Building the Revolutionary Party

An introduction to James P Cannon

Dave Holmes, Doug Lorimer, George Breitman, James P. Cannon

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Introduction

The 1990s have not been kind to those committed to building revolutionary socialist parties. The failure of any progressive reform processes in the old Soviet bloc countries, the subsequent collapse of those states and their move towards capitalism; the strong capitalist ideological offensive against socialism; and the big rightward shift of the labor and social-democratic parties and the key role they are playing in the harsh capitalist austerity drive — all these factors have contributed to working-class retreat and confusion and a decline of the socialist left.

However, the case for socialism is undiminished. Arguably, as we approach the 21st century, the need to replace destructive, profit-mad capitalism with a cooperative, solidaristic, democratic socialist society has never been greater. Moreover, on closer inspection, the left is certainly not finished. In a whole number of countries, important processes of clarification, realignment and regroupment are proceeding. And beyond the undoubted problems of the moment, the collapse of Stalinism and the unprecedented exposure of social democracy as an agency of capitalism actually create better, not worse, conditions for building strong revolutionary socialist parties.

It is with this firm conviction that we put forward this book — to introduce a new generation of socialist activists to the life and work of the incomparable James P. Cannon. A Marxist of the Lenin-Trotsky school, his struggle to build a revolutionary workers party in the United States contains an extraordinarily rich legacy for socialists today.

Dave Holmes' opening article gives a broad overview of Cannon's life, with plenty of references to the relevant reading for each stage. A chronology is included to facilitate the orientation of the reader.

Doug Lorimer's contribution deals with a vexed question for adherents of Cannon: Why did the party he founded and guided for so long-the Socialist Workers Party-

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Dave Holmes is a member of Socialist Alliance. He was a longtime leader of the Democratic Socialist Party.

suffer a sectarian degeneration after his death, under the leadership of Jack Barnes? Lorimer convincingly shows that it was precisely a sharp departure from Cannonism that underlay the SWP's decline.

The reading guide is not meant to be a comprehensive bibliography of everything Cannon ever wrote. But it does include all the books and pamphlets by Cannon or containing material by him that are currently in print (or have been until recently).

The Cannon miscellany is of considerable interest. The items in the collection "Don't Strangle the Party", together with George Breitman's introduction, complement the analysis made by Doug Lorimer.

The letter "Intellectuals and revolution" is extremely valuable for what it reveals of Cannon's attitude to the intelligentsia. With good reason, Cannon was harshly critical of US academics and their subservience to Washington's cold war drive. But he shows a warm admiration for C. Wright Mills, a genuine radical intellectual who courageously engaged with the big issues of the day.

In a period in which the international left is faced with the tasks of clarification, rebuilding and regrouping, Cannon's 1961 letter, "New revolutionary forces are emerging", offers a timely perspective. There is none of the dogmatic narrowness of the Trotskyist sects here, but a genuine broad and realistic vision of how a real revolutionary international might be formed and what the first steps might be.

The final piece, Cannon's 1953 birthday tribute to his veteran collaborator Arne Swabeck, touches on so many enduring Cannon themes — a fervent belief in the socialist future, comradeship in the struggle and unswerving committment. "Our theory is a guide to action," he writes, "not only for the party but for each individual member … Faith without works is dead." This is a text for all socialist activists. A study of James P. Cannon's life and work can illuminate the way and fortify us in the struggle, whatever may lie ahead.■

An Introduction to James P. Cannon

By Dave Holmes

James P. Cannon was a pioneer of the Communist Party of the United States and one of its central leaders in the 1920s. Breaking with the Stalinised CP in 1928 he founded the American Trotskyist movement and played the decisive role in building it for over three decades.

Cannon's name is not known to millions around the world, as are those of his acknowledged teachers, the Russian revolutionaries Lenin and Trotsky. Rather, he is known only in much smaller circles and-regrettably-as yet appreciated in even narrower ones. Cannon was, however, a revolutionary leader of the very highest calibre. Arguably, he is the most outstanding figure produced by the socialist and revolutionary movement in the United States. His life and work deserve to be far more widely known and studied by socialist activists around the world.

His efforts to build a revolutionary party in the United States, the heartland of world imperialism, are without historical precedent-in the results obtained; in the richness of the experiences; and in their sheer tenacity and duration over many decades.

