

SUMMARY TO THE POLITICAL REPORT TO SWP NC PLENUM

February 27, 1970

by Jack Barnes

First I'd like to say that Nat's totally correct in saying that the most fruitful and preferable procedure was not used. Since I don't know exactly what happened in California, I can say this so it's not picking on any individual. But the Bay Area leadership did a poor job in organizing local discussion on the Chicano political party developments. There should have been discussion in the California branches, at least in the Bay Area, where there was some disagreement or question about the public position our state campaign took and the procedure in taking it. Comrades could have discussed it out, had their say, and sent the transcript of the discussion with the proposals of the majority in to the Political Committee. The Political Committee could have had its own discussion with all views before it on the Chicano party and distributed the transcripts of these to the National Committee before it met here today. It would have been a more fruitful discussion. Now maybe there were various practical problems in the Bay Area. I don't think they were decisive.

We should begin by being clear on our view of the independent Black political party. Nat's last presentation was wrong -- wrong in the sense that the factors he said were decisive in our decision to adopt the Case for a Black Party were not the most decisive factors at all. We faced a situation that was unique. That is, Lenin did not exactly foresee this in his writing on the national question.

Lenin was clear on the responsibility of the party in stressing socialist demands and democratic demands; it depended on whether the socialist party, the revolutionary party, was in the oppressor nation or the oppressed nation. If it was the revolutionary proletarian party of the oppressor nation, its support to the democratic demands of those nationalities that their ruling class oppressed was unconditional, and they stressed this in propaganda to the usually chauvinist infected workers. If it was in the oppressed nation, the proletarian party, which fought as part of and supported the nationalist movement for self-determination stressed the internationalist and proletarian demands to win over the workers to the banner of proletarian internationalism. These were two of the things Lenin emphasized that I know of. In addition he was crystal clear on questions like that of the Ukraine. He supported their unconditional right, not just to organize and fight for their independence, but to separate from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics if they chose, as the only basis to establish a strong Soviet Union and prepare for world socialism.

But we faced here some special circumstances. What Trotsky began grappling with, what he saw -- and then we saw later -- in the Black struggle in the United States, was a situation with

characteristics that Lenin had not dealt with. That is, the Afro-Americans were a nationality that did not originate like most nations. We must remember, the Afro-Americans are not a nationality like others that Lenin and the Leninist movement have grappled with. When they came to North America they were from many different nations and tribes. They were dragged here as slaves. They came here speaking different languages. They came here from different levels of historical and cultural development. They came here from totally different nations, from totally different tribes, totally different sections of Africa and the Middle East. But certainly none of these things a common denominator.

Their common denominator became their servitude, the destruction of their separate nationality, their separate communal or their separate tribal understandings and identity. The destruction of their native language, destruction of their native culture, the destruction of their native religion by the slave masters. What happened was that on American soil, under unique conditions, a new nationality not directly linked to the nations or tribes which spoke different languages and often didn't know each other, had no common bonds whatsoever, grew from these Black slaves. What we today call the Afro-American nationality, the Black nationality, the former slave nationality, etc. Whatever word you want to use.

Their common denominator became their skin color, and racism was reinforced with the defeat of Reconstruction and the rise of American imperialism, and an oppressed "Black" nationality was welded more strongly together by the oppressor. This was not like the normal nation, the normal oppressed nation with a clear geographical boundary and a long single cultural-historical identity. And it wasn't just the geographical boundaries. It was a unique phenomenon. And that's why Trotsky -- in his discussions with the American comrades, who couldn't see this because they concentrated on what was different about Afro-Americans compared to classical oppressed nationalities -- stressed the lessons from the Bolsheviks on the national question, but added some things that were new. He thought the American socialists were pretty blind on this combined development -- this new nationality -- that the unevenness of the development of American capitalism had created.

Here is a country that is creating new nationalities. Think for a minute about the Indians. The word Indian comes from the fact that the white man was so dumb he thought he was in India. It has nothing to do with a nation. These Native Americans came from different levels of cultural development, from different tribes. They spoke different languages, some had no communications with others, there were no nation-states. They were one of the real genocidal victims of American capitalism, and what happened was their culture, their separate identities were, not completely like the Africans, but to a large degree, stripped away from them, and they developed a common bond, too. The

common bond of being called a goddamned Indian. And that was about all. They were herded together on reservations, they became further discriminated against -- victims of the deepening racism and the rise of imperial arrogance, and it was in this process that a new national minority was created. The Indian, or Native-American nationality. It did not exist before.

