

FORUM

Discussion & Information Bulletin
of the Independent Socialist League

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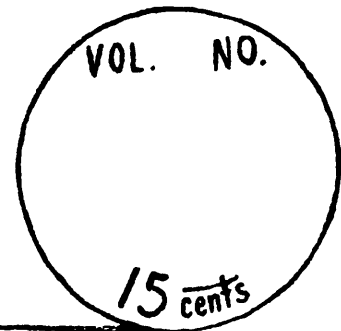
SOCIALISTS AND WORLD WAR III

By Saul BERG

WHO CAN WAGE A DEMOCRATIC WAR?

By J. WALKER

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The long period of time which has elapsed between the appearance of this issue of FORUM and the last issue was due to the absence of copy to make up a whole number. This particular issue contains two articles as contributions to the discussion on the war question which originally appeared in the New Internationalist. Another issue of Forum will appear as soon as material for it is collected.

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SOCIALISTS AND WORLD WAR III

Comrade Shachtman's recent articles in the New Internationalist on the war question disturbed numerous comrades. Specifically what was involved was the paragraph in which he advocated not carrying out the class struggle in World War III in such a way as might result merely in a military victory for Stalinism. Comrade Haskell, likewise disturbed by this formulation, proposed a substitute but Comrade Shachtman rejected as quite unwarranted any criticism of this paragraph.

Despite the fact that Haskell cannot endorse the paragraph, he still maintains that there is actually no difference in position, just a question of bad wording. But we cannot take this seriously, since Shachtman is not exactly an amateur at expressing himself, and since most comrades, examining the paragraph and Haskell's proposed substitute are entirely capable of explaining exactly what the political difference between them is.

What is it, then, that makes Haskell so timid in his criticism and so sure that there really is agreement? In my opinion it is the fact that he has swallowed a basic conception and approach to the problem of World War III that can only, in the end, lead logically to the concrete formulation to which it was reduced by Shachtman, even though Haskell's concrete formulation today is unquestionably different.

This conception was present in embryo in the International Resolution of the last ISL convention, but, although some statements in it worried me, it seemed to me that on the whole the resolution would merely alter somewhat the emphasis of our agitation and not make any basic change in our policy. But the slogan "Turn the imperialist war into a democratic war" does clearly represent a basic change.

The statement below attempts to summarize what is fundamental in an internationalist socialist criticism of the policy proposed by Shachtman and unfortunately endorsed in part by Haskell.

1. During a world imperialist war the continuation of the class struggle is a manifestation of the fact that the basic antagonism in each country, obscured to a greater or lesser extent by chauvinism and the success of the ruling class in infusing the whole population with its ideology, is the class antagonism between exploiter and exploited.

Stalinism exploits the people s of Russia and Eastern Europe, not the American working class. American capitalism exploits the American workers, not the Russian workers. Domination of the entire world by either of these powers means reaction and slavery for peoples elsewhere. Under these circumstances the undoubted fact that the domestic regime of U.S. capitalism is more democratic than that of Russia cannot be the basic consideration in anti-war strategy, so long as we maintain our present opinion that capitalism is not viable and that the U.S. cannot and will not establish elsewhere the kind of relative democracy that is able to exist here precisely at the expense of the rest of the world.

If the basic antagonism is that between exploiter and exploited within each sovereign nation, then the foundation of socialist strategy cannot be any proposal to make war on other regimes, no matter how democratic or socialist the purpose of such a war. This is true during a socialist struggle against an

imperialist war, because: (1) a factor in sharpening the class struggle at home is the rise of war-weariness. If our struggle is summed up not by a demand for workers power to make peace, but in order to wage a "democratic war", then we are overlooking completely the very factor - war-weariness - which is most likely to deepen the class struggle to the point where a social crisis exists. (2) It is not the object of the working class to overthrow the regime of any other country except through active solidarity with an existing revolutionary struggle of the exploited classes of that country. Therefore, aside from the question of war-weariness, advocacy of a democratic war is in conflict with the fundamental notion that democracy cannot be imposed by bayonets.

What the working class wants is a democratic peace, not a democratic war, and in seeking such a peace the immediate strategic aim of the workers in each country is only to prevent its own ruling class from depriving any other peoples of the right of self-determination. In each country, therefore, the working class struggles against its own exploiters and thereby helps to keep its exploiters from imposing their will on other nations.

