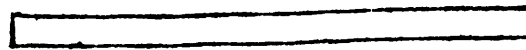


INTERNAL BULLETIN



WORKERS PARTY

No. 5

Nov. 12, 1940

Con tents:

1. "Fraternity" & note on the Intellectual Atmosphere in the Par ty.
2. Letter from Comrade Johnsen
3. Statement of the Political Committee

PRICE = 2¢

"FRATERNITY"
(A Note on the Intellectual
Atmophere in the Party.)

To: The Political Committee

Dear Comrades:

When, during the faction fight last winter, Felix Morrow wrote some articles in the APPEAL ostensibly against the line on the Finnish war taken by the Socialists and the Lovestoneites, but actually - as every one in the Party knew - directed at the Minority, when this happened, we of the Minority legitimately protested at such a perversion of the Party organ.

But Morrow had at least the excuse that a factional struggle was going on inside the Party. Now, however, we have one member of our Party, J.R. Johnson, using the editorial columns of THE NEW INTERNATIONAL (Morrow at least didn't venture to give his masked polemics the status of editorials) to polemicize in the sharpest terms against another member of the Party, namely myself, while ostensibly attacking the bourgeois press. And this in a period when, so far as I am aware, there is no factional struggle going on inside the party!

If this is doubted as unbelievable - as well it might be - I invite comrades to compare the first page and a half of my article, "National Defense: The Case for Socialism" in the current PARTISAN REVIEW with the first five paragraphs of the editorial, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" and the August NEW INTERNATIONAL.

The line of the section of the P.R. article can be thus suggested: "Paris, 'said the Nazi, Rosenberg, two days after the city was occupied by the Reichshwehr, 'was the center of mental confusion that pervaded all Europe....' Beneath the clumsy, turgid phrases so typical of this misbegotten Nazi 'revolution' one can see that Rosenberg has intuitively seized the symbolic significance of Paris, for a century and a half the center of the most advanced European cultural and political consciousness, being occupied by the armies of victorious National Socialism.....A year and a half ago I wrote here: 'If France goes fascist, we shall be saying goodbye to Western culture in all seriousness and for a long time to come'....The fears then express have been only too well realized...."

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY has yeilded to LABOR, FAMILY, FATHERLAND. It is characteristic of the fascist 'world revolution' that the eighteenth century abstractions sound considerably more modern than their 1940 successors."

The line of the NI editorial (first page only) runs thus: "The American bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois intellectuals have been rending the heavens with their wails over the defeat of the French army, and the extinction of French culture, symbolized by the swastika flying over Paris. Paris is fallen, fallen

that great city.....The fundamental ignorance and stupidity of these learned chatterers are without bounds.....Intellectuals who mean and slobber over the capture of Paris show no knowledge of either history or culture - but a sure instinct for hiding in the steadily diminishing crevices of bankrupt bourgeois democracyPut the counter-revolutionary squawking of these songbirds being driven out of our hearing, the workingclass movement, etc., etc."

Johnson - with whom I have talked on this matter - does not deny he was thinking, in this opening page of his editorial, chiefly of my article in PARTISAN REVIEW. (It would indeed be hard to find another article which fits the indiotment made in the NI editorial.) In fact, he rather insisted on the point and, with a stern gesture, refused to withdraw one iota from his "principled" position. Good - in fact, excellent! Let us look a little more closely at this "principled" criticism, which Johnson thinks important enough to justify terming (undercover, of course) a "comrade" and fellow-editor of the NI a "counter-revolutionary songbird".

The NI editorial falls into two main parts; the first five paragraphs, and the rest of the article. The opening paragraphs are concerned mostly with Paris as a cultural center, and are dragged in only so that Johnson may relieve his feelings about my PR article. The body of the editorial is about Paris as a political center. Between these two parts there is only a loose connection - as is usual in such amalgam jobs.&

The theme of the first part is that these "petty bourgeois intellectuals" -- how Cannon must have smiled when he read that phrase cropping up in our own press! -- who lament over the extinction of French culture "delude themselves that they are different" from the bourgeois commentators on the fall of Paris. Actually, they function as a cover for bourgeois politics, and their concern over the cultural debacle in Paris is really a screen - whether conscious or not - for their distress over the political overthrow of French bourgeois democracy. This peculiar structure confuses readers unconnected with the real aim of the editorial. Thus a Chicago comrade, in all innocence, wrote me the other day: "I was very much interested in the editorial on France - a rather unique conglomeration of erudition and invention. The former holds up much better. The writer (Johnson?) certainly sprinted all over the place, from Attila to the N.Y. Times, showering opinions of Ruskin, Wagner, France and the local intellectuals. The impact was dispersed into too many diatribes. Why was it called an editorial? Must the NI take a position on all these questions -- painting, music, philosophy, literature, Paris in the spring, etc.?" (I may add, lest dark suspicions arise of the existence of a "Macdonald clique", that this comrade agrees with Johnson and not myself on the nature of the war, of fascism, etc.)