In certain ways, this is true of the Chicanos. I think we should use Chicano, and not Mexican-American, because it does capture more of the heart of the matter. That is, to some degree, not as much as these others, the creation of a new nationality by American conditions. It's not the desire to return to Mexico. It is the determination to stand up united and win the right of self-determination right where they are -- Aztlan. And it's not a common Spanish language. The real common language of the Afro-Americans, of the Indians, and of the Chicanos is English. That's their common language. It was good that Doug's Militant article on the Black Belt said that. I don't think we've ever spelled it out before. And it's true. That's the common language. Trotsky raised the possibility of Afro-Americans developing a separate language. But it would have had to be a new language. It wouldn't come from their former languages, which had been wiped away.

So what did Trotsky say? Not only in the discussions reprinted in Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination but in the articles on the national question reprinted as part of the Pathfinder series, The Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-1940, he said that imperialism itself, under special conditions and out of racial material, can create nationalities. And that's exactly what happened here, and the concrete process is outlined in the political report adopted by the last convention:

"Earlier in the (political) resolution, a thumbnail sketch is given of the rise of American imperialism. It says that 'after spreading across the North American continent, slaughtering and dispossessing the Indians and overpowering the slave system in the South in the process, it became a world imperialist power at the turn of the century. In the Spanish-American war, U.S. imperialism seized sectors of the decayed Spanish empire outright, dislodged Spain from Cuba, and proceeded to establish its own empire in Latin America and the Pacific.' In that thumbnail sketch are described all the components that American capital incorporated in its nation: Afro-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans. . . ." (Internal Information Bulletin No. 8 in 1969, p. 11) It is not the working class but the oppressor class in its drive to incorporate labor and territory under its national control that creates the oppressed nationalities, and oppressed nations.

Comrade Breitman raised the question in his contribution to the discussion at the convention, when exactly did the Afro-Americans become a nationality? I think they became a nationality

with the defeat of Reconstruction, the incapacity of American capitalism to integrate the former slaves, and the rise of American imperialism. That's just my opinion. We've just begun grappling with and thinking about that question and another comrade may pick another time. But certainly that period, with racism and the rise of Jim Crow both necessary to justify American imperial expansion against the colored peoples of the world and to help create pariah pools of unemployed low-wage labor and divide the working class was a key point in the creation of this oppressed nationality.

We can't be positive about all these details -- we are thinking them out. And it is also true, we can't get it all from Lenin. We can get more from reading Trotsky's writings in the 1930s. He grappled with a lot of these complex problems of nation and nationality. His late writings on the Ukraine, his discussions and arguments on the Black question, his polemics with the Stalinists and the centrists on the national question, in the late 1930s -- they all bear restudying. Trotsky, who was no slouch on theoretical questions, was sure about the Afro-Americans being an oppressed nationality and was a little bit impatient with the American comrades' hesitancy about it.

Trotsky was conscious of lurking prejudice even among advanced workers of the oppressor and privileged nation. He said it's often not that hard for the revolutionary party to teach an English worker to have solidarity with the rest of his class. It's alot harder to teach him to have solidarity with a yellow coolie, or a brown laborer. And it's alot harder to teach him to have solidarity with the struggles of women. One clear thing we can take from Lenin, Trotsky and our own party's experience and tradition, and we explicitly affirmed it in the resolution we discussed at the last convention. That is, we, as the revolutionary proletarian party in the oppressor nation, the United States of America, have the responsibility to lead the fight for the unconditional right of these oppressed nationalities to independently organize and determine their own destiny, a revolutionary democratic task the American bourgeoisie has long been unable to carry out. Only the proletarian revolution can do that, we say, and the SWP socialist fighters will prove that by being at the head of those who unconditionally fight at the side of the national minorities at each stage. And we are not afraid, unlike any capitalist, any bourgeois or petty-bourgeois politician or bureaucrat, because every independent democratic struggle that's waged is a fight against imperialism, and a fight for the working masses. It's a fight against the enemy of the working class, and we will prove our worth in practice -- whether it's a fight for preferential hiring, open admissions, or the establishment of a separate state -- like no other party. We all agree on that.