On the basis of the above considerations, it is clear we should not jump from the correct notion (previously underemphasized by our movement) that the working class has a stake in preserving national independence to the false notion that the basis of our strategy in an imperialist war is not the struggle against our own ruling class but the aim of defeating totalitarian Stalinism. We should, by all means, expose the reactionary and politically ineffectual methods, on which the U.S. relies to fight this new totalitarian social order, but not in order to advocate a democratic war against it.

2. Should we prosecute the class struggle regardless of military consequences? No, not if, in the given circumstances, there is absolutely no question that the only possible result is the loss of our own national independence. But such narrowly circumscribed conditions can scarcely be fulfilled, for they assume that, when a point is reached where there is so much dissatisfaction in our society that there could be a possibility of the class struggle having such consequences, at this point we would be facing an enemy camp which was absolutely united and faced absolutely no internal problems of its own. The basic strategy of internationalist socialism relies not on the weakening of the class struggle (or the pursuit of the class struggle "in other ways", as some delicately put it) but on active solidarity between the forces of the exploited in each camp. If the class struggle in the U.S. were to rise to a pitch where it could have serious military consequences, this could only be due to actual material conditions at home, and not to the stubbornly sectarian approach of a group of "defeatists". This being the case, it would be the job of internationalist socialists to seek to utilize the situation as the springboard for workers' power and for ending the war. Whether under such circumstances, the actual result would instead be the conquest of the US by Russia would depend on the degree to which any such upsurge of internationalist socialist activity here was echoed by the struggles of the workers and oppressed peoples in the Russian camp and in its conscript armies.

--Saul BERG

WHO CAN WAGE A DEMOCRATIC WAR?

The main task of the independent (revolutionary) socialist today is to oppose the coming third world war. To prevent it if possible, or to transform its character and bring it to a quick and progressive conclusion should it break out. Yet facing such a huge task the international socialist movement is definitely at its lowest ebb since the beginning of the 20th century - in the world and in the United States. These are simple truisms which are implicitly and explicitly affecting the political perspective of the ISL today.

In this context we must examine the last international resolution of the ISL (followed by Shachtman's articles in the New Internationalist) which looked toward the intermediate step in the U.S. of a labor party, which "while not yet socialist" would nevertheless pursue a consistently democratic foreign and domestic policy which would enable independent socialists to support its government and war, should it take power electorally. I believe that such a policy cannot be realized within the framework of a labor party, although it might serve as a valuable agitational slogan within such a party in power or reaching for power, in order to move a left wing within the party onto a broader road of action.

First, I recognize the necessity of calling for the labor party - as a transitional program - and of helping to organize it, of participating in it as a left wing element, of its being the only likely arena for working class politics, and in general of its being a step forward for labor politically. The point that I wish to emphasize is that the ISL must recognize the limitations of such a labor party. Bureaucratic it will be. Reformist it will be. Socialist and internationalist it will not be.

What we can expect from a labor party (assuming it takes power in some capitalist economic crisis or in the disaffection of the people with the policies or manner in which the government would be preparing for or conducting the third world war) is probably not much more than a fairer distribution of the national income to labor, a toning down of some of the more outrageous war profiteering, a more considerate treatment of some labor disputes, and some pious declarations on the international situation discussing the lofty aims of U.S. capitalism in the war.

Think of what it would mean to come out for a democratic foreign policy! First it would mean rejection of all the imperialist aims of all the capitalist countries of the world! (Imagine a labor party taking power peacefully and parliamentarily with such a program.) Second, it would mean support for trade union and labor organizations (including political!) within the totalitarian countries of the "free world" (Spain, Yugoslavia, Argentina, Africa, the Near East, Asia, et. which would mean undermining capitalist domination throughout its own camp! In under-developed capitalist countries (excluding Yugoslavia) the capitalists rule not through concessions to a higher standard of living or more democracy, but through police terror. Thus, fundamentally, a labor party in order to pursue what I believe to be a utopian policy of a "democratic and anti-imperialist" foreign policy, would be in effect, to adopt a policy of "capitalism in one country" (!) with few exceptions throughout the world.

Now the present trade union top leadership will not advocate such a policy. Nor will the secondary, or tertiary leaders for that matter. And it is these people who will prevail in the labor party's policy making.

It is up to socialists to recognize that in the United States, only a mass socialist party in power will be able to carry on a democratic war. If this means that the U.S. lags behind third camp elements throughout the world, then this is regrettable - but true. It is time for the ISL to recognize the "facts of life" and restore the labor party to some perspective in the eyes of socialists!

J. WALKER

Oakland, Feb. 4, 1952