The rest of the editorial is devoted to demonstrating with a great parade of half-digested learning, something I should think would be taken for granted in the theoretical organ of a Marxist movement: that "Liberty, equality, fraternity" have been mere words in the bourgeois French republic and that whatever content they have occasionally had has been due to the radical workingclass movement. With this theme I am in perfect agreement, as is clear to any one who reads beyond the first page and a half of my PR article. I am no longer here concerned with it, except to note that, in the general confusion and uproar of explosive language the casual reader gets the impression that the arguments with which Johnson refutes those who talk of French democracy also refute those who talk of French culture.

As to the first part of the article, the implication is that one cannot both believe that Western culture will be seriously affected by the Nazi occupation of Paris, and also that French democracy was a fraud long before the Nazis took Paris. Only this assumption could justify the abusive terms Johnson uses, climaxing in "counter-revolutionary", a word not lightly used between fellow members of a Marxist group. But in point of fact, it is possible to hold both beliefs at once, and the proof is that I myself do so and that the PR article does so. (Whether I am "deluded", whether I am merely exercising my "instinct for hiding in the crevices of bourgeois democracy" - to answer this would require the services of a psychoanalyst. All I can say is that I am not conscious of any such self-delusion, that I do not know of it, and that Johnson, who has never psychoanalyzed me, cannot possibly know either.)

Johnson's wild charges, delivered in a coarse parody of Lenin's more vituperative style, thus boil down to this: those who write of the collapse of French culture are, whether wittingly or not, giving aid and comfort to the bourgeoisie, who also paint the Nazis as barbarians. Better to say nothing about such things right now and emphasize the political issues. Even assuming for argument's sake Johnson is right, this is clearly not a matter of basic political principle, but of propagandistic tactics. And in fact, during our conversation, he had to agree that what he objected to in my article was not its political line about French democracy (since this was identical with his own) but the impression the article (he thought) would make on a bourgeois reader. Thus Johnson converts a tactical difference into a principled difference and launches a disloyal attack against a comrade and fellow-editor.

Even Johnson's tactical criticism I grant only for argument's sake, not in reality. Apparently, I conceive of Marxism in much broader terms than Johnson does. I think it is the function of a Marxist intellectual to concern himself with all phases and expressions of human society, and with culture not the least. I think that Trotsky was the great revolutionary he was partly because of his concern with culture, and that it is a sterile, narrow and crippled kind of "Marxism" which brushes aside such matters as trivial compared to the specifically political issues.

Johnson's abuse of those "intellectuals who moan and slobber over the capture of Paris" is the sort of Philistine "proletarianism" which Trotsky so brilliantly attacked in "Literature and Revolution".£

As to the question of propagandistic emphasis, I would say (1) that PR is a cultural magazine and that, with apologies to such firm Bolsheviks as Johnson, its readers must be approached on that basis; and (2) that it is the task of Marxist revolutionaries to fight for the preservation of the best of bourgeois civilization as well as for the raising of that civilization to a higher level.

.....

I have dwelt at such length on this episode not because of its intrinsic importance, but because it is a specially good example of the serious degeneration in the intellectual life of the party since the split. Under the pressure of the war crisis and, at least in my opinion, of the impotence of Johnson and other leading comrades to cope with international developments on the basis of their simple-minded mechanical-Marxist approach, there has been generated a really poisonous atmosphere. Comrades who, like myself, dissatisfied with the official "answers" and are casting about for more satisfactory interpretations, are regarded with the same fear and bitterness and suspicion as Cannon used to regard all of us during the faction fight. Why, after all, was Johnson impelled to go to such fantastic lengths in order to score a point off my PR article? Not because of the point he criticizes - a minor part of the article - but for an entirely different reason: because my general conception of fascism is "unorthodox" and, in his opinion, dangerous. This is what is believed the whole business, this is the real issue.

