

Information, Education & Discussion

Bulletin

In Defense of Marxism

Published by expelled members of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.A.)

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INTRODUCTION

Number 2 of the Bulletin in Defense of Marxism focuses on a single event: the latest wave of expulsions in the Socialist Workers Party (December 1983-January 1984). These expulsions surprised most SWP members and shocked many. They have alarmed party sympathizers. That is why the exemplary responses of seven expelled members of the Twin Cities branch of the SWP should be widely publicized as soon as possible, for the information and welfare of the party and the Fourth International and their periphery.

Even though these documents by loyal and dedicated members are all from a single branch -- the Twin Cities branch -- they are typical of proletarian resistance in the party to the revisionist changes introduced by the SWP leaders since the last convention in 1981.

These statements by comrades from the Twin Cities are in the best Minneapolis tradition of the SWP. As these expelled members themselves say, they responded in the only way they knew how because that is the way they learned from Minneapolis leaders like Carl Skoglund and Vincent R. Dunne who were an essential part of the original Trotskyist nucleus in this country.

Their appeals to the Twin Cities branch executive committee and to the branch membership, combined with their reasoned statements to the SWP political committee expose the arrogant attitudes and bureaucratic methods of the SWP central leaders better than anything that has yet been published.

The documents speak for themselves. However, they contain references that require further explanation. The current purge wave is bigger than most SWP members realize and than the Twin Cities comrades could know at the time of their letters. Nationally, around 70 "were ousted" in a few weeks, according to the SWP leadership. That is over 7 percent of the national membership. The total number expelled in the last year is well over 100, and that does not include hundreds of others who resigned during this recent period under pressure from the leaders to do so.

The attack on the democratic rights of the SWP membership began systematically in 1982 at the February-March plenum of the National Committee when 27 motions on party norms were adopted. These motions were designed to transform the SWP from a democratic-centralist organization into a monolithic party devoid of political debate and dissenting opinion.

For the last two years the SWP members were told that they would have to wait for the next national convention before they could discuss any of the revisions in party program and practice that the leadership had introduced without discussion by the membership, but they were promised repeatedly that such a preconvention discussion would give all members the right to present their views. Now, on the eve of the preconvention discussion that was arbitrarily postponed from 1983 to 1984, all members suspected of having serious disagreements are being expelled on trumped-up charges to exclude them from the discussion. It is no wonder that the membership's confidence in the leadership is being eroded and that the leadership is acting as though it is surrounded by enemies and potential enemies among the members.

When the opponents of the majority faction in the NC were purged at the plenum in August 1983, the spurious charge against them was that the opposition tendencies constituted a "secret faction." No evidence was submitted to substantiate this charge against comrades who had been trying in every way possible since the 1981 convention to organize an open discussion in the party on all disputed issues.

The charge now brought against suspected party members (whose names are on a secret purge list) is similar to that brought against the NC oppositionists last summer. Selected party members are confronted with a curious demand to repudiate the actions of certain delegates to the recent California state convention of the SWP without being given an opportunity to find out who the delegates in California were, what they stood for, what they did that was wrong, or why they were expelled. When these comrades in several widely separated branches of the party all refused to comply with this unprecedented and outrageous demand from their inquisitors, the victims of this entrapment were then described and denounced as "splitters of the party," members of a "secret faction that supports Socialist Action."

Socialist Action is a group of party members who were undemocratically expelled in the 1982-83 purges and began to function in November 1983. It describes itself as a "public faction" of the SWP. The SWP leadership swiftly seized on this formation to condemn it as a hostile organization and to use it as a stalking horse against oppositionists still in the SWP, including those like the Twin Cities comrades who had no connection with Socialist Action.

This was the device used in California where the delegates to the state convention were summarily expelled by the state committee for "failing to take the floor before the convention to repudiate the split statements made by minority delegate Marc Rich and the minority reporter Michael Schreiber to the effect of declaring support to and intent to collaborate with the sect Socialist Action." As an example of the twisted connection between this allegation and the guilty verdict, we are including a form letter of the California state committee. This follows the documents of the Twin Cities comrades, also accused of sympathy or association with Socialist Action and therefore found guilty of "disloyalty."

Our last items in this number of the Bulletin are two resolutions that anticipated and shed light upon the current purges. The first was submitted by the Fourth Internationalist Caucus in the NC to the February-March 1982 plenum which opened the assault on the traditional norms of the party. The second was introduced by comrades Steve Bloom, Frank Lovell, Nat Weinstein, and Lynn Henderson to the August 1983 NC plenum where its authors were purged.

The purge in the SWP has not yet run its course. It is inevitable that new oppositionists will speak out and the leadership will try to intimidate and silence them too. Bulletin No. 3 will report further on the purge. We also plan to include an article on the tragic events in Grenada and the meaning of factionalism, our endorsement of the SWP 1984 presidential ticket, other programmatic documents of the opposition in the SWP national committee, and a chronicle of events in the SWP since the 1981 convention.

CONCERNING OUR EXPULSION

By Seven Expelled Comrades

To The Members Of The Twin Cities Branch

Dear Comrades:

By now you have heard of our expulsion from the Socialist Workers Party by the Political Committee on charges of "disloyalty." We reject those charges and reaffirm our loyalty to the revolutionary party we dedicated our lives to build.

We were expelled from the SWP not because we committed acts of disloyalty but because we refused to participate in the procedure used by the Political Committee to sniff out and victimize loyal party dissidents. To charge someone with disloyalty for refusing to repudiate others for something they did or did not do is spurious and unprincipled. It is a violation of communist integrity to demand a repudiation of the actions and views of others on command as a price for membership in a revolutionary party. It never has been so before in the SWP. It has never been necessary or possible to safeguard the loyalty and centralism of the party by demanding self-abasing rituals such as those presented to us.

Just the opposite is true. This method is drawn from the arsenal of Stalinism, the antithesis of revolutionary Marxism. The parallel between this demand and the demands placed on the Minneapolis communists in 1928 that they approve the expulsions of Cannon, Shachtman and Abern as a price for continued membership in the Communist party is plain to anyone.

What is inevitably also involved in this method is the ultimate demand for renunciation of one's own political views, in a demonstrative public way, as a price for membership. The conclusion that will be drawn and is being drawn is that political views at variance with those of the leadership will of themselves lead to disloyal action. Therefore, renunciation of all dissident and minority views is an a priori test of the capacity to be a loyal member. This is why it was a matter of principle to have rejected the demand that was placed upon us regardless of what our opinions were of the events in question.

We are appealing our expulsions which we feel are unjust. We have already contacted the party leadership requesting that we be allowed to participate, under the direction of the party leadership, of course, in such party-building activities as Militant sales, the election campaign, forums and PRDF. We think we have something to contribute in these areas and sincerely hope our request will be granted.

We are enclosing the trial statement submitted by Bill Onasch which summarizes the reasons why we declined to sign the loyalty oath repudiation demanded of us by the Political Committee.

We believe the charge of "disloyalty" is false and unjustified. We are being expelled for our political views, which have evolved over the past two years. We belonged to no tendency--membership tendencies being currently banned in the party by decision of the National Committee. But we have been outspoken in our opposition to the revisions in party positions undertaken by the NC since the 1981 convention without the participation of the party membership.

We have defended the theory of permanent revolution against the new, false counter-position of Lenin to Trotsky. We have upheld our movement's traditional program for workers' democracy both for the workers states and for the revolutionary party against the new theory of "revolutionary centralism." We have indicated our ideological support for the positions of the Fourth Internationalist Caucus (the Bloom-Lovell tendency in the NC suspended at the August plenum) on Castroism and the "New Leninist International." And we have fought to maintain the Cannon methods of party building against the new "norms" constantly being introduced into the party. Our expulsion is part of the ruthless drive of the NC to force out the Trotskyist cadre who stand in the way of their total revision of our basic theory, program, strategy and organizational methods.

This purge is not limited to the Twin Cities but is sweeping the party. We have confirmed that the following comrades in other areas have been expelled on charges identical to ours: George Breitman, Dorothy Breitman, George Weissman, Sarah Lovell, Paul Segal, Evan Segal, Naomi Allen, Alan Wald and Jean Tussey. We are sure there are many more.

Despite the crippling blows to the party's program and cadre dealt by the NC's revisions and purges, we still consider the SWP to be a revolutionary party. We will fight to be reinstated into the party and demand the reinstatement of all others unjustly expelled. We believe all revolutionists in this country should be in the U.S. sympathizing section of the Fourth International--the Socialist Workers Party.

