WRP's *News Line* published Scargill's statement, made months earlier, correctly condemning Solidarność as anti-socialist. Fleet Street had a field day and the TUC's anti-Soviet fat cats seized the club supplied by the Healyites to launch an anti-Scargill witchhunt, as a pre-emptive blow against the upcoming miners strike.

### Throwing the Baby Out with the Bathwater

Banda/Slaughter have shed some of the most exposed lunacies of the Healy cult, but after discarding Healy they

now move to abandon any claim to historic continuity with Trotskyism including the IC's correct if partial struggle against Pabloism in 1953. The most extreme expression of this is a convoluted, telescoped, skewed and fundamentally mendacious discourse on the Fourth International by Mike Banda called "Twenty Seven Reasons Why the IC Should be Buried Forthwith and the Fourth International Built" (*Workers Press*, 7 February). Banda's willfully ignorant attack on those who fought against Pablo's abandonment of the Trotskyist program is mainly a stupid attack on James Cannon (who was in fact the finest communist politician ever produced in America and also an intimate political collaborator of Trotsky's for many years). What supreme chutzpah has this creature Banda, whose sole personal/political credential is that he spent 25 years framing up and expelling people for Gerry Healy. Our article, "Genesis of Pabloism" (*Spartacist* No. 21, Fall 1972) written 14 years ago, stands today as a pretty good answer to Banda's "god that failed" view of Trotskyist history.

One look at those with whom the Banda/Slaughter wing now chooses to associate will give a full sense of their direction of motion. Those invited to a recent WRP conference in England included the remnants of the grouping around Labourite wretch (and scab) Alan Thornett, the virulently anti-Soviet group of British followers of the French Parti Communiste Internationaliste (formerly Organisation Communiste Internationaliste [OCI]) and Workers Power, whose "plague on both your houses" stance toward the 1953 IC fight against Pabloite liquidationism fits in neatly with Banda's thesis that the FI was never any good. For all their "tactical" and cliquist differences, what unites these centrist pseudo-Trotskyists is a strident Stalinophobia which on key issues of the international Cold War finds them lined up behind their own bourgeoisie and its labor lieutenants.

Over the years, Healy/Banda's rotten organization has run through many subjective revolutionaries and spit them out as embittered anti-communists. Healy perverted dialectics into a brain-numbing mumbo jumbo. But dialectics, an understanding of contradiction, is essential to

**WORKERS REVOLUTIONARY PARTY**  
International Relations Bureau

21 (B) Old Town,  
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April 28, 1986.

Eibhlin McDonald,  
Spartacist League Central Committee.

Dear Comrade,

Thank you for your letters of March 12 and April 14 1986, which were discussed at the meeting of our Central Committee held on Sunday, April 20. I have been asked to reply to them.

First of all, may I apologise for the Comrades in our office who misplaced the April 12 letter, so that the Party was unable to consider in time your request to send observers to sessions of our eighth congress.

The Committee felt that it would in any case be wrong at this point to enter into formal relations to the extent of receiving your observers at our congress. The differences you mention run very deep. For example, the WRP defends the right of Polish workers to have free trades unions, and we demand the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

We have, of course, no intention of limiting the public discussions and informal contacts that have developed over the last few months.

In particular, I am glad to confirm that your representative will be the first to be called in the discussion at the meeting this Wednesday night.

Yours fraternally,  
s/Bob Archer

Marxists, not least of all in dealing with the reformist workers parties and Stalinist bureaucracies. The WRP denies the dual character of the Stalinist bureaucracies, viewing them as counterrevolutionary through and through. The Healyites were always an Anglocentric tendency; Banda/Slaughter are confined (not coincidentally) to the two most Labourite countries in the world (Britain and Australia) and are evidently headed toward reconciliation with social democracy.

Out of all the components adhering to the early International Committee, there is only one today which retains its programmatic integrity and is based on true international democratic centralism: the international Spartacist tendency. In offering an alternative to both trivial Healyism and social-democratic betrayal, we concluded in "Healyism Implodes":

"'Morality' for Marxists is inextricably tied to program. The Spartacists' unwavering adherence to revolutionary Trotskyism—our genuine, concrete defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism and against the treacherous Stalinist bureaucracy, our commitment to building an international party of proletarian revolution—this has been our political compass. From that also comes a certain superstructure, a certain morality. We are fortunate to have been the heirs to an unbroken tradition which started with the American party of the Russian Revolution—the Communist Party—and continued through James Cannon's SWP to the Spartacist League, the party which is today acknowledged as the Trotskyist party in the United States." ■