We can learn a lot from Cannon's inspiring struggle about the building and organisation of a revolutionary party in an advanced capitalist country and about the meaning of revolutionary leadership. Cannon's writings contain so many acute and incisive analyses and insights. But they also convey so much of the socialist outlook and values which sustained him throughout his long life of activism. (His wonderful and instructive *History of American Trotskyism* exemplifies all these qualities.)

Cannon's life itself is an inspiration of the highest order. When he died at the age of 84 he had devoted some 66 years of his life to the cause of revolutionary socialism.

This article is based on a talk given at the 17th National Conference of the DSP, January 1997.

In a tribute at a memorial meeting held shortly after Cannon's death, Joseph Hansen, one of his longtime collaborators, summed up this truly epic accomplishment:

> The capitalist class nearly always has talented political organizers at its disposal, some of them coming from wealthy families that specialize in offering political leadership. They are rather rare in the working class, one reason being that many with the talent for it are drawn into serving the capitalist parties. A person with talent in this field must be capable of great dedication and capacity for self-sacrifice to take up the cause of the working class and to remain devoted to it for decades and even a lifetime.
>
> Jim was such a person …
>
> [His] achievement was to build a viable nucleus of a revolutionary party inside the United States, the main bastion of world capitalism. Not only did Jim build this nucleus, he maintained it and continued to build it for an unprecedented number of decades in face of enormous pressures. There has been nothing like it in the history of the revolutionary socialist movement.
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> Jim held this nucleus together against the lure of posts in the trade-union bureaucracy, none of which are without considerable emoluments.
>
> He held this nucleus together against the merciless blows and venomous slanders of American Stalinism, once a powerful force in the radical movement and in many trade unions in the United States.
>
> He held this nucleus together in face of the hysteria of World War II, marching to prison at the head of the Trotskyists convicted as the first victims of the Smith Act for their political opposition to imperialist war.
>
> He held this nucleus together during the infamous decade of McCarthyism in the United States, when the Trotskyists were hounded from their jobs by the American political police, the FBI, and when our movement was almost completely isolated politically and virtually paralyzed for lack of funds.
>
> He held this nucleus together against the deadly combination of McCarthyite repression and economic prosperity that led to years of passivity in the labor movement.[1]

Degeneration of the SWP

Of course, no assessment of Cannon and Cannonism can avoid addressing the evolution-after his death-of the organisation he founded, the Socialist Workers Party. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, under the leadership of Jack Barnes, the SWP underwent a sectarian degeneration.

This evolution resulted from serious political errors. These are analysed by the Democratic Socialist Party in the pamphlet by Doug Lorimer, *The Making of a Sect*,[2] and here in his following article. In short, instead of a Marxist analysis of US politics

the SWP leadership adopted a workerist schema which led the party to turn away from its traditional involvement in the progressive social and political struggles of the day — struggles still largely occurring outside the framework of the organised labor movement. The mistaken political course of the SWP leadership was accompanied by an organisational degeneration which led to mass expulsions and the forcing out of a large proportion of the party's cadre. Today the SWP is just another sect on the US left with a number of small clone groups abroad.

The demise of the SWP was a tragic waste in so many ways-of the political capital built up through the party's long and glorious history; of the precious cadres that had been accumulated so painfully; and, above all, because it broke up the nucleus of the revolutionary party in the US on the eve of big and acutely testing developments in the world political situation. The SWP's evolution was especially painful and thought-provoking for our party because of the long collaboration between our two organisations, a relationship which had been especially fruitful for the DSP.

The fact that the US SWP went right off the rails after surviving for so long — some 50-odd years — shows that no revolutionary organisation is guaranteed forever against big political errors and the pressure of the capitalist environment. This illustrates a basic proposition of Marxist dialectics — that under certain conditions things can turn into their opposites.

In itself, the collapse of the SWP is not a cause for pessimism about the revolutionary project, about revolutionary Marxism. Similar questions are raised by the fate of Lenin's Bolshevik party: it lasted some 20 years during which it led a successful socialist revolution, the first in history. Yet from 1923 it was destroyed as a revolutionary organisation by the rising bureaucratic reaction and the ebb of the world revolution. However, we reject all interpretations of this experience which conclude that socialist revolutions are impossible or are bound to undergo bureaucratic degeneration or that Leninism somehow leads to Stalinism.

Indeed, the demise of the SWP under Jack Barnes' leadership makes Cannon's accomplishment seem all the more impressive. Moreover, Barnes' errors are not a result of Cannonism but are precisely a sharp departure from it. It is interesting to note that this is also the general view taken by the left historian and ex-SWP member Paul Le Blanc in his two very interesting essays in the book, *Trotskyism in the United States.*[3] It is also relevant to point out that the DSP is built on the traditions of Cannonism and has decidedly not evolved in a Barnesite direction.

