

RWH TRADE UNION CONFERENCE

About 150 people attended the "Trade Union Conference" on Saturday, December 12. The conference was organized by members of the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters as a meeting for socialist and "politically advanced" (as RWH says) workers to discuss trade union perspectives and questions. The other political groups represented were: CP-ML (or ex-CP-ML), IS, League for Revolutionary Struggle (Baraka's group) and the Proletarian Unity League. The conference seems to have been originally called as part of a regroupment process that includes the Marxist-Leninist groups listed here. It was then broadened to include IS and a number of independents.

In spite of the socialist composition the political level was fairly low. It was in many ways like a Labor Notes conference in its content. In general the discussions of trade union work or issues were concrete and useful. The more political workshops inspired a higher level of rhetoric and political jargon of the Maoist variety. In general, however, the people attending the conference were serious with significant experience. The atmosphere was non-sectarian and positive.

The basic political messages of the three opening speakers and most workshop leaders were compatible with IS thinking on the subjects covered — basically economic and labor issues and the relation of minority workers to those issues. Only the LRS seemed to be out of step on these questions — that is, sectarian in their approach.

There was, more or less behind the scenes, a political "struggle" between the League and the RWH. This had to do with the fact that the RWH had invited some ex-League workers to the conference and put one of them on a workshop panel. More importantly these two groups were competing for some of the third world ex-members of the CP-ML. The only time this fight broke out into the open was at the end of the National Minorities workshop when one LRS member calmly suggested that the work of the white comrades of the RWH in the Black community in Milwaukee was paternalistic. An RWH member involved in that work blew his stack and there was a few minutes of rancor. Other than that everything was conducted in a comradely spirit.

Although there was some prior objection to inviting us, there was no expressed hostility toward us. In fact, it was a good opportunity for us to get to know more of the RWH and the CP-ML. There is a "wing" of this milieu that is quite friendly to us and open to many of our ideas. A smaller number openly speak of regroupment with us as well as forces more in their tradition. There are, of course, big political differences on the question of China and the relationship of the socialist movement to it, most of them view themselves as "that new communist trend that has aligned itself with the views of the Chinese Communist

Party," to quote the recent RWH pamphlet on realignment. Although it was not particularly evident at the conference this milieu also has a "pop-front" orientation that leads toward an emphasis on anti-Reagan coalitionism without much clarity on the role or relationship to the labor bureaucracy.

The conference was not intended to produce any particular organizational outcome. It was meant primarily to be a forum for discussing approaches to union questions. With the exception of a couple workshops it did this and was a positive experience for all. There was a sense that the revolutionary left had a role to play in the movement to rebuild the unions.

On Sunday a separate meeting for activists in the steel workers for the RWH, IS and ex CP-ML was held. Dennis for the IS made the opening presentation on the question of a national newsletter for the opposition forces. Recently Balanoff had proposed such a newsletter. The meeting, which was about half ISers or friends, concluded that such a newsletter should concentrate on the contract and be aimed at the broad audience. Dennis plans to work on it, although people felt that it would take more people with more time to make the project a reality. The newsletter will be sponsored by the major figures in the opposition movement.

—Kim

Traveling

Frank T., a member of the PC and long-time union activist, will be travelling for the group during the last half of February and March. It is hoped that Frank will travel to every city where we have a branch, as well as cities where we have contacts but no members.

Frank will speak on "Socialists in a Period of Union Retreat" in meetings organized by each branch. The talk will put the current rush to concessions in a political context and discuss the role of revolutionary socialists in such a period.

Frank's tour is part of the PC's program for strengthening the group. In addition to speaking publicly, Frank will be talking to branches and members about future plans in their area, about our long range regroupment perspective and any possible steps to be taken locally, and about the state of the organization and the political discussions going on currently.

Frank will also want to meet with independents, particularly trade union activists in your area. So please give some thought to who Frank might see and help us set up appointments. For further information or ideas, call the N.O. at 869-3138.

