

Pages From SLP History**Revitalization of SLP Begins in 1970s***Last in a Series*

By the time of the SLP's Twenty-Eighth National Convention in 1972, declining activity and membership attrition had brought the party to a major crossroad.

As Nathan Karp, who had been elected to the post of National Secretary in 1969 (replacing Arnold Petersen), noted in his report to the convention, a lack of human resources was undermining important agitational activities and hampering efforts at the party's national headquarters to perform essential organizational tasks. Moreover, the situation at the national level in large measure reflected the critical situation that existed among the local subdivisions. Accordingly, while failing to reach a consensus on the root causes of the party's problems or even to develop any concrete proposals for reversing its decline, the 1972 convention noted the pressing need to "take stock and reverse course."

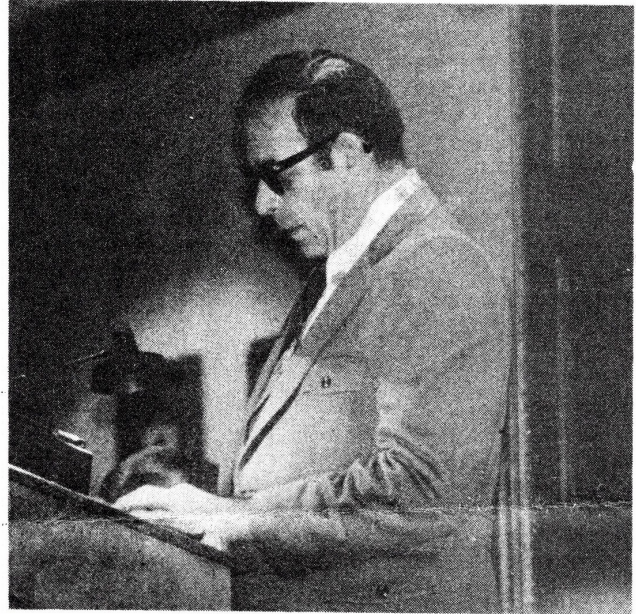
**National Headquarters Move**

In the absence of more positive steps, the party was forced by the prevailing situation to contemplate retrenchment. The 1972 National Convention thus empowered the National Secretary to investigate the feasibility of relocating the party's national headquarters, then situated in New York. As part of this investigation, the prospects for liquidating the party's outmoded printing plant and having party publications, including the *Weekly People*, printed by a commercial firm were to be assessed. Such moves, it was hoped, would reduce personnel requirements at national headquarters, eliminate the heavy financial burden of maintaining the printing equipment, and facilitate the finding of qualified help to bolster the headquarters staff.

In keeping with the convention's directive, the feasibility of relocating to six different metropolitan areas was investigated, and the results of that investigation were subsequently reported to the party's National Executive Committee. In 1973, the decision was made to give up the party's printing plant and to move national headquarters to their present location in Palo Alto, California. The move was completed in September, 1974.

Adding to the urgency of the move and the need to reconstitute the national headquarters staff on a sound basis were the events that led to the resignation of John Timm as editor of the *Weekly People* in 1973. At that year's National Executive Committee meeting, National Secretary Karp submitted a critique of the *Weekly People*, pointing out numerous deficiencies and errors—shortcomings that were born, in part, of the fact that the editorial office was seriously understaffed. However, declining to take part in any critical evaluation of the paper and any dialogue on how it might be improved, Timm resigned, forcing the party to publish the paper on a makeshift basis until the nucleus of a new editorial staff could be assembled in Palo Alto.

Fortunately, by the time the party moved to its new headquarters, the framework of a new national office staff had been assembled, and although the party had been forced to retrench, there was reason to hope that a base had been established from which the party could rebuild. Toward this end, every effort was made to improve the appearance and contents of the *Weekly People*, which was regarded as the key element in any campaign to increase the ranks and extend the influence of the SLP.



SLP National Secretary Nathan Karp addressing the 1976 national convention. *Weekly People*

Despite the continuation of many of the old problems and the addition of some new ones, an underlying sense of optimism prevailed. As the National Secretary put it in March, 1975, "we are in a position to mount a long overdue resurgence of 'the fighting SLP.' Certainly the social conditions are ripe for a growth of our movement. And surely if we can continue the steps already taken, we can translate this opportunity into concrete progress."

**1976 National Convention**

By the end of 1974, however, it had become increasingly clear at national headquarters that critical problems continued to jeopardize the party's future existence. Accordingly, in 1975 the NEC met twice, once in special session, to discuss the nature of the problem. At these two NEC sessions it became increasingly evident that the roots of the party's problems were deeper than previously realized. This growing realization set the stage for the 1976 National Convention, which represents a major turning point in the party's history.

