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The Cannon Tradition:

“Don’t Strangle the Party!”

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Introduction

by **George Breitman**

On April 8, 1983, a membership meeting of the Bay Area District of the Socialist Workers Party (from branches in San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose) was held in San Jose to hear a report on the latest three in a series of expulsions being engineered by the SWP “central leadership team” headed by Jack Barnes. During the discussion period, Asher Harer, a veteran party member from San Francisco, made some comments about the newly announced “organizational norm” prohibiting SWP members from communicating with members of other branches under pain of expulsion. Harer said that if James P. Cannon, the principal founder of the SWP, were alive today, he could not exist in the SWP. Cannon often communicated directly with members in other branches, on all sorts of questions, and Harer said he had a file of Cannon letters to prove it.

Harer was answered by Clifton DeBerry, a member of the national Control Commission, a former member of the National Committee, and a former presidential candidate, who said: “If James P Cannon wrote such letters today, he would be expelled.” DeBerry added that the SWP is a “more disciplined” party today than in Cannon’s time. Some NC members who supported the new norms were also present, but none differentiated themselves from what DeBerry had said.

DeBerry’s remarks were not repeated in written form, then or later, but they were very revealing. For more than a year the SWP leadership had been accusing oppositionists in the NC of violating the party’s organizational principles (“norms”), which the leadership allegedly was trying to maintain and defend. And now DeBerry had blurted out the truth: Even the founder of the party would have been ousted as “undisciplined” if he had lived to 1983 and tried to function in accord with the organizational norms that prevailed in the party from its founding in 1938 to his death in 1974. Since these norms had never been changed in Cannon’s time, or later, they were being violated all right - not by the

oppositionists but by the leadership itself, which was reinterpreting them and giving them a new content without ever formally discussing or formally changing them.

In the following year the SWP leadership expelled all known or suspected oppositionists, dissidents, or critics. The real reason they were expelled was that they had political differences with or doubts about the leadership's new orientation toward Castroism and away from Trotskyism, and that the leadership was afraid to debate this orientation with them in front of the SWP membership. The ostensible reason given by the leadership was that the expelled members had in various ways violated the party's traditional organizational principles, especially the 1965 resolution on "The Organizational Character of the Socialist Workers Party."

The present pamphlet consists of three letters and the text of a talk by Cannon in 1966 and 1967, which prove conclusively that Cannon did not share the current SWP leadership's interpretation of the 1965 resolution. The real tradition of the SWP on democratic centralism is different than the present leadership makes it out to be. Like Trotsky, Cannon is a witness against the revisionist political and organizational policies of the Barnes group.

Cannon was 75 years old and living in Los Angeles in 1965. He was national chairman of the party but no longer responsible for its day-to-day activity, which was handled by the Political Committee and national secretary Farrell Dobbs from the party center in New York. When the PC decided to submit a resolution on organizational principles to the 1965 convention, it chose a committee of Dobbs, George Novack, and Cannon to prepare a draft. Dobbs wrote it and Novack edited it. A copy was sent to Cannon, who sent it back without comment. He thought the draft was poorly written and too ambiguous on certain key points, but did not undertake to amend or redraft it. He did not attend the 1965 convention, which adopted the resolution by a vote of 51 to 8.

In 1968 Cannon discontinued direct correspondence with the party center in New York. But before that happened, he wrote and said some things in 1966 and 1967 which showed that he disagreed with PC members who were interpreting the 1965 resolution as a signal to "tighten" or "centralize" the party, which he believed could only damage it, perhaps fatally.

1. Don't Try to Enforce a Nonexistent Law

Cannon's letter of February 8, 1966, had the following background: Arne Swabeck, a party founder and NC member, had been trying for seven years to convert the SWP from Trotskyism to Maoism. Despite repeated efforts before and during SWP national conventions in 1959, 1961, 1963, and 1965, his small group made little headway among the members. Increasingly he and his group began to ignore the normal channels for discussion in the party, and to communicate their ideas to selected members by mail. This led to demands by Larry Trainor, an NC member in Boston, for disciplinary action against Swabeck and his ally in the NC, Richard Fraser. Through a circular letter for the PC Tom Kerry announced that the matter would be taken up at a plenum of the NC to be held at the end of February.

Cannon's letter was addressed to the supporters of the NC majority tendency (which excluded the supporters of the Swabeck and Fraser-Clara Kaye tendencies, etc.). Cannon tried to convince the majority that political discussion and education were the answer to the minority tendencies, not disciplinary action. "There is absolutely *no party law or precedent for such action*," he said, "and we will run into all kinds of trouble in the party

ranks, and the International, if we try this kind of *experiment for the first time*.... It would be too bad if the SWP suddenly decided to get tougher than the Communist Party [of the 1920s] and try to enforce *a nonexistent law* — which can't be enforced without creating all kinds of discontent and disruption.” (Emphasis added)

This was written five months after the adoption of the 1965 resolution. It demonstrates that Cannon saw nothing in that resolution that could be cited as “party law or precedent” for the kind of disciplinary action taken by the Barnes leadership in the 1980s.

The February 1966 meeting of the NC found Cannon's arguments convincing. They did not want to conduct, for “the first time” in the party's history, the experiment of trying to enforce “a nonexistent law.” So the whole question was dropped - until after Cannon's death.