As many comrades know, I am developing a radically different conception of the nature of the war and of Nazism than Johnson and the other Party leaders hold. I am completing a long and well-documented article on these questions, which I will present for publication in the NI. Naturally I expect, and welcome, Johnson and others to express whatever disagreements they have. But let's have the argument conducted in the open, not by means of such envenomed masked attacks as this one of Johnson.££ And let's remember this lesson from the long factional struggle, that it is

£ Johnson became so carried away with his own verbiage as to state that it doesn't make any real difference, culturally, whether the Third Reich or the Second Republic rules over Paris: "The capture or non-capture of Paris does not signify either the continuance or the extinction of a culture. Hitler is not Attila, Weygand is not a Charles Martel." Two questions, Comrade Johnson: (1) Was Paris the chief center of consciousness of such culture as this age boasts? If not, what other city was? (2) What has been the attitude of Hitler and the Nazis to the sort of avant-garde art and letters which has centered in Paris? And one more: do you think that, in a Nazified Europe, Picasso and Leger will continue to paint, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein will continue to write, Stravinsky will continue to compose music, LeCorbusier will continue to build Houses?

the most dangerous device of demagogy to substitute denunciation for argument and appeals to authority for appeals to reason.

To sum up, it seems to me that Johnson has committed the following offenses against any reasonable conception of comradely relations within the Workers Party:

(1) In a non-factional period he has used the press of the party to polemicize against another member of the party. He has furthermore used the editorial department of the NI for this purpose. As it happens, I am also an editor of the NI. So we have one editor launching a venomous polemic against another editor, in the very editorial columns.

(2) He has done this without mentioning either me or PARTISAN REVIEW by name, so that those inside the party would realize whom he meant, while the outside public would remain in ignorance of the real aim of the attack. This undercover attack was necessary for two reasons. (1) In his irresponsible super-Leninist violence of language, Johnson went to such lengths that to have mentioned me by name would have not only provoked a real scandal but would have made the NI look like a very peculiar sort of magazine, with one editor denouncing another as a counter-revolutionary squaker. (2) The Political Committee had not yet taken any action on my PR article - and have not as yet - and so Johnson was unable to make any direct reply. When I asked him why he had not stated whom he was attacking, Johnson rather naively replied: "The PC hadn't acted, so I couldn't say anything openly." His editorial thus has the character of a lynching rather than a legal execution.

(3) Johnson said nothing to me about the editorial, nor did I see any advance proofs. The first time I saw it was after the magazine had come out. I happened to be out of the city while the issue was going to press, but I was back in plenty of time to have been shown a proof before it appeared.

ff (See para 1), Incidentally, not the only one by Johnson. In another article in the same NI he writes: "Some intellectuals, using (God forgive us!) the sacred name of Marx, hear the chatter in the forum, prick up their ears, rush to their typewriters, and add their little piece of 'theory' to the confusion." (You might have at least spared me the quotes around "theory," Comrade Johnson!) And again: "Sidney Hook and other petty bourgeois intellectuals" who "thrill with joy" when they discover their new theories about fascism." To whom do these remarks refer, Comrade Johnson? And if I am included, why not say so?

I therefore ask the Political Committee to take the following steps:

(1) to have this document distributed internally among the party membership, either as a separate mimeographed document, or as part of the next internal bulletin, whichever procedure will be the speedier.

(2) to state whether it considers Johnson's actions permissible. If so, why? If not, to see to it that Johnson conducts his polemics in the future in the open, naming names.

(3) to ask Johnson whether he considers the political tendency of my article in the current PARTISAN REVIEW to be "counter-revolutionary", as stated in the NEW INTERNATIONAL. If not, to require a statement by him, for the internal bulletin, to that effect. If so, to require that he take steps to have me expelled from the party. I cannot see how revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries can exist side by side either on the editorial board of a Marxist magazine or in a revolutionary party.

Comradely,

DWIGHT MACDONALD

New York City
September 14, 1940

LETTER FROM COMRADE JOHNSON

Due to circumstances over which I have no control, I am unable to reply at present in a fitting manner to Macdonald's letter. No one regrets more than I that I have not yet replied adequately, for it is in the Party interests to do so. As soon as my health permits, I shall reply to what I regard as an indefensible revisionist attitude to Marxism.

I shall deal also with his personal charges against me in so far as they have any pertinence to the manner of functioning in a political party.

J.R. Johnson

STATEMENT OF THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE
(On Comrade Macdonald's Letter to the P.C. on "Fraternity")

Comrade Macdonald's letter to the Political Committee on the editorial in the August, 1940 issue of The New International written by comrade Johnson, is devoid of all sense of proportion.