We urge all party members who support our views--or who oppose our expulsion--to remain in the party as loyal party builders. We further urge that at the appropriate time you raise your voice against the revisions, against the purges and support our reinstatement to the party.

To organize our political work during our forced separation from the party, we have established a branch of expelled members. This is not an attempt to form a rival party but an organizational form (temporary we hope) imposed upon us by our expulsion.

We wish all the comrades well and look forward to the day when we will be reunited with you in the Socialist Workers Party.

Comradely,

Bill Onasch
Christine Frank Onasch
Dave Riehle
Gayle Swann
Bill Peterson
Melanie Benson
Ralph Schwartz

BILL ONASCH

Political Committee
Socialist Workers Party

1/2/84

Dear Comrades:

I regret and must protest your decision to conduct my trial at a time and place ensured to exclude me from participation. I totally reject Comrade Stone's charges against me of "disloyalty" and "violation of the NC motion regarding collaboration with Socialist Action." These charges have no substance or merit whatever and should be dismissed.

These malevolent charges hinge solely upon my declining to sign a statement "...(repudiating) the action of the entire minority delegation to the California State Convention in refusing to repudiate the split statements of minority reporter Michael Schreiber..." My reasons for refusing to lend my name to this statement are several.

First of all, my repudiation would imply that I have some responsibility for persons or events at the California State Convention. I, of course, accept no responsibility for any conduct or inaction by anyone at all--majority or minority--at the California convention. I do not know Michael Schreiber and to my knowledge, have never communicated with him about anything whatever at any time. I have not spoken with any California comrades--either majority or minority--about the convention before, during or after the convention.

I not only have no responsibility for the California convention, I have no reliable facts about that convention. Other than the brief article which appeared in the Militant, Comrades Stone and Sheppard's synopsis delivered to me is my only source of knowledge. During the PC's reorganization of our branch last summer, I got some first-hand experience with the kind of one-sided, self-serving reports given by these comrades. I would never lend my name to a repudiation of other comrades solely on the basis of remarks by Comrades Stone and Sheppard.

The very concept of demanding that comrades on a factionally selected hit list repudiate actions they have no responsibility for or information about is repugnant. All proportions guarded, this reminds me of the expulsion of a number of Minnesota communists 55 years ago for refusing to repudiate Cannon without knowing the facts. I don't compare myself to Dunne or Skoglund, but I try to learn from them. Those communists who bravely faced expulsion rather than condemn comrades on orders from others represent the continuity I identify with--not the Lovestonite higher bodies that booted them out for "disloyalty".

I made it clear to Comrades Stone and Sheppard that if anyone was taking the position that party members could collaborate with Socialist Action without approval from the party, that I thought that was unacceptable. I, of course, believe the party has the right--and as a Leninist organization, the obligation--to regulate its members' relations with other political groups. I have always abided by that principle, and I have supported disciplinary action against those who have consciously violated that principle in the past.

I was told this was not sufficient. I must sign the prepared statement because we are dealing with "splitters." It is, of course, evident that a split in the SWP is in progress. I am opposed to this split among other reasons, because the political

differences in the party and the Fourth International have not yet been clarified. An unclear split is an unprincipled split.

Without knowing all the facts, and while certainly not endorsing all the positions and actions of those who have been expelled and who have resigned, I nevertheless feel the fundamental political and moral responsibility for the split rests upon the present National Committee. The drastic changes in fundamental party positions coupled with organizational measures such as postponing the convention, prohibiting tendencies for the international discussion and numerous questionable expulsions have created the conditions for a split.

On the branch floor, during plenum report discussions, I have called for slowing down and reversing the split trend. I believe there should be a moratorium on expulsions and resignations, and all those who have been expelled for political reasons should be readmitted to the party providing they are prepared to function in a disciplined manner. We should then have an open, thorough-going discussion to see if the differences can be resolved in a common organization or are so fundamental they justify an organizational split.

I was told that this position on the split was inadequate. I must demonstrate my loyalty by signing the prepared statement repudiating the "splitters." I don't believe "loyalty" is established by signing loyalty oaths under pain of expulsion. I have a record of words and deeds extending over twenty years by which comrades can judge my loyalty to this party.

A particularly malodorous part of the charge against me cites me with "violation of the NC motion regarding collaboration with Socialist Action." I had stated early in my "interview" that I was not collaborating with Socialist Action, was not contemplating collaboration with that organization and certainly would not collaborate with any non-members without approval from the appropriate party body. I demanded to know why this was included in the charge and asked for specific allegations of how I had violated the NC motion. Finally, Comrade Sheppard admitted there were no specific allegations of indiscipline being made against me. Through some logical construction understandable only to members of higher bodies my refusal to repudiate the California comrades put me in violation of the NC motion regarding collaboration with Socialist Action.

If, as I fear, it is reported to the party membership that I have been expelled for violating the NC motion, then this verges on deliberate dishonesty.

After the latest plenum, it was reported to us that there would be no purges, no suspect lists. We would discover the splitters by watching to see who builds the party and who doesn't. That seemed reasonable. During this past period, as over the past twenty years, I have worked to build our party. I defy anyone to contradict that. My companion, Christine Frank Onasch, who faces a charge identical to mine, has worked even harder on party building tasks.

This current purge has nothing to do with loyalty, collaboration with Socialist Action or party building. I, and evidently numerous others, are being expelled because of our political views. And this is a far greater crime against the party

than any of the fraudulent charges leveled against me .

The timing of this purge is hardly coincidental. In three weeks our branch has scheduled our first Task and Perspectives discussion since we were reorganized by the PC. Less than a month after the T & P is our Minnesota State Convention. A few weeks after that should be the opening of long-delayed pre-convention discussion.

Obviously, you do not feel confident about debating those of us who remain committed to a Trotskyist program and the Cannon methods of party building. You seek to resolve your political crisis through crass organizational measures. You hope to appear tough, but many will see through your desperate purge and will understand that you, like most bullies, are motivated by political cowardice.

I implore you to pull back from this purge while you still can. Subordinate your factional concerns and demonstrate responsible leadership to live up to the standards of the party you were elected to lead. Stop the purge. Reverse the split!

Comradely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Onasch".

Bill Onasch

CHRISTINE FRANK ONASCH

TO THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE:

I am innocent of the charge of disloyalty which has been brought against me. I am a loyal member of the Socialist Workers Party and am an active participant and builder of the party. I am not a "splitter."

To charge someone with disloyalty for refusing to repudiate others for something they did or did not do is spurious and unprincipled. Selectively making certain "suspect" comrades take oaths or sign statements is not a procedure which is compatible with Leninist norms of functioning. Leaving aside my personal loathing and disgust for such methods, I could not in good conscience as a Bolshevik and member of a Leninist party give credence to this action by participating in it because it is totally inappropriate and alien to our movement. Extracting loyalty oaths or giving tests represents another new norm which is being bureaucratically instituted from the top and selectively applied without any consultation with the membership.

In spite of the fact that I stated my disagreement before the Political Committee sub committee and the branch organizer with the remarks of minority reporter Michael Schreiber in regard to collaboration with Socialist Action and reaffirmed my support to the responsibility and obligation of the party to regulate relations with other organizations, I was charged with disloyalty because I refused to make a repudiation of Schreiber's statements for the reasons stated above. I implore the Political Committee to reject this method of sniffing out and victimizing loyal party dissidents.

What is also disturbing about this affair is that my trial will not take place under the scrutiny of the party ranks here in the Twin Cities branch where comrades know me as a consistent party activist but in New York under the auspices of the Political Committee. I understand that the Constitution provides for the right of higher bodies to conduct trials. However, in this case, I must protest the use of this constitutional provision since I will be unable to attend my own trial. I feel that it is more than expediency and practical concerns which have prompted the central leadership of the party to place this particular series of trials within the jurisdiction of the Political Committee. I believe that the party leadership has done so out of the fear that these trials simply will not wash before the ranks for two reasons.

First, like myself and others who have been charged, many comrades may not find acceptable the manner in which the charges of disloyalty have been brought against us. Many party members would undoubtedly see that those of us who have been charged have been given two choices by having been set up either to violate long-standing Leninist principles of functioning where loyalty is judged by how one actively builds the party rather than by oaths and tests or to capitulate to the bureaucratic methods of the party's central leadership in order to save our membership. I believe many comrades would see the problem of those charged in this manner as being stuck between a rock and a hard place and would consider these trials unjustified and factionally motivated. Most importantly, they would recognize that this method is not a proper way to defend the revolutionary party.

