

PREPARING THE NATIONAL CONVENTION AND ELECTION
OF THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE

By Jack Barnes

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Committee, December 19, 1978

We'd first like to lay out the schedule of meetings for the next months so the National Committee can be thinking about and preparing for them. Sometime in late April we'll hold our next plenum. Then we have a national convention in August, and the world congress in November.

At our next plenum we'll have to prepare the convention. We'll choose the ticket for the 1980 election campaign, decide on the documents and reports to be published to start the pre-convention discussion, and decide on the agenda and other matters related to the convention. This includes the international side of the convention, of course.

The nature of the convention will be two-fold. It will be a pre-world congress convention as well as deal with all the important questions we face in the class struggle in this country. This will be where we'll discuss and vote on the documents before the world congress. That vote will determine the selection, by the newly elected leadership, of our delegation to attend the world congress.

April Plenum

Let me go over what we think some of the questions are that will be before us at the April plenum so comrades can be thinking about them and passing on suggestions and ideas.

First, we're going to have to deal with the leadership question. Comrades remember that when we discussed this at the February 1978 plenum we came to the conclusion that we were to blame for some of the confused aspects of the discussion on the election of the National Committee at the last convention. One of the reasons was that we had not really discussed it out ourselves and put something in the bulletin to help prepare the comrades.

So we have a responsibility to review the leadership question and prepare for the election of the National Committee at the convention. We'll have to think out the deepening of our turn into industry and its relationship to party leadership, as well as look at some historical questions connected with this. We have to think through what it means to put together a kind of leadership

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that's never been put together before, a different kind of leadership even than led the Bolshevik Party and the Russian revolution. For example, there were no women in the central political leadership of the Bolshevik Party.

I think we are attempting to do and must do something that has never been done before, and it is going to be a key to the American revolution. Class composition, female leadership development, and the multinational character of the party's leadership have to be looked at in their interrelationship, their relationship to the strategic line of march of labor, and the character of the party we must build.

By placing this point on the agenda and by having a thorough report and discussion on leadership, we can put something in the bulletin that will give comrades a broad view. It will help precipitate consciously thinking about party leadership along with every other question of the class struggle in this country. It will be a helpful guide to comrades in thinking about the leadership selection at the convention.

Secondly, we have to launch our 1980 presidential campaign. And by launch, I mean that we have to decide on it at the plenum. We must decide on the character of the campaign and the ticket, and we must agree on a general pattern for launching the campaign. This can't be a matter of simply motivating good reasons for the candidates we choose and how we are going to organize the campaign. It will have to be basically a political report going over the whole character of where our presidential campaign fits into the changing pace and character of political events in this country.

Third, we'll have to decide on the political resolution for the convention. The outgoing Political Committee thinks that it will not be enough to submit most of our political reports from this plenum and the April plenum. We will do that for the party, of course, and that will be a legitimate part of the discussion.

But it's necessary at this stage to also have a resolution. We're aiming toward a relatively short thesis-type resolution that supplements and brings up to date under the new circumstances, Prospects for Socialism in America.

We've gone through some new experiences, and there's some far-reaching theoretical and political questions, nationally and internationally, which it becomes necessary to explain and discuss.

Then, there are several points we had hoped to discuss here but weren't able to fit onto the agenda. One is the antinuclear question. Another is the question of working farmers.

Leaving aside for a moment the national responsibilities we have and the importance of this for the American revolution, we have a burning practical necessity to deal with working farmers. When the comrades launch election campaigns now they have to come

up with an analysis and a series of demands for the working farmer. It's a real question in state after state.

We have to deal with our opponents. Once again, I'm not proposing any form. A separate report is probably not the best. That's not very helpful, unless you're headed for a regroupment or something like that. It's probably more helpful to deal with our opponents in connection with the deepening class struggle and how we're bumping into them and their false policies as we get deeper into our turn. We've got to discuss the possibilities of affecting individual opponents and recruiting them, and fighting for leadership in sections of the labor movement.

We'll make final preparations on the international questions for the convention, including taking up any big new questions that are posed by the world political situation.

Comrades should be thinking about these questions, because these are things we have to discuss out just a few months from now.

To help facilitate this, we are proposing to open the discussion bulletin soon after this plenum for written discussion on the international resolutions and on the Cuban question.

This is not to open verbal discussion in the branches. That would be wrong now. That would get in the way of the rhythm of the spring work, and it's not necessary. But by opening a literary discussion in the bulletin on the five world resolutions that have been adopted by the United Secretariat and on the Cuban question, we can start getting a head start on these questions. We can start a certain rhythm for the written discussion. Comrades can read these documents as they have time and make contributions.

