

Houston SWP
3311 Montrose #208
Houston, Tx. 77006

January 28, 1976

SWP Political Committee

Dear Comrades:

In regard to the censure of Comrade Debby Leonard by the Houston branch and her appeal of that censure, I would like to make the following points:

1. There was no disagreement by Comrade Debby Leonard or by any other comrade on the CLUW fraction about the facts of this case. Comrade Debby Leonard made this explicitly clear in her statement to the trial body: that the facts contained in the charge are correct.
2. In the course of the trial Comrade Debby Leonard herself made a very telling point about the significance of her participation in the CLUW vote in question. In her opinion, two of the independent CLUW activists who abstained on the vote would have voted with us if they had not been confused by Comrade Debby Leonard, who is a recognized spokesperson for the SWP, not voting. Since this is the opinion of Comrade Debby Leonard herself, it weighs in favor of the branch decision to censure her for a serious violation of discipline.
3. It has never been reported to us that the IMT has a line on the question of what motions to raise in the Houston chapter of CLUW or whether or not comrades are required to vote in CLUW meetings according to decisions made by the fraction and the branch.
4. The effect of the trial and the motion to censure Comrade Debby Leonard is to reiterate and enforce the basic norms of functioning for members of a democratic-centralist party in a fraction working in an outside organization.
5. The Houston branch has never restricted Comrade Debby Leonard from expressing her political point of view about CLUW or any other topics, whether or not her point of view reflects the line of the IMT. During pre-convention discussion a special debate was organized to give Com. Debby Leonard extra time to present her views.
6. Comrade Debby Leonard has asserted that the charge and the censure were factionally motivated. The trial body took this assertion seriously. There was no evidence and no convincing argument made to substantiate this charge. A motion was passed by the trial body and by the branch indicating this.

Comradely,


Stu Singer,
Houston Branch Organizer

Report to Houston Branch on Trial of Debbie Leonard

by Tom Vernier, Dec. 21, 1976

Last week the branch voted to set up a trial body to hear charges brought by Jill Fein against Debbie Leonard. The body was set up according to the constitution of the party, Article VIII, Section 3, which was read at that time. I'll read it again:

Section 3. Charges against any member shall be made in writing and the accused member shall be furnished with a copy in advance of the trial. Charges shall be filed and heard in the branch to which the member belongs, or in a higher body which may decide to act directly in the case. Charges filed before the branch shall be consid-

ered by the Branch Executive Committee (or a subcommittee elected by it) at a meeting to which the accused member is summoned. The Branch Executive Committee shall submit a recommendation to be acted upon by the membership of the branch. Charges considered by higher bodies of the Party shall, however, be acted upon by said bodies.

The trial body that we elected last week was composed of the branch executive committee plus Sas Scoggins. The trial body met on the 17th of December, and the members of the trial body who were present were Rick, Dan, Tom F., Becky, Stu, Jim, Pedro, Sas, Sarah, and Tom V.

Present as witnesses at the trial were Jill, Debbie, and Diane.

The trial body discussed among themselves the charges that have been brought; they questioned the three witnesses about the charges; and we have reached a decision on a recommendation to bring before the branch tonight.

I want to make clear the procedure that we followed. After Jill decided to bring the charge before the branch, which is a very serious decision for a comrade to make, she talked to the organizer about taking this action. After discussing it with Stu they decided it would be a good idea to have an informal meeting with Debbie, against whom the charges were being brought, and myself, who was acting organizer at the time the events took place that led to the charge, and Becky, who is head of the CLUW fraction which is involved with the charge.

We had this meeting just to try to get the facts straight, to see if there was disagreement about what the facts were. Perhaps it was just a confusion and we could avoid this serious step of having a trial. After the meeting the charges were brought to the executive committee who made the recommendation that was brought to the branch last week. The branch voted to set up a trial body, and the trial body has met, and we're bringing our recommendation in now.

I'll just read the charge again so that comrades know exactly what it says.

ference between whether this action was conscious or not conscious, whether she was just thinking about something else or whether she decided not to vote on this vote; whether it was stupid because she should have been thinking about it or stupid because she was breaking discipline.

Debbie would not define this phrase of "making a stupid lapse" any further than that for the trial body. What the trial body was forced to conclude from the evidence we heard was that this withholding of a vote for a line question on which the SWP position is clear was a conscious act, one which Debbie now regards as unwise, "stupid," but nonetheless a conscious act. This conclusion was agreed upon unanimously by the trial body.

In her statement which she submitted to the trial body, Debbie takes the position that although the action on which she is brought up on charges for, is correct, that formally bringing charges and having a trial over the issue is in her words, "totally out of line." She also used the phrase in her testimony that it was "out of proportion" with what she had done. And she says later on in the statement that, "It is difficult to accept the serious nature of this charge."

