

(11)

13 January 1967
Ithaca, New York

Lou Davis
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dear Comrade Lou,

I'm sorry I haven't replied before now to your letter but I've been very busy with school and political work. And even now I can't make an adequate reply, but must wait until my final exams are over, Jan. 31st. However, I did want to write you a short letter before then.

The Baltimore business has concerned me too. I'm going to write Cdes. Sherwood and Kaufman a letter on the question but it must wait for a couple of weeks; I'll send you a copy when I complete it. In this letter I'm going to go into some detail about the recent events, including discussing each one of their charges specifically, but in the meantime I urge you to consider the following.

There are two separate issues involved in the Sherwood-Kaufman business.

First, the specific charges that they make against the comrades in New York. From a distance, as you will appreciate, it is not easy to evaluate each and every charge on its own merits. The PB minutes say that Baltimore omitted mentioning the Negro struggle from a mass leaflet on the grounds that it was intended to reach white workers, and judged that this was an opportunistic omission. The Baltimore people say "LIE!", you are calling us opportunists on the Negro question, it wasn't our mass leaflet, the Negro struggle is mentioned in our mass circulation material, etc. From 500 miles away it is impossible to know exactly every nuance of the particular issue. Did they omit mention of the Negro struggle or not? If so, why? (They don't reply directly to the criticism.) If this was not their mass leaflet, where did they intend to distribute it? Do they understand the difference between saying that a comrade has made an "opportunistic" omission on a leaflet, and calling him an "opportunist"? And by going only to one side, you of course learn only one side of the story. If you cannot judge the conflict from afar--and I think that the essence of this conflict can be judged from afar, and that the specific facts involved are only a part and not the most important part of the evaluation--but if you cannot judge it from afar, then you should get both sides of the story, directly, as concerns the specific facts of the case. (Again, I don't think the "facts" thus far presented are as important as other considerations.)

Second, and most important, is a political evaluation of each side in the dispute, and, if it comes to that, a choosing of sides.

Sherwood-Kaufman do not say that the New York comrades have missed some opportunities for interventions, have been too slow on getting out the minutes, have incorrectly appraised their political position in an unfair way, have made this or that bureaucratic response to criticism. Since political perfection is a limit which can only be approached but not attained, such criticisms within a communist tendency are always plausible, although not necessarily true. I have made such criticisms myself and have been on the receiving end of them too. Properly made, such criticisms are necessary to improve our functioning and should be welcomed.

But Comrades Sherwood and Kaufman are saying something qualitatively different. That is, they are not just making a lot of deep criticisms, they are making a lot of criticisms in the context of a judgment that the New York comrades are unfit to lead a revolutionary party, i.e., are not revolutionary in their politics.

That is the only content that one can give to their charges that the leadership are "liars," "slanderers," "chronic dilletantes," who do not realize that "the class struggle amounts to more than mouthing a cliché, daydreaming an ambitious project, and showing up at a demonstration with a slogan [which] while maybe not very understandable nevertheless identifies you as the red." And the method they have used to advance their views within the organization shows that they thus assess the leadership.

Now, they may be right or wrong about their views, but they have clearly shown that they wish to destroy the national leadership politically. And of course if one feels that a certain group is a bunch of liars and slanderers who wish to drive out healthy active comrades involved in the class struggle, then he should undertake to wage a struggle to the death against them and destroy them.

The task of every member of the SL now becomes: to assess the Baltimore evaluation of the national leadership and decide whether or not it is true, and to assess the political quality of the Baltimore comrades themselves, who are, implicitly or explicitly, offering themselves as a political alternative. The facts presented by each side in the present dispute, insofar as they can be judged from afar, are of course a necessary element in such an assessment, but naturally many other things must enter in too: we must go back and judge the behavior of each side in the past, its present positions, its present actions in relation to other questions, and so on. If the New York comrades are lazy liars, it should show up elsewhere than just in relation to Baltimore, especially in the political program, theoretical positions, etc., held by them. (We didn't attack the SWP majority just because they refused to send people to the South, but also, and more importantly, because of their revisionist line on Cuba, and the two were related.)