Concretely, we propose that this literary discussion be opened with the publication of the Europe resolution, which is the one we haven't yet got in the bulletin, and the Cuba report adopted by this plenum. So with the appearance of these, the discussion will be open.

Reporting Back the Plenum

I should mention one thing about reporting the plenum back to the branches. Several of the organizers have raised this question. There are two sides to it. The main purpose of the meeting of the National Committee is to give the members of the National Committee a chance to get together and discuss out politics, to share ideas, to debate back and forth, to raise problems, and change our minds on things in light of the response of other comrades. It's one of the advantages of a well-organized and politically homogeneous leadership, that it gives us the flexibility to kick around questions like we do at our plenums. It's an aid in thinking about a number of new questions.

However, in order for comrades to really feel comfortable about getting up and presenting their views and reactions to

other views, it has to be understood that meetings of the National Committee are closed. We invite guests, but the discussions are closed. It's completely incorrect to report back the discussions from the National Committee plenum to the party. It breeds lack of clarity; our memories are selective. It freezes a process that hasn't worked its way out yet. And it's undemocratic--the entire membership should get the same information at the same time. Not this or that branch or this of that friend of a member of the National Committee.

What we report back to the party is the decisions of the plenum and the motivations for those decisions. If this were not true, we could not have thorough discussions because everyone would hesitate a long time before speaking. Because if a comrade speaks and changes her or his mind a day later, by the time you've changed your mind someone may have taken down notes of what you said and it will be reported back to someone else.

This seems obvious and common sense, but it's an important concept of Bolshevik organization. What happens within the National Committee plenum is the business of one group of people and one group of people only--the members of the National Committee. No other group of people has the right to that information. Not that it's secret or anything. Over time, you involve the party in all these discussions. But the leadership has to be free to discuss and prepare and clarify first.

The same is true of the Political Committee. The deliberations of the Political Committee are not the business of the National Committee. The decisions of the Political Committee are, and of course it's the National Committee's obligation to review the work of the Political Committee and elect it.

This is also true of branch executive committees. It's totally correct and an important part of democracy for the executive committee in a branch to have the right to meet in closed session with just the members of the executive committee. Of course it then has the obligation to report out its decisions to the branch. If this were not true, we would dissolve the whole structure of the party and become like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) used to be. There really wouldn't be room to listen to each other and change our minds.

In the National Committee this gives us an advantage. Part of the deepening of the turn will include a chance to have richer, more concrete discussions on a whole number of questions, which will be very useful. It goes along with more frequent National Committee plenums. And of course all guests invited to the plenums, organizers, etc., accept the same framework as the National Committee when accepting the invitation to attend.

Cuba Classes

Another thing I want to make clear to comrades is that we very much want to continue the classes we've begun on Joe Hansen's book, Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution. This should be seen as a national educational task, one that every branch tries to carry out. There should be no confusion between the discussion we're going to have in the party that will be open to the entire membership in a month or so, and the fact that the party has a long-established position on Cuba. We want to make sure that comrades know, absorb, and understand that position.

We think that conducting these classes on the basic theory and political line of the party on the Cuban revolution simultaneous with the discussion will make our discussion much richer.

One of the best things that'll happen with the new discussion is that comrades who weren't around for the original one in the early 1960s will relive it and absorb a tremendous amount that you never get just having read it on your own.

The Political Committee

We've had several discussions in the Political Committee, as Mary-Alice indicated we would when she presented the proposals at the last plenum in August, about the character of the Political Committee. We want to propose making a shift in the kind of Political Committee we have.

As comrades know, for some years now our pattern has been to elect as the Political Committee all the resident regular members of the National Committee living in the New York area. In addition to that, we began systematically increasing the attendance at Political Committee meetings. We began regularly inviting to all meetings the alternate members of the National Committee who were department heads in a couple of main areas of work.

So we actually got a Political Committee whose average meeting was close to thirty comrades, not counting those we would invite for special points. Of course this played a very important role in homogenizing and educating the leadership. For example, if we had not taken this step we could never have launched the national field organizers.

But the negative side of it caught up with us, as comrades who have had a lot of experience in these things warned us it would. A committee of twenty-five or thirty people just is not a committee. You can't have committee discussion. You can't come to rapid decisions. You can't really have give and take. You can't function as a committee.

Such a body can have rich discussions and politically orient comrades, but the real committee is a series of steering committees

and informal bodies. This results in the decentralization and separation of the areas of party work to a harmful degree.

We want to reverse this. We think it's important, especially because of the need for a rounded, direct political leadership of the turn into industry, to go back toward a smaller Political Committee. We need a committee small enough to be a functioning committee. This means, among other things, being able to meet several times a week on call if necessary.

You can make the arguments either way. Sometimes it's better to have a larger committee and sometimes it's better to have a smaller committee. It's a concrete question.