We discussed at the last convention the fact that although for many years we didn't recognize the degree to which the national

question applied to the oppressed national minorities, this did not prevent us from supporting independent candidates of these minorities. We applied our class struggle principles and supported every fight (unlike all the other tendencies) for democratic rights, up to and including independent political action. Before we adopted our 1963 position (or re-adopted our 1939 position in light of the unfolding rise of nationalism) we had a long history of supporting genuinely independent candidates of the national minorities. We understood our responsibility very clearly on that. I emphasize that because I think that some of the comrades that came into the party during the period of the rise of nationalism in the 1960s aren't really familiar with this history.

At our last convention, we pointed out how the coming American revolution would be a combined revolution. Like the Russian revolution. It will be a revolution of the oppressed national minorities for self-determination -- complete independence and the right to determine their future -- and of the working class to establish a workers state, to overturn capitalism. And a very important fact, which makes our perspective even more revolutionary and more optimistic, is the class composition of the oppressed national minorities in the United States. In fact, the odds are it will be the oppressed national minorities in the United States who will adopt most rapidly, most completely and most thoroughly the proletarian demands. On this we have no reason to doubt Trotsky's prediction.

If the national struggle is another, very complex form of the class struggle, as Trotsky insisted, the nationalist consciousness of a heavily proletarian national minority is an important form of class consciousness. I think Black nationalists, and by this I don't mean each individual, I mean the general nationalist feeling among the mass of working Blacks, also have the most class consciousness of any broad layer of the proletariat in this country.

All right, we were starting to think out some of these problems in 1963. This is the Freedom Now resolution. One of our turning points. It has a section entitled "Independent Political Action," where we came out for the Freedom Now Party. We say:

"The Negro struggle" -- we were still saying Negro -- "is above all a political struggle -- that is, its solution requires political action. The coming labor-Negro alliance will operate in many areas and through many forms, but above all it will be a political alliance. And yet it is precisely in the field of politics that up to now all tendencies in the Negro movement are weakest and least independent, both in theory and practice."

I think that's true of the Chicano movement, too. Some comrades in the discussion emphasized previous independent Chi-

cano campaigns. But, comrades should be careful not to exaggerate these earlier campaigns. I'm not that much of a student of it, but I doubt if you'll find a real rich history of independent political action in the electoral sense. You'll find a much richer history of subordination to the Democratic Party, like you will in the labor movement.

The 1963 resolution continues:

"Among politically active Negroes are some whose main interest is in electing Negroes to office. But these are repeatedly frustrated because the Negro Democrats or Republicans whom they help elect usually turn out to be captives and apologists for the corrupt capitalist political machines rather than consistent spokesmen for the Negro people.

"Most current tendencies reflect, to one degree or another, the desire of the Negro masses to determine their own destiny -- to have their own organizations, their own leaders, their own strategy, tactics and programs. But few of these tendencies have expressed a similarly independent spirit in the vital field of politics by breaking with the parties of their oppressors and organizing to challenge their political monopoly. Yet such a break and such a challenge are implicit in everything that has happened up to now. It is contradictory and self-defeating to talk about Freedom Now while accepting the right of the white supremacists and gradualists to jointly wield the political power of this country."

The key idea is that most militant tendencies want to determine their own destiny, to have their own organizations, their own leaders, their own strategy, tactics, and program. These tendencies are not yet raising the idea of an independent party; but that was not crucial to us -- it's part of the logic of their independent organizational thrust.

And then the resolution continues and raises the idea of a Negro party. It says it's not a totally new idea. And the examples that are given are: Rep. Adam Clayton Powell talked about it a couple of times. On and off during recent years. Liberator wrote an article on it. During the 1962 election campaign, Eliza Muhammed advocated it. And William Worthy "has spoken along similar lines." That's it. That's the total paragraph.

Well, the Chicanos have done that well. So far. Nat's correct in pointing out that only a narrow section of the Chicano leaders have raised the party question explicitly. But that's not decisive; anymore than it was in our 1963 decision on the Freedom Now Party. What we saw was objective evidence of the desire for independent struggle among the Blacks, and we grabbed on to these semi-phoney (Powell and Muhammed) and semi-confused (Liberator and Worthy) calls for an independent

political instrument for this struggle to launch a campaign of education around the idea and support for any practical initiatives. And we were basically correct. We said:

"The basis for such a party already exists. Millions of Negroes are concentrated in the big cities of the country, North and South. United in a party of their own, they are so situated geographically that they could sweep the elections in dozens of congressional districts. They could send a bigger bloc of Negroes to Washington than they did in Reconstruction days and elect a sizable body of state and city legislators who would for the first time be beholden to no one but the Negro community. Both nationally and locally they could hold the legislative balance of power and be in a position to compel bigger concessions from the dominant parties. More fundamentally, with a party of their own Negroes could take a lead in undermining and changing the whole power structure.

