

Reply to Carl F.'s Document

Timing is decisive in politics. Lenin told us that. C.F. repeats it. But only to make a case that the IS is not capable of making a successful turn to agitation' in 1975. Correct timing, C.F. says on "how and when one makes a 'turn to agitation'" can be seen by the SWP's turn of 1946-7. In this document we are going to confine ourselves solely to the question of the timing of turns.

The elements that made possible the successful SWP turn in 1946-7 are absent today. Those elements were a labor upsurge and militancy (the great strike wave of 1946), a large cadre with strong roots in the working class (SWP membership of 1800), and a leadership with 20-30 years of experience in mass struggles. Since the IS lacks these elements, then where C.F. argues is there "the basis for a turn toward agitation in the US of 1975?"

Earlier in his document, C.F. had modestly ~~con-selld~~ us to wait a year or two for a turn to be feasible. But one is left with the dismaying thought that a turn couldn't be envisioned for years (until we have a labor upsurge) and possible for decades (to gain a sufficient critical mass through patient propaganda accretion, and to temper a leadership with 20-30 years experience.) How to overcome the lack of these ingredients essential to a successful turn is peculiarly not even discussed in What To Do Next. One could be left with the pessimistic thought that nothing essentially has changed in the world. Or worse, if something has, there is nothing the revolutionary Marxists can do about it. Such pessimism flows from a lack of theory of the nature of the capitalist crisis. And also it comes from a reading of revolutionary history which leads to conservative conclusions and methodology.

We are not going to reargue our theory of the nature of the capitalist crisis That was decided by the last convention. Subsequent events have only confirmed our views. Nor are we going to restate the Marxist case on the relation of consciousness to objective conditions. That is for other documents. We are only interested here in learning from the history of our movement, so as as not to repeat our past errors.

C.F. argues that the SEP in 1946 had "reason to believe that the time for the turn had come." Surely this must be grossest ~~understanding~~ understanding of revolutionary timing in the history of the movement. The SWP turn of 1946 had thr outward appearance of success. In content, it was an historical disaster. The SWP turn of 1946 was years if not decades too late. It came not at the beginning of a period of capitalist crisis, but at the very end of the last long period of capitalist crisis. Indeed, it occurred when the world was already into transistion to the long period of post war expansion which was to destroy the possibility of revolutionary agitational leadership within the working class for a generation.

The 1946 strike wave, CF's correct time for a turn, was the very last act of a crisis which had begun in 1917. That period, Lenin said, opened the period of wars and revolutions. But it was a period which closed in 1946-7, and remained closed for over twenty years. The leadership of the SWP got their 20-30 years of experience as mass leaders in the three decades of the crisis. Their tragedy was in timing. Their turn, unfortunately, was too little and too late. The turn of 1946, rather than being the success CF makes it out to be, is a damning indictment of the methodology which CF presents for the IS in 1975. Wait, he implies, until all the conditions have matured and are favorable. Don't take gambles without those conditions. Make some small gains, enough to put you a little ahead, and to confirm your belief that you are doing the right thing. Meanwhile, historical development has passed you by.

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The world economic crisis began in 1914. From then until 1939, and if you count war damage and reconstruction, until the late 40's, the means of production did not expand on a world scale. In this period the business cycles, booms and busts continued, but in the context of capitalist decay. In the US the crisis did not hit with the same intensity as in Europe until 1929 - but then it was even more intense than in Europe. This change in objective conditions, the usual historical lag, had a profound impact on the consciousness of the workers, and eventually produced a working class radicalization. While there is no one to one relation between objective and subjective conditions, nonetheless it is material conditions, being, which determines consciousness. The conditions which we live under eventually have their impact on shaping consciousness. Instability and crisis produced revolt and radicalism. A generation of prosperity produced conservatism and lack of political consciousness. The oscillations of the economy, even with a long period of crisis, had their impact on political events. Although the depression was a decade long, it was unilinear, but cyclical. It was during the economic recovery, within the context of the depression, from 1934-7, that the great working class upheaval which produced Minneapolis, San Francisco, Toledo and the organization of the CIO occurred. It was this four year period which was decisive for the future development of working class history in the next two generations.

It was in this period that the SEP made its greatest error, whose consequence was the rise of the CP as the mass force in the CIO.

Our movement was forced to begin anew in 1928, due to the triumph of Stalinism in the Comintern. The world economic crisis was already 14 years old, but was still on the horizon in the US. The original Trotskyist nucleus in the US spent the five years from 1928-33 as a propaganda group. Their activity was strictly subordinated to two tasks. First, they had to win a basic cadre to the communist program. They had to wipe away the degeneration of Communist politics, and to build a core around this revived Bolshevik program. Secondly, they had to try to reform the CP, which we still considered to be the revolutionary party. Therefore, all external activity was solely propaganda directed to the CP members to win them to the fight to reform the CP. Our comrades were successful in their first task. They failed miserably in the second one. In the five years of propaganda of the Communist League of America our numbers grew from 100 to 150 people. We made no dents in reforming the CP through propaganda.

After the rise of fascism in Germany, and the dismal role of the CP in allowing Hitler to come to power, the Trotskyists decided that the CPs were not reformable. That it was necessary to construct new revolutionary parties and a new international. They acted upon that belief.

In 1933, the Communist League, all 150 of them, turned to agitation. They decided to build a revolutionary workers party in the only way it has ever been built, by revolutionaries contending to give leadership in agitational struggle. In 1933 they adopted the general slogan "Turn from a propaganda circle to mass work." To do so, Cannon relates, they had to fight sectarianism, "the determined resistance from comrades who had adapted themselves to isolation and grown comfortable in it." (For the whole story, see Chs. VI and VII in Cannon's History of American Trotskyism.) They failed to wait for CP's essential ingredients for a successful agitational recipe - a labor upsurge, strong roots, or a leadership with 20-30 years of experience, or even to await the coming of a Lenin. A hardy band of 150 in 1933, they got themselves into a hotel strike in NYC (somewhat less world historic than April 26th), some unemployed work, and a toehold in the Progressive Miners. That's all.