At this time, the greatest need, in our opinion, is a smaller Political Committee which can take responsibility for the rounded direction of the party's work along the axis of the drive into industry and the proletarianization of the party.

We can't do this all in one leap at this plenum, as I'll explain, but this is the direction in which we want to go. The comrades, I'm sure, all noticed from the minutes that we took a partial step toward this in September. We elected a Political Bureau, which is a sub-committee of the Political Committee. The Political Committee delegated all its powers to the bureau. With eleven members it was a much smaller body. The last couple months it met quite often, and the Political Committee less often. This was simply a transitional step, but there's no point in maintaining that form for an indefinite period.

Leadership Shifts

Let me explain some leadership shifts that have a bearing on the structure of the Political Committee.

As we agreed at the last plenum, we've managed to take another step in releasing comrades who were on the Political Committee to go out in the field to take assignments and/or go into industry. Since the plenum about four months ago, we've released Nelson Blackstock from his assignment as circulation director to go to Birmingham to head up the project to establish a new branch there.

We've released Catarino Garza to go out to California to become the national field organizer for the whole west coast. We've released Susan LaMont to go out to the Midwest and become the national field organizer there. We're in the process of releasing Bruce Levine from his other responsibilities to be one of the comrades to go into industry. We released Willie Mae Reid from her Political Committee assignments to go into industry. Living up to a four-year promise, we released Syd Stapleton, to go to Boston and get into industry.

That's five more comrades from the Political Committee taking full-time assignments in the field or getting into industry. So that's significant progress along the lines we talked about four months ago. In addition to that, the comrades all know from reading the minutes that we brought Wendy Lyons in from her field organizer assignment to come into the center and become women's liberation director.

Another step we've taken is to dissolve the steering committees for different areas of work and we're trying to re-structure the leadership of the work through the Political Committee itself. We've dissolved the administrative secretariat and now we face the responsibility of organizing the work of the Political Committee in a different way.

The work of the Political Committee has become more complicated than previously. There's no way of looking at its work without including the district organizers and the field organizers. Three or four times a year, all the NFOs and the district organizers come in and meet with the Political Committee. We do this for the preparation of every plenum, convention, national educational conference, etc. This helps us have the most thorough and rounded discussions. It's one of the ways having a smaller national office and a whole section of the elected national leadership on full time in the field can work.

As Mary-Alice explained at the last plenum, we're in a transition stage. We make no predictions on the exact form. We're going toward more districts, that's for sure. But we do not yet have a plan in mind or a definite perspective of an entire district structure of the party. We can't jump past something like NFOs or it will be impossible to function. So we have to combine the two for a period of time.

Within the leadership we've also made another change which is going to be a help for both our international and national work. The California leadership has agreed to release Peter Camejo to come back full-time into the national and international work. This will be a help in organizing our division of labor, the leadership of the international work, and the political leadership of our campaigns in the party as a whole. Between now and the convention Peter's going to divide his time between Texas, Latin America, and Europe and then he'll come to New York.

We made another change that involves the organization of the leadership. That's to set up a New York-Northern New Jersey District. It's not just another district, simply because of the number of comrades involved. I think the number of comrades in the New York-Northern New Jersey District is not much smaller than the national membership of the party at its low point. It's definitely bigger than the membership of the majority of sections of the Fourth International. So it's no small operation. Establishing the district takes head on the task of leading the party in the New York area into industry. It's a national leadership responsibility and affects leadership assignments.

Each time we set up a new district, it helps set examples for doing some things in a new way. My impression from talking to comrades in branches around the country is that they are very interested in the New York-Northern New Jersey District and see it as a step forward for the party.

To take this step we had to make some changes, though. We released Andrea Morell from her assignments in the national office to be the Newark organizer. Tom Leonard was released from Texas to become the district organizer.

We also have to make another change. Over six months ago we decided we wanted to pull Linda Jenness, who is the New York City organizer, into the national office to help prepare the presidential campaign. I leave aside the question of candidates, which doesn't have to be decided yet.

We considered making this move at Oberlin but decided it was best for Linda to see through the organization of the district. So we decided to wait until Christmas. But now we feel we have to do it in order to help keep our promise about presenting the plans for the presidential campaign at the next plenum. So we've decided to make another major shift by releasing Joel Britton from the national office so that he can become New York City organizer. On one hand, this has a couple of big advantages. Not only is Joel politically qualified to do this, but he's probably the comrade in the national office who has by far the most experience in the last time period in trade-union work and leading the party turn forward. This will be a help in carrying through what we've begun in the New York-Northern New Jersey District.

On the other hand, this move raises a problem. Who's going to do what Joel did as party trade-union director?