The Committee wishes to say at the very outset that it considers it regrettable that comrade Johnson did not find it possible to present his article in The New International to other members of the editorial board of the review, comrade Macdonald included, before publishing it, so that it might appear as the opinion of the editorial staff if the latter approved it, or, if that were not the case, to publish it under his own signature instead of as an official editorial. Unfortunately, we have had similar instances in the past when, for one reason or another, it proved difficult or impossible to have the whole editorial board go over the editorials written for a particular issue of the magazine, and they had to be published on the responsibility of the editor or the acting editor. We have a meager personnel, occupied by a multitude of tasks, and a smooth, formally proper and necessary functioning of all comrades, departments and institutions is often extremely difficult. However that may be, comrade Macdonald's complaint on this score is quite legitimate. Only, it is necessary to reduce it to its proper size and not inflate it beyond all proportions.

Comrade Macdonald's criticisms on this point might bear more weight if he himself were not guilty of a far more reprehensible act which, in the excitement of his attack on Johnson and the "degenerated intellectual life of the party", he does not mention by so much as a word. Johnson published an article in the party press in which he defended (well or poorly, that is beside the point) Marxism and the program of his party. Macdonald, however, published an article in the non-party press in which he attacked (well or poorly, that is again beside the point) Marxism and the program of his party; and this article comrade Macdonald never thought of submitting to the proper party committee, he never thought of notifying the proper party committee of his intention to publish it, and he never inquired of the proper party committee if it was permissible to open such a "discussion" (i.e., such an attack on the party) in the public, non-party press. But of all this, not a word in Macdonald's letter. He is outraged at the thought that the acting editor of the party organ published an editorial defending the party without obtaining his approval, or at least without submitting it to him for approval. Evidently, however, he finds it quite normal when he himself makes a public attack upon the party, its foundation principles and its program in a non-party periodical and without troubling to notify the party, much less to obtain its permission. More simply: the party owes him, as a member, certain obligations; he does not owe the party these obligations.

As to the contents of comrade Johnson's editorial, comrade Macdonald again loses his sense of proportion. Modern politics do not revolve around comrade Macdonald's editorials in the Partisan Review and not even around his editorial in the issue referred to. It is not necessary to agree with every single word or mark of emphasis in Johnson's editorial to see that in substance it attacks the point of view of those "radical" intellectuals and bourgeois demagogues - from the New York Times to the New Leader, from Walter Lippmann to Sidney Hook - who used the fall of Paris for a renewed patriotic or social-patriotic offensive. If Johnson paraphrased some sentences from the article by Macdonald, as the latter declares, it is no less true that substantially the same sentences can be found in any number of articles in the patriotic press and are, consequently, just as faithfully represented in Johnson's paraphrase. So far as that "attack" is concerned, it is, to quote Macdonald, "devoted to demonstrating, with a great parade of half-digested learning, something I should think would be taken for granted in the theoretical organ of a Marxist movement." Comrade Macdonald can sustain his assumption that it is he who is being attacked by Johnson, and he alone, only if he can prove that he holds the views against which Johnson polemicized or that nobody but himself holds such views. He will find it difficult to offer such proof!

The comparison with Morrow's crimes against us in the S.W.P. factional fight is no more valid. We merely exercised our right to present our views inside the party; and, in the pre-convention period, in the party press. Morrow attacked our views anonymously in the official party press, and attributed them to social democrats and patriots with whom we had absolutely nothing in common. What is the difference in the present case? It is Macdonald who initiates a public attack upon the party and its program in the non-party press; we defend the party from this attack. Johnson, who is not authorized by the party to attack Macdonald directly and by name, (subsequently, Shachtman was authorized by the PQ to dissociate the party from the views of Macdonald, and to do so by naming Macdonald specifically. This he did.) refrains from doing so and confines himself to attacking those views of Macdonald which conflict with the party program and to defending the views of the party - which he is always authorized to do. (Whether Johnson does it well or poorly, with "half-digested learning" or with vituperation, is here entirely beside the point; it has nothing at all to do with Macdonald's complaint and he needlessly muddles up these two distinctly different questions. The question of how well a comrade defends the party program, how good are his literary style and structure, how cogent are his arguments and reasoning for a given party policy - that is always subject to discussion or debate. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the question Macdonald really raises; namely, proper party procedure and party loyalty.)

