

IS. DISCUSSION BULLETIN

7/84

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PC Report

The PC has begun developing some ideas for papers to be discussed at a National Convention which will be held in the early Spring, 1985. We plan to get out the major papers to the organization by mid to late September thereby allowing ample time for discussion to take place prior to the convention. Resolutions to be ultimately voted upon will come out at a later date.

The papers that are being planned at this time are:

- Socialist Perspectives Today
- The Role of the IS -- Past, Present, and Future
- An Interim Perspective for the IS in the Next Year
- Socialist and Marxist Feminism: An Assessment
- The Central American Crisis

We are also planning to hold a one day meeting for union activists and our close contacts and friends in conjunction with the national convention. The Trade Union Committee (TUC) will be giving direction to this aspect of the meeting. The meeting for IS union activists will happen one day prior to the IS Convention. It has been many years since we tried to "sum up" our union work. In the absence of factions, members have ceased to discuss their union work with each other, much less try to draw lessons from it.

Many IS members continue to play important roles in the labor movement. It's been a long time since many of us tried to relate our day-to-day work to the fact that we're socialists and that we are where we are for a reason. This one-day meeting will be our opportunity to assess the state of the labor movement and our past and current work.

We count almost 50 people (not counting close contacts) who are either in or around the labor movement. This meeting will only be held if there is significant commitment to attend from people outside Detroit.

This is a very preliminary report on plans for a national convention and meeting for IS unionist activists. More information will be forthcoming in future bulletins.

Plan now for



IS NATIONAL CONVENTION
EARLY SPRING 1985



New Members

The good news is that we have four new members who recently joined -- Linda M. from Detroit, Al S. from Juneau, Alaska, Glenn F. from Denver, CO, and Ray K. from Toronto, Canada. We welcome each of you!

These members, except for Linda who is a member of the Detroit IS Branch, will all be members-at-large (MAL's). They are all activists and will continue to be active in their various arenas. They each plan to take a bundle of Changes and have a long term perspective toward recruitment.

Other News

Dan L. and Jane S. were in Guatemala for almost two weeks. There is an interview with Jane about her experiences there in the next issue of Changes. Dan will have an article in In These Times in the next couple of weeks.

Enid and Kim from Detroit and Teresa from Cleveland are going to Nicaragua with a group of labor and health care people. They will focus on the role of the unions in the economy and the state of the economy under conditions of war. They will also be looking into the health care situation.

If you are interested in having speakers on Guatemala or Nicaragua, contact one or more of these individuals or contact the national office and something can no doubt be arranged.

Marriage and Babies

Candy and Joel had a baby boy May 15, 1984. His name is Matthew Michael.

Doreen and Bill are expecting a baby any day now.

Dennis and Robin are expecting a baby in the next month or so. Robin was recently called back to the mill (She hadn't expected to ever be called back.) and is now off on sick leave. Lucky breaks come now and again.

Mike U and Joanne had a baby boy in the Spring named William.

Connie from Detroit recently married Ron.

Jim and Susan are being married on August 11.

Moved and Moving

Gay, Mark, and Daniel moved to New York early in the summer.

Dennis and Linny are moving back to Portland, Oregon in the fall.

Joining the ranks ...

Elissa has joined the ranks of those in the group with computers -- Foss, Mike P., Teresa and Jeremy, and Dennis S. Note that Elissa's critique on the Harman article is in dot form. She acquired an Apple II-E this week. Many of us here in Detroit are envious, but happy for those paving the way to the electronic age.

NEXT ISSUE OF CHANGES

The September-October issue of Changes will feature several articles on diverse themes, which should make the issue of more than average interest.

The major feature article, by Kim, summarizes the impact of capitalist economic restructuring on the political strategies and balance of forces within the reformist parties of Europe. The analysis also suggests the reasons for the rightward shift of the political center of gravity in the Democratic Party in the U.S. over the past several years. In fact, the effects of the restructuring are to produce on the one hand, a larger affluent sector of society which backs Reaganism (in the European context; Thatcherism) or neo-liberalism (in Europe, British SDP-type politics), and on the other hand, a less organized working class which either does not relate to electoral politics or is susceptible to rightist appeals. The article thus cogently sums up a few of the factors that explain why, in the running battle between "the reformist imagination" and conservative politics, the general trend is to the right at the expense of reformism.

The second feature, by Milt Fisk, a former member of the ISO, sketches in historical outline the relationship of the AFL and later AFL-CIO to the Democratic Party. The basic thesis of the article is that the consistent goal of the labor leadership has not been progressive or pro-worker government, but rather the legitimacy of the trade union bureaucracy itself as the broker for labor. Milt suggests that a labor party breakaway from the capitalist parties would be significant primarily because of the radical implications of the initial challenge it would pose to bourgeois politics and the union bureaucracies themselves.