2. Reasons for the Survival of the SWP and for Its New Vitality in the 1960s

Cannon's September 6, 1966, talk was one of “my last speeches before I fell into retirement, so to speak,” he said shortly before his death. It was given to a Labor Day weekend educational conference at a camp near San Francisco, and it was obviously intended primarily for members of the SWP and YSA, rather than for the general public. The form of this talk was that of a discussion about the history of the SWP and the FI, which Cannon used to express his thinking about the problems facing the SWP in 1966, its strengths and weaknesses, the pressures it was feeling, and the lessons from the past that it could learn for the present and the future. Although the talk was couched mainly in historical terms, experienced listeners understood that Cannon was saying, “I think we have some serious problems now and we'd better think about how to handle them.” The SWP leadership never printed this talk (which was transcribed from a taped recording and edited by Evelyn Sell eighteen years later, after her expulsion from the SWP as an oppositionist, and was printed in the *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, No. 14, December 1984).

Cannon's main concern here was that some SWP and YSA leaders were not sufficiently resisting and opposing the harmful influences of the “New Left” to which they were subjected in the antiwar and student movements. Some “younger comrades,” he said quite openly, gave him the impression that they had not fully assimilated the cardinal principle of internationalism. His stress on the SWP as “revolutionary continuators” was directed not only against the New Left but against those in the SWP and YSA who disregarded this factor or thought it insignificant. His demand for polemics with opponent tendencies (“the mark of a revolutionary party”) stemmed from his conviction that there was a reluctance among SWP and YSA leaders to openly explain their differences with the New Left. Similarly with most of the talk - it was not just a criticism of the New Left but of party and YSA members who he thought were defaulting on the theoretical and educational struggle against New Leftism.

But Cannon did not fail also to raise the questions about party democracy that had been on his mind during the previous two or more years. He began by touching on the “flexible democracy” that had enabled the party to survive historically: “We never tried to settle differences of opinion by suppression. Free discussion - not every day in the week but at stated regular times, with full guarantees for the minority - is a necessary condition for the health and strength of an organization such as ours.” It never occurred to him to add that any of this had been superseded by the 1965 resolution.

Continuing, he noted that factionalism can get out of hand or become unprincipled. “But

on the other hand,” he said, “if a party can live year after year without any factional disturbances, it may not be a sign of *health* — it may be a sign that the party’s *asleep*; that it’s not a real live party. In a live party you have differences, differences of appraisal, and so on. But that’s a sign of life.” The present SWP leaders hardly ever say things like that any more; and even when they do, they mean something different than Cannon meant.

3. A Trend in the Wrong Direction

In 1966 some SWP members raised the question of codifying parts of the 1965 resolution through amendments to the party’s constitution at the next national convention. A PC-appointed constitution committee (Reba Hansen, Harry Ring, Jean Simon [Tussey]) began, in consultation with national organization secretary Ed Shaw, to consider proposed changes for the constitution, including one to alter the way the national Control Commission was elected and functioned.

In his response (reprinted from *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, No. 8, June 1984), Cannon was quite disturbed by this proposal, especially because he saw it as part of a dangerous trend: “As far as I can see all the new moves and proposals to monkey with the Constitution which has served the party so well in the past, with the aim of ‘tightening’ centralization, represent a trend in the wrong direction at the present time. The party (and the YSA) is too ‘tight’ already, and if we go much further along this line we can run the risk of strangling the party to death.”

Most of Cannon’s letter was an explanation of why the party would be better off if the Control Commission remained an “independent” or “separate” body elected by the national convention as a whole than it would be as a mere subcommittee of the NC. But he also seized the opportunity to assert the necessity to “practice what we preach” about existing constitutional provisions “to protect every party member against possible abuse of authority by the National Committee.” There was nothing ambiguous about his position:

“In the present political climate and with the present changing composition of the party, democratic centralism must be applied flexibly. At least ninety percent of the emphasis should be placed on the democratic side and not on any crackpot schemes to ‘streamline’ the party to the point where questions are unwelcomed and criticism and discussion stifled. That is a prescription to kill the party....”

Cannon clearly did not feel that the 1965 resolution justified or authorized the kind of undemocratic changes that the “centralizing” Barnes leadership made in the name of the 1965 document in the 1970s and 1980s. Cannon’s letter was effective - none of the proposals he warned against were recommended by the constitution committee or adopted at the 1967 convention.

4. The SWP’s Great Tradition

The Arne Swabeck case came up again in 1967, when both an SWP national convention and an FI world congress were scheduled. By then Swabeck had lost all hope in the SWP and the FI. Instead of trying once more to convince their members, he publicly attacked the SWP’s policies in a letter to a hostile political group in England (the Healyites). For this deliberate violation of discipline, the PC asked the NC to suspend him from membership pending the coming convention.

Cannon had no sympathy whatever for Swabeck's politics or organizational practices, but he felt it would be "awkward" to begin the preconvention and pre-world congress discussions by suspending the one articulate critic of the party's positions and actions. He therefore urged that Swabeck's provocation be handled by publishing Swabeck's letters together with a comprehensive political answer to them. This "subordination of disciplinary measures to the bigger aims of political education" - which he called a continuation of the party's great tradition - had always served the party well in the past, he argued, and in the Swabeck case would "better serve the education of the new generation of the party and the consolidation of party opinion" than would the proposed suspension.