Within a year of embarking on the turn, it was vindicated, in the great labor upsurge that produced the great Minneapolis strike of 1934, and the merger with the Musteite. We don't expect any such quick successful vindication. But let it be said, it would have been impossible for the Trotskyists to have led the Minneapolis strike

of 1934 if they had not named the turn in 1933. Had Minneapolis occurred in 1932, we would not have led it. It required our thoroughly changing our perspective - ending the period of propaganda directed to the Stalinist CP, taking the lead in forming a new revolutionary party (with 150 members), and adopting the conception of leading workers in trade union struggles as the road to a new party.

Fortunately, the CLA did not await CP's essential criteria to mature. They put themselves at the head of events. They helped fill the vacuum of leadership in the working class. They prepared to take part in what was to be a coming labor upsurge, and thereby got roots and a leadership with the right experience. The roots and experience of propaganda to the CP was of little help. New ones were required, and they were developed in the struggles of 1933. Fortunately, the plunge to agitation was taken 13 years before the "favorable timing" of 1946-7. Unfortunately for our subsequent history, Trotsky convinced us one year later, in 1935, to return to the flashpots of propaganda. We were urged by Trotsky, and did, give up providing agitational leadership of struggles of raw workers, for a propagandistic intervention among the "advanced workers" of the Socialist Party. It was a disaster - particularly of timing. In 1935 was lost in a 10 month faction fight to consummate the new French turn, entry into the SP. In the process, the bulk of the workers gained in the struggles of 1934 were lost. 1936-7 was spent in the good fight in the SP on the burning propaganda issues of the day: opposition to the Moscow trials, opposition to the Popular Front in Spain (and of course to the POUM), and opposition to the labor party slogan in the US. 1936-7 were the years that the American workers were organized into industrial unions in the great upheaval of the CIO.

Timing, which is decisive in politics and agitational turns, found us up to our necks in propaganda in the SP. It was the easy thing. Those grown comfortable in isolation, found the surrogate charged battles of the SP more stimulating than fighting to give a lead to workers in struggle who couldn't give a damn about the POUM or the Moscow trials. In this period there were no doubt many standard patter documents which convinced us that we could make solid gains among the students of the SP who were amenable to our views on Spain or Russia, rather than raw workers who were interested in building unions, which is after all a low level of consciousness, that times were not right, there was after all a 4 year boom under way, and our roots were too weak to play a leadership role anyway. And so we recruited some hundred of young students. Meanwhile, the biggest class battle of the American workers passed over our heads, but not those of the CP.

After leaving the Sp in late '37, the SWP took a new turn to agitation in 1938. With a renewed perspective on forming an independent revolutionary workers party, the SWP adopted the slogan, "Face the Masses." The Transitional Program was adopted as a program of agitational and struggle for this turn. Yet timing is decisive - the turn was already too late. A small group of 150-200 in 1933-34 could play a large role because of the vacuum of leadership in the working class. A group of 1500-2000 (SWP membership in 1938) could not play as big a role, even with greater roots, a leadership with much greater mass experience, and a much greater trade union arena. The vacuum of leadership had been substantially filled by the role the CP played in 1936-7 - a role of agitational leadership. With greater numbers, roots and experiences, our comrades in 1938-9 were substantially frozen out - desperate enough to make flirtation to Homer Martin for an anti-CP bloc, until Martin deserted the U.M.W. for the AFL. If through hesitancy, sectarianism, or conservatism, we miss our timing, our historic opportunities, our fate will be as black.

During WWII there developed yet another opportunity to make a turn to agitation. The CP's support of WWII, the no strike pledge, opposition to the struggle for black equality, produced a new vacuum of leadership among the militants. A strike wave began in 1943 which gained momentum for 3 years. It started during the war

war not in 1946, when as CP would have us believe the SWP "correctly read the significance of a labor upsurge." The upsurge had been going on for 3 years, but during this period the SWP denied that there would or could be an upsurge during the war, and in fearful fashion buried themselves with the slogan "preserve the cadre." Our tendency, the Workers Party, with much weaker roots, and much less experience, could and did play a much larger role during the war years in the labor upsurge. In 1942, we took a turn to agitation, to proletarianization, to leadership in trade union struggles around the no strike pledge and other immediate issues, which allowed us to fill a part of the vacuum of leadership in the working class. Unfortunately, the WP was incapable of translating the lead they gave in 43-6 into a workers organization or to develop the organizational base capable of recruiting and assimilating the workers they led in this upsurge. When the SWP took its turn in 1946, its roots and experiences aided it in playing an even greater role than the WP (but with much worse politics, for example it opposed the slogan of the GN 46 strike of Wage Increases Without Price Increases, on the ostensible ground that it was not in the transitional program, but really for conservative reasons.) Its much better organization, roots, and strength, allowed it to grow rapidly in the turn of 1946 - giving the surface appearance of success, which continues to fool CP 30 years later, but only by the most historically picayune version of what correct timing is.

For 30 years, this story would have been at best an exercise in sectarianism. Today, it takes on a different significance. For the first time in 30 years it is necessary to talk about a turn to agitation, and the question of timing, historically, and today, does become a decisive criterion. The errors of American Trotskyism on turning and turns essentially developed from the isolation imposed by much stronger CPs and later by the boom. For a generation, it led to our removal from the working class. For the first time in a generation it is possible to change this. But only if we are prepared to break with the past habits of a generation.