

A SUMMARY OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION OF
NEWS AND LETTERS COMMITTEES, SEPT. 3-4, 1983

Raya, National Chairwoman, then took the floor for her summation of the day's reports and discussion. She began by saying she wanted to use a word not usual for her: "nitty-gritty." It is a great Convention, and everyone agrees on Perspectives, on the pamphlets, on everything. But has anybody concretized it into the nitty-gritty points? You can't become the "new member" we are talking about without confronting what we did wrong last year and work out how not to repeat it when we are confronted with a type of opposition we don't expect. The WL Committees in Detroit are certainly all Marxist-Humanists. They know P&R, RLWLKM and M&F. And they knew that the women who were coming around had something very different in mind

as the basis for the kind of study group they wanted; they were interested in "culture" as the basis. We wound up wasting a month or more on people who had no intention of seriously studying the trilogy with us. Did anyone tell them you can agree or disagree with this book, but this is what we are going to discuss?

We also all know about Hegel's summation of all attitudes into three attitudes to objectivity: We can follow Hegel from the first attitude of faith, through the second critical attitude of a Kant, and expect the next to be even more critical. But what Hegel showed was that unless you work out and fully understand the dialectic you will retrogress to a third attitude like Jacobi.... The locals could get nothing from the tour if the attitude was wrong, no matter how many lectures or media interviews they achieved, if they didn't grasp and project to others, that is, that they were hearing something never heard before on Marx and on us. We kept underestimating our enemies. Everything I ever wrote has been polemical, but there will be more criticism of us than ever before on RLWLKM. When you confront Engels, the whole world of Marxists will say: "If he was good enough for Marx, he should be good enough for you."

but it isn't a question of his loyalty. It is a question that he was no Marx right from the beginning. One of Engels' earliest letters to Marx was to urge him to "Get that thing published" that Marx was working on. He had never read those 1844 Mss. but he thought Marx was taking too long to work them out. There was never the digging into all the new Marx was creating. Take the question that Marx had no theory of the party, which is true. But since P&R we can see that not having a theory of the party means nothing if you have the philosophy of "revolution in permanence." It's only 100 years later that we are seeing Critique of the Gotha Program as an organizational document.

How you answer someone may come out in a different way than you intended because the question is asked differently than you expected. You forget the ground. Do you know how much time we wasted when the WLM first began and we met Terry who wanted feminism without Marx? Terry's friend came to a class on Marx and wanted to study something other than Marx. Who she chose was Proudhon! That was an easy one to answer because Proudhon was the worst sexist ever. The anarchism sounded great until you saw what it was for, concretely. Meantime, how much time was wasted? The point is that each of us has to ask how does it happen that my attitude was such and such on the tour, when every talk was new and we were concretizing something so new that the first task is to grasp that newness. You will first now face the real challenge in your own locals. If you aren't ready for the unexpected, you won't be able to meet it.

Look at what we are doing on the 1949-50 Miners' Strike. We aren't going back to the 1920s; we want to concentrate on 1950. And whoever said that after the caravan the strike ended and it was finished was wrong. That was when the ramifications just began. We want to concentrate on the events of that strike, on moments like Red's speech that launched the relief committee. It meant taking responsibility for life or death. The miners saw that there were thousands of others who wanted to make sure they lived. The other key was the miners calling that machine a "man-killer" and not just worrying about the number of jobs they would lose. The ramifications of that go all the way to M&F and the question of the division of mental and manual labor.

The new kind of member we want now -- and all of us, including the founders, have to be that new kind of member -- is one who will learn what ground means and never separate ourselves from it no matter what the subject is. Even when Marx was looking at Art, it was from the point of view of how to get rid of this damn oppressive society. The word, revolution, permeates everything. Erudition, as in an Althusser, doesn't mean anything if it is separated from revolution. At the Executive Session, we will be studying "Organization/Philosophy; Philosophy/Organization." It isn't called "leadership" this year. Unless we recognize that it is each one's responsibility to project Marxist-Humanism, we won't get there.