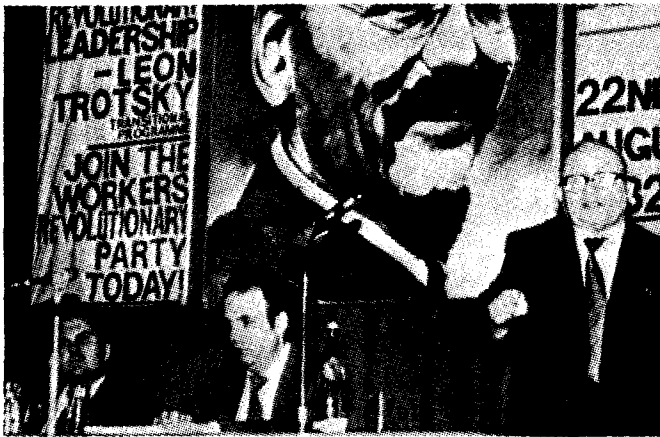
**Genesis of Pabloism**

"Genesis of Pabloism" (*Spartacist* No. 21, Fall 1972) is an analysis of the revisionist response by tendencies in the Trotskyist movement to new problems posed by Stalinist expansion at the end of World War Two. "The destruction of the Fourth International by Pabloist revisionism, paralleled by organizational fracturing into numerous competing international blocs, necessitates unremitting struggle for its rebirth."



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Mitchell, North and founder-leader Healy, 1982.



Founder-leader Healy, M. Banda and Slaughter, 1983.

# Healyite Diaspora

Since the spectacular implosion last October of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) and its Potemkin Village "International Committee" (IC), Gerry Healy's once-monolithic organization has shattered into smithereens. (See "Healyism Implodes," *Spartacist* No. 36-37, Winter 1985-86.) Self-styled founder-leader Healy had apparently become too old and feeble to continue to enforce the IC's principle of unity—that Gerry Healy's whims are the essence of "Marxism." Since he was expelled by the WRP he has virtually disappeared; those who went with him, including the actress Vanessa Redgrave, today constitute a dwindling, if well-heeled, cult minus the cult figure, careening along into oblivion with their obligatory daily paper and a handful of followers in Spain and Greece.

With the systematically brutal organizational practices of the Healy/Mike Banda machine partly blown away, a political Pandora's Box was opened. Manifesting a diversity of political and cliquist tendencies and widespread confusion internationally, the newly anti-Healy forces began to fracture almost immediately. The IC had a second split in February when the British leadership of Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter refused to recognize the "political authority" of the dwindling remnants of the "International Committee" now controlled by David North of the "fraternal" American party, the Workers League (WL). North supporters in Britain took a small minority out of the WRP plus most of the Young Socialists and formed the "International Communist Party."

North's power play began when the Slaughter/Banda wing played the "IC" card in the hope that the already irreversible split with Healy in Britain could be finalized while keeping the lid on the political ferment unleashed in the ranks when the Healyite thieves fell out. Banda/Slaughter's device was a party "re-registration": you could continue as a member if you undertook to subordinate yourself to the "authority" of the IC. This use of the fictitious IC as supreme arbiter had long since been Healy's way of foisting his will on the organization: if you want to object or even to discuss it more, you are thereby exposed

as an "anti-internationalist." Banda/Slaughter realized too late that they had strengthened a fictional monster: the IC imprimatur now belongs to North, the Healy of the second mobilization, to be used in the same deeply cynical and truly anti-internationalist manner.

A month later, the British split was echoed in Australia where North got the majority, with a substantial minority of the SLL breaking off to become the Communist League (CL), Banda/Slaughter's lone international affiliate. Internationally, North emerged as the apparently dominant force, maintaining control over the U.S., German, Sri Lankan and Peruvian IC satellites, as well as the Australian majority. In June, the Northites reported that their Peruvian group had come out with an open denunciation of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and the entire history of the Fourth International, while splitting with the Northites in the direction of Stalinism. Now, Mike Banda and his brother Tony, taking a group with them, have split with the Slaughterite WRP amidst squalid wrangling over finances and property.

The North-controlled IC has clung to every despicable hallmark of Healyism; the Banda/Slaughter wing has now shamefacedly disavowed some of its most grotesque expressions. But both wings have maintained programmatic continuity with the anti-Sovietism which has been a consistent hallmark of Healyism for two decades. The IC under Healy, Banda, Slaughter and North gave fulsome support to virtually every hostile force encircling the Soviet Union—from Khomeini's Iran to the Afghan mullahs to Polish Solidarność. In the late 1970s this culminated in the WRP's corrupt political subordination to Arab bourgeois regimes. Perhaps the most appalling betrayal was the support by Healy and all his IC satellites to the murder of 21 Iraqi Communists by the Iraq Ba'ath regime. The Healyites gloried in this hideous act, painting the militant Communist oil workers, the vanguard of the working class, as agents of counterrevolutionary Stalinism.

Today, the WRP proudly proclaims its distance from

*continued on page 54*