

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE SWP/YSA:

The War, the Class and the Liberals

"Unless it is linked up with the revolutionary class struggle of the proletariat, the struggle for peace is merely a pacifist phase of bourgeois who are either sentimental or are deceiving the people."

--Lenin

DEAR COMRADES:

More than eight months have passed since last summer's New York NPAC conference, where members of the Spartacist League (SL), Revolutionary Marxist Caucus (now Revolutionary Communist Youth), and Progressive Labor (PL)/SDS were thrown out and Senator Vance Hartke spoke from the podium. We predicted that the results of that event would set the course and tone for left-wing politics for a long time. What happened at that NPAC conference is central to an understanding of the nature and political direction of the SWP in its present electoral campaign.

The physical beatings and expulsion of SL and PL at the hands of the SWP was merely the concrete expression, albeit for the first time with violence, of the clash of two clearly contradictory political lines--lines which were the direct expression of two world views, two directly counterposed conceptions of working-class politics. The SWP's view represented, in the last analysis, the subordination of the working class to the liberal imperialists under the aegis of a "classless" single-issue popular front, which in verbiage was "non-exclusionary" vis-à-vis all political tendencies; the view represented by Spartacist (and its reluctant, vacillating and temporary ally, PL--which has since taken a nose dive into the pop-front swamp) on the other hand called for the independence of the working class--and hence the determined exclusion of bourgeois tendencies and spokesmen in favor of workers' democracy and the genuine inclusion of all working-class tendencies. Historically, this point about "non-exclusionism" has been blurred to suit the needs of the SWP: if, in the early '60's and cold-war aftermath, the call for non-exclusion meant a struggle for the right of communist organizations to function in the civil rights and anti-war movements, by the late '60's this struggle was made to stand on its head: "non-exclusionism" then became the demand, at the hands of the SWP, for including representatives of the bourgeoisie into the "movement." In practice this meant, as NPAC showed, that "non-exclusionism" referred only to the liberal imperialists while the communists were treated with violence and expelled!

THE LOGIC OF POP-FRONT POLITICS

Politics has its own logic, especially for socialists who see historical movement as the expression of the class struggle. The SWP's block with the liberals, if it was to be firm, demanded the exclusion of the most obstreperous communist elements. They were an embarrassment to the coalition; their very existence in determined opposition, to say nothing of their call for the smashing of the coalition as a prerequisite for anti-war struggle, threw a searching light on the nature of the bloc as the subordination of the workers to the labor bureaucrats and the bourgeoisie. To maintain the coalition meant smashing the communists, just as a fight for class independence meant driving out the bourgeoisie. It was the irreconcilable nature of this conflict which lay behind the July NPAC events. It was the class and political nature of this clash which created so much trouble and confusion for the fake lefts at the conference. The International Socialists (IS) and the National Caucus of Labor Committees initially refused to take a stand on the expulsions, the former coming out in its press (Workers' Power) in favor of the expulsions. Only the justly-despised Workers League endorsed the SWP's acts--after physically aiding in the expulsions of the anti-class collaborationists while sitting in well-behaved silence during the speech of Hartke, ruling-class representative!

There is nothing singular or unique about the process described above, or the apparent contradiction between the SWP's formal adherence to socialist politics and their class collaborationist practice and popular-front program. Since World War I the spectacle of formally revolutionary parties succumbing to opportunist, class collaborationist, reformist appetites has been more the rule than the exception. It was true of the major parties of the Second International, the SFIO (French Social-Democrats) and the SPD (German Social-Democrats); under the sway of the degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, all the Communist parties became social-patriotic. This same process has had its way in the SWP; as a result of the dry rot of revisionism, the revolutionary program of the party was eaten away, and the hollow, organizational shell filled with a reformist content. It is not unusual that like the parties of the Second International, it was the pressure of war which forced the final step in the transformation of the SWP from revolutionary to reformist. The problem of imperialist war is the supreme test for the working class and the parties which speak in its name; the more gradual degeneration of the SWP (from revolutionary to centrist to reformist), in contrast to the overnight collapse of the Second International parties, is a product of a number of factors including the McCarthyite repression of the '50's, the SWP's isolation from the working class over a number of years, and its caving in to petty-bourgeois radicalism over the Cuban revolution (which marked a turn in a right-centrist direction). Furthermore, the more "distant" character of the Indochinese war (compared to the world wars) facilitated gradual degeneration rather than overnight collapse. But the transformation from revolutionary to reformist is equally fundamental.