This issue also contains two substantial reviews. Elissa Clarke reviews Lise Vogel's Marxism And The Oppression Of Women, one of the works which helped focus the PC's discussions of women's liberation during the past year. Vogel's discussion of the development and relative strengths and weaknesses of the theories of "dual systems" and more so-called "orthodox" Marxist analyses of women's oppression, Elissa says, will help Marxists and feminists leave that frustrating debate behind us. Vogel's attempt to use the tools of Marxism to analyze the role of domestic labor in "social reproduction" -- which according to Vogel, Marxists have never successfully done but which can be done within the terms of Marxism rather than "dual systems" -- is an important contribution. Elissa argues, however, that much more remains to be done, because Vogel doesn't sufficiently deal with the inherently burdensome aspects of child care. Nor does she have anything resembling a satisfactory theory of the position of women in allegedly "socialist" societies.

The other review, by Kent Worcester, discusses two books by Alan Wald. Since Kent is a member of the ISO and Alan is in Socialist Action, having such a review greatly helps building an atmosphere

of openness and dialogue which we want to build around the magazine. The importance of the books (one on the novelist James T. Farrell during his years in the revolutionary socialist movement, the other on two little-known but illustrative poets of the 1930s who supported the Trotskyist movement of that time) is that they illustrate the possibility of artists having a revolutionary socialist political commitment without degrading the form or content of their artistic expression to meet narrow party political needs.

The issue also contains several short pieces, which I won't list in detail here, as well as R.F. Kampfer's "Random Shots," which has rapidly emerged as the magazine's single most popular feature.

* * *

Changes is interested in promoting a climate of dialogue among our readers. The editorial board has decided we should make a specific effort to obtain responses to major theoretical and analytical articles. To take one example, we have written to a few people trying to generate responses to the critical assessment of the Permanent Revolution theory in the current issue. Similarly, we will try to stimulate some discussion around Kim's article in the upcoming issue. It should be stressed that this invitation applies to I.S. members as much as to other readers of the magazine! You may hear directly from us with a request that you consider responding to a piece in the magazine; but we don't want you to wait until it occurs to us that you have a particular interest in the topic of discussion.

It's your magazine; write for it!

* * *

Central America will continue to be a focus of coverage. Several I.S. comrades will be visiting Nicaragua in August, in a group that will hopefully have an opportunity to examine a few specific questions of the economic and political situation in more depth than I was able to during my brief trip. The upcoming issue (in addition to the features mentioned above) has an account by Jane Slaughter of her visit to the Coca-Cola workers' occupation in Guatemala City. We are planning an article by Jane and Dan L. on the broader context of the efforts at union organizing in Guatemala today. Kim has been doing some research (related to the general question of capitalist "restructuring") that points to the critical importance that U.S. imperialism, including liberal imperialism, attaches to Central America and I am anticipating an article on that theme which should be most useful in our solidarity work.

--- DF

The British Socialist Workers Party has adopted a position against the independent organization of women. An article by Chris Harman in *International Socialism* 2:23, "Women's Liberation and Revolutionary Socialism," lays out the position.

This is one of the issues which contributed to internal problems within the ISO. Cal and Barbara wished to prevent the debate from taking place in the organization and did not want the intervention of the British SWP on this matter, but they did not allow the organization to decide whether to discuss it or not. It was one factor in the demotion of Cal and Barbara from leadership status, which led later to their suspension for a year and their eventual resignation.

Currently, the ISO is engaged in a discussion of this question.

It is difficult to discuss Harman's article because his critique of feminism is only a pretext for a discussion about the relationship of the party to social movements. The essence of that discussion is that social movements are counterposed to party building, especially in a period of downturn. Revolutionaries can be the left-wing of social movements, always arguing for the most class-conscious line, but the resources of the party are depleted when revolutionaries take responsibility for building social movements.

To quote:

"You have to be insistent that they cannot win their demands unless they connect with the struggles of the mass of workers. And that means arguing loudly and clearly for a revolutionary socialist organization that makes such connections, in theory and practice.

"Theories that separate off any struggle, whether for peace, against women's oppression or against racism, from the wider class struggle, prevent these connections being made.

"That is why the ideas of people like E.P. Thompson impede the struggle against nuclear war. That is why the arguments of patriarchy and socialist feminist theorists impede the struggle for women's liberation. That is why black nationalist and separatist ideas impede the struggle for black liberation." (p. 33)

Too much involvement in social movements is attacked as "movementism" (it's not clear how much is too much), and the danger is that revolutionaries drift to the right when they become movement activists. They "make concessions to the idea that the movements' goals can be achieved without working class action." (p. 32)

Building the party is counterposed to building social movements. Recruiting directly to socialism is the priority. The formula is a-hard-group-for-hard-times.

But there is a pitiful desperation underlying Harman's arguments. All this posturing for recruitment in "ones and twos." "In every locality, in every workplace, in every college, there are a few individuals who are receptive to what revolutionary socialists have to say. The key to building the embryo of a revolutionary organization is locating these ones and twos and arguing general politics with them." (p. 36) Of course, Harman is being realistic about the potential for recruitment, which is good, but why one can't recruit in these small numbers from social movements, but can on campuses, is a mystery.