—Kim

Solidarity

POLAND UPDATE

Solidarity

As of January 11, it has become clear that Solidarity has formed an underground organization, that it has not been smashed, that there will be passive protracted resistance to the military crackdown. We do not yet know how effectively workers will be able to slow down production or otherwise maintain organization. It will be some time before we can directly measure the effectiveness of the crackdown, or the regime's ability to restore production. We can take *indirect* readings: in particular, the Church's refusal to come to a quick deal with the authorities suggests that popular anger remains too overwhelming for it to do so.

What political conclusions will Solidarity activists draw from this struggle? And will there be the possibility for them to act on those conclusions? These are the most critical issues for which we still have no answers.

A Quick Roundup of Recent Activities

NY [based on conversations with Mel] The Solidarity Support Campaign is pursuing a plan to bring E.P. Thompson, the leading figure in the European Nuclear Disarmament movement, and Daniel Singer, author of *The Road To Gdansk*, to the U.S. for a speaking tour. As we understand the situation, the scheduling problem lies in Thompson's extremely crowded agenda. The NY committee is pursuing contacts with the aim of bringing them over around the end of February. The politics of the tour would combine the lessons of Poland with the struggle against nuclear incineration.

DETROIT — The District Committee has told the NY Solidarity Campaign that we want to build a big meeting for the above mentioned tour. This is contingent on Thompson's availability. Our strategy would be to approach the Church-based and all other broad anti-war forces for a mass mobilizing effort.

CHICAGO [From conversations with Dan] A very interesting meeting of roughly 200 people was organized by the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters people. Speakers included a University of Chicago professor and several others. The turnout was a unique blend of Polish nationalists and independent leftists. The discussion period was an interesting exchange on whether one should support Reagan's sanctions and indeed demand tougher ones, or oppose them on the grounds that neither imperialist camp will liberate the Polish people. Polish nationalists and RWH arguing the former, ourselves (tacitly supported by other leftists) the latter.

BAY AREA [From conversations with Leo] A meeting of a couple hundred people was held at a union hall. Essentially a left audience. Despite complications caused by sectarian infighting and backwardness, a steering committee has been formed to work on future activities. One of our members was also able to get a motion in support of Solidarity through the local Labor Council (no simple task since in general all motions with political substance are tabled to oblivion).

—DF

El Salvador Support Work

Detroit Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) is energetically waging a campaign against the training of 1600 Salvadoran troops in the U.S. There have been demonstrations and media events. Detroit CISPES, along with an Ann Arbor solidarity group are sponsoring a campus Teach-in at Wayne State University on February 3 and 4. CISPES is holding its National Convention in Washington DC in March.

A Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) spokesperson, speaking to CISPES members, emphasized that one of the most serious obstacles to the Front was that the level of solidarity action (though much improved since last year) is not yet sufficient to prevent U.S. sponsored intervention. The possibility of such intervention will be even greater after the phony Salvadoran elections this spring.

We fear such intervention to be a real possibility especially given the declaration of Martial Law in Poland. If the Russians can get away with "cleaning up their backyard," Reagan is likely to give it a try in El Salvador.

Ray from Gary reports that the Gary El Salvador Committee has been having pickets and showing films. They are trying to build support among trade unionists in the area.

We urge people who have the time and energy to become active in their local CISPES chapter. For further information contact the Detroit National Office.

—Fuss

Progressive Student Network

Marty (Detroit) and Peter (NY) have become active in the Progressive Student Network (PSN). They see the PSN as having two purposes. To unite the "progressive forces" within campuses and to increase the communication between campuses. The PSN was founded with the idea of rebuilding a student movement in this country.

People involved tend to be new to politics, and there is very little organized left involvement. The Revolutionary Workers Headquarters seem to be the only group taking any interest in PSN. Marty has talked with them, and they seem eager to work with ISers in PSN. They invited ISers in PSN to their meeting on student work. (Too bad we only have two).

Marty and Peter are both working on getting PSN newsletters started. These Newsletters are, for now, basically calendars to help coordinate events both within campuses and between campuses. This will also help build and formalize the existence of PSN in NY and Detroit.

Through working in PSN ISers can help build campus groups. Through our work, and conferences (Kim and Elissa spoke at the last PSN conference), hopefully people will be interested in IS politics.