It is not hard to find out what Lenin thought about imperialist war; what he thought about fighting it by the SWP method of supra-class anti-war coalitions can be seen in the quote at the head of this letter. Lenin's thoughts on the matter are also clear in his articles in the public Bolshevik press with such titles as "The Defeat of One's Own Government in the Imperialist War" (he was for it), or in his popularization of such slogans as "revolutionary defeatism" or "turn the imperialist war into a civil war." But the use of such educative propaganda tools might make it a bit hard for liberal imperialist senators, who are against the war only because it's a loser, to stay on the same platform with you.

TROTSKYISM AND IMPERIALIST WAR

One of the strongest cards the present SWP leadership holds is the non-education of most SWP/YSA members in their own party history. This lack of education has facilitated the leadership's manipulations of the party in its ever-increasing forays after ever-increasing "successes." Assuming a subjectively revolutionary attitude on the part of some SWP/YSAers, who may have joined what they thought was a Trotskyist party, we would like simply to point out here that the anti-war popular front the SWP builds now was precisely the sort of thing the SWP fought bitterly in the 1930's. There were plenty of things around in the '30's like the NPAC, SMC, etc. The difference was that the SWP was flatly on the other side, while the role the SWP plays now was played then by the Communist Party, in full Stalinist regalia.

One of the finest pieces of work the Trotskyists published on the anti-war question is the pamphlet War and the Workers, printed by the Workers Party of the U. S., forerunners of the SWP in 1936. The SWP/YSA would do well to pay attention to this excerpt:

The most common mistake made in the attempted struggle against war comes from the belief that this struggle is somehow "independent" of the class struggle in general, that a broad union of all sorts of persons from every social class and group can be formed around the issue of fighting war since--so the reasoning goes--those people may be all equally opposed to war whatever their differences on other points. In this way, war is lifted from its social base, considered apart from its cause and conditions, as if it were a mystic abstraction instead of a concrete historical institution. Acting on this belief, attempts are made to build up all kinds of permanent Peace Societies, Anti-War Organizations, Leagues Against War, etc.

This kind of attitude is about as effective as it would be for doctors to treat the high fever in acute appendicitis by putting the patient in an icebox. The only way actually to get rid of the high fever is to remove the cause of the fever--that is, to take out the diseased appendix. The same thing is true for war: the only way to get rid of war is to remove the cause of war.

[emphasis added]

For Marxists, war in the epoch of imperialist decay is fundamentally a result and a symptom of the irreconcilable conflicts within imperialism. It follows then, that the only real, concrete way to fight against war is to fight against capitalism. To do so two things are required: that the working class maintain its independence from the bourgeoisie and bourgeois institutions; and that the party of the working class fights for hegemony over the class on a revolutionary program. In the 1930's this role was played by the Trotskyists, while the Stalinist Communist Party was the major purveyor of classless "peace" propaganda and organization-building. Today, the program and the organizations are the same--Stalinist class collaboration--only today it is the ex-Trotskyist SWP peddling the Stalinist-reformist line.

FRONTING FOR THE DEMOCRATS

The Jenness-Pulley campaign is the culmination of the SWP's voyage into pop-frontism. It is beginning to shape up as the same kind of electoral campaign the CP has been building since Earl Browder's campaign in 1936, which openly garnered "left" support for the Democrat Roosevelt. The present SWP campaign is showing many of the same earmarks, and recent issues of the Young Socialist Organizer make the orientation clear. Geoff Mirolowitz writes in the 4 February issue regarding the upcoming April 22 anti-war demonstrations:

Every group and individual that is against the war should be approached and asked to endorse April 22. Despite the pressures of the election period, many of the forces who will draw back from working with the anti-war movement will also feel a need to remain identified with it because of the mass sentiment against the war.

And just who might these unmentioned "forces" be, except Democrats? But there is more. Groups like Youth for McGovern are singled out to be solicited for endorsement of the SMC conference. Mirolowitz further writes in the same article:

The article [in the New York Times] noted that almost every major contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, from George McGovern to Hubert Humphrey is running as a "peace" candidate. These politicians and their supporters should be approached to endorse April 22.

