

Politics of the Guardian split (II)

The Guardian and the antiwar movement

By RANDY FURST
and HARRY RING
(Second in a series)

(Randy Furst was a member of the Guardian editorial staff beginning in October 1967. In January of this year, he was elected to the newspaper's five member coordinating committee. Shortly afterward, he joined the Young Socialist Alliance. In April, he was fired from the Guardian for his political views. Harry Ring has followed the political evolution of the Guardian since its founding in 1948.)

Last week we reported the main facts in the split of the staff of the Guardian and the emergence, at least temporarily, of two Guardians.

The original Guardian is publishing from "clandestine" offices under the continuing stewardship of Jack Smith and Irving Beinin. The staff workers who left are putting out an amorphously anarchistic-oriented *Liberated Guardian*. They are publishing from 339 Lafayette St. in New York, a building which houses assorted pacifist and libertarian groupings, including Dave Dellinger's *Liberation* magazine.

Assailing the anarchistic outlook of the splitters and their inexcusable use of violence as a means of settling the dispute, the editors of the regular Guardian assert that the basic issue is preservation of the paper's "Marxist-Leninist" policies.

The Guardian is a pro-socialist publication. But anyone having a minimum acquaintance with both Leninism and with the twists and turns of Guardian politics would be excused for a certain scepticism regarding the durability of the declaration of adherence to Leninism.

It is generally agreed that Lenin's principal contribution to revolutionary political theory was his concept of the revolutionary party—a politically homogenous organization capable of acting as the combat vanguard of the working class and leading that class to political power.

Such a party could be built, he insisted, only on the basis of having a worked-out Marxist program and by assembling cadres on the basis of agreement with such a program. Program, he argued, determines the party—not vice versa.

The Guardian's approach is the very opposite. Lenin argued by word and example that the function of a revolutionary paper is to hammer out, to clarify the political ideas on which a political party must be built. The Guardian, to the contrary, has persistently sought to somehow latch onto a movement, regardless of program, and let the future worry about political clarity.

This approach was exemplified by its adaptation to and encouragement of the ultraleftism which contributed to the demise of SDS.

Lenin also taught that an effective revolutionary party could be built only in the process of relating to mass struggles. While rejecting every form of opportunism, he waged unrelenting war against ultraleft sectarianism, insisting on the need to develop the broadest possible united-front actions with other political groupings in the fight for specific common objectives.

The test of war

And one of the central places where Lenin categorically asserted there could be no abstention from the mass movement was in the struggle against war—and most particularly against a war being waged by one's "own" bourgeoisie.

That test—the test of war—is one the Smith-Beinin team has flunked rather miserably.

The U.S. effort to smash the Indochinese revolution has become a focal point of its drive to contain the world revolutionary process. By the same token, the magnificent resistance of the Vietnamese has proven a powerful catalyst for the world revolutionary movement, including the radicalization that is taking place in this country.

Solidarity with the Vietnamese liberation movement, measured by any and all political considerations, is a key responsibility for American revolutionaries.

But the rhetoric of solidarity is insufficient. Meaningful solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution comes down to a single, concrete objective—helping to get American imperialist forces out of Vietnam and all of Southeast Asia. Clearly, that aim can be accomplished only if there is a sufficiently powerful mass pressure for the total withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. To substitute other objectives and demands—no matter how radical the rhetoric—is an abdication of revolutionary responsibility.

Nor can it be effectively argued, as the Guardian has often tried, that the building of mass actions for withdrawal from Vietnam contradicts or interferes with the building of a revolutionary, anti-imperialist movement. The simple fact is that the ongoing mass actions against the war have proven the most effective instrument for developing radical, anti-imperialist and anticapitalist consciousness and winning recruits to a radical commitment.

Those who have failed or refused to recognize this have found themselves—at the height of the political radicalization—in crisis.

The demise of SDS can be traced largely to its abandonment of the antiwar struggle. After making a key contribution by organizing the first national antiwar demonstration in Washington in 1965, it threw in the towel and declared for a perspective of substituting "community organizing," which allegedly would "stop the seventh war from now." While for a period

it may have seemed otherwise, that was the beginning of the end of SDS.