At the 1976 National Convention the party's declining activity and membership were, for the first time, viewed as manifestations of deeper political problems. Seeking out the underlying cause of the party's decline, the report to the 1976 convention advanced the view that the party's failure to adopt "correct methods of theoretical and practical work" was largely responsible for the current situation within the party. The report identified the "help" or "headquarters problem" as a "consequence of a more basic problem—what we refer to as a 'political problem,' one that embraces an understanding and attitude as revolutionists and our concept of the role of our party and the individuals in it." The report thus initiated a process of self-criticism and a reexamination of the party's strategy, tactics and political viewpoints that continue to this day.

These more general conclusions were concretized in the

convention's consideration of two specific questions that had already provoked some controversy among party members. One involved the party's position on the Vietnam War and, more generally, its attitude toward national liberation movements. The other dealt with revolutionary tactics and the question of peaceful vs. violent revolution. As a result of the debate over these two questions, the party concluded that it had been advancing incorrect views that stemmed, at least in part, from faulty presentations of basic party principles. Moreover, it was recognized that the incorrectness of these views had seriously crippled the party's efforts to translate the public protest over the war and other issues into an increase in membership and activity.

### **View Of National Liberation Struggles**

The reconsideration of the Vietnam issue was sparked by a Weekly People editorial greeting the defeat of U.S. imperialism at the hands of the Vietnamese national liberation movement. Though the editorial did little more than cite the progressive aspects of this imperialist defeat, some party members saw it as a repudiation of the party's then-held view that the Vietnam War was essentially a superpower conflict in which the Vietnamese liberation movement was, at most, a secondary factor. Responding to such criticism, the Weekly People issued a statement outlining a new view. That statement was endorsed by the NEC at its 1975 session. However, continuing disagreement on the part of some members, and a recognition that the adoption of the new position had not been accompanied by adequate internal debate, placed the issue on the agenda again at the 1976 National Convention.

The 1976 Weekly People report to the convention summarized the two contending positions on this question for the delegates. "In essence," it noted, "the view advanced...by the staff and the National Secretary was that socialists (especially socialists in the imperialist countries) had an obligation to support the right of oppressed nations fighting for national self-determination, that Vietnam was such a case, and further, while the conflict had a dimension of Soviet-U.S. imperialist contention, this did not alter the main character of the war which pitted progressive Vietnamese nationalism against U.S. imperialism.

"Previously the SLP had advanced the position that the basic character of the Vietnamese war was a fight between two superpower imperialist camps, that socialists should not support the Vietnamese liberation forces who were pawns of the Soviet Union and China (perhaps no better than the U.S. puppets), and that in most cases the nations fighting for national liberation since World War II were not nations at all but 'anachronisms,' and that everything that occurred in the international arena was completely dominated and determined by the superpowers."

In endorsing the new position, the convention went on to note that in "statements made on a number of topics recently covered in various Weekly People articles, [the party] has broken with certain traditional habits of thought and reevaluated and clarified its position on several subjects." The convention also observed that these changes in no way modified the party's "fundamental Marxian basis or...changed the basic De Leonist principles and program that are the very essence of its being as a revolutionary socialist organization."

A Weekly People article also prompted a discussion by the national convention on pacifism and the role of physical force in socialist revolution. In the article, "The Transition to Socialism," the Weekly People had discussed questions relating to the use of violent and nonviolent tactics, emphasizing the need to view socialist tactics from a class basis and in light of existing material conditions, instead of from abstract moral precepts. The article noted that socialists reject both sending workers into "suicidal battles" and emasculating the

revolution with "pacifist illusions." And while declaring that "both organizational and educational agitation can today best proceed along legal and peaceful avenues," it cited De Leon's observation that circumstances could tomorrow force the working class to "resort to the last resort and physically mop the earth with the barbarian capitalist class." The convention upheld the article as reflecting the party's long-held views on this question.

The 1976 National Convention not only marked the first time the party's practical problems were clearly linked to more fundamental political problems, but also constituted a milestone in efforts to reinvolve the entire party membership in a discussion of organizational matters. An entirely new atmosphere prevailed at the 1976 National Convention. The free exchange of ideas was encouraged, and there was general agreement that the entire membership had to be involved in rebuilding the party. To stimulate discussion that would generate new ideas to help the party along this difficult road, the fullest participation of the membership was encouraged and numerous steps were taken to enhance party democracy.

### **Minority Opposition**

Though the overwhelming majority of members supported the new position on national liberation struggles, agreed with the view that political errors were largely responsible for the party's decline, and generally approved of the effort to strike a new direction, there was strong opposition by a minority of party members centered primarily in New York. More importantly, bypassing the democratic organizational channels available to them to advance their dissenting views, this minority sought to subvert the decisions taken at the 1976 convention and subsequently endorsed by majority vote of the membership. This opposition, which had surfaced in relatively incidental ways prior to the 1976 convention, became more pronounced in its aftermath and found expression largely in opposition to two specific actions taken in 1976, one regarding union activity, the other regarding participation in demonstrations.