This is a short letter so I don't want to make such an assessment here; anyway, I think you yourself can do that adequately. I will just put down the result of my assessment; I do not think that the present leadership (including myself) are perfect in every sphere, least of all in regard to seizing every opportunity for interventions, but, taken as a collective, we are revolutionary, we are Leninists and Trotskyists. I do not think that Sherwood and Kaufman are incompetent in everything that they do, but I do think that they are a non-Leninist tendency. (Any living organization will include currents which deviate from the main line, perhaps currents which could deviate basically: the question is, which dominates. When such deviant currents are freed from control by the basically correct one, they can swiftly develop the full force of their views. Thus, on the CC of Lenin's Bolshevik party, you could always find individuals and groupings which on their own would not have been Bolshevik after a short time. This did not mean that Lenin's party was any the less Bolshevik for including them.) Within the centralist SL, the political tendency represented implicitly by Sherwood and Kaufman will behave in relation to the outside world more or less like Bolsheviks. On their own, these comrades would not be a Bolshevik tendency. Since they now raise themselves up as an

independent grouping, it is correct to assess them politically in this manner.

Having made this assessment and chosen sides, one must still deal with all the charges made by Baltimore. As I said, it is impossible to decide on every isolated charge on its own merits from a distance. (If an SWPer told me that Ode. Lou had, say, voted to exclude a YSA speaker from an anti-war meeting in Philadelphia, I couldn't answer him on that point by referring to the facts, since I don't know the facts in that case. I would reply that 1.) that seems unlikely, given his past and present beliefs, and that 2.) of course, there might be some exceptional circumstances in this case and I would have to hear his side of the case before making a judgment (and I wouldn't go to Philadelphia and talk only to YSAers before deciding), but that 3.) in any case, even if Ode. Lou did make a real error in that instance, the general line he is upholding is a revolutionary one, and the SWP's is counter-revolutionary, and that is what is of basic importance.) In any event, my own response to the Baltimore charges is that: even if every single factual charge made by Baltimore were true (which I strongly doubt), then that would mean that within my, revolutionary, tendency the leadership was making some mistakes, maybe even big ones, in dealing with a non-revolutionary clique, and it would be my duty, at the proper time, to try to correct those errors within my tendency. In no case would I take a neutral or pro-Baltimore attitude.

If the Baltimore people had made all their charges within the context of genuine basic political solidarity with the New York people, it would be an entirely different matter. Then we would be faced with a simple inner-tendency dispute on important organizational and tactical matters and it would be entirely permissible to vote and act with the Baltimore people. But it should be obvious that they have by their own declarations made themselves a basic opposition tendency, and so have shifted the question from one of organizational and tactical matters to one of political judgement. They have forced us to judge each side on the basis of what fundamental political trend it represents, and there can be no question about that. And in any case I think that 95% of their attacks on New York and praise for themselves is false, so in this case the secondary tactical matters line up with the basic political ones, as they usually do anyway: but they are two separate matters, and should be treated as such.

I strongly urge you to read Trotsky's IN DEFENSE OF MARXISM and Cannon's STRUGGLE FOR A PROLETARIAN PARTY again; the contents of those books mirror (in an infinitely more important dispute) the recent events in our organization.

We would like very much to see you if you would have time to visit Ithaca. We could set up a small meeting for you if you chose, or you could spend the time just informally visiting with us. Let us know if you can come.

Comradely,

Doug Hainline

cc: Files, PB

Post-script. As I mentioned, I'm writing a letter in a couple of weeks (a refinement and expansion of an earlier one which I think you have seen) which takes up in detail each and every factual charge made by Baltimore and explores its merits. But on looking over your letter to me of 14 December I see that there are some questions you have which should be answered right away, and others which won't be taken up in my letter to Baltimore because they are your ideas alone. If you have a copy of your letter look at it because it lists a number of points which I'll answer briefly point by point.

(1) (Regarding the lateness of SPARTACIST 8 and the conference minutes). Yes, they're late. If they are late because of legitimate reasons, let's help New York out by increasing our pledge and pestering those who don't pay theirs (like Baltimore) so that our National Office can be staffed by more than one full-time functionary and tired comrades who come in for a few hours after work. If they're late because someone in New York isn't energetic enough, let's keep up a mild and friendly pressure and we will probably see improvements such as have occurred with SPARTACISTS frequency. (If you are disturbed because SPARTACIST is a month late, you should have seen it a couple of years ago. There has been about a 3-fold increase in frequency.)