"The immense implications of such an independent Negro course in politics illustrate graphically the truth of the revolutionary-socialist analysis that the independent Negro struggle tends to stimulate, spur and shake up the major forces in the country. The creation of a Negro party running its own candidates would rock the whole political structure to its foundations. It would throw the Democratic Party into a crisis. Without the majority of Negro votes which it now gets, it could never again hope to hold national power. The only place it could go would be down. Organized labor would be faced with an excruciating dilemma too. Its coalition with the Democrats is justified on the ground that the Democrats can "win." But when it becomes plain that they cannot win, the unions would be forced to reconsider their whole political policy. Advocates of a labor break with the old parties would get a bigger and better hearing from the ranks. Thus the creation of a Negro party would benefit not only the Negro but his present and potential allies.

"The Socialist Workers Party contends that racism, like unemployment, exploitation and war, can be abolished in this country only by independent political action aimed at taking control of the government out of the hands of the capitalists and their parties. As a step in this direction, we have long advocated that the unions break from the Democratic Party and form an independent labor party that would seek to politically unite workers, farmers and Negroes and elect their representatives to office. In addition, and for the same reason, we have also endorsed and supported representatives of the Negro community whenever they have run for office independently of and in opposition to the old parties, even when they were not socialists.

"Extending this policy in the light of current developments we publicly express our readiness to support and collaborate with any Negro party or Freedom Now Party that runs candidates

of its own in opposition to the capitalist parties and seeks to elect representatives whose primary allegiance will be to the Negro community. Our support of such a party in no way conflicts with our own independent socialist political campaigning or with our continued advocacy of a labor party. On the contrary, we believe that a Negro party, a socialist party and a labor party would find much in common from the very beginning, would work together for common ends, and would tend in the course of common activity to establish close organizational ties or even merge into a single or federated party. Revolutionary socialists don't care whether capitalism and racism are abolished by a single party or by a combination of parties, just so long as they are abolished."

That's the end of the whole section. That is the totality of the section of the 1963 resolution on the independent Black party. Those were our real reasons -- not some of the ones Nat mentioned. Two important things to note. One, we didn't make a condition that the party start out as a mass party, or a party in many states, or with a full program of democratic and transitional demands. But that it have this perspective and potential. And, second, we made it clear that our support did not preclude -- but rather made more important and complemented -- our own independent SWP candidates and our propaganda about other forms of independent political action.

The central idea is the need for mass independent political action. We've come too often to use the term in too narrow an electoralist way. The Atlanta election brochure is excellent in the way they call for mass independent political action. They list three things: mass action in the streets, like the antiwar actions, independent of the capitalist parties. That's one form of mass independent political action. For the formation of a mass labor party. And for the formation of a mass Black party. These are forms of mass independent political action. The party is an organizational form to generalize, organize and intervene around a program of mass independent struggle for self-determination, for control by oppressed minorities, and on the part of labor.

The question of how and when we call for an independent party of a national minority is a tactical question. For instance, we're not calling for a Native-American party. Maybe we will at some time in the future, or maybe we never will. There may be some development of a self-confident independent Native-American organization that might want to be part of a federation with a Chicano party or a labor party. There are other possibilities. Do we not call for a Native-American party because we're against it? No. I don't think so. It could be, if genuinely independent and with a basis in the political situation, a further stage of the mass and independent political mobilization of the Native-Americans. But at this stage it would be premature to raise it. At this stage, for us to call for it would be to impose this demand when there is no basis for it. We would be falsely concrete about this form of independent political action.

It's important to remember several things. One, we're not just supporting a party. We're advocating the need for a mass party. This is part of our transitional concept of mass mobilization. We don't support the call for simply an independent Chicano party as some small group, or as a little electoral apparatus to run candidates, even though if a small group somewhere ran a few candidates that were independent we would support them. But even there we would use our support to raise the idea of developing a program and turning this into a mass party. We want to mobilize the mass of the national minorities to independently struggle and politically break from capitalist parties. That's what hurts the Democratic Party. That's what advances the class struggle. It's a mass party that we're in favor of. We propose a transitional approach to build a mass party. And we learned a lot from the mistakes of the Freedom Now Party experience, including a few of our own mistakes.