It is arguable that — "Barnesism" notwithstanding — Cannonism will have its victory, not only in the final triumph of socialism in the USA, but also in the essential contribution it will make to the development of revolutionary parties, especially in the

imperialist countries. It is simply not possible for revolutionaries to bypass or ignore this tremendous historical experience. Our own modest successes to date owe more than a little to the heritage of James P. Cannon.

Cannonism

At this point it might be as well to ask, just what is "Cannonism"? In essence, it is the Leninist revolutionary perspective applied to an advanced capitalist country. Several ideas seem crucial:

- An unyielding commitment to the socialist revolution and the building of a new society as the only way out of the horrors and misery of capitalist society.
- Only the working class can make this revolution; the irreplaceable instrument needed for this struggle is the vanguard party.
- Such a party, facing the most colossal tasks in history, cannot arise spontaneously: "it has to be continuously, consistently, and consciously built", as Cannon put it in his essay on *The Revolutionary Party*.
- The utmost attention must be given to all aspects of party building, from determining the party's line on the big political questions — including the defence of that line within the party — to all questions of internal party organisation. Especially decisive here is the selection, training and consolidation of the party's leadership team: without the development of a tested and authoritative leadership the party cannot play its historic role.
- Cannon was a firm defender of the Leninist organisational principle of democratic centralism and he applied this fundamental idea in a flexible and masterful way in building the SWP.

Those wishing to become more familiar with Cannon's ideas can turn to the many collections of his writings and speeches now in print. (See the reading guide later in this booklet.)

Early years

James P. Cannon — the "P" stands for Patrick — was born in Rosedale, Kansas in 1890. He died in Los Angeles in 1974.

A socialist father gave him an introduction to left-wing ideas. At the age of 18 he joined the Socialist Party. Three years later he left it and joined the more militant Industrial Workers of the World-the IWW or "Wobblies" as they became known. Pre-Russian Revolution radicalism in the United States was tied up with the SP — and more particularly with its outstanding public figure, Eugene V. Debs — but also with the syndicalist IWW.

In 1955 Cannon wrote essays on each of these organisations. They are contained as appendices in his book *The First Ten Years of American Communism*. Cannon assesses the strengths and weaknesses of both Debs and the IWW and contrasts them with Lenin's concept of building a revolutionary vanguard party.

The Socialist Party's greatest asset, Cannon explains, was Debs. A revolutionist through and through, he "denounced capitalism with a tongue of fire" and developed a huge following for the party. In the 1912 presidential election Debs gained almost a million votes (probably equivalent to five or six times that figure today). But within the party he avoided entering the lists against the right-wing leaders — the middle-class lawyers, preachers and academics with which the party abounded. Debs stood for an all-inclusive party where there was a place for both reformist, pro-capitalist elements and revolutionists.

> Debs' blind spot [says Cannon] was the narrower, but no less important field of internal party politics and organization. On that field he evaded the fight. This evasion was not inspired by pacifism; it followed from his own theory of the party …
>
> He himself always spoke for a revolutionary program. But at the same time he thought the party should have room for other kinds of socialists; he stood for an all-inclusive socialist party, and party unity was his first consideration …
>
> Debs' refusal to take an active part in the factional struggle, and to play his rightful part as the leader of an organised left wing, played into the hands of the reformist politicians. There his beautiful friendship and generosity played him false, for the party was also an arena of the struggle for socialism. Debs spoke of "the love of comrades" — and he really meant it — but the opportunist sharpers didn't believe a word of it. They never do. They waged a vicious, organized fight against the revolutionary workers of the party all the time. And they were the gainers from Debs abstention.
>
> Debs' mistaken theory of the party was one of the most costly mistakes a revolutionist ever made in the entire history of the American movement.[4]

Cannon goes on to explain that capitalism's real strength is the bases of support it has within the working-class organisations and that "nine-tenths of the struggle for socialism is the struggle against bourgeois influence in the workers' organizations, including the party". Lenin understood this clearly.