(2) Sherwood's Xerox copy. You ask "what sort of nonsense is this to come out of the Political Bureau of a Leninist organization." It is the sort of entirely understandable irritated "nonsense" which the torrent of dishonest nonsense from Sherwood is extremely likely to provoke. If any comrade were so inept as to not keep copies of articles and letters he wrote, and then wrote and requested me to take time off from my work to go through the files, get out his article, go downtown and have it Xeroxed, and then mail it to him, I would be a little annoyed even if he were the best of comrades. And if he were not the best of comrades but rather someone who didn't pay his pledge, I would be even more annoyed. And if such a request was from people who were calling me a liar and slanderer and chronic dilattante, etc. I would be triply annoyed, to say the least. I would send him his copy, with a bill, although I suspect the bill wouldn't be paid. However, I entirely understand and empathize with a response such as the one in the PB minutes. Yes, our leading comrades do have something better to do than to nastily turn down requests from local comrades. It depends on the nature of the requests. Your requests for aid when you were in the YSA--how were they met? That should give you a measure of how serious requests from local comrades are treated.

(3) On the Black Power dispute, I haven't seen the documents from each side so I cannot say anything about that right now. I will soon see the complete set of documents and then will write something about that. In other words, I'll get both sides of the question before coming to a conclusion, including talking to the Baltimore people (by phone if necessary), as well as the New York comrades. Please, Lou, do the same. (As far as "opportunism" goes, I do have one piece of absolutely clear evidence, a quotation from a recent Baltimore SL leaflet entitled "Merry Xmas from GM--You're being laid off,"

"We feel that this country is too good to be run for the bosses' private interest."

This, of course, doesn't prove that the Baltimore people are opportunists on every question and on every occasion. It does prove that the charge that they made an opportunistic omission in one of their leaflets is not on the face of it impossible.)

(4) On the SPARTACIST press "blackout" of their campaign. I think that a short article in the next SPARTACIST after the election would

possibly be appropriate, depending on what else was available. The Baltimore people should send in an article so that the PB has something in front of it to discuss.

(5) As for what Verret and you wrote to the Baltimore comrades, the PB isn't responsible for that. I do not think that everything that both of you said was correct, by the way. (Although if any comrade ever starts praising the national leadership the way Sherwood and Kaufman praise themselves ("herculean") I'll know something's wrong.) One of the negative results of antics like that of Sherwood-Kaufman is that some comrades, in a justified angry response, may wish to take actions against them that violate our democratic centralist practice, instead of defeating them politically.

As for what Ithaca did: the difference is that we were raising questions of a political nature in the pre-convention discussion period, not after the convention. In any case, until we have a formally-written set of organizational rules, and a set of precedents embodied in the minutes, questions of this sort are necessarily going to be unclear. What is required is that comrades act in good faith, which we in Ithaca did. The Baltimore people deliberately hope to provoke the PB; we were simply ignorant.

Lou, get out your minutes and documents from Baltimore again. As objectively as possible, go over the minutes and note what they contain about Baltimore (if necessary, substitute Ithaca for Baltimore). Then read the Baltimore response. How in the world can you possibly term the PB references to Baltimore as "abuse" and "slander" (your terms). Abusers and slanderers (yes, and liars and dilattantes too) there are, but not in New York, not in this case. Read the minutes for the last 2 or 3 years and note how often criticisms are made of comrades, including self-criticisms of New York itself. Only wilful ignorance can make someone see abuse and slander in the PB minutes.

You agree that their "method is bad." Bad is not the word for it. Let us suppose that my well-known ultra-leftism, super-Bolshevism and chronic hardness were interpreted by the PB in some specific case as "caving in to Posadism" and characterized thusly in the national minutes. Assume that it was an unjust criticism, or one which was formally false because it was stating as a present fact what was only the logical future development of present tendencies. (A lot of people in the pre-1917 Russian movement felt that Lenin was slandering them when he called them "liquidators," etc. In reality, they were victims of Lenin's dialectical foresight.) Now what if I responded to those criticisms or "slanders" by an attempt to wreck the organization--something, let us say, much more blatant than that which Baltimore is doing, since you don't seem to see such designs on their part. What should you do? You should first get both sides of the story and then try to correct the PB if it was wrong--but you should fight me to the death, politically, even if I was only the innocent victim of the PB's error and my own inflated egotism. (Only egotism could lead to an attempt to wreck the organization.)