Most members of the NC disagreed with Cannon. They felt Swabeck's violation of discipline was too flagrant to be ignored, and they felt that he already had been answered politically over and over again, so that disciplinary action in this case would not represent any rupture with the SWP's great tradition. The NC suspended Swabeck, who continued to attack the SWP publicly, and soon after he was expelled. The differences in this case between the NC majority and Cannon were tactical, and it is possible to see the logic and merits in both their positions. But perhaps Cannon was looking a little farther ahead than most of the NC members.

Swabeck had so discredited himself, Cannon told the PC, that the immediate effect of the party's reaction to the new provocation would not be very great whether he was suspended or not. "But the long-range effect on the political education of the party, and its preparation to cope with old problems in new forms, can be very great indeed." It is clear from this that Cannon was concerned with something bigger than the fate of Swabeck; that he was trying to alert the party to dangers that transcended the issue of whether or not to suspend Swabeck prior to the convention; that he feared mistakes on this issue could have damaging long-range effects on the party, its political education, and its ability to fulfill its revolutionary mission.

The Swabeck case was soon forgotten, but the dangers that worried Cannon are worth recalling today, after the SWP leadership, in a brutal break with the party's tradition of subordinating disciplinary measures to political discussion and clarification, expelled and in other ways drove out any and all members who were suspected of having oppositional views (whether they were articulate or not). The SWP leadership "justified" this purge by accusing the expellees of being disrupters and splitters who, "like Swabeck," were outside the party only because of their own indiscipline and disloyalty. But everybody in the SWP knows that most of the expellees fought to remain in the party, unlike Swabeck, and are still fighting to be reinstated, also unlike Swabeck. Most members of the FI know this, too, because at their world congress in February 1985, they voted overwhelmingly to demand the reinstatement of the purged members. The fight for the SWP's tradition continues, but the SWP leadership is fighting on the other side.

In May 1983, a month after the Harer-DeBerry exchange in San Jose, the NC held a plenum in New York where oppositionists contrasted Cannon's positions on democratic centralism with those of the Barnes group. Barnes finally took the floor and said, "It looks as though we are going to have to rescue Cannon from these people the same way we rescued Trotsky from the sectarians." Barnes had "rescued" Trotsky at a YSA convention on December 31, 1982, in a talk entitled "Their Trotsky and Ours" (*New International* Fall 1983). It was rather a unique kind of rescue since in this talk Barnes tried to demolish Trotsky and most of his work as sectarian and harmful. A similar "rescue" of Cannon would mean a wholesale reevaluation of his work and his place in

the history of the SWP and the FI. Even as Barnes uttered this promise or threat, a dossier was being compiled that would “prove” Cannon had been a “Stalinophobe” in the 1930s and 1940s, etc. Whether or not such material will be published, it stands to reason that the Barnes group will have to differentiate itself from Cannon and Cannonism more and more as it proceeds further away from them politically and organizationally. The antidote includes an objective reading of Cannon’s writings, of which there are fortunately many in print.

May 1985

Don’t Try to Enforce a Nonexistent Law

February 8, 1966

For NC Majority Only

To the Secretariat

Dear Comrades:

I feel rather uneasy about the circular letter from Tom [Kerry] dated Jan. 28, enclosing a copy of Larry T[rainor]’s letter of Jan. 15 and Arne [Swabeck]’s letter of January 7 addressed to Larry and his letter of Dec. 14 addressed to Rosemary and Doug [Gordon], and also the circular of Al A. announcing his decision to join the PLP [Progressive Labor Party] (which I had already seen locally).

The Swabeck letter and the [Clara] Kaye document, which I had previously received, make serious criticisms of the party and youth actions at the Washington Thanksgiving Conference,[\[1\]](#) and make a number of other serious, and even fundamental, criticisms of party policy and action in general.

The problem, as I see it, is how to deal effectively with these challenges and how to aid the education of the party and the youth in the process - in the light of our tradition and experience over a period of more than thirty-seven years since the Left Opposition in this country began its work under the guidance of Trotsky. One might well include the first ten years of American communism before that, from which I, at least, learned and remember a lot from doing things the wrong way.

Larry’s letter of Jan. 15 suggesting disciplinary action, and Tom’s letter of Jan. 28 informing us that the Political Committee has put the question of discipline on the plenum agenda, are, in my opinion, the wrong way.

Probably the hardest lesson I had to learn from Trotsky, after ten years of bad schooling through the Communist Party faction fights, was to let organizational questions wait until the political questions at issue were fully clarified, not only in the National Committee but also in the ranks of the party. It is no exaggeration, but the full and final truth, that our party owes its very existence today to the fact that some of us learned this hard lesson and learned also how to apply it in practice.

From that point of view, in my opinion, the impending plenum should be conceived of as a

school for the education and clarification of the party on the political issues involved in the new disputes, most of which grew out of earlier disputes with some new trimmings and absurdities.

This aim will be best served if the attacks and criticisms are answered point by point in an atmosphere free from poisonous personal recriminations and venomous threats of organization discipline. Our young comrades need above all to *learn*; and this is the best, in fact the only way, for them to learn what they need to know about the new disputes. They don't know it all yet. The fact that some of them probably think they already know everything, only makes it more advisable to turn the plenum sessions into a school with questions and answers freely and patiently passed back and forth.