Second, to charge people like myself and my companion Bill O. with disloyalty when we have both made it clear to the SWP our intention to remain within and actively build the party would be difficult to sell to the party ranks. Bill and I have been loyal builders of the party all along regardless of any disagreements we may have because we both feel that the Socialist Workers Party is the revolutionary party in

the United States, that this is where revolutionary Marxists belong and that there is no other organization for us. Since we have made this very clear to our fellow comrades in the Twin Cities branch, how then could they see fit to expel us for disloyalty? Thus we are to be tried in New York in absentia.

I feel it is necessary to pose before the Political Committee two simple questions: Why is this happening and what will the end result be? Since the central leadership of the party has decided to interrogate all comrades who are considered to be "suspicious"--that is supposed adherents of one or another political tendency--and to charge them with disloyalty if they fail the test, the ramifications of the subsequent trials are much broader than what happens to Chris Frank's membership. It is very likely that the end result will be the expulsion of most of the current minority in the SWP.

It is difficult to believe that the central leadership of the SWP is too frightened to go through a debate over the disputed issues in the party when all along they have been saying how insignificant the minority is. It appears now that all of this has merely been a lot of bravado and fourflushing on the part of the party leadership to convince the ranks that the ideas of the minority aren't worth giving a hearing. In reality, the minority in the SWP is more like the Aesopian gnat on the bull--small but very annoying and bothersome as it buzzes about. That is why a major purge is now under way through these trials.

Throughout its deliberations in these trials the Political Committee must consider the consequences of the expulsion of the party minority. Once there are no more dissenting views within the SWP, the danger of the party becoming a sterile vacuum becomes very real. The party needs a minority to prevent a situation of complete homogeneity in terms of ideas being discussed and debated--there being a difference, of course, between the homogeneity of ideas among the ranks and the homogeneity in program which is absolutely essential. Historically our movement has arrived at some of its most important political conclusions as a result of the persistent struggle of a minority in trying to convince and win over the party ranks. The analysis of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy by the Left Opposition and the character of the East European workers states are two examples. As long as a minority conducts itself properly in a disciplined manner and applies a patient and pedagogic approach with the good of the party in mind, it can play a healthy and useful role. A minority can be constructive in the party building process if it proceeds with the confidence that it can win the party ranks. As Farrell Dobbs taught us, "If you proceed on the basis of reason, if you try in a responsible, loyal, and disciplined way, using the power of ideas and the force of argument to convince people, if you are right and the party is wrong, then the party will rectify itself." This has certainly been the intention of myself and Bill O. and no doubt others like us who have remained consistent party builders while holding dissident views.

A growing tendency can be observed in the party today toward dalliance as opposed to a healthy doubting and skepticism. Whenever the central leadership of the party hands the membership a new programmatic revision, be it rejection of permanent revolution or the newfound obstacle of the labor aristocracy, the party ranks immediately become infatuated with the idea rather than approach it with serious questioning and testing out as a trained scientist would do since as Marxists and

revolutionists, scientists and practioners are what we are. One can ask, where is the thinking machine Comrade Barnes says the party must become? I fear it is rusting away in some dusty storeroom. The party ranks are forgetting that Marxism, although it is not a dogma, like any science, does have its conservative aspect in that it possesses a body of doctrine and theory which has been put to the test through practice and has been proven correct and applicable in the real world. Many comrades no longer are in the habit of taking what they are currently being told and seeing how it measures up to what they have been taught in the past. We all know that the programmatic acquisitions of our movement were not obtained easily but were fought for over many decades of struggle and should not be rejected so lightly. I believe that the presence of the party minority in a debate will help comrades to sharpen these skills and begin anew to apply the methods of Marxism in strengthening our program.

I am sorry to say that if the party minority is ^{unjustly} expelled for disloyalty, what will be left will be a single-minded body of people who have stopped thinking for the good of the party and accept whatever their leadership tells them. A party of handraisers is no party at all, and it is a far cry from a well-tuned thinking machine. This is not to say that there will not be many good people left in the party who are sincere and dedicated to the socialist future of humanity. However, today many of the party ranks consist on the one hand, of a large layer of enthusiastic revolutionary-minded youth who unfortunately have been quite miseducated. These precious young fighters should not go to waste. On the other hand, there are the older cadre well grounded in Marxist theory and experience in the mass movements who should know better than to accept the leadership's revisions without question but have been lured by the fantastic promise of a fusion with the Castroist current when there is no principled programmatic basis for it at this time. For this reason, I feel that to place the minority outside of the SWP would be a great loss to our movement since we have a positive contribution to make and are quite willing to do that both in terms of party building and in the formulation of the SWP's program.

What is at stake here in these trials being conducted by the Political Committee is the future of the revolutionary party in the United States. As Cannon said, "A factional struggle is a test of leadership." I hope that the Political Committee does not fail this test. So far, the central leadership of the party is not doing too well. Rather than using factional struggle to aid in the party building process, it is using the political differences with the aid of slander campaigns and bureaucratic maneuvers to split and liquidate the Socialist Workers Party. This approach is unprincipled and gutless and will only reap history's condemnation.

I am a strong adherent of Cannon's approach to party building. I firmly believe that there are no short cuts or get-rich-quick schemes and that there is no substitute for patience and hard work. That is how I judge the performance of the party leadership, my fellow comrades and myself as well. Again, I am sorry to say that the central leadership of the party has not measured up. One has in mind the ludicrous picture of Jack Barnes breathlessly pacing the floor of the penthouse at West Street nervously awaiting that fateful telegram from Havana offering the franchise on the New International. This will never happen as long as revolutionary Marxists do not live up to our historic responsibility to not only unconditionally defend the Cuban Revolution but to also teach to the Castroist leadership the elements of Marxist program and theory which are not objectively part of this revolutionary current's political heritage. This is absolutely essential if a real con-

vergence is to take place. It will never happen by ignoring and glossing over the basic weaknesses of the Castroist current or by throwing out the Trotskyist program in order to eliminate any embarrassing obstacles. No. Any fusion with the Castroist current must take place on a principled basis. I say this to set the record straight so that you know for what I am really being threatened with expulsion--not for disloyalty but for Trotskyism.

In conclusion, the possibility of the nuclear annihilation of humanity by imperialism makes the threatened liquidation of the Socialist Workers Party a disaster of potentially tragic proportions. However, revolutionary Marxists have been faced with disaster and tragedy before and have gone on to struggle with even greater determination. If I and others in the party minority are expelled for disloyalty, I do not intend to weep but to continue fighting.

Fraternally,

Christine Frank Onasch

Christine Frank Onasch

1/3/84

DAVE RIEHLE

Political Committee
Socialist Workers party
Jan. 3, 1984

Dear Comrades,

I decline to sign the statement repudiating the actions of the minority at the recent California state convention. I reject the entire method involved in presenting an ultimatum of this sort as alien to our movement.

Repudiation contains the clear implication of accepting responsibility. I accept no responsibility for the actions of the California minority. Consequently it is totally inappropriate to demand that I repudiate their actions.

I reject the clear implication that I need special certification of my loyalty to the Socialist Workers party in order to remain a member.

I reject the Star Chamber procedure that resulted in my being placed on a list of suspect party members who must be given security clearances.

I reject the charge that I am in violation of the N.C. motion regarding collaboration with Socialist Action.

Since I was a supporter of the majority political resolution at the last party convention in 1981, and since I have been charged with no act of disloyalty or indiscipline in fifteen years of membership, it is evident that the sole basis for my name being on this list is those political views I have expressed that have been at variance with those of the current party leadership.

This judgement has been arrived at through a process to which I have not been privy, or allowed to participate in. I have no information that these consultations were even carried on in authorized party bodies, and not the result of informal discussions between individuals in local and national leadership. Whether the characterization of me was prompted by political judgement, personal malice or mere whim neither, I nor most other party members have any direct knowledge.

Had I been asked to state my own position rather than to sign a statement, in other words, to express myself politically rather than mechanically, I would have replied as follows:

My position on relations with non members is clear and unequivocal. I support the right and obligation of all authorized party bodies to direct the political activities of those members under their jurisdiction, including their political relations with non-members and their right and obligation to take disciplinary action against those who violate this norm. I have complied with and intend to continue to comply with all decisions of authorized party bodies, as governed by the SWP constitution, the 1965 resolution on organizational norms, and all other relevant decisions including the N.C. motion on relations with Socialist Action.

I reject the actions of any and all SWP members who do not adhere to these norms. In saying this, I am merely restating and reaffirming the long-standing Leninist norms of the SWP.