Finally, as to the "intellectual atmosphere in the party" and the serious degeneration in the intellectual life of the party since the split." We cannot say less than that such statements by Macdonald are simply irresponsible. On more than one occasion, leading comrade after comrade has proposed to Macdonald: "You have differences with the party program or policy or analysis? Well, we do not live in Cannon's asphyxiation chambers. We welcome a discussion. Put your ideas down on paper, as any other comrade would do, and present them to the party. Whereupon, we will promptly organize an intelligent, coherent and fair discussion throughout the ranks of the party". Comrade Macdonald will surely not presume to deny that such proposals were made to him repeatedly. He will surely also not presume to deny that he never took advantage of the offer. The Political Committee is not obligated to open a formal discussion in the party on, let us say, the nature of fascism or the nature of the war, if the Committee has no new analysis or policy to offer on these points. It is obligated, of course, to organize such a discussion when others propose a new analysis or policy; and it is further obligated to defend the official party policy until or unless it proposes to change it.

But comrade Macdonald was not content with this normal arrangement. He is "dissatisfied with the official answers!" and he is "casting about for more satisfactory interpretations." That is his right and even his duty. Only, in "casting about" he forgets one little detail, namely that he is a party member who, like all others, has not only rights but obligations, and that his rights do not include special privileges granted no other party member. When Macdonald writes so lightly about our intellectual degeneration, and our bad atmosphere, he is completely misjudging the temper of at least nine-tenths of the party membership! They are aroused, and rightly so, at the liberties Macdonald has taken with the party and its program. In his article in Partisan Review, Macdonald delivered a public attack on the party program all along the line! At whom was his article directed, that is, at least ninety percent of it? Who holds the views on fascism and the present war against which he polemicized? Macdonald's patriotic colleagues on the Partisan Review? or Sidney Hook and Co. of the Statesman or the New Leader? or the Leontines? Of course not! They are held by us, the Workers Party, and to the extent that we agree with us, by the rest of the Trotskyist movement, and by their absence

Unless specifically given contrary authorization, party members speaking in public defend the party program and policy. Or if a comrade disagrees with one or another point in our policy, he is, upon request, specifically exempt from speaking publicly in defense of the party position. Every Yipfel knows that good rule; every party member is bound by it. But not comrade Macdonald!

He, more than a hundred others, knows that the emphasis in our basic declaration of principles upon the fact that we consider ourselves a Marxian party, was not put there by chance, or as a

ceremonial formula. He was present at the meetings of the leading comrades when we fought out that question with the late Burnham. Yet, he does not hesitate to fill his articles with cheap jeers at "orthodox Marxists" (does he mean James Connel and Sidney Hook, or, perchance, the Workers Party?), and to throw overboard one Marxian principle after another. In flat conflict with everything the party - his party! - stands for, he argues that Hitler's Reichwehr and not the proletariat is the gravedigger of capitalism; that this is not an imperialist war but a social war; and ends up by presenting as his program (as Trotsky rightly pointed out to the humiliation of our party) the theory of skepticism towards all theories and programs, the Marxian included.

What other party member would permit himself such a privilege, or more accurately, such a flagrant abuse of party membership? What other party member would be permitted that privilege? No one. For everybody understands that if such privileges were granted, the problem of abuse of party membership would no longer exist for the good reason that the party would not exist.

We want, in our party, the freest intellectual atmosphere, one in which we can hammer out, in the most comradely spirit, with the greatest earnestness, with the most critical of attitudes, the revolutionary course of the party. We want to welcome new ideas, more thoroughgoing answers to the multiplicity of problems, old and new, that face us. But we have not the slightest intention of scrapping Marxism. We have not the slightest intention of scrapping the party's fought-for and thought-out program the minute any half-baked notion is exploded in our midst or the minute someone who never studied Marxism proposes to revise it. We have not the slightest intention, either, of allowing the party to degenerate - really degenerate! - into a loose, undisciplined sect. We are a fighting party. Our fight is the most difficult in history - the fight for socialism. The minds of the greatest thinkers in the last century combined to forge the weapons in that fight - Marxism, the program of social revolution. We would be fools to allow these weapons to be kicked around as if they were rubbish in our way. We would be fools to allow the most important of these weapons - the revolutionary party - to be weakened by the kind of privileges comrade Macdonald has taken to himself.

Your ideas, comrade Macdonald, you are welcome to present and are urged to present, in a forthright and responsible way. You and your ideas will be accorded the full rights and respect of party membership, not more and not less. But your attitude towards the party and its program, and their rights, must be changed. A self-respecting party cannot brook a repetition of the incident that precipitated the present controversy.

Political Committee,
Shachtman, Secretary.