You read the minutes of 14 Nov. as an attempt by the PB to split the organization. I cannot refute you, since there is simply nothing on which you base your charge. Unless you mean this: the PB isn't going to take any organizational measures against Sherwood-Kaufman as long as they adhere to discipline. But it will respond, and has responded, politically to their attacks. If this drives these sensitive egotists out of the organization, that is too bad. But a political response by the PB is necessary. If that is splitting, it is a necessary act. But the splitters will be Kaufman and Sherwood.

No, there will not be any YSA-style expulsions, although in the YSA Sherwood and Kaufman would have been booted out long ago. How can you say the PB is preparing a split? I do not understand this at all.

I frankly expect Sherwood and Kaufman to leave the revolutionary movement in an injured huff, although I would be delighted to see myself proved wrong. But their loss would be of minimal importance, to be honest. It is you who is important in this dispute, and I implore you to get the fullest information from both sides before making any more political decisions. Make up a list of all your specific criticisms of the New York people, meet with them and discuss with them. If you still agree with Baltimore that they are only a bunch of liars, slanderers, chronic dil tantes seeking to drive class struggle Hercules' out of the movement, then so be it. But I think that careful consideration of the whole dispute will prove that it is Kaufman and Sherwood who have been doing the lying and slandering.

If you have the time, please write to me as well--I have been at some distance from the whole dispute and have a different slant on it. Or phone if necessary. (Our number: 607-277-1619). And I repeat our invitation to you. (Also, if you are still undecided, perhaps I could come to Philadelphia for a while during the first week in February.)

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PPS: Since I wrote the above pages I've learned something else that might interest you, regarding the so-called Spartacist "press blackout".

Before the campaign was over there should have been an article in Spartacist to encourage our Baltimore readers to aid the campaign. Why wasn't there? Because the decision to make the campaign (the final, concrete decision) made in between issues, i.e. after the last issue that would come out before the elections had already gone to press. Any article on the campaign would have been in an issue which came out after the election.

Should there have been (or be) an article after the election is over? Space in Spartacist is very limited: for everything that goes in, something else must come out. For instance, our picket of the SANE rally, which exposed SWP-SANE continuum and which was very carefully planned, should be in the paper. It would be very useful and we need something like this on the anti-war movement to heat up the attack on the pro-imperialist peaceniks, etc. But it can't go in because other things are too important. Now, is a write-in campaign which is purely abstract (i.e. not related to any Spartacist participation in workingclass struggles, where we might get support from some ghetto group, relate the campaign to some serious work inside a union, etc.) worth having an article in the paper about? Especially one with no particular spectacular occurrences or conditions about it? (Kaufman has made similar campaigns before--if he or anybody else were to run such a campaign in, say, Mississippi it would be a different matter. Of if they had a series of physical clashes with an opponent group during the campaign, or something like that.) All one can say is that a story on such a campaign has a relatively low priority: it should possibly be in the paper if there is nothing more important. For the last couple of issues there have been more important things which would have had to be cut, so it shouldn't have been in.

But perhaps the Baltimore people or others might see in this bureaucratic machinations in New York to deprive Herculean fighters in the class struggle of any recognition, so as not to show up the rest of us lazy types (outside New York, where all the rest of the organization put together has not done a fraction of what Bob Sherwood and A. Robert Kaufman have done to advance the class struggle), or lazy types and slanderous liars to boot (in New York)? To quell such accusations, Cd. Robertson offered the Baltimore people a quarter of a page in the paper, to write a story about their campaign, even though it will take away from some other article and occupy someone several evenings to put Sherwood's article into readable English. (Is this last a slander from me? Go read the originals of Sherwood's articles.)

Please comrade, for the good of the movement, take the time to get both sides of the story when you hear a "horror tale" about us. Because many young YSAers don't try to get "both sides of the story" when they are fed horror tales about Spartacist (about all of us, you and me and especially Kaufman and Robertson--you should hear some of the stories about them), they persist in a non-revolutionary path.

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(Motion of 23 Jan. 1967 PB meeting:

"PB endorses general viewpoint of Hainline letter of 13 Jan. 1967 to Lou D. re. Baltimore."
Passed unanimously)