[emphasis added]

This is an offer, to put it mildly, to do some mutual back scratching with the liberal imperialists; a less polite way of putting it is to say that the SWP is involved in calculated, shameless prostitution. What is the attitude of the "anti-war coalition" toward McGovern and Humphrey? Do we take advantage of their "dove" postures to point out their contradictions, to denounce them as warmongers and murderers of the Vietnamese people, as cold-warriors, as imperialists who are against this particular war because the U. S. cannot win? Do we take the opportunity to explain to the workers about capitalism and imperialism? No! Good god--that would be--sectarian; that would "tend to destroy the coalition." No, what we will do is something else entirely: we will approach these imperialists, these enemies of the Vietnamese people--for an endorsement of April 22!

The SWP is beginning to unravel the logic of the popular front. The Jenness-Pulley electoral campaign is nothing more than a stalking horse for the anti-war coalition, that is, for the political program of the liberal imperialists. We would ask the YSA--what, except for the fact that she is a member of the Democratic Party, separates your political program from that of, say--Shirley Chisholm? She is for community control, she is a feminist, she is against the war. What else are you running on? By such logic, Shirley Chisholm belongs in the SWP! But she is a loyal Democrat, with your program--or most of it. Shouldn't you then support her campaign on the grounds that program, not organizational affiliation is decisive? Wouldn't your refusal be the worst kind of--organizational sectarianism?

WORKERS LEAGUE SUPPORTS CLASSLESS SWP CAMPAIGN

The editorial in the 17 January Bulletin establishes the uncritical line of support the Workers League is taking on the SWP electoral campaign:

The Workers League sees support to the campaign of Linda Jenness and Andrew Pulley as a critical part of breaking the trade unions and the entire working class from the two capitalist parties.

Later on in the editorial it states:

We will fight for this support ["in the unions, schools and communities"] on the basis of the only program which can pose an alternative to the Democrats and Republicans and defeat capitalism.

The editorial concludes with a series of slogans around a general strike, against the wage freeze, unemployment, withdrawal from Indochina, etc., ending in the call: "Build a labor party in '72 to carry out these policies!" There is only one problem for the Bulletin: the program on which the WL is supporting the SWP is not the program the SWP is running on!

The WL does not call even for critical support to the campaign. Rather, the advertising headline on the front page reads "Workers League Endorses SWP Candidates" and the headline of the editorial itself proclaims "Support SWP in '72 Elections!" It must be concluded that the reason the WL does not call for critical support, is because in the process of explaining the criticism, it would become clear that the classless program of the SWP (which does not call for a labor party--the minimum demand making critical support possible) is supportable in no way. So the WL ignores the SWP's program, supplies its own, and calls for support for Jenness and Pulley on this fantastic basis!

The WL states that because the SWP campaign is run in the name of socialism, a vote for it represents a step towards breaking with the capitalist parties. But program is decisive and the SWP's program does not differ from that of the liberal Democrats. To call for support to it is to help strengthen the illusion that these reformist, classless demands are socialist. With the same logic, why not support electoral campaigns of the Communist Party or Socialist Party?

Despite the Wohlforthite talk about the SWP building a labor party, it is clear that the SWP electoral program is the program of the popular front: indeed Wohlforth's real purpose is to cloud the issue, serve as a left cover and help the SWP protect its left flank.

FOR A SOCIALIST PROGRAM AGAINST THE WAR!

We quoted earlier from a Trotskyist pamphlet, written in the '30's, War and the Workers. We think any honest anti-war militant, or would-be socialist will be interested in another passage from it:

To suppose, therefore, that revolutionists can work out a common "program against the war" with non-revolutionists [read liberal imperialists] is a fatal illusion. Any organization based upon such a program is not merely powerless to prevent war: in practice it acts to promote war, both because it serves in its own way to uphold the system that breeds war, and because it diverts the attention of its members from the real fight against war. There is only one program against the war: the program for revolution--the program of the revolutionary party of the workers. [emphasis added]

It is only fitting that the most savage attack against the present reformism of the SWP is that made against it by its own, authentic, revolutionary past.

Fraternally,

Spartacist League
Revolutionary Communist Youth
25 February 1972

The proposal the SL/RCY is presenting at this conference includes the following main demands:

1. For the unconditional exclusion of the bourgeoisie and their political representatives from the anti-war movement!
2. For the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all U. S. troops from Indochina! For unconditional military support and victory for the DRV-NLF! All Indochina must go communist!
3. Labor strikes against the war and against the freeze!
4. Control prices, not wages. Union mis-leaders off the Pay Board!
5. Fight economic protectionism! For international working-class solidarity!
6. For a labor party based on the trade unions!