> Lenin believed that for victory the workers required a party fit to lead a revolution; and to him that meant a party with a revolutionary program and leadership — a party of revolutionists. He concentrated the main energies of his life on the construction of just such a party, and on the struggle to keep it free from bourgeois ideas and influences.
>
> Lenin recognized that this involved internal discussion and conflict, and he never shirked it …

> Lenin believed in his bones that the internal problems of the party were the problems of the revolution, and he was on top of them all the time.[5]

By comparison to the Socialist Party, the IWW was a clearly proletarian organisation but its effectiveness was hampered by some key errors. Reacting against the rotten capitalist political system and the timid reformism of the conservative SP leaders, the IWW rejected "politics" in favor of direct action. It also projected itself, not as a party, but as a union. In essence, however, it was a sort of proto-party, i.e., a selection of militant activists.

"In truth," Cannon explains, "the IWW in its time of glory was neither a union nor a party in the full meaning of these terms, but something of both, with some parts missing. It was an uncompleted anticipation of a Bolshevik party, lacking its rounded-out theory, and a projection of the revolutionary industrial unions of the future, minus the necessary mass membership. It was the IWW."[6]

Formation of the Communist Party

The First World War and the 1917 Russian Revolution brought a fresh influx into the Socialist Party and there developed a strong left wing in which Cannon played an active role. The left split in 1919 and formed the Communist Party. Cannon became one of its central leaders: When the legal, above-ground Workers Party was formed in 1921, he was its national chairperson.

Those interested in the early years of the Communist movement in the United States can consult Cannon's *First Ten Years of American Communism* — mostly a series of letters to the historian Theodore Draper but with substantial additional material. There are also the first two chapters of *The History of American Trotskyism* and the compilation of Cannon speeches and articles from this period, *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, published by the Spartacist League's Prometheus Research Library.

The formation of the Communist Party was a tremendous advance, Cannon stressed.

> It was composed of thousands of courageous and devoted revolutionists willing to make sacrifices and take risks for the movement. In spite of all their mistakes, they built a party the like of which had never been seen in this country before; that is, a party founded on a Marxist program, with a professional leadership and disciplined ranks …
>
> They learned to take program seriously. They learned to do away forever with the idea that a revolutionary movement, aiming at power, can be led by people who practise socialism as an avocation. The leader typical of the old Socialist Party was a lawyer practising law, or a preacher practising preaching, or a writer, or a professional

> man of one kind or another, who condescended to come around and make a speech once in a while. The full-time functionaries were merely hacks who did the dirty work and had no real influence in the party. The gap between the rank and file workers, with their revolutionary impulses and desires, and the petty-bourgeois dabblers at the top was tremendous. The early Communist Party broke away from all that, and was able to do it easily because not one of the old type leaders came over wholeheartedly to the support of the Russian revolution. The party had to throw up new leaders out of the ranks, and from the very beginning the principle was laid down that these leaders must be professional workers for the party, must put their whole time and their whole lives at the disposal of the party.[7]

One of the points Cannon was always at pains to make — and where he differed radically with Draper — was on the positive role and impact of the Russian Bolshevik leaders on the US Communist Party in its early years. Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev helped the party overcome its early errors which it was unable to do on its own. Later, as the Stalinist degeneration in the Soviet Union developed, the Russian influence became malign.

But even then, Cannon stressed, the Stalinisation of the American CP could never have taken place without the softening up and loss of faith in the revolutionary perspective brought about by the long capitalist boom of the 1920s.

> The American boom of that period, carrying European capitalism with it to a new stabilization after the post-war crisis and revolutionary upsurge, was the prime influence generating the mood of retreat to national reformism, and therewith the rise of Stalinism in Russia.
>
> At the same time, the astounding vitality of expanding American capitalism seemed to close off all perspectives for a revolutionary movement in this country. As the wave of labor radicalism was pushed back by the ascending prosperity, the party began to run into difficulties on all fronts …
>
> The great crisis of the Thirties, with its limitless possibilities for the revolutionary party, was just around the corner, but the party leaders could not see it. They spoke about it, from old habit, but they began to doubt it. The degeneration of the party as a revolutionary organization definitely began already then, and partly for this reason. When the crisis finally arrived-pretty much on schedule according to the Marxist prognosis-the party was no longer the same party.[8]

Break with the Communist Party

Cannon's account of how he came to Trotskyism and his break with the Stalinised Communist Party is told in *The History of American Trotskyism*. It remains a great and

inspiring story, a testament to the power of the great ideas of Marxism which animate our movement. It also endures as a monument to conscience and faithfulness to the revolutionary socialist cause.