Mass actions derided

And, for the Guardian too, the war has been a major political stumbling block. From the time Smith and Beinin assumed control of the paper in 1967, they were in the forefront of those who irresponsibly and light-mindedly debunked the worth of mass actions against the war. They promoted the thoroughly false notion that "resistance" to abstract "imperialism" by a few was of more significance than building mass resistance to a concrete, ongoing imperialist war.

In an Oct. 7, 1967, editorial a few months after the Beinin-Smith takeover, the Guardian declared the need to "move from protest to resistance." This echoed the ultraleft notion that a small but hardy band of "window-trashers" could be more effective in fighting the war than masses mobilized around the demand for immediate withdrawal.

Reporting on the huge Oct. 21, 1967, Pentagon demonstration, Jack Smith was impressed not by the size and militancy of the demonstration, or the clear-cut character of the demand for U.S. withdrawal, but what he saw as the element of "resistance" in the action.

"Content," Smith wrote Oct. 28 of that year, "is being injected into the anti-Vietnam-war movement's rhetoric of 'from protest to resistance' . . ."

The sort of "content" Smith had in mind that would presumably lay the basis for a more radical movement may be gleaned from his description of the rally at the Pentagon that day:

"Aside from its superfluity, the parking lot rally [at the Pentagon] was notable for a revolutionary speech by Carl Davidson, SDS interorganizational secretary . . . 'Repression,' he said, 'must be met, confronted, stopped by whatever means possible . . .'. The next major demonstrations, he said, must be aimed at disrupting draft centers. 'We must tear them down,' he said, concluding, 'and burn them down if necessary.'"

The Guardian persisted in advocating isolated acts of disruption. A March 2, 1968, editorial advised: "The war machine and those who support it must be disrupted. The disruption must be such that . . . Johnson and the warmongers may no longer find imperialism profitable."

(Wrote "Marxist-Leninist" Beinin in the Aug. 24, 1968, issue: "Disruption is not a program, and sometimes it can be a cover for lack of a program. Yet this year, without an effective alternative, disruption seems to be the most creative thing to do for the left in most of the country.")

Perhaps the low point came when a March 30, 1968, editorial baldly



MASS ACTION. The Oct. 21, 1967, Washington demonstration, which began with a massive rally at the Lincoln Memorial and culminated with a huge protest at the Pentagon, gave a tremendous spur to popular antiwar opposition. To the editors of the Guardian, the whole significance of that action lay not in the massive turnout but in the acts of individual resistance by a small minority at the Pentagon.

asserted: "Opposing the war in 1968 is not a radical demand. It is a liberal demand, founded on the correct premise that U.S. imperialism is losing in Vietnam."

And an Aug. 24, 1968, editorial on the eve of the Chicago Democratic Party convention wailed: ". . . public opinion is against continuing the war. This leaves our movement in an ambiguous position. Our thousands will demonstrate in Chicago to end the war. Eugene McCarthy also wants to end the war, as do George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey and Lyndon Johnson. Both the Republicans and Democrats want to end the war."

The editorial continued, "Whether or not these politicians and parties actually seek to end the war—and we think they would prefer to disengage from Vietnam, though on terms favorable for the continuation of imperialism—the fact is that they have adopted our rhetoric. This would not be such a terrible loss if it were not that rhetoric, unfortunately, is our most prized possession."

It's difficult to think of a more glaring example of a superficial, light-minded attitude toward so serious a question. Apart from how the course of events has demolished the prognosis, it's apparent that the Guardian editors didn't even understand what the antiwar movement is about.

Of course, if the movement were simply "against the war," the rhetoric could be easily adopted by every faker in the country.

But no wing of the capitalist class or its political spokesmen are about to adopt and carry out a program of organizing mass action in the streets, not simply "against war," but for the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam.

Such a program cannot be coopted because it goes directly and decisively against the most basic interests of imperialism. It is precisely what gives the antiwar movement its validity, and its revolutionary potential.

But, it will be argued, the Guardian changed its mind. In August of 1969, it declared it had reconsidered and decided that mass actions for immediate withdrawal are in fact objectively anti-imperialist and should be supported.

We'll discuss that argument next week.

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