We don't really propose a replacement for Joel as trade-union director. We'll make a shift with myself or someone else on the Political Committee becoming trade-union coordinator, but that's only for a brief transitional period. It's simply recognizing that someone has to be responsible for coordinating the work. The key to this proposal is a fundamental shift, and it's the most important part of the functioning of the new Political Committee.

The turn has to be led by the elected leadership of the party at every level. If that's not happening, we're doing something wrong. And we are doing this in most branches, locals and districts. We haven't gone quite as far down this road on the Political Committee. One reason was the large size of the Political Committee. But we must now make that shift.

This will probably also involve establishing a coordinating committee that can draw in comrades with lots of experience like Tom Leonard, Frank Lovell, and Joel Britton in order to discuss out our general work.

This also should facilitate working more closely with the comrades on the writing staff who spend a lot of their time covering the labor movement. They not only write, they spend time with our comrades on the scene, get a feel for situations, and have to be involved in policy discussions.

But every member of the Political Committee has to follow the work in general, every member of the Political Committee has to follow a couple industries or a couple of fractions in particular, in order to become knowledgeable and help with the work.

We also are making another move that will help us, and that is in respect to the Militant. For the past months, Steve Clark and Cindy Jaquith have basically been sharing the editing of the paper, which has given us a little flexibility in writing major political articles. We're now taking another step by having Andy Rose share in this editing. This three-way division of labor should give us more flexibility in writing as well as broadening the editors on the Militant who follow trade-union work more closely.

In our discussion on the Political Committee, we also discussed the question of the comrades from the ex-Revolutionary Marxist Committee. It's our unanimous opinion that we've reached the stage, through practice and experience, that the ex-RMC comrades represent no current or tendency of any kind in the Socialist Workers Party. This does not have to do with the position of many of the ex-RMC comrades on the theory of state capitalism in the Soviet Union, etc., but on the strategy and perspectives of the work in this country. There's nothing we can see that differentiates the ex-RMC comrades from the party leadership or the cadre as a whole. They participate in the give and take discussions of questions facing the party along with the rest of us. We think this plenum then is a good place to recognize the basic completion of the political integration of the comrades coming from the RMC on this level. Ex-RMCers "represent" no one but themselves and they have no special rights of consultation or circulation of material among themselves.

It also means that while we weigh the capacities, contributions, division of labor, assignments, etc., of the ex-RMC comrades, there's no consideration any more of placing them on the Political Committee or any other leadership body because they come from the RMC. They will be proposed for leadership bodies because they demonstrate capacities and fit into the team like the rest of us.

What we propose is a smaller Political Committee, one that will be small enough to meet on call and meet several times a week if necessary. George Breitman reminded me how small the Bolshevik political committees often were but how they set up organization bureaus and other bodies composed partly of non-members of the Political Committee to handle a broad range of responsibilities,

so that the Political Committee could actually concentrate on the major political questions.

We propose a Political Committee of 17 comrades. This is a big step down from the 28 or 29 that we've had in most of the recent meetings. But it's not yet small enough. To have the kind of functioning committee we're after, our perspective must be to move towards a smaller one. And that's one of the things that the new Political Committee will work on.

The committee of 17 would of course include a representative from the YSA leadership. So we'd like to open the nominations by nominating 16 comrades: Jack Barnes, Joel Britton, Steve Clark, Maceo Dixon, John Hawkins, Gus Horowitz, Cindy Jaquith, Doug Jenness, Linda Jenness, Shelley Kramer, Wendy Lyons, Andrea Morell, Harry Ring, Larry Seigle, Betsey Stone, and Mary-Alice Waters.

There are a couple of things I want to point out to the comrades about these nominations. One is that it does not include George Breitman or Frank Lovell. It simply is not possible for George or Frank to serve on a committee that meets on call. But that's just a small part of what this means. It's also another step forward in the continuing process of transition of leadership in the party. Not that Frank and George will be doing less, in fact, I hope that they will be doing even more. But they will not be formal members of the committee.

The second thing to point out is that we have four members of the Militant staff on the Political Committee. That gives us a problem. It's not clear that comrades can make all of the meetings. We also have the organizers of the New York local and the Newark branch on the committee. But we think this is necessary in order to prepare for the next steps.

So the two formal motions that we want to place before the comrades are:

That a literary discussion be held in the party discussion bulletin on Cuba and the five resolutions now before the world movement: "The World Political Situation and the Tasks of the Fourth International"; "Socialist Revolution and the Struggle for Women's Liberation"; "Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat"; "Resolution on Latin America"; "The Crisis in Capitalist Europe and the Present Tasks of the Fourth International"; and that the literary discussion be open with the publication of the European resolution and the report on Cuba adopted by the plenum.

That the Political Committee consist of 17 members, including one to be elected by the National Executive Committee of the YSA.