I am not a supporter or adherent of Socialist Action or any other political organization other than the SWP. I consider the SWP to be the only viable, authentic revolutionary Marxist organization in the U.S. and the only one I would recommend to a revolutionary-minded worker as worthy of support.

This will continue to be my position regardless of the outcome of the trial to be conducted by the Political Committee on Jan. 5. I have no reason to believe that the outcome will be anything else other than the contrived expulsion of eight loyal members of the Twin Cities branch of the SWP.

I and my comrades here belong in the ranks of the S.W.P., which we have devoted most of our adult lives to building. I protest the convening of this trial based on contrived charges directed toward the pre-determined end of expulsion and urge that I be found not guilty of the charges.

It is a violation of communist integrity to demand a repudiation of the actions and views of others on command as a price for membership in a revolutionary party. It never has been so before in the S.W.P. It has never been necessary or possible to safeguard the loyalty and centralism of the party by demanding self-abasing rituals such as you propose to conduct.

Just the opposite is true. Your method is drawn from the arsenal of Stalinism, the antithesis of revolutionary Marxism. The parallel between your demand and the demands placed on the Minneapolis communists in 1928 that they approve the expulsion of Cannon, Schachtman and Abern as a price for continued membership in the Communist party is plain to anyone.

What is inevitably also involved in this method is the ultimate demand for renunciation of one's own political views, in a demonstrative public way, as a price for membership.

The conclusion that will be drawn and is being drawn is that political views at variance with those of the leadership will of themselves lead to disloyal action. Therefore, renunciation of all dissident and minority views is an a priori test of the capacity to be a loyal member.

This is why it is a matter of principle to reject the demand you have placed on me, regardless of my opinions of the actions involved.

I don't take this action lightly.

A cadre organization of revolutionary workers that can meet the tests of struggle that will be posed in the course of the American revolution can be composed only of self-reliant, independent-minded, contentious and combative individuals. Only people of this type can impose on themselves the kind of iron discipline necessary for the fight ahead.

These are not the kinds of people you are going to keep or attract. By pursuing the methods you are currently using, you will end up with an illusory and complacent "homogeneity."

A party membership assembled along the lines you are now pursuing will blow apart at the first serious pressure exerted on it by the ruling class.


People selected for leadership and membership on the basis of political passivity and willingness to change views on cue are not the human material out of which American Bolshevism will be constructed. It is not accidental that the founders of our party were stiff-necked rebels and militant defenders of their right to hold and defend their opinions.

What the party needs now is not bureaucratic optimism and homogeneity but frank and open discussion and debate--not for the benefit of a few dissident individuals in need of personal self expression, but in order to grapple in a serious way with why the party, in the midst of the gravest attack on the working class in 50 years is losing ground in terms of members, periphery, circulation of the press and most other objective indicators of our influence. We need to answer the question of why so many party campaigns projected to reverse this trend have been dropped without explanation, after rosy promises of success. Even the frantic efforts around plant gate sales have made no appreciable impact on our influence among the organized workers.

These questions have to be ruthlessly debated out regardless of whose toes are stepped on. The atmosphere inculcated in the party over the past period precludes this. Unless the current leadership is infalible, the road ahead will have to be charted through vigorous polemics, debate and, yes, even factional struggle. These are the tools that must be used to fashion the party program. They are not burglar's tools used by alien invaders to disrupt our "homogeneity" and "revolutionary unity."

I urge the Political Committee to reverse the course the party is on by rejecting these charges, reinstating comrades expelled for political reasons and leading the organization of a real Bolshevik debate over the course the party must take in the period ahead.

The first step is to , as Comrade Cannon said 55 years ago, "break down the disruptive expulsion policy, and to reinstate the expelled communists with the right to express their views in the party by normal means. The worker communist must be able to feel at home in his own party. He must have the right and feel the freedom to open his mouth and say what he thinks without being called into the office of some petty official or another like a recalcitrant workingman in a factory, and threatened with discipline. All talk of party democracy in the face of suppression on all sides and the wholesale expulsion of comrades for their views is a swindle."*


David Riehle
Twin Cities Branch

*Platform of the Communist Opposition, 1929

1/3/84

Comrades:

On January 2, 1984, a member of the PC charged me with disloyalty for refusing to repudiate those who refused to repudiate a statement made in a recent California State Convention. I did make it clear that I agree with and intend to continue to carry out the NC resolution regarding Socialist Action. Agreement with the NC resolution was not important to the PC delegation in my case. What was important was the repudiation. This, of course, does not constitute disloyalty, and the charges should be rejected by the PC.

In the course of the discussion, it became clear that what was important to the PC delegation was that I was on a suspicious list of comrades, and therefore, certain extraordinary action was required of me to prove loyalty. Even though the criteria for being on the list was kept secret and described as the sole property of the maker of the list, being on the list was more important than my loyalty to carrying out the recent NC resolution or any other. It was also made clear that no other comrades but those on the list are required to repudiate anything to maintain their membership. And what certain comrades are required to repudiate sometimes becomes known only after the fact or "opportunity to repudiate." This, of course, is a procedure designed to establish different criteria for membership and a privileged layer of comrades in the party. This is in conflict with the norms of democratic centralism, Bolshevism and this revolutionary party. Setting up of privileges or different criteria for membership has long been identified as a mortal danger to any revolutionary organization. That is one reason why I cannot participate in this signing.

One may ask if you are really loyal, why wouldn't you sign this statement or any other for that matter? I cannot condone privileges in the SWP. Decisions of norms or requirements of membership must be the same for all and decided upon by all or the appropriate elected representative bodies (such as a convention or plenum). If all of the membership of the party were presented with the statement presented to me, the vast majority would probably reject its content, implication and threat to the norms of membership. Very few SWP members would tolerate an individual on the PC or a few individuals arbitrarily concocting a succession of oaths, or repudiations or chants required to repeat or sign as a condition of membership. Then, of course, a small meeting in NY could organize a trial and expel the vast majority of the party for not signing on cue to the latest revolutionary jingle emanating from NY. That is the direction this repudiation scheme leads us.

As a footnote, the comrades faced with PC executive action in regard to membership constitute the proletarian bedrock of the Twin Cities Branch in length of time and experience in the trade unions, its party fractions and in other mass work. We are workers who would not give up our revolutionary party because it is vital for the struggle of our class against capital and imperialism. Recognizing the stubbornness of us workers to give up our revolutionary organization, the PC was forced to take the party away from us. If you think this will gain the favor of the working class fighters of Nicaragua or Cuba, you are sadly mistaken.

In conclusion, I am innocent of the charge of disloyalty that has been levelled against me. I demand that it be dropped and that this victimization of the proletarian cadre of the Twin Cities Branch be ended.

Bill Peterson

Bill Peterson

MELANIE BENSON

To the Political Committee:

My refusal to sign an oath of repudiation concerning events of which I had no prior knowledge, for which I had no responsibility nor over which I had any control is no indication of disloyalty to the Socialist Workers Party. It is instead a serious and disciplined response to an extraordinary situation:

First, the sketchy, one-sided and privately delivered account of alleged "sins of omission" committed by comrades in California, with no opportunity for open discussion; second, the presentation of a written repudiation to be signed under threat of expulsion selectively administered to comrades solely on the basis of their having expressed differences with the current party leadership; third, the unprecedented mass trial in absentia of several loyal, talented, dedicated and committed party members who have given their lives to revolutionary struggle.

I do not share the views expressed by the California reporter challenging the party's right to regulate its members' relations with non-party members. What I reject is the method being used to target loyal oppositionists. There is absolutely no real evidence to support the charges of disloyalty.

Therefore, I strongly urge that these charges be dismissed. To carry through expulsions on this indefensible basis would do immeasurable harm to the party and to the future of the revolutionary movement.



Melanie Benson

1/4/84

RALPH SCHWARTZ

Dear Comrades:

I totally reject the charges filed against me by the representatives of the P.C. on January 2, 1984.

First: I have never collaborated with Socialist Action.

Second: It is clear to me that I was asked to repudiate actions committed by people with whom I have had no political or personal collaboration on the basis of my positions on various political questions discussed in the T.C. branch. In other words, I am being charged not for acts committed by myself but for ideas I hold. I have been a party member since 1970 and have never committed a disloyal act.

In the course of my discussions with the P.C. representatives, I was informed I was "suspect" because of my views. I was informed that I was in agreement with Lovell and Weinstein. It is a matter of record that the only time party members have been able to vote on resolutions presented by these people, I voted against them. This was in 1981, in the pre-convention discussion. My opinions on various questions since that time are my own, independently arrived at.