Raya took the floor to speak briefly on the difference between what is a universal and what is historic, and why a Constitution has to be very brief. I agree with Mike that the Constitution is not a fourth pamphlet. The reason CLR James was trying to break up the organization was that he didn't want Marxism and Freedom to be the basis for organization, our theoretical foundation. The full foundation was with our original Constitution in saying that both M&F and N&L were needed; we would never again separate theory and practice. Why do we have to reject some of the amendments made here? It's not that they are wrong, but that they take away from the seriousness, the totality, the conciseness. Raya went on to speak about the amendments on ageism and homophobia; Look at By-law 14c that it is proposed we change. It says that members may be expelled for "chauvinism against Blacks or other oppressed groups." "Oppressed groups" means just that. You have to see that very nearly every word in the Constitution is a category. We are speaking about the specificity of oppressed groups everywhere. Raya also spoke about the motion to include Indignant Heart in the Constitution. Look at the welcome statement Denby sent to us. What he singled out was the trilogy of revolution and ACOT. Those are the works of the whole organization, and it is those that are the theoretical foundations we can all stand on.

At this point Felix Martin turned the floor over to Raya for her summation of the discussion. Raya began with the question of "what is new?" and why that question has to be posed concretely. Everyone repeats the quotation from Hegel: "Individualism that lets nothing interfere with its universalism". Yet why is it that our first reaction to a problem, whether it's lack of time for a session, or anything else, is "technical"? It is the same with the paper-- on time (not meeting deadlines), or space (leaving it to the PTC to cut). In that case time is not only space for self-development, but space for self-discipline. That is a new way to look at it.

Or Lou's move to the Center last year. That wasn't a "geographic" move; it was directly connected not only to the Black Dimension, but to new responsibilities for the paper. Let's continue with the Black Dimension, with two points. Frank had brought up the 1947 pamphlet Invading Socialist Society. Talk about empty rhetoric. Israel is there declared to be the center of world revolution and the heart of the invading socialist society. I had to telegraph him to ask it be taken out, because I had learned about Begin from the German Jewish socialists who has gone to Israel and then left in disgust under his kind of attacks. Unfortunately it meant nothing to CLR James. The point is that "individualism that lets nothing interfere with its universalism" has to be expressed in a concrete manner, whether on deadlines or on challenging post-Marx Marxists.

What was new from the very beginning in our break? Even though CLR James had tried to take credit for Denby's JH, there was no motion to have Denby as worker-editor of the paper. W&L was the first to make that category. "What is new" has to be concrete or it isn't proved. Take JHRWJ. The difference between Part I and Part II of it begins with the fact that Part I was written under the influence of CLRJ. The fights at the beginning of the mimeoed Correspondence were on the question of how that paper would concretely express what we stood for. Supposedly it was for the workers' viewpoint, but when it came to the miners' strike, the tens of thousands who were out were suddenly not who we were writing for, but only for ourselves. And the fight had to be waged all over again when the paper was printed, with the Beria Purge. There was no way to escape world events, no matter how hard they tried to say this was not something workers would be interested in.

If we return to 1983 and see the latest book coming out-- the Marcus Garvey Papers, edited by Robert Hill in UCLA (who is a friend and co-thinker with CLRJ on many points-- you will see that the problem has not been "left behind in the old days". Hill reported that CLRJ had gotten mad at him for documenting Garvey's relationship to the Irish Revolution, describing a meeting of Garvey and DeValera as being billed as the Provisional Pres. of Africa and the Prov. Pres. of Ireland. Garvey and Lenin's relation is the one you know from ACOT, but Lenin's trouble with the American CP on Garvey is still not known. It isn't that Lenin had any idea that Garvey was a Marxist, but he could see masses in motion and national liberation as a new path to revolution. What we are trying to do, and to do concretely, is to be so internationalist, and at the same time so national, when it comes to masses in motion, that we can fully present Marx's philosophy of revolution for our day.

"What is new" is still the hardest question because it is concrete, and concrete within our own organization and paper. This is the first time we had a woman as OIAT columnist. The concrete thing that made that happen was Mary's trip to Mexico, her internationalism, that meant she came back with a contract to publish RLWLKM. Raya concluded with one more "geographic" story. Do you know how we chose Detroit as the Center when we decided to leave NY? We put pins in the map for large, industrial cities-- Chicago, Pittsburg, Detroit... But we picked Detroit because it isn't any good unless it's concrete-- and Detroit was where Denby and Zupan were.

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