People interested in PSN, especially those in school, should contact Marty or Peter, they would love more ideas, and would like to get PSN started at more campuses.

—Fuss

Solidarity Buttons

Solidarity's troubles in Poland has meant a big demand for Solidarnosc buttons here. Changes has placed ads in In These Times, the Guardian and a local Hamtramck paper (Hamtramck has a large Polish population). Button sales have been brisk. One priest from Hamtramck saw our ad and bought 1600 buttons. The ads have also gotten some interest in the magazine, selling single issues or getting requests for samples.

I'd like to encourage other people in other cities to try selling some. The National Office has plenty and can always get more. Buttons are \$1 each — 60 cents for 10 or more — 50 cents for 100 or more — and special discounts are available for orders of over 1000. If a branch would like to use them as a fund raiser for Solidarity work (as we have in Detroit), I suggest putting a classified ad in local papers. They also sell well in bookstores, at meetings and at demos. As you know Solidarity appeals to a broad group of people, including Al Haig and Reagan(though of course they would prefer non-union versions of the button).

In addition to getting requests about Changes through the ads, I am sending button purchasers a promotional mailing (this is especially relevant because the next issue of Changes is going to deal exclusively with Poland). So if you plan to use such ads, please keep the addresses for me. If there is a paper that you think would be good for such an ad, but you don't want to take on the project, tell me about it, and we can have the ordering address in Detroit, and I'll fill the orders.

So place those orders for buttons, it's fun, profitable and if you do a good job, you begin to see our Solidarity buttons all over the place.

—Foss

New Members

Don B., a member of the Newspaper Guild, has joined the NY Branch. Don is a former IS member, and has been working closely with the branch for some time, especially on Poland work. He is a leader of a union caucus in his workplace.

Kay E., also a former member, has joined in the Bay Area. Kay is a union activist, currently a steward, and formerly president of her local. She spoke at the Labor Notes conference on New Areas of Organizing. Recently Kay has been helping Paul to coordinate a study group in the Bay Area.

Welcome Don and Kay.

—Elissa



In our efforts to build a campaign in support of the Polish workers' resistance to martial law, several political questions have come up. For example, at a meeting in Chicago sponsored by the Solidarity support committee in which we participate along with members of Revolutionary Workers Headquarters and other leftists, the RWH joined with Polish nationalists in not only supporting Reagan's sanctions against Poland but even urging that Reagan be pushed to go farther in forming a united front against Soviet hegemonism. On the other hand, at a small planning meeting in Detroit where we were attempting to organize a press conference in support of Solidarity, several members of DSOC came in with the position that we should be urging in the name of solidarity with the Polish people, western banks should declare a moratorium on the Polish debt (i.e. allow the Polish government to suspend payments). I do not know to what extent this view is generally held within DSOC but it does reflect a strand of thinking within the left.

The question for us is: how do we adopt a political stance on the questions surrounding the western response to Poland which does not compromise either our support of Solidarity or our anti-imperialism? How do we fight to prevent solidarity with Solidarity from becoming another pawn in the Cold War? While the issue as a whole is a complex one, there are several specific political questions surrounding sanctions, bank loans etc. which can be dealt with straightforwardly and which I think can be used to illustrate our overall approach. The following position reflects my own views, which will be discussed by the PC and to which other comrades are invited to respond.

I. ARE WE "FOR" OR "AGAINST" SANCTIONS?

I consider this to be the perfect example of a "trick question": that is, once you begin arguing it in the terms it is presented to you, you've already fallen into a hopeless trap. To support Reagan's declaration of economic sanctions against Poland and the Soviet Union, or (like RWH) to even call for the people to demand tougher ones, is to fall squarely into the imperialist camp. It is understandable that "Three Worlds" theorists like RWH would make this mistake, since the thesis of the Soviet Union as the "main danger," coupled with a tinge of opportunism in response to the obvious popularity of the sanctions within the Polish-American community, make the position an attractive way of "reaching the masses" with the message of anti-hegemonism. In reality, it is a desperate mistake: popular support for sanctions against Poland (and the Soviet Union) will simply be channelled into support for the U.S. effort to strangle Nicaragua, escalate the war in El Salvador, and other attempts by the U.S. to police the Third World. (The RWH comrades are aware of this problem and have a highly esoteric way of trying to get around it, but to explain would go too far into the exotic byways of the Three Worlds theory and must be left for another discussion).