I want to take up for a few minutes whether this procedure is totally out of line or not, whether or not it is making a mountain out of a molehill, or whether or not the branch faces a serious question that the branch is obligated to take up in the way we did take it up.

Number one, the question that's involved here relates to trade union work that the party is carrying out. While everyone would agree that whatever we're doing, whether it's selling the Militant or cleaning out the headquarters or whatever we're doing, it's necessary to maintain a disciplined, serious attitude towards all our activity. At the same time, trade union work is one of the most difficult areas that the party is involved in. The opposition we face in the unions is very severe, and it is very tightly organized. It means that if a small group, which the SWP is, expects to make any gains inside the movement, we have to act as a unit; when the party makes a decision in order for that decision to be seriously implemented, we have to be able to utilize every single one of our forces to carry it out, and there can't be any hedging. Because if you slip just a little bit, it can be more than just a little slip in the end result. Little errors in a seemingly unimportant meeting can be magnified into large mistakes.

And also in the union movement tight organization is necessary because of the bureaucratic methods of the opposition. The bureaucrats are not just strong; they're also bureaucrats. They try to keep us from speaking at meetings. At the CLUW convention some of the comrades found this out for the first time in a very graphic way. They were physically prevented from speaking at microphones.

The party, of course, has always taken its work in the trade unions very seriously and considered the implementation of its line in the union movement much more important than the pride or opinions or anything else regarding an individual member. The

This Dec. 3 meeting was not just a routine meeting of CLUW in Houston. It was a special meeting that Jill thought it was necessary to call before the convention so that Houston CLUW could discuss this issue and take a position on it. That's why this meeting was called in the first place. The point of the meeting was to discuss affirmative action and take a position on it. This was the first time Houston CLUW voted on this question. There had never been a vote before. It was the first chance to stand up and say what our position was and vote on it.

The discussion that we've had inside the SWP on the question that was voted on at this meeting, the question of affirmative action, is one that is familiar to all of us here. We discussed it this summer in the Houston branch. In fact, we had a debate on this question during the discussion. Jill presented the position that this is now the party's position, and Debbie argued against that position, against our present line on affirmative action.

It's extremely important to make the point that Debbie is entitled to have that opinion on the line on affirmative action. She doesn't have to agree with it; if she disagrees with it we encourage her to develop her disagreements, sharpen them, and try to convince the party she's right. However, no matter who you are, whether you have disagreements or not with the line that the party establishes, you have to carry out the line, regardless of your opinion of it. That's elementary democratic centralism.

Debbie's functioning in relation to this line within CLUW has not been exemplary. But prior to the incident that is under discussion tonight Debbie had not formally violated discipline. As I've said, Debbie has her opinion on the line, but the fraction, the CLUW fraction, expressed another opinion, and that was the opinion that should have been implemented by everyone at that meeting.

The fraction's opinion was that a discussion on affirmative action, a vote taken on it, if it could be an authoritative vote, which it was, was that a special meeting of CLUW should be called so that this discussion and vote could take place. That is the opinion of the fraction, and that's the opinion that should have been carried out by everyone. Debbie did not carry it out.

Another aspect of this came up during the trial. I want to read the last two paragraphs of Debbie's statement, which we think are extremely serious: "Comrades, I think this trial must be interpreted as a political victimization of myself, a loyal Party member for over ten years, and that it must be seen as an attack based on my acknowledged support of the IMT. This is a Party-wrecking operation and sets a dangerous precedent for the right of a loyal tendency to exist in the SWP. I am opposed to this method of operation and I urge you to reconsider."

We thought it was important to take this up. Was this trial a factional attack on a supporter of the IMT or not? The SWP has a long history of respect for comrades who hold minority opinions. As you read and study the history of the party you find example after example where we have bent over backwards to avoid placing organizational obstacles in the way of political discussion. The

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things. It is a formal warning, an action of disapproval taken by the branch. The purpose of the action is to say in the strongest terms possible, that this kind of activity will not be tolerated.

The trial body discussed two things that we hope to achieve by taking this action. The first is to establish very clearly a norm that perhaps was in question. Do you vote on a question when you disagree with it? The answer that we're suggesting is a very straight-forward, yes, you do. The party has a line, and when it comes to a vote, you vote for it.

The second thing we hoped to achieve is more positive. And that is that by calling this to the attention of the branch and taking action on it, we can start over again, wipe the slate clean and go forward to more productive, more collaborative, more fruitful work in CLUW and other areas that Comrade Leonard is assigned to.