But what does Harman have to say about women? The article begins with a restatement of the traditional Marxist position that women's oppression arises from class society. What is striking about Harman's version is the lengths to which he goes to demonstrate that women's oppression has a material root, as opposed to an ideological one. (Which is not say that he denies an ideological component; that would be absurd.) For example, in a discussion of the family, he sees the

capitalist class almost as an organized conspiracy. "Capitalism did not have the resources or technology to provide for socialized reproduction (through baby farms, nurseries, communal restaurants, and so forth) and so the most far sighted representatives of the capitalist class looked to creating a new family structure for the working class." (p. 5)

What is the point of this? I assume it is to bolster the argument that capitalism (and not patriarchy) causes women's oppression. In fact, Harman considers patriarchy such a minor influence that he challenges the use of the word. Presumably, it follows from this that building the party is the most direct route to ending women's oppression.

The distinction that Harman draws between the material and ideological basis for women's oppression is then used to make the argument that women's oppression will easily fall by the wayside after the socialist revolution because men will realize that it is in their interests to end it.

"The benefits working class men get from the oppression of women are marginal indeed...The benefits really come down to the question of housework...What the working class male gains directly in terms of labor from his wife can be roughly measured. It is the amount of labor he would have to exert if he had to clean and cook for himself. This could not be more than an hour or two a day." (p. 27) Harman does concede that when children are involved the "apparent gain to the husband (is) immense." But, of course, socialism will eliminate the burden of childrearing, and so men will not see it in their interests to oppress women.

Harman briefly dismisses the SWP's experience with Women's Voice (a now-dissolved section of the party which focused on organizing women as a failure that "separated the struggle for women's liberation off from the rest of our political work." (p. 35) The discussion is far too brief to be convincing, one way or the other, on the practical arguments for or against Women's Voice. It does seem clear, however, that the dissolving of Women's Voice was tied up with a change--in our view, a deep retreat--in the SWP's theory of women's liberation. In fact, what Harman presents here is really the old anti-feminist position of Tony Cliff, which had become a marginal minority viewpoint in the IS-GB (the forerunner of the SWP) during the '70s.

Harman's discussion of socialist-feminist theory is either ill-informed or dishonest. Socialist-feminists subscribe to what Harman terms a "theory of patriarchy." When he describes that theory, it is the same as what is called "dual systems" in this country. But his description of this theory does not acknowledge that it recognizes class society as a problem at least equal to patriarchy. "The dominant view in what remains of the women's movement in Britain is the theory of patriarchy. This holds that the oppression of women is a result of male domination and is quite separate from the division of society into economic classes. It sees 'men' as benefitting from the oppression of women in all societies and maintaining that oppression even if socialist revolution takes place. It accuses attempts to explain women's oppression on the basis of the dynamic of class societies as 'reductionist.' From this it draws the conclusion that the struggle for women's liberation is something quite separate from (even if parallel to) the struggle for working class revolution and socialism." (p. 15)

If you have been following the I.S. Political Committee's reports on the readings we have done on socialist-feminism in the bulletin and in Changes, you will recognize that we have made some of the same criticisms of socialist-feminist dual systems theorists. However, not to recognize that dual systems at least struggles with the integration of socialism and feminism (even if unsuccessfully), is an attempt to discredit the theory by unfairly simplifying it.

Another over-simplification is employed when Harman discusses the existing women's movement. He says there are three alternatives for the movement in a period of capitalist crisis: 1) abandon the goal of liberation in favor of pursuing the limited reforms possible; 2) separatism; 3) "identify with working class challenges to existing society as the way of smashing the structures responsible for women's oppression." (p. 13)

Option one, reformism, is totally discounted. Harman says "effectively this amounts to demanding individual advancement for a few privileged women, while leaving the conditions of the mass of women completely untouched." (p. 13) I don't know much about the British women's movement, but certainly the fight for reforms has more potential than that in the U.S. While some middle-class organizations can be written off as merely vehicles for advancement for ruling-class women, even NOW has done much for working class and even poor women. Ms. Magazine, which certainly sees its audience as middle class, runs important articles on women and poverty, health issues, even imperialism. Issues like sexual harassment, fought for by middle class women, have obvious benefits to working class women.

But for Harman, none of these positive factors exist. Therefore, the first two alternatives are rejected, leaving us--again--with party building.

In another sleight of hand, Harman equates separatism with independent organization. He says that even revolutionaries like Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai who concentrated on organizing women, never saw this as their only activity. Pointing to some of their socialist activity, he says, "This, of course, has not stopped some confused feminists from claiming Kollontai, Zetkin and Sylvia Pankhurst for the cause of separatism!"

In fact, Kollontai and the experience of the Russian Revolution is a powerful argument for independent organization. Many of the reforms that the infant revolution instituted for women occurred only because of Kollontai's work, and over the protest of (male) party leaders.

Harman's article was originally written as an intervention in the discussion in the ISO. It is unclear at this point what position the ISO will take. Members of the ISO leadership, as we understand it, are supposed to be replying to Harman in a subsequent issue of the International Socialism Journal.

--Elissa