The classic example for all time, in this matter of conducting political disputes for the education of the cadres, is set forth in the two books which grew out of the fundamental conflict with the petty-bourgeois opposition in 1939-40.^[2] I think these books, twenty-six years after, are still fresh and alive because they attempt to answer and clarify all important questions involved in the dispute, and leave discipline and organizational measures aside for later consideration.

Compared to the systematic, organized violation of normal disciplinary regulations and procedures committed by the petty-bourgeois opposition in that fight, the irregularities of Kirk [Richard Fraser] and Swabeck resemble juvenile pranks. Nevertheless, Trotsky insisted from the beginning that all proposals, or even talk or threats, of disciplinary action be left aside until the political disputes were clarified and settled. The party was reborn and reeducated in that historic struggle, and equipped to stand up in the hard days that were to follow, precisely because that policy was followed.

As for disciplinary action suggested in Larry's letter, and at least intimated in the action of the Political Committee in putting this matter on the agenda of the plenum - I don't even think we have much of a case in the present instance. Are we going to discipline two members of the National Committee for circulating their criticisms outside the committee itself? There is absolutely no party law or precedent for such action, and we will run into all kinds of trouble in the party ranks, and the International, if we try this kind of experiment for the first time.

We have always thought proper and responsible procedure required that party leaders confine their differences and criticisms within the National Committee until a full discussion could be had at a plenum, and a discussion in the party formally authorized. But it never worked with irresponsible people and it never will; and this kind of trouble can't be cured by discipline.

In the first five years of the Left Opposition, Shachtman and Abern took every dispute in the committee, large or small, into the New York Branch - with unlimited discussion and denunciation of the committee majority by an assorted collection of articulate screwballs who would make the present critics of the party policy, from one end of the country to the other, appear in comparison as well mannered pupils in a Sunday School. There was nothing to do about it but fight it out. Any kind of disciplinary action would have provoked a split which couldn't be explained and justified before the radical public.

To my recollection, there has never been a time in our thirty-seven-year history when a critical opposition waited very long to circulate their ideas outside the committee ranks, despite our explanation that such conduct was improper and irresponsible. We educated and hardened our cadre over the years and decades by meeting all critics and opponents *politically* and educating those who were educable.

I will add to the previously cited examples of the fight with the petty-bourgeois opposition two minor examples.

1. Right after our trial in Minneapolis in 1941 the well-known [Grandizo] Munis blasted our conduct at the trial as lacking in “proud valor,” capitulating to legalism, and all other crimes and dirty tricks. I answered Munis by taking up his criticisms point by point and answering them without equivocation or evasion. Munis’s letter and my answer, some of you will remember, was published in a pamphlet on “Defense Policy in the Minneapolis Trial,” so that all party members and others who might be interested could hear both sides and judge for themselves.

That pamphlet was published twenty-four years ago, and I personally have never since heard a peep out of anybody in criticism of our conduct at the trial. On the contrary, my testimony “Socialism On Trial” has been printed and reprinted a number of times in a number of editions and, as I understand it, has always been the most popular pamphlet of the party.[\[3\]](#)

2. I notice that the YSA has just recently published, in an internal discussion bulletin, my two speeches at the 1948 plenum on the Wallace Progressive Party and our 1948 election campaign.[\[4\]](#) The circumstances surrounding these speeches have pertinence to the impending plenum.

No sooner had the Wallace candidacy been announced on a Progressive Party ticket than Swabeck in Chicago, consulting with himself, decided that this was the long-awaited labor party and that we had to jump into it with both feet. Without waiting for the plenum, or even for the Political Committee, to discuss the question and formulate a position, he hastily lined up [Mike] Bartell and Manny Trbovitch and the local executive committee and from that, quick as a wink, the entire Chicago Branch to support the candidacy of Wallace and get into the Progressive Party on the ground floor. There was also strong sympathy for this policy in Los Angeles, Buffalo, Youngstown, and other branches of the party. The discussion at the plenum should be studied in light of these circumstances.

My two speeches were devoted, from beginning to end, to a political analysis of the problem and a point by point answer to every objection raised by Swabeck and other critics. It is worth noting, by those who are willing to learn from past experiences, that Swabeck’s irresponsible action and violation of what Larry refers to as “committee discipline” were not mentioned once.

There was a reason for the omission, although such conduct was just as much an irritation then as now. The reason for the omission was that we wanted to devote all attention at the plenum to the fundamental political problems involved and the political lessons to be learned from the dispute. My speeches, as well as remarks of other comrades at the plenum, had the result of convincing the great majority present and even shaking the confidence of the opponents in their own position. By the time we got to the national convention a few months later, the party was solidly united and convinced that the nomination of our own ticket in 1948 was the correct thing to do.

Committee “discipline” follows from conviction and a sense of responsibility; it cannot be imposed by party law or threats. I have said before that in more than thirty-seven years of our independent history we have never tried to enforce such discipline. There was such a law, however, or at least a mutual understanding to this effect, in the Communist Party during the period of my incubation there. But what was the result in practice?

Formally, all discussion and happenings in the Political Committee and in the plenum were

secrets sealed with seven seals. In practice before any meeting was twenty-four hours old the partisans of the different factions had full reports on secret "onion skin" paper circulated throughout the party. Even the ultra-discipline of the Communist Party never disciplined anybody for these surreptitious operations.

It would be too bad if the SWP suddenly decided to get tougher than the Communist Party and try to enforce a nonexistent law - which can't be enforced without creating all kinds of discontent and disruption, to say nothing of blurring the serious political disputes which have to be discussed and clarified for the education of the party ranks.