Evelyn Sell says we only have a little information on La Raza Unida in Texas. That's true, but we have more than enough evidence from what Evelyn reported today for the Texas SWP to publicize the early initiatives of La Raza Unida Party and intervene and educate for the concept of a broader independent formation of a Chicano party in Texas and, say, the Southwest. Does that mean that the current leader Guitierrez himself will make it, or that this party in these few counties might not make wrong turns or even go downhill? No! But the very fact that this is always a chance with the pressure of the Democrats, is all the more reason, when you have concrete experience like this, to intervene, with the correct tactical proportions guided, to raise our idea. That's the one help we can give, and a way of making political contact and establishing political relations. Does that mean that, with the evidence available today, we would give critical support to their coming campaign? I don't know. But that can be decided as facts are gathered. We do know enough to know that we can intervene with the idea of a mass, really independent Chicano party, as a fruitful tactic. And we can publicize the real examples of independent political activity La Raza Unida has carried out. We don't have that many positive examples to choose from right now!

It's important to understand that our support for a Chicano party is not necessarily an agitational demand. That was one of our mistakes that we tended to make in the initial stage of the Freedom Now Party. That's a personal opinion of mine. We tended at our own convention to turn it into an agitational concept and spirit. I remember at the time it was great, it was the most moving experience of the convention, but to some degree that approach, as we carried it out, was premature. We noted in 1965 that the Freedom Now Party leaders themselves underestimated the propaganda and educational job they had to do and the time it would take. It can be an educational and propaganda demand. When we list it in an election platform, it's not necessarily put in an agitational form. It's not an agitational demand in

the California SWP election platform. This may change after the Denver conference or after a few further developments -- but we'll see.

So our proposed position does flow from the same criteria that led us to support the Black political party idea, and it flows from the basic motivations that lead us to this in 1963 and the experiences and lessons since then. What doesn't flow from it is the concrete program of the Chicano party. That's another error to avoid. Leaping in too rapidly with some sort of program composed of bits and pieces of the Transitional Program for Black Liberation.

Nat raises the problem of changing our line. As I said, I can foresee different political federations, even under certain circumstances a rapid federation between a Chicano party, a Native-American party, or a Chicano party and some Black organizations or a radicalized union formation in a heavily Chicano city. There are innumerable possibilities as the class struggle heats up. They don't change our line at all. These possibilities would simply represent another advance in the independent political organization of the struggle of the oppressed national minorities or a section of labor and their collaboration against capitalism.

We intervened in Lowndes County, with support and with education, even though it was isolated to a county. And that was one of the two examples along with the Freedom Now Party that we used in our 1965 resolution. Comrades should go back and read that resolution for the lessons. We drew lessons from both the Freedom Now Party and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization.

Finally, the impact of Chicano political initiatives that are genuinely independent political action, even just a slate of candidates or the beginning of the organization of a party, would be a big step forward. A tremendous inspiration. It could help bring sections of the Black movement out of the lull it's in. It could have an impact on sections of the labor movement in the Southwest. It could help educate the student movement.

As we grapple with these developments over time, as the characteristics of the American revolution, like the ones Comrade Novack was talking about, deepen and become clear, we're going to have to write many resolutions and articles. We'll probably at some stage need a more concrete resolution, "The National Question and the Third American Revolution." If we reread Comrade Brietman's article before the last convention we can find some of the questions that we would have to grapple with. But that's not what we're voting on today.

What is basically involved? We tried to present it very carefully with all its cautions in the political report -- be-

cause it's wrong, even though a majority of comrades agree on something, to ram it down comrades' throats when it's not necessary for our work. The Chicanos are an oppressed nationality; there is increasing evidence of the growth of militant and independent struggle in several arenas; a small section of the vanguard has raised the idea of a Chicano political party independent of the Democrats and Republicans. Not a big section of the vanguard, maybe not even a dependable section of the vanguard, and maybe we'll be disappointed in three months by that vanguard. But under those conditions, which we all agree on, I can't understand why we would be opposed to the Latino comrades going into the Denver conference supporting the idea of an independent Chicano party and raising the educational points and cautions we can contribute. It means basically approving that part of the platform of the California state campaign. It means we're concurring with Joel's proposals to the Political Committee to participate in this conference along these lines.

I want to correct one thing Dick Garza said -- it doesn't mean we're voting for an independent Puerto Rican party. Maybe the New York election campaign will consider making that one of their propaganda demands, and may propose it. They may not. But that's not what we're voting on now. Nor are we voting for any specific opinions that I or other speakers have presented on the history of the rise of nationalism. We have plenty of time to discuss those questions as unfolding events necessitate.