Recognizing that the failure to become more closely involved in the union movement for many years had been "a factor in the [party's] isolation from the working class," the party began removing barriers to intervention by party members in the class struggle. The party voted to delete a constitutional ban preventing members from voluntarily joining or holding office in a procapitalist union. The membership also voted to rescind a ruling prohibiting participation in demonstrations, recognizing that demonstrations offer the party another opportunity to reach the working class with its socialist program. These steps have since been followed by others designed to facilitate membership involvement in daily class-struggle movements.

Though expressing itself in opposition to these specific actions, the minority opposition, which had little support outside the New York area, was born of a more general rigidity of thinking and was seemingly intent on continuing the self-imposed isolation and theoretical errors that had been responsible for the organization's decline. Disdaining principled debate on the issues at hand, this element engaged for over a year in obstructionist actions, creating organizational turmoil which hampered the implementation of the party's majority decisions, not only in New York but throughout the country.

Moreover, its disagreement over the party's new view of national liberation struggles and new attitude toward union

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work and intervention activities gave way to active disruption characterized by reckless charges of opportunism and reformism against the party majority that endorsed the party's new direction. Reflected in these charges was a general inability to recognize the difference between reformism and principled, nonopportunist methods of intervention. As the report to the Thirtieth National Convention observed, this opposition element believed that "certain forms of activity are *inherently* reformist." These members mistook isolation for revolutionary purity and irrationally held that abstentionism was revolutionary while activities that involved socialists in workers' day-to-day struggles were reformist.

Moreover, the New York group proved incapable of even considering the possibility that the changes in the party had been initiated not for the opportunist reason that they might attract new members, but rather because of a recognition that certain views which had crippled party activity had to be rejected because they were incorrect.

This group had, in fact, substituted dogmatism and sectarianism for Marxist dialectics. Citing the dogmatism that characterized their thinking, the 1977 convention report observed that among this minority, "Rigid inflexibility is mistaken for principle, as if the measure of a good revolutionary was his or her capacity for obstinate intransigence. A scientific attitude is replaced by arrogant professions of infallibility. Errors and incorrect premises are hardened into a body of dogma, and the defense of that dogma becomes more important than the continued study and application of Marxist science."

"As for sectarianism," the report continued, "one could say it is dogmatism put into action—or inaction as the case may be. Where dogmatism eliminates the complexities of understanding society with simple formulas, sectarianism eliminates the difficulties of changing society by retreating into isolation. Dogmatism mistakes mechanistic rigidity for a principled theory; sectarianism mistakes isolation and abstention for principled activity."

Despite continued efforts to engage this minority element in constructive debate, it proved incapable of coming to grips with its dogmatic posture and sectarian practices. And having proven itself incapable of examining the mistakes made by the party in the past and of contributing to the efforts to rectify those mistakes, their views were repudiated by the 1977 convention.

## **Rebuilding Efforts**

Having rejected abstentionism, the 1977 National Convention urged party members to expand their activities and to intervene in the class struggle in nonopportunist ways. The convention also reaffirmed the party's view of national libera-

tion struggles. Still, the convention's chief accomplishments were the formal rejection of dogmatism and sectarianism, the demonstration of overwhelming delegate support for the path taken by the party in 1976, and an expressed determination not to retreat to the sterile ways of thinking that had brought the party to a low state.

Since the 1977 National Convention, the party has given top priority to strengthening the organization by expanding and improving the party's agitational efforts. Guidelines for intervention activity have been adopted, and the party has continued to debate and define the role of party members engaged in trade union activity. In 1978, the national convention set forth a statement of general principles on trade union work and the application of the principles of socialist industrial unionism to the labor movement as it now exists. The process of democratizing the party's internal life has also continued.

At the same time, theoretical questions continue to be addressed. In 1977, for example, the NEC resolved questions arising from the treatment given to the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in a Weekly People series that was later published as the pamphlet, "After the Revolution: Who Rules?" The 1978 National Convention adopted a policy statement on the Middle East and a resolution on South Africa.

When the party started the process of rectifying its mistakes and initiating the difficult task of rebuilding the party, the membership was under no illusions that the task would be either easy or accomplished in short order. The problem was embedded in decades of practice and thought, and resistance to change was bound to hamper the long overdue rebuilding process. However, to its credit, a majority of the membership saw the correctness of the changes proposed and the need to adopt tactics that would overcome the party's isolation from working-class struggles. The need for building a viable party capable of giving relevant expression to the party's Marxist-De Leonist program was paramount.

Instead of succumbing to the weight of past errors, the SLP has in a relatively short time span identified the cause of previous problems, engaged in extensive self-criticism, and taken steps to rectify the problems as it sees them. While much more remains to be achieved in all areas, not the least important task is the need for continued vigilance against remnants of dogmatism and sectarianism. Whether the party will ultimately be successful in revitalizing the organization remains to be seen. But the answer no doubt lies, in part, in whether those workers who believe that social ownership and the democratic administration of the industries by an industrially organized working class can provide a solution to capitalism's manifold problems will join our efforts to build a strong Marxist-De Leonist current in the United States.