Third: The method used to remove me from the party is anathema in the revolutionary movement. Asking me--I did not participate in the events in California in any way and I do not know anything of what occurred there except from a Militant article and a five-minute summary by Betsy Stone--to repudiate them is merely an attempt to force me into an untenable position. Any principled revolutionary would have refused to make a statement under these conditions. It is reminiscent of McCarthy-style loyalty oaths and Stalinist "recantations."


Ralph Schwartz

1/3/84

Executive Committee
Twin Cities Socialist Workers Party
508 North Snelling Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55104

January 5, 1984

Dear Comrades:

To coordinate our political work during our forced separation from the party, we have organized ourselves into a branch of expelled members. We do not have the perspective of competing with the SWP--on the contrary, we seek reinstatement into the party and are appealing our expulsions.

Until we can be reinstated, we wish to do whatever is possible to build the SWP. We propose being allowed to participate, under your direction, in at least the following areas of work: Militant sales, election campaign, forums and PRDF.

Please let us know as soon as possible if this perspective is agreeable to you or if you have any other proposals to us.

Comradely,

Christine Frank Onasch

Christine Frank Onasch

In behalf of:

Bill Onasch, Dave Riehle, Gayle Swann, Bill Peterson, Melanie Benson and Ralph Schwartz.

CC: SWP Political Committee

California Socialist Workers Party
1184 Broadway
Seaside, Calif. 93955

December 14, 1983

Dear

At its meeting of December 10, 1983 the State Committee of the California Socialist Workers Party passed the following motions:

"Based on the actions of the entire minority delegation to the California SWP State Convention, to find Paul Colvin, Ralph Forsyth, Hayden Perry, Marc Rich, Michael Schreiber, and Evelyn Sell guilty of disloyal actions in failing to take the floor before the convention to repudiate the split statements made by minority delegate Marc Rich and the minority reporter Michael Schreiber to the effect of declaring support to and intent to collaborate with the sect Socialist Action.

"This conduct is in violation of the motions passed by the SWP national committee at its meeting of November 16-21. The motions state in part, 'Membership in, affiliation to, support to or unauthorized collaboration with Socialist Action or any of its members is incompatible with membership in the SWP. The national committee and the Political Committee are the only bodies empowered to authorize any such collaboration.'

"This conduct is also in violation of the SWP Constitution Article VIII. Section 1. which states, 'All decisions of the governing bodies of the party are binding upon the members and subordinate bodies of the party. And also section 8. which states, 'Political collaboration with non members of the party must be formally authorized by the party committee having jurisdiction.'"

Having found you guilty of disloyal actions the State Committee voted to expel you from the Socialist Workers Party.

Sincerely,

Sam Manuel
for the State Committee

Democratic Centralism and the Building of the Revolutionary Combat Party in the U.S.A.

Resolution submitted by the Fourth Internationalist Caucus in the National Committee
Submitted to the February-March 1982 plenum.

In the recent past, a number of organizational concepts have been introduced by the current party leadership which begin to constitute a challenge to the historic norms of functioning of the SWP. This process has been accelerated since our August 1981 convention, as serious political differences have increasingly emerged on the SWP National Committee, which in turn reflect developing tendencies within the party as a whole. It is not the goal of this resolution to present a comprehensive overview of our organizational principles. Such a task is, of course, a periodic necessity for our movement, and would be quite useful at present. The last time this was done was in 1965. But given the immediate questions that have been raised, the most urgent necessity is to place the question of our organizational functioning in its correct political framework. Only by starting from this general perspective will we be able to arrive at correct solutions to whatever specific problems might arise in the SWP today.

The organizational principles of the Leninist revolutionary party are summed up by the concept of democratic centralism. This concept flows from our most basic political task--constructing a revolutionary combat party which will prove capable of leading the American working class to political power. It is a two-sided, dialectical concept, which encompasses the greatest possible democracy in discussing and deciding every political question we face, as well as the greatest possible centralism in action--intervening into the class struggle with a single voice, as a united force. Neither side of this dual concept has any meaning in isolation or separation from the other.

One of the most important factors in the welding of a democratic centralist party is an active, informed, politically conscious, and critical membership. Anything which cuts across the construction of such a membership is completely alien to democratic centralism. This is the correct content which must be given to the concept of "worker-Bolshevism." The revolutionary party requires a membership of worker-Bolsheviks because history clearly demonstrates that even the best, most dedicated, and most educated leadership is no guarantee of a correct course at all points in the class struggle. It was the existence of such a membership in the Russian bolshevik party in 1917, for example, whose understanding was far in advance of the official party leadership in February and March, that set the stage for Lenin to wage his successful fight for the famous "April theses."

There is no such thing as a leader, or grouping, within the revolutionary party who is always right, or who has a monopoly on a correct political course. That is why periodic conflicts and disagreements over one or another question are inevitable, and should be considered normal; and that is why each and every member of the organization has not only the right but the responsibility to consider and review every decision taken by the party.

Finally, it must be kept in mind that every member of the revolutionary party must be trained as a leader of the working class and of the mass movements. This makes it essential to develop each member's ability to understand and apply the Marxist method, which cannot be done simply by reading books or attending classes, though these things are indispensable. Nor can this method be learned merely by carrying out directives from above on what to do. It can be learned only by members testing their own ideas and gaining experience both within the party and in the mass organizations.

The centralism side of the democratic centralist duality is equally important. Without the ability to intervene in the class struggle as a single, united, fighting unit, the revolutionary party would be reduced to impotence. Particularly in the United States, with the most powerful ruling class on earth, our small forces must maximize our impact if we hope to chart a course forward and win acceptance for it among working people.

Discipline, loyalty, and dedication to the party are the natural attributes of workers who have come to understand the necessity of a revolutionary Marxist program. These attitudes reflect their commitment to the cause of socialism, and their appreciation of the party as the indispensable instrument for the victory of the new society. The collective effort of millions will be required to bring this about, and only the conscious Marxist vanguard, acting as a unitary force, can hope to channel these millions onto the correct road.

An effective application of democratic centralism to party building requires that the two sides of this formula complement and reinforce one another. In fact, without the ability to carry out decisions in a centralist manner, party democracy becomes a hollow shell with no content. Discussion may lead to decision, but if decision does not lead to action then it has no meaning. On the other hand, if centralization of activity takes place without the fullest and most democratic decision-making process possible, then the likelihood of serious errors increases qualitatively, and over time becomes inevitable.

On the subjective level, the reality of party democracy will reinforce the dedication of every comrade to participate wholeheartedly in common political work. (This assumes in the first place an honest and comradely discussion in which all sides make an effort to understand the views of others and share a willingness to review their own opinions in the light of subsequent developments.) And the effectiveness of united activity, in turn, can only result in the rededication of every member to participate, fully and open-mindedly, in the broad discussions necessary to insure that the basic programmatic goals of the party are applied with a correct strategic and tactical approach.

It is completely destructive to the functioning of the revolutionary party if democracy and centralism come in conflict unnecessarily. The need for a full participation of the membership in the decision-making process cannot be allowed to significantly restrict the ability of the party to act. This is what we mean when we say that we are not a discussion circle but a party of action. And it must also be understood that in order to construct a cadre of worker-Bolsheviks, the centralist aspect of party functioning should be limited, to conflict as little as possible with the ability of the membership to read, think, exchange ideas, and participate in the overall, collective consideration of political questions.

It is with this understanding that we must approach the problem of what specific organizational norms and guidelines should govern the revolutionary party at any given moment. The 1965 "Organizational Principles" can be an extremely helpful and useful guide if understood and applied correctly. But we must also keep in mind that there are no prefabricated blueprints which we can apply. Rigid and formalistic thinking is as inappropriate here as in any other area. Many factors must be taken into account, including the level of the class struggle, the size of the organization, the degree of legality, the extent and character of political disagreements, the level of experience of the cadre, etc. We must consider the concrete reality we face today if we are to effectively chart a road forward for resolving the currently disputed questions, preserving the unity of our party, and laying the basis for a mass revolutionary Marxist vanguard to lead the third American revolution.

Submitted Feb. 22, 1982

New Norms vs. Old: the Erosion of Proletarian Democracy in the SWP

Draft resolution by Steve Bloom, Frank Lovell, Nat Weinstein and Lynn Henderson

Submitted to the August, 1983 SWP National Committee meeting, for the agenda point: "Appeals and Reviews."