It is very unlikely that the I.S. would fall into this side of the sanctions trap. There is another, more subtle, side, however: a tendency to react more strongly to any escalation of Cold War rhetoric from Washington than to the Polish crisis itself. This is natural: when right-wing and chauvinistic sentiments begin to arise around us, we naturally want to combat them, and we should. But does this mean that when the Reagan Administration makes sanctions (or at least tries to make sanctions) the key issue in the political debate over Poland, that we should do the same? I believe this is also a mistake. To campaign against sanctions just because the Reagan-Halt bunch is running around the world campaigning for them, is to give the whole

issue of sanctions an absurdly exaggerated significance.

I believe our attitude to U.S. economic sanctions over Poland should essentially be one of indifference. The sanctions will have no real effect on events in Poland, nor are they particularly intended to. The sanctions are really directed primarily against Western Europe; that is, for Reagan and Haig, Poland represents an opportunity to try to whip the European allies into a more disciplined and subservient position. The U.S. sanctions in themselves are weak (weaker than Carter's grain embargo over Afghanistan) and are designed to avoid damage to Reagan with the U.S. farmers; but the attempt to make Europe (which has greater trading and financial stake in Eastern Europe) follow along, is a form of blackmail to force Western Europe to support American foreign policy in general. This pressure will probably fail; we hope it does, and we are against the sanctions on those grounds. On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that the declaration of sanctions by the U.S. is undoubtedly overwhelmingly popular inside Poland. In fact, the announcement by Reagan of the cutoff of government-to-government food aid to Poland was undoubtedly the best news Poles heard during the first week of the martial law. They are against anything that in any way strengthens the Jaruzelski junta. I suspect that the overwhelming majority of Solidarity, including its left wing, would like nothing more than a U.S.-led total economic boycott of Poland, regardless of its motivation. I don't agree, but if I were in their position I would probably share the same sentiment. I am certainly against any demands that would help the martial law junta in Poland, and I consider Solidarity's resistance struggle far more important than whatever short-term fluctuations in the American political climate or U.S.-Soviet relations may result from sanctions one way or the other.

I believe our political line should be to call for a total international trade union boycott of Poland until martial law ends and Solidarity's elected national leadership is free and able to speak for itself. This primarily would depend on Western European unions, not North American ones. Unions should refuse to handle anything going into or out of Poland with the exception of food and medical relief aid. This should be completely independent of any policies of any government and should have the sole aim of defending Solidarity's survival and independence. Whether this happens to coincide with the particular policy of the U.S. or West German or any other government at a particular moment is really of no importance at all. Government sanctions aren't imposed to defend Solidarity, and they will be imposed or lifted quite irrespective of what benefits the Polish workers. Only the workers' movements can do anything that would have a progressive impact, and that is how we should approach this issue.

II. WHAT ABOUT THE BANK LOANS?

Many of the same considerations apply (except that of course trade unions don't lend money, banks do.) For example, when the Wall Street Journal ran an editorial urging Poland be declared in default, it was intended not so much to punish the Polish Communists as to punish the West German banks for having built up such close financial ties to Poland against U.S. wishes. Obviously, we understand this as an extension of U.S. imperialist policy. However, within the left a rather muddled idea has sprung up that in the present circumstances it is still progressive to support rescheduling the Polish debt (which we would certainly not have opposed before Dec. 13). The idea is that the Polish regime might be less repressive if we gave it a break. I consider this proposal to be no more "progressive" than calling for soft loans to any military dictatorship in Chile, Argentina or Turkey. Calling for debt moratorium to the Polish junta would discredit us with any progressive Pole and we should have nothing to do with it. We don't care whether the banks ever see the money they loaned Poland as long as all we care about is the survival of Solidarity.