I would like copies of this letter to be made available to National Committee members who received Tom's letter of Jan. 28.

Fraternally,

James P Cannon

Reasons for the Survival of the SWP and for Its New Vitality in the 1960s

The party that we represent here had its origin thirty-eight years ago next month when I and Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, all members of the National Committee of the Communist Party, were expelled because we insisted upon supporting Trotsky and the Russian Opposition in the international discussion. It seems remarkable, in view of the death rate of organizations that we have noted over the years, that this party still shows signs of youth. That is the hallmark of a living movement: its capacity to attract the young. Many attempts at creating different kinds of radical organizations have foundered, withered away, over that problem. The old-timers stuck around but new blood didn't come in. The organizations, one by one, either died or just withered away on the vine (which is probably a worse fate than death).

In my opinion, there are certain reasons for the survival of our movement and for the indications of a new surge of vitality in it. I'll enumerate some of the more important reasons which account for this.

Internationalism and the SWP

First of all, and above all, we recognized thirty-eight years ago that in the modern world it is impossible to organize a revolutionary party in one country. All the problems of the different nations of the world are so intertwined today that they cannot be solved with a national policy alone. The latest to experience the truth of that dictum is Lyndon B. Johnson. He's trying to solve the problems of American foreign policy with Texas-style arm-twisting politics. It does not work. We decided we would be internationalists first, last, and all the time, and that we would not try to build a purely American party with American ideas - because American ideas are very scarce in the realm of creative politics. By becoming part of an international movement, and thereby participating in international *collaboration*, and getting the benefit of the ideas and experiences of others in other countries - as well as contributing our ideas to them - that we would have a better chance to create a viable revolutionary movement in this country.

I think that holds true today more than ever. A party that is not internationalist is out of date very sadly and is doomed utterly. I don't know if our younger comrades have fully assimilated that basic, fundamental first idea or not. I have the impression at times that they understand it

rather perfunctorily, take it for granted, rather than understand it in its essence: that internationalism means, above all, *international collaboration*. The affairs, the difficulties, the disputes of every party in the Fourth International must be our concern - as our problems must be their concern. It's not only our right but our *duty* to participate in all the discussions that arise throughout the International, as well as it is their right and their duty to take part in our discussions and disputes.

Our Revolutionary Continuity

The second reason that I would give for the durability of this party of ours is the fact that we did not pretend to have a new revelation. We were not these "men from nowhere" whom you see running around the campuses and other places today saying, "We've got to start from scratch. Everything that happened in the past is out the window." On the contrary, we solemnly based ourselves on the *continuity* of the revolutionary movement. On being expelled from the Communist Party, we did not become anticommunist. On the contrary, we said we are the true representatives of the best traditions of the Communist Party. If you read current literature, you'll see that we are the only ones who defend the first ten years of American communism. The official leaders of the Communist Party don't want to talk about it at all. Yet those were ten rich and fruitful years which we had *behind us* when we started the Trotskyist movement in this country. Before that, some of us had about ten years of experience in the IWW and Socialist Party, and in various class struggle activities around the country. We said that we were the heirs of the IWW and the Socialist Party - all that was good and valid and revolutionary in them. We honor the Knights of Labor and the Haymarket martyrs. We're not Johnny-come-latelys at all. We're *continuator*s.

We even go back further than that. We go back to the "Communist Manifesto" of 1848, and to Marx and Engels, the authors of that document, and their other writings. We go back to the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917. We go back to Lenin and Trotsky, and to the struggle of the Left Opposition in the Russian Soviet party and in the Comintern.

We said, "We are the *continuator*s." And we really were. We were in dead earnest about it and we were very active from the very beginning. This is one of the marks of a group, however, small, that has confidence in itself. We engaged in polemics against all other pretenders to leadership of the American working class: first of all the Stalinists, and the reformist Social Democrats, and the labor skates, and anybody else who had some quack medicine to cure the troubles of working people. Polemics are the mark of a revolutionary party. A party that is "too nice" to engage in what some call "bickering," "criticizing," is too damn nice to live very long in the whirlpool of politics.

Politics is even worse than baseball, in that respect. Leo Durocher, who had a bad reputation but who carried the New York Giants to a championship of the National League and then to the world championship over the Cleveland Indians, explained this fact in the title of an article he wrote, "Nice Guys Finish Last." That's true in politics as well as in baseball.

If we disagree with other people, we have to say so! We have to make it clear *why* we disagree so that inquiring young people, looking for an organization to represent their aspirations and ideals, will know the difference between one party and another. Nothing is worse than muddying up differences when they concern fundamental questions.

Working-Class Orientation

Another reason for the survival of our movement through the early hard period was our *orientation*. Being Marxists, our orientation was always toward the working class and to the working-class organizations. It never entered our minds in those days to think you could overthrow capitalism over the head of the working class. Marxism had taught us that the great service capitalism has rendered to humanity has been to increase the productivity of society and, at the same time, to create a working class which would have the interest and the power to overthrow capitalism. In creating this million-headed wage-working class, Marx said: capitalism has created its own gravediggers. We saw it as the task of revolutionists to orient our activity, our agitation, and our propaganda to the working class of this country.