"All talk of party democracy in the face of suppression on all sides and the wholesale expulsion of comrades for their views is a swindle."
--James P. Cannon, The Left Opposition in the U.S. 1928-31.

The recent wave of expulsions is the clearest indication of a fundamental change that has taken place in the Socialist Workers Party.

Bolshevik organizational norms are summed up in the formula "democratic centralism," and every organization that lays claim to the heritage of the October Revolution--be it revolutionary party, ultraleft sect, or counter-revolutionary Stalinist apparatus--also swears fidelity to democratic centralism. For the vast majority, of course, this is an empty phrase used to justify a thoroughly undemocratic organizational structure--bureaucratic centralism, with all policy tightly controlled by a small, self-perpetuating leadership.

At least two organizations in the history of the working class movement have demonstrated that democratic centralism is not a utopian, unattainable ideal. One was the archetype itself: the Bolshevik party before its Stalinist degeneration. Another has been the Socialist Workers Party.

Over the past two years, however--since the last convention--a fundamental change in the organizational character of the SWP has become evident. The democratic traditions and norms of the party are being sliced away, salami style. The most obvious symptom of this trend is the unprecedented plague of expulsions, which is, if we are to call things by their right names, a purge.

Most party members are unaware of the scope of this purge because their knowledge has been restricted to what has happened in their own branch. The restriction of information concerning expulsions has been a deliberate policy of the central leadership. That was conclusively demonstrated by the May 1983 NC meeting, which voted to uphold a number of expulsions, but not to report these actions to the membership. The censored, single-faction branch reports that followed this plenum represented an unprecedented violation of Bolshevik and SWP organizational norms.

"The foundation of party democracy," Trotsky wrote, "is timely and complete information, available to all members of the organization and covering all the important questions of their life and struggle" (Writings 1932-33, p. 57). But such information became a casualty of the "new norms."

The purge has been orchestrated by the national office and has aimed at ridding the party of members with political views that differ from those of the national leadership. This process has gone under the false heading of attaining "political centralism."

The expulsions, however, are just the tip of the iceberg. Kicking a comrade out on flimsy grounds not only eliminates a dissident directly, it also intimidates others from defending their own independent views, or even questioning leadership decisions. It introduces a "chilling effect" into the internal life of the party. As a result, the rank-and-file has been effectively blocked from even discussing and expressing an opinion about what is happening to the party.

At the same time as the rights of the ranks are restricted, the central leadership has arrogated a new freedom to do and say anything it pleases, no matter how alien to party tradition or contrary to convention decisions. Two salient examples are Doug Jenness's ISR articles and Jack Barnes's speech at the last YSA convention in Chicago (now in print in the first issue of New International). With no discussion and no vote in any formally constituted party committee (not to mention the party as a whole) they publicly turned the ideological foundations of our movement upside down and inside out. Anyone with the temerity to protest this after the fact or to attempt to defend our traditional perspectives in the party was charged with "unauthorized discussion," or some other crime, and expelled or threatened with expulsion. In this way a leadership which has lost its confidence in the Marxist program and method has attempted to line up the party in support of its new perspectives without having to openly confront those who reject their new ideas.

The postponing and downgrading of the 1983 national convention was a body blow at party democracy, and yet another example of the cavalier attitude with which the national leadership violates the real democratic norms and traditions of the Socialist Workers Party.

The participation of the party as a whole in all important decisions, and particularly in any decision on basic program, is absolutely essential for the maintenance of a healthy political atmosphere in the party. Cannon explained this point in a letter to the Akron branch of the SWP in April 1942: "No important decision of a programmatic nature has ever been made in the history of the American Trotskyist movement without ample discussion of the membership. There has never been a time when the party refused to reopen discussion on old decisions when the necessity for a new discussion was manifest to a reasonably numerous section of the party membership" ("Criticism and Discussion of Current Party Policy," The Socialist Workers Party in World War II, pp. 235-236). It is the repeated and militant refusal of the present leadership of the SWP to open discussion on its new theoretical perspectives to the party as a whole, attempting to use its formal positions of authority, its formal right as a majority of the leadership to "regulate" discussion, to in fact strangle and suppress any and all objective consideration of these basic ideas by the party ranks. This is the fundamental source of all of our recent problems with "violations of norms."

Although it would be fruitless to try to pinpoint an exact moment when the internal democracy of the SWP went off the track, the National Committee plenum of February-March 1982 was obviously an important turning point. That plenum heard a series of charges from the Control Commission and issued a list of warnings that have been used in part as a juridical basis for further actions, including expulsions. Since that plenum, an "educational" campaign has been underway designed to convince party members that these charges and warnings represent nothing new; that they are no more than a reaffirmation of the historic organizational norms of our party, as codified in particular in the 1965 document, "Organizational Character of the Socialist Workers Party." But this is completely false.

If anything has been proven by this experience it is that democratic centralism cannot be guaranteed by a legal code, no matter how well and how sincerely written. For the code to serve its function requires a leadership commitment to defending proletarian democracy and this is now lacking in the SWP.

"The present leaders and teachers of the party," James P. Cannon wrote in 1928, "substitute the idea of discipline in the formal mechanical sense for the Leninist doctrine of democratic centralism" (Left Opposition in the U.S., 1928-31, p. 72). It is ironic that these words, written during the struggle that gave birth to our movement, so precisely describe the situation in the SWP today.

The 1965 organizational document did not intend to set forth a rigid legal code. The February-March 1982 plenum abused the spirit of that resolution by turning the general principles it articulated into an ossified list of "thou-shalt-nots." Subsequent practice has shown that even unintended transgressions of these commandments as interpreted by the party leadership--or still worse, even imagined transgressions--lead to summary expulsion. The expulsion procedures themselves have exhibited a quality of justice that completely fails to protect the basic rights of party members.

To gauge the extent of the erosion of internal democracy, let us compare some of the recent expulsions with the historical attitude of our party toward this ultimate disciplinary action, as described by James P. Cannon: "This is such an easygoing party that some people who haven't been in any other party don't know what a paradise they've got. So easygoing, so democratic, so tolerant. Never bothers anybody for anything, never imposes any discipline. Why our National Control Commission has gone by three conventions without having anything to report. The only time the good-natured somnolence of the SWP begins to stir into action on the disciplinary front is when somebody gets disloyal. Not if he makes a mistake, not if he fiddles around, but if he begins to get disloyal. . . ."

"But it's a literal fact that the only time we ever expelled anybody for anything was for violating discipline after repeated warnings not to do it. That's the only time" ("Internationalism and the SWP," May 1953, Speeches to the Party, p. 76).

In saying this, Cannon was, in fact, arguing for the expulsion of Felix Morrow. Morrow had been discovered leaving SWP political committee meetings and heading straight for the headquarters of an opponent group, the Shachtmanites, and reporting to them on SWP internal matters. Cannon felt it necessary, even in such an extreme and obvious case of disloyalty, to patiently, politically motivate kicking Morrow out, because expulsions have never been treated lightmindedly by the SWP.

The recent wave of expulsions has been carried out in total violation of that tradition. Loyal comrades have been expelled on the most trivial grounds imaginable. And these expulsions have not been for disloyalty, and particularly not "after repeated warnings" to use Cannon's words, but for some alleged overstepping of the arbitrary bounds of the new norms.

There have also been undemocratic disciplinary actions other than expulsions; the prime example of which was the "censure" of Asher H. When Asher's branch refused to vote the censure, the leadership took it to the Bay Area District Executive Committee which did do so. But when the district membership refused to endorse that decision, it was taken to a National Committee plenum, where a factional mechanical majority upheld the district EC. What a sordid, degrading affair; not for Asher H. , but for the Socialist Workers Party.

The exclusion of Peter C. is of unique significance, because Peter was a central leader and one of the best known public spokespersons for the YSA and SWP for many years. He was refused readmittance to our party on flimsy organizational pretexts, despite the SWP leadership's recognition that Peter was a member of the Fourth International. (They voted for his inclusion on the IEC as a full member.) Such an exclusion has no precedent in our movement's history. Whatever political differences comrades may have had with Peter , and whatever Peter's subsequent political trajectory has been, the correct approach required debating out our differences within a common organizational framework.

Rights of factions and tendencies

The aim of the new norms and their attendant disciplinary actions has been to stamp out any points of view in the party that are not in agreement with the central leadership's by ostracizing, harassing, slandering, and ultimately expelling those who hold those views. This is done in the name of the "right to regulate" internal party life. This right is not in dispute. What is in dispute is the political wisdom of the measures taken by the majority leadership, which attempts to "regulate" internal life in order to smother it. This can only smother the party. Along with the right to regulate internal life goes the responsibility to do so wisely, in the best interests of the party as a whole, and not in the narrow, factional interests of the current leadership.

"The principle of Bolshevik organization," Trotsky wrote, "is 'democratic centralism,' assured by complete freedom of criticism and of groupings, together with steel discipline in action. The history of the party is at the same time the history of the internal struggle of ideas, groupings, factions" (August 1935, Crisis of the French Section, p. 47).

A ban on internal party groupings strangles the internal life of the party and eventually destroys its revolutionary character. In the SWP at present the rank-and-file is rigorously prohibited from participating in any such groupings.

This ban on factions was exemplified by the expulsions of Jake C., Harry D., Gillian F. To be sure, these comrades violated a technicality of procedure in mailing out their platform directly to party branches, but this is hardly the basis for an expulsion. Their real crime was attempting to form a faction.

An even clearer manifestation of the present ban on internal groupings was the response of the majority party leadership to eighteen comrades (including 5 past and present National Committee members) who announced

their intention to participate as a tendency in the pre-World-Congress discussion of the Fourth International. In denying permission, the SWP leadership directly **violated** the statutes of the Fourth International.

"Without temporary ideological groupings," Trotsky wrote, "the ideological life of the party is unthinkable. Nobody has yet discovered any other procedure. And those who have sought to discover it have only shown that their remedy was tantamount to strangling the ideological life of the party" (Third International After Lenin, 1928, p. 149).

"And, indeed," he later added, "How could a genuinely revolutionary organization, setting itself the task of overthrowing the world and uniting under its banner the most audacious iconoclasts, fighters, and insurgents, live and develop without intellectual conflicts, without groupings and temporary factional formations?" (Revolution Betrayed, 1936, p. 95).

The SWP leadership presently holds that the rights of tendencies and factions are restricted only to preconvention discussion periods. That is in complete contradiction to the true history and traditions of the SWP and of Bolshevism.

The real Bolshevik tradition is one of internal disputes and groupings at all times when this was made necessary by new events in the class struggle, by the development of new disputes in the party, and in extreme cases even as a continuation of old disputes. The real pace of political life does not always follow a pre-set timetable corresponding conveniently to the schedule for SWP conventions.

Lenin would have had a few things to say about the schematic notions of the present SWP leadership. In 1906, as a result of a dispute in the reunified Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, he commented on the necessity for the continued right of discussion and criticism of party policy by the ranks even after the decisions of the party congress. "We must and shall fight ideologically against those decisions of the Congress which we regard as erroneous. But at the same time we declare to the whole Party that we are opposed to a split of any kind. We stand for submission to the decisions of the Congress. Rejecting boycott of the Central Committee and valuing joint work, we agreed to those who share our views going on the Central Committee, although they will comprise a negligible minority on it. We are profoundly convinced that the workers' Social Democratic organizations must be united, but in these united organizations there must be wide and free discussion of Party questions, free comradely criticism and assessment of events in Party life" ("Appeal to the Party by Delegates to the Unity Congress who Belonged to the Bolshevik Group," C.W., Vol. 10, p. 314).

"I will remind the reader that in my pamphlet, Social Democracy and the State Duma (published together with an article by Dan) I pointed out before the Congress that the trend that remained in the minority must be insured freedom to criticise the decisions of the Congress and freedom to agitate for another Congress" ("Report on the Unity Congress of the RSDLP," Ibid, p. 372n).

"Against this tendency of our Right Social Democrats we must wage a most determined, open and ruthless ideological struggle. We should seek the widest possible discussion of the decisions of the Congress. We must call upon every member of the party to take a conscious and critical stand on these resolutions. We must see to it that every workers' organization, after

making itself thoroughly familiar with the subject, declares whether it approves or disapproves of any particular decision. If we have really and seriously decided to introduce democratic centralism in our Party, and if we have resolved to draw the masses of the workers into intelligent decision of Party questions, we must have these questions discussed in the press, at meetings, in circles and at group meetings.

"But in this United Party this ideological struggle must not split the organizations, must not hinder the unity of action of the proletariat. . . ." (Ibid, p. 380).

No one, of course, would hold this up as a model of proletarian functioning for all times and for all places. But the fact that Lenin considered this kind of discussion an acceptable mode of functioning within the context of democratic centralism speaks volumes in opposition to the rigid and narrow concept of party organization, defined by the current SWP leadership as a set of dos and don'ts spelled out in the 1965 resolution and schematically applied to all situations.

It is, of course, correct to say that under ordinary circumstances it is normal (i.e. a norm) for internal party groupings to dissolve after the end of a discussion, and for new internal groupings to wait until regularly constituted discussion periods. But these are norms, not rigid laws carved in stone; and it could not be otherwise. It is also normal for the party leadership to present its thinking on all major questions to the party as a whole during the course of the regularly constituted discussion period and not wait for the day after the close of the convention to launch a major revision of our basic program. It is this abnormal action by the central party leadership which created the necessity for the reopening of discussion and the pressure for the formation of internal groupings in the party in an abnormal fashion. The adamant refusal of the majority leadership to recognize this fact--its retreat behind abstract formulas about "norms"--demonstrates its complete default as a Leninist leadership.

When challenged on this point, the SWP majority leadership's supporters have an almost invariable response: "The SWP is not a discussion club." Those who mouth these words are obviously unaware of their history. James P. Cannon, during the struggle in which our movement originated, replied to them: "'The Communist Party is not a debating society.' Behind this statement, true enough in itself, all the bureaucrats who fear discussion seek to hide their incompetence" (December 1928, Left Opposition in the U.S., 1928-31, p. 53).

Trotsky often described the internal life of the Bolshevik party, and his description stands in marked contrast to the image of Bolshevism which the present majority leadership of the SWP is attempting to apply to our party: "We must not forget that even if we are centralists, we are democratic centralists who employ centralism only for the revolutionary cause and not in the name of 'prestige' of the officials. Whoever is acquainted with the history of the Bolshevik Party knows what a broad autonomy the local organizations always enjoyed; they issued their own papers, in which they openly and sharply, whenever they found it necessary, criticized the actions of the Central Committee. Had the Central Committee, in case of principled differences, attempted to disperse the local organizations or to deprive them of literature (their bread and water) before the party had had an opportunity to express itself--such a central committee would have made itself impossible.

Naturally, as soon as it became necessary, the Bolshevik Central Committee could give orders. But subordination to the committee was possible only because the absolute loyalty of the Central Committee toward every member of the party was well known, as well as the constant readiness of the leadership to hand over every serious dispute for consideration by the party" ("The Crisis in the German Opposition," February 1931, Writings 1930-31, p. 155).

We must reconquer this conception of Bolshevism and of Bolshevik leadership and organization if we are to resolve the present organizational and political crisis in our party. "Hand over every serious dispute for consideration by the party." This is the key to putting an end to the so-called "violations of discipline" by individual members, not a further clamp-down on discussion and disagreements.

The expulsions and other repressive organizational measures have enforced an internal party life where individual comrades cannot express their political differences under any circumstances. This "new normality" is diametrically opposed to Leninist norms, Bolshevik practice, and the historical tradition of the Socialist Workers Party.

Political roots of the organizational distortions

Since the organizational question cannot be separated from political questions, the underlying political causes of the erosion of party democracy must be identified.

As previously mentioned, the central leadership of the SWP has made a sharp ideological and political turn away from the party's historical program. While claiming "continuity" with the past, it is in fact now promoting a qualitatively different program from that to which most of the current membership was recruited. The differences include such questions as the theory of permanent revolution, our view of Stalinism, and our attitude toward the Fourth International.

In the context of our Trotskyist heritage, the leadership's new program is simply indefensible. The only honest course it could pursue would be to openly acknowledge its break with the historical program of the SWP and argue for the necessity of that break.

Instead it has chosen to falsely cloak itself in the authority earned by the American Trotskyist movement in more than a half century of struggle. Since an open and democratic discussion would quickly reveal this cloak to be as insubstantial as the emperor's new clothes, the leadership is compelled to stifle party democracy in order to defend its indefensible policies.

Trotsky explained, "A correct class policy is the main condition for a healthy party democracy. Without this, all talk of democracy and discipline remain hollow; worse, it becomes a weapon for the disorganization of the proletarian movement." These words describe precisely what has happened in our party over the last two years--the gradual and progressive erosion of party democracy because of the attempt by the leadership to introduce an incorrect and indefensible political line, which has led to the transformation of party discipline from an instrument which can weld together the proletarian vanguard in united action into its opposite--a means for the disorganization and increasingly the disintegration of that vanguard. This is the inevitable result of centralism divorced from democracy.