Putting Theory into Action

Another reason for our exceptional durability was that we did not merely study the books and learn the formulas. Many people have done that - and that's all they've done, and they might as well have stayed home. Trotsky remarked more than once, in the early days, about some people who play with ideas in our international movement. He said: they have understood all the formulas and they can repeat them by rote, but they haven't got them in their flesh and blood, so it doesn't count. When you get the formulas of Marxism in your flesh and blood that means you have an *irresistible* impulse and drive to *put theory into action*.

As Engels said to the sectarian socialists in the United States in the nineteenth century: our theory is not a dogma but a guide to action. One who studies the theory of Marxism and doesn't do anything to try to put it into action among the working class might as well have stayed in bed. We were not that type. We came out of the experiences of the past, but we were activists as well as students of Marxism.

The Capacity to Learn

One more reason for our survival: one factor working in our favor was our *modesty*. Modesty is the precondition for learning. If you know it all to start with, you can't learn any more. We were brought to the painful realization in 1928 that there were a lot of things we didn't know - after all of our experiences and study. New problems and new complications which had arisen in the Soviet Union and in the international movement required that we *go to school again*. And to go to school with the best teachers: the leaders of the Russian Revolution. After twenty years of experience in the American movement and in the Comintern we put ourselves to school and tried to learn from the great leaders who had made the only successful revolution in the history of the working class.

We had to learn, also, how to *think* - and to take time to think. We believed in a party of disciplined action but disciplined activity alone does not characterize only the revolutionist. Other groups, such as the fascists, have that quality. The Stalinists have disciplined action. Disciplined action directed by clear thinking distinguishes the revolutionary Marxist party. Thinking is a form of action. In the early days of our movement we had a great deal of discussion - not all of it pleasant to hear, but out of which came some clarification. We had to learn to be patient and listen and, out of the discussion, to formulate our policy and our program.

Those were the qualities of our movement in the first years of our almost total isolation that enabled us to survive. We had confidence in the American working class and we oriented toward it. When the American working class began to move in the mid-thirties, we had formulated our program of action, and we were in the midst of the class, and we began to grow - in some years, we grew rather rapidly.

Internal Democracy Within the SWP

Not the least of our reasons for remaining alive for thirty-eight years, and growing a little, and now being in a position to capitalize on new opportunities, was the flexible democracy of our party. We never tried to settle differences of opinion by suppression. Free discussion - not every day in the week but at stated regular times, with full guarantees for the minority - is a necessary condition for the health and strength of an organization such as ours.

There's no guarantee that factionalism won't get out of hand. I don't want to be an advocate of factionalism - unless anybody picks on me and runs the party the wrong way and doesn't want to give me a chance to protest about it! The general experience of the international movement has shown that excesses of factionalism can be very dangerous and destructive to a party. In my book, *The First Ten Years of American Communism*,^[5] I put all the necessary emphasis on the negative side of the factional struggles which became unprincipled. But on the other hand, if a party can live year after year without any factional disturbances, it may not be a sign of *health* - it may be a sign that the party's *asleep*; that it's not a real live party. In a live party, you have differences, differences of appraisal, and so on. But that's a sign of life.

The New Left of the 1960s

You have now a new phenomenon in the American radical movement which I hear is called "The New Left." This is a broad title given to an assemblage of people who state they don't like the situation the way it is and something ought to be done about it -but we mustn't take anything from the experiences of the past; nothing from the "Old Left" or any of its ideas or traditions are any good. What's the future going to be? "Well, that's not so clear either. Let's think about that." What do you do now? "I don't know. Something ought to be done." That's a fair description of this amorphous New Left which is written about so much and with which we have to contend.

We know where we come from. We intend to maintain our continuity. We know that we are part of the world, and that we have to belong to an international movement and get the benefits of association and discussion with cothinkers throughout the world. We have a definite orientation whereas the New Left says the working class is dead. The working class was crossed off by the wiseacres in the twenties. There was a long boom in the 1920s. The workers not only didn't gain any victories, they lost ground. The trade unions actually declined in number. In all the basic industries, where you now see great flourishing industrial unions - the auto workers, aircraft, steel, rubber, electrical, transportation, maritime - the unions did not exist, just a scattering here and there. There were company unions in all these big basic industries, run by the bosses' stooges. The workers were entitled to belong to these company unions as long as they did what the stooges told them to do. It took a semi-revolutionary uprising in the mid-thirties to break that up and install real unions.

There were a lot of wiseacres who crossed off the American working class and said, "That's Marx's fundamental mistake. He thinks the working class can make a revolution and emancipate itself. And he's dead wrong! Just look at them!" They didn't say who would make the revolution if the workers didn't do it - just like the New Leftists today don't give us any precise description of what power will transform society.

People who said such things in the 1920s were proved to be wrong, and those who say the same things about the working class today will be proved to be wrong. We will maintain our orientation toward the working class and to its organized section in particular. I hope that our party and our youth movement will not only continue but will intensify and develop its

capacity for polemics against all pretenders to leadership of the coming radicalization of the American workers.

Above all, I hope our party and our youth movement will continue to learn and to grow. That's the condition for survival as a revolutionary party. I don't merely get impatient with Johnny-come-latelys who just arrived from nowhere and announce that they know it all, I get impatient even with old-timers who think they have nothing more to learn. The world is changing. New problems arise, new complexities, new complications confront the revolutionary movement at every step. The condition for effective political leadership is that the leaders themselves continue to learn and to grow. That means: not to lose their modesty altogether.

The Importance of the Individual

I'd like to add one more point. The question is raised very often, "What can one person do?" The urgency of the situation in the world is pretty widely recognized outside of our ranks. The urgency of the whole social problem has been magnified a million times by the development of nuclear weapons, and by the capacity of these inventions and discoveries to destroy all life on earth. Not merely a single city like Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but capable of destroying all life on earth. And it's in the hands of reckless and irresponsible people. It's got to be taken away from them, and it cannot be done otherwise except by revolution.

What can one single person do in this terribly urgent situation? I heard a program on television a short while ago: an interview with Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, former pacifist, fighter against nuclear war. He's not a revolutionary Marxist but is an absolutely dedicated opponent of nuclear war and a prophet of the calamity such a war will bring. He was asked, "What are the chances, in your opinion, of preventing a nuclear war that might destroy all life on earth?" He said, "The odds are four-to-six against us." He was then asked, "How would you raise the odds of being able to prevent a nuclear war?" He answered, "I don't know anything to do except keep on fighting to try to change the odds."

Now suppose as a result of all the protests and the activity of ourselves and other people, we change the odds to fifty-fifty. Then you have a scale, evenly balanced, where just a feather can tip it one way or another. If a situation such as that exists - which, in my opinion, is just about the state of affairs in the world today - one person's activity in the revolutionary movement might make the difference.

A Trend in the Wrong Direction

November 12, 1966

Copies to:

Ed Shaw, New York

Jean Simon, Cleveland

Reba Hansen

New York, N.Y

Dear Reba:

This answers your letter of November 2 with which you enclosed a copy of Jean Simon's letter of October 12. I was surprised and concerned by Jean's proposals to change the constitutional provisions providing for an independent Control Commission elected by the convention, and making it a mere subcommittee of the NC, which would mean in effect a subcommittee of the PC. This would be the *de facto* liquidation of the Control Commission as it was originally conceived.

As far as I can see all the new moves and proposals to monkey with the Constitution which has served the party so well in the past, with the aim of "tightening" centralization, represent a trend in the wrong direction at the present time. The party (and the YSA) is too "tight" already, and if we go much further along this line we can run the risk of strangling the party to death.

As I recall it, the proposal to establish a Control Commission, separately elected by the convention, originated at the Plenum and Active Workers' Conference in the fall of 1940, following the assassination of the Old Man. The assassin, as you will recall, gained access to the household in Coyoacan through his relations with a party member.^[6] The Political Committee was then, as it always will be if it functions properly, too busy with political and organizational problems to take time for investigations and security checks on individuals.

It was agreed that we need a special body to take care of this work, to investigate rumors and charges and present its findings and recommendations to the National Committee.

If party security was one side of the functions of the Control Commission, the other side - no less important - was to provide the maximum assurance that any individual party member, accused or rumored to be unworthy of party membership, could be assured of the fullest investigation and a fair hearing or trial. It was thought that this double purpose could best be served by a body separately elected by the convention, and composed of members of long standing, especially respected by the party for their fairness as well as their devotion.

I can recall instances where the Control Commission served the party well in both aspects of this dual function. In one case a member of the seamen's fraction was expelled by the Los Angeles Branch after charges were brought against him by two members of the National Committee of that time. The expelled member appealed to the National Committee and the case was turned over to the Control Commission for investigation. The Control Commission, on which as I recall Dobbs was then the PC representative, investigated the whole case, found that the charges lacked substantial proof and recommended the reinstatement of the expelled member. This was done.

In another case, a rumor circulated by the Shachtmanites and others outside the party against the integrity of a National Office secretarial worker was thoroughly investigated by the Control Commission which, after taking stenographic testimony from all available sources, declared the rumors unfounded and cleared the accused party member to continue her work. There were other cases in which charges were found after investigation to be substantiated and appropriate action recommended.

All these experiences speak convincingly of the need for a separate Control Commission of highly respected comrades to make thorough investigations of every case, without being influenced by personal or partisan prejudice, or pressure from any source, and whose sole function is to examine each case from all sides fairly and justly and report its findings and recommendations. This is the best way, not only to protect the security of the party, but also to respect the rights of the accused in every case.

As far as I know, the only criticism that can properly be made of the Control Commission in recent times is that it has not always functioned in this way with all its members participating, either by presence or correspondence, in all proceedings - and convincing the party that its investigation was thorough and that its findings and recommendations were fair and just.

* * *

It should be pointed out also that the idea of a Control Commission separately constituted by the convention didn't really originate with us. Like almost everything else we know about the party organizational principles and functions, it came from the Russian Bolsheviks. The Russian party had a separate Control Commission. It might also be pointed out that after the revolution the new government established courts. It provided also for independent trade unions which, as Lenin pointed out in one of the controversies, had the duty even to defend the rights of its members against the government. Of course, all that was changed later when all power was concentrated in the party secretariat, and all the presumably independent institutions were converted into rubber stamps. But we don't want to move in that direction. The forms and methods of the Lenin-Trotsky time are a better guide for us.

* * *

I am particularly concerned about any possible proposal to weaken the constitutional provision about the absolute right of suspended or expelled members to appeal to the convention. That is clearly and plainly a provision to protect every party member against possible abuse of authority by the National Committee. It should not be abrogated or diluted just to show that we are so damn revolutionary that we make no concessions to "bourgeois concepts of checks and balances." The well-known Bill of Rights is a check and balance which I hope will be incorporated, in large part at least, in the Constitution of the Workers Republic in this country. Our constitutional provision for the right of appeal is also a "check and balance." It can help to recommend our party to revolutionary workers as a genuinely democratic organization which guarantees rights as well as imposing responsibilities, and thus make it more appealing to them.