The campaign to stack the deck against a democratic discussion began on day one after the last convention in 1981. The attack on the ideological roots of Trotskyism took the form of a proposed "reexamination" of Lenin's view of the Russian Revolution, and the leadership's revised ideas about Lenin were to be transmitted to the party ranks in the form of classes. The demagogic claim that the classes would study Lenin without any preconceived notions or interpretations was belied by the immediate emergence--and dominance--of the classic anti-Trotskyist line, later spelled out in Doug Jenness's second ISR article, and further developed in Barnes's Chicago speech.

If someone were to forthrightly state: "We've decided that the Stalinist 'theoreticians' from Radek to Basmanov were right about Trotsky all along," then the basis for a discussion would be clear. But to pretend that the majority leadership's new revelations are in continuity with the traditional SWP view, and that it simply emerges from an unbiased reading of Lenin's works, is a hypocritical and cynical cover-up.

The announcement of this new "educational" effort at an expanded PC meeting the day after the 1981 convention closed reveals that the leadership deliberately acted to avoid a discussion on this subject. The ranks of the SWP were swindled out of their democratic right to discuss and vote on a 180-degree change in the fundamental ideology of our party--the foundation upon which our political program stands. It is hard to imagine a greater perversion of party democracy.

Nonetheless, the campaign proceeded. The Lenin classes were organized. Doug Jenness's articles appeared in the ISR. How did the party membership react? On the surface, the reaction seemed relatively calm. But the superficial calmness was illusory, just as water approaching boiling appears no different from cold water to the eye. In fact the ideological revision has had a profound impact on the party ranks.

Quite a few gradually became aware of what was happening and consciously opposed the revision. But since they were unable to state this opposition to the party as a whole, it appeared that only an insignificant handful in one's own branch was "out of step." By launching this campaign the day after the 1981 convention, the leadership gave itself two years before the next scheduled preconvention discussion to strengthen the prejudice that its internal opponents were an isolated fringe element. (And apparently even two years weren't enough; hence the postponement of the 1983 convention.)

On top of that, oppositionists were framed up and undemocratically expelled, creating the prejudice that to oppose the new ideology was to be disloyal to the party.

But the effects have gone deeper than the layer of conscious oppositionists. A considerable number of comrades have become confused and demoralized by the strange goings-on in the party. They may not be able to put their finger on it, but they feel in their bones that something is not quite right; that the party is no longer the same kind of party they joined, and that the change has not been for the better. This category is partially represented by a wave of resignations, the scope of which the party hasn't seen since the witchhunt years of the 1950s.

These comrades typically resign "for personal reasons" and "with no political differences." But whether they recognize it or not, they have been affected by the qualitative change in the party's political direction. It is evident that the party, at the very least, has failed to inspire them to retain their membership and remain active. Included in this group are quite a few who played key cadre roles in leading the party during the anti-Vietnam war movement.

The expulsions and resignations, combined with a negligible recruitment rate, mean, of course, that the party is diminishing at a rapid rate. Ordinarily, this in itself would give pause for reconsideration. Building a revolutionary party is not a straight-line process, but whenever a serious backward trend sets in, the natural question should at least be raised: Might our shrinkage be a result of an erroneous political course?

Instead, the leadership would seem to prefer that those who defend--and even those who merely remember--the program of the SWP drop out, hopefully to be replaced by a new levy of recruits to the new program (a new program which is characterized in practice mainly by revolutionary phrase-mongering and abstentionism).

In fact, for those comrades too confused and disoriented to make the break themselves, a new effort has been launched to help them leave the party. Certain dropouts have been hailed as "model" resignations to be emulated. In some places branch committees have been formed to encourage opposition comrades to leave, and threaten them with disciplinary action if they don't. These committees, where they exist, seem to be more energetic than the recruitment committees.

Furthermore, for the first time a quantitative standard of activity has been adopted. It is now supposedly a "norm" of party membership to participate in a Militant sale once a week at an industrial worksite. Although as of this writing nobody is known to have been expelled for directly violating this "norm," it has been used as a source of pressure to convince members to resign because their contributions to the party are allegedly insufficient.

In sum, the Socialist Workers Party is disintegrating. Both the cadre and the program of the revolutionary party are under attack, and are in danger of being destroyed. For the first time in its history, the SWP faces a liquidationist challenge not from a minority tendency but from the central leadership itself. This liquidationism is born of impatience: the familiar quest for short-cuts and dramatic break-throughs has led to an opportunistic adaptation to Castroism.

While Castroism has proved itself in action to be a revolutionary current, it nonetheless possesses an inadequate and incorrect ideology for a revolutionary party in the United States.

"The stand taken by the Socialist Workers Party towards the Cuban revolution," wrote Joseph Hansen in 1978, "can be summarized in three points." Point one is "for defense of the Cuban revolution against all its enemies." Point two is "for the development of proletarian forms of democracy in Cuba." Point three is particularly relevant to the present question of organizational forms and norms: "For the formation of a Leninist-type party that guarantees

internal democracy, that is, the right of critical opinion to be heard. The power of a party that safeguards the right to form tendencies or factions was demonstrated by the Bolsheviks" (Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution, p. 16, emphasis added).

How peculiar these words must seem to a recently recruited member of the YSA or SWP. Was this Hansen fellow some sort of reactionary? Five years ago Hansen could write that the stand taken by the Socialist Workers Party was that the Cuban Communist Party was not a Leninist party; was not the kind of party we aspire toward. Today, however, our party press promotes the Cuban and other Castroist parties as models of revolutionary organization. The gulf between these two viewpoints is immense. No one can honestly pretend not to notice that a profound ideological shift in our leadership's attitude toward organizational forms has occurred.

This should not be too surprising. Since politics and organization are inseparable, adapting to the Castroist political program has led to emulating its organizational forms as well. That is what is happening in the Socialist Workers Party today. Political methods of resolving differences of opinion have been replaced by an organizational lawbook designed to discourage opposition. That is the essence of the new norms.

There are, of course, two crucial differences between the Castroist leadership and the current majority leadership of the SWP: first, Castro's team earned its authority by leading a revolution; and second, it now holds state power. For the SWP to copy the Castroists' organizational forms is not merely an error, it is downright quixotic.

Cannon, and the other founders and leaders of our party well understood the interconnection between politics and organization. And they also understood that for Leninists, organizational questions are always subordinate to political ones. Cannon consistently rejected any disciplinary solution to problems when this would get in the way of a necessary discussion and clarification of political differences. Even after consistent disloyal behavior by Albert Goldman and Felix Morrow, for example, he rejected their expulsion from the party before the political questions were resolved.

In May 1946, Cannon explained, "First, the political issues which were latent in the struggle from the beginning have broken through in full flower finally at this plenum. These are important issues, in the discussions of which not only our party but the whole International will be educated. You can't learn much just from expulsions, [or] from personal fights, except that one person is good, another bad, etc. That only creates demoralization and discouragement. But from the discussion of great political questions--the French constitution, the national question in Europe, the theses of the international conference, wages and prices--from the discussion of such questions the whole new generation of party members can learn great lessons. And we want that discussion. The discussion between orthodox Marxism and revisionism has to unfold not only in our party but in the International. We sincerely desire to have it conducted within the framework of our party and the Fourth International" (Report on the Internal Party Situation, "The Struggle for Socialism in the American Century", p. 249).

This understanding of Cannon, in complete consonance with the revolutionary and democratic-centralist traditions of our movement stands in marked contrast to the attitude of the current leadership of the SWP. The time has come to put an end to the policy of expulsions and disciplinary actions. Let us begin the discussion which has been put on the agenda by the central leadership itself through its public pursuit of the new line. We must do this because "from the discussion of great political questions the whole new generation of party members can learn great lessons."

The expulsions, the threats, the new "norms," the ban on tendencies and factions, the single-faction plenum reports, the arbitrary convention postponement--all of this adds up to an extreme unwillingness of the majority leadership to allow any discussion of its policies. The aversion to discussion demonstrates a lack of confidence in its ability to defend those policies. It is well aware of the fundamental incompatibility of its present course with the historical revolutionary-socialist program of our movement.

Unable to justify their policies, they have opted to stonewall. In that direction lies the sure destruction of the revolutionary party; the end of the line for American Bolshevism. It is way past time to call a halt. Reject the "new norms"! Return to the "old" norms of democratic centralism!

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