I believe that these considerations have more weight now than ever before in the thirty-eight-year history of our party. In the present political climate and with the present changing composition of the party, democratic centralism must be applied flexibly. At least ninety percent of the emphasis should be placed on the democratic side and not on any crackpot schemes to "streamline" the party to the point where questions are unwelcomed and criticism and discussion stifled. That is a prescription to kill the party before it gets a chance to show how it can handle and assimilate an expanding membership of new young people, who don't know it all to start with, but have to learn and grow in the course of explication and discussion in a free, democratic atmosphere.

Trotsky once remarked in a polemic against Stalinism that even in the period of the Civil War discussion in the party was "boiling like a spring." Those words and others like it written by Trotsky, in his first attack against Stalinism in *The New Course*, ought to be explained now once again to the new young recruits in our party. And the best way to explain such decisive things is to practice what we preach.

Yours fraternally,

James P. Cannon

The SWP's Great Tradition

June 27, 1967

To the Political Committee, New York, New York

Dear Comrades:

I am opposed to the motion adopted by the Political Committee recommending the immediate suspension of Comrade Swabeck.

As you have been previously informed, I favor a different approach to the problem raised by Swabeck's letter to [Gerry] Healy. I explained my views to Art Sharon during his brief visit here, and I presume that he communicated it to you. Also, Joel [Britton] showed me a copy of his letter to the National Office in which he reported the discussion which took place at a meeting of the NC members here.

I consider it rather unfortunate that these divergent views were not incorporated in the PC minutes of the meeting which decided to recommend the suspension of Swabeck - so that the other members of the National Committee would have a chance to consider and discuss them before casting their vote on the ballot sent to them together with the PC minutes.

My approach to the problem can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Since Swabeck's letter to Healy deals with two questions of great world importance - Chinese developments and our policy and tactics in the struggle against the Vietnam war - which are now properly up for discussion in the international movement as well as in our party, any action of a disciplinary nature which we may propose should be closely coordinated with international comrades, particularly the comrades in England, and carried out in agreement with them.
2. Since we are just now opening up our preconvention discussion, where the questions raised by Swabeck will properly have their place on the agenda, it would be rather awkward to begin the discussion by suspending the one articulate critic of the party's positions and actions. A more effective procedure, in my opinion, should be simply to publish Swabeck's letters (to Healy and Dobbs) with comprehensive and detailed answers.

If past experience is any guide, the education of the new generations of the party and the consolidation of party opinion would be better served by this procedure. Examples in favor of this subordination of disciplinary measures to the bigger aims of political education have been richly documented in the published records of the fight against the petty-bourgeois opposition in 1939-40, and in the internal discussion bulletins dealing with the Goldman-Morrow affair in 1944-56.[\[7\]](#)

3. In the course of discussion, during a number of years of opposition to party policy, Swabeck has managed to isolate himself to the point where the immediate effect of the party's reaction to this new provocation will not be very great one way or the other. But the long-range effect on the political education of the party, and its preparation to cope with old problems in new forms, can be very great indeed.

It is most important that our party members, and the international movement, see the leadership

once again in continuation of its great tradition - acting with cool deliberation to serve our larger political aims without personal favoritism or hostility.

Fraternally, James P. Cannon

Notes

[1.](#) An antiwar convention and demonstration at the White House were held in Washington, D.C., Nov. 25-28, 1965, under the sponsorship of the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam. The convention was marked by heated controversy between radical and liberal forces, which led to disputes over antiwar policy inside the SWP. Cannon's views about the conference, given in a December 1965 speech in Los Angeles, were published in *International Socialist Review*, October 1974, and reprinted in the Education for Socialists Bulletin, "Revolutionary Strategy in the Antiwar Movement," April 1975, pp. 12-17.

[2.](#) *In Defense of Marxism* by Leon Trotsky and *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* by Cannon (Pathfinder Press, 1973 and 1972) answer the positions of the minority group in the SWP, led by Max Shachtman, Martin Abern, and James Burnham, which split away in 1940 after a bitter factional struggle.

[3.](#) Pathfinder Press's 1973 edition of *Socialism on Trial*, Cannon's testimony at the 1941 Minneapolis trial, also contains "Defense Policy in the Minneapolis Trial" as an appendix.

[4.](#) Cannon's two speeches at the SWP NC plenum in February 1948, analyzing the new Progressive Party led by Henry Wallace and proposing that the SWP run its first presidential campaign that year, are reprinted in the Education for Socialists Bulletin, "Aspects of Socialist Election Policy," March 1971, pp. 21-34.

[5.](#) Reprinted by Pathfinder Press, 1973.

[6.](#) Leon Trotsky, "the Old Man," was assassinated in Mexico in August 1940 by an agent of the Soviet secret police who pretended to be a sympathizer of the Fourth International.

[7.](#) Cannon's letters and speeches about the oppositional group in the SWP led by Felix Morrow and Albert Goldman are printed in his books *Letters from Prison* and *The Struggle for Socialism in the "American Century"* (Pathfinder Press, 1973 and 1977).

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