In short, in mid-1928 Cannon was part of the CP delegation in Moscow attending the Sixth Congress of the Comintern (as the Communist International was known). Together with Canadian CP leader Maurice Spector, he accidentally got hold of a copy of Trotsky's criticism of the draft program of the Comintern (today this critique is contained in Trotsky's *The Third International After Lenin*[9]). They were completely convinced by its powerful arguments and made a pact to go home and fight for Trotsky's Left Opposition, come what may.

Cannon, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern — all leading figures in the CP-were expelled in October. They were derisively dubbed by the Stalinists the "three generals without an army". The first issue of *The Militant* appeared on November 15, 1928. It bore the headlines: "For the Russian Opposition! Against Opportunism and Bureaucracy in the Workers Communist Party of America!"[10]

There began a long and painful process of recruiting people to the tiny Opposition group one by one. All their efforts were aimed at the cadres and periphery of the CP. It was a heroic struggle, in every sense of the word. As Cannon recounted it in *The History of American Trotskyism*:

> While we were busy with our singlejack agitation, as we used to call it in the IWW — that is, proselytizing one person to another-the [CP's] *Daily Worker*, with its comparatively big circulation, blazed away at us in full-page and sometimes double-page articles day after day. These articles explained at great length that we had sold out to American imperialism; that we were counter-revolutionists in league with the enemies of labor and the imperialist powers scheming to overthrow the Soviet Union; that we had become the "advance guard of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie". This was printed day after day in a campaign of political terrorisation and slander against us, calculated to make it impossible for us to retain any contact with individual members of the party. It was made a crime punishable by expulsion to speak with us on the street, to visit us, to have any communications with us. People were brought up on trial in the Communist Party charged with having attended a meeting at which we spoke; with having brought a paper which we sold on the streets in front of the headquarters on Union Square; or with having had some connections with us in the past — they were compelled to prove that they had not maintained this contact afterwards. A wall of ostracism separated us from the party members. People whom we had known and worked with for years became strangers to us overnight.[11]

In May 1929 the Communist League of America (as the Left Opposition group was

called) held its first national convention. Delegates representing some 100 members attended. From 1929 to 1933 Cannon and his comrades went through four harrowing years: in *The History of American Trotskyism* he calls them the "dog days" of the Left Opposition. After six months, recruitment to the CLA dried up, mainly due to the Stalinist "left" turn internationally and in the US.

This was the so-called Third Period. The turn — really an ultraleft turn — was marked by an extremely sectarian attitude to the socialist parties and their mass following. In Germany the Comintern's Third Period line meant that the powerful Communist and Social Democratic parties were unable to form a defensive united front to bar Hitler's march to power. In the USSR, the Third Period was marked by forced collectivisation in the countryside and the first five-year plan for industry. In a capitalist world wracked by the mass unemployment and misery of the Great Depression, the Soviet plan aroused considerable enthusiasm among sections of the working class.

> The Stalinist "left turn" piled up new difficulties for us. This turn was in part designed by Stalin to cut the ground from under the feet of the Left Opposition; it made the Stalinists appear more radical even than the Left Opposition of Trotsky. They threw the Lovestoneites out of the party as "right wingers", turned the party leadership over to Foster and Company and proclaimed a left policy. By this maneuver they dealt us a devastating blow. Those disgruntled elements in the party, who had been inclined toward us and who had opposed the opportunism of the Lovestone group, became reconciled to the party. They used to say to us: "You see, you were wrong. Stalin is correcting everything. He is taking a radical position all along the line in Russia, America and everywhere else …"
>
> In those dog days of the movement we were shut off from all contact. We had no friends, no sympathizers, no periphery around our movement. We had no chance whatever to participate in the mass movement. Whenever we tried to get into a workers organization we would be expelled as counter-revolutionary Trotskyists. We tried to send delegations to the unemployed meetings. Our credentials would be rejected on the ground that we were enemies of the working class. We were utterly isolated, forced in upon ourselves. Our recrutiment dropped to almost nothing. The Communist Party and its vast periphery seemed to be hermetically sealed against us.
>
> Then as is always the case with new political movements, we began to recruit from sources none too healthy.[12]

The struggle was to hold on and fight it out until a break came and then to take advantage of every opportunity. Trotsky wrote an article in this period entitled "Tenacity! Tenacity! Tenacity!"[13]

It is worth noting that in the midst of this grim period, the internal situation in the CLA was highly factionalised, at least in the central leadership. Cannon was ranged against Shachtman and Abern. (Those wishing to read about this struggle should consult the Cannon volume, *The Communist League of America 1932-34*.)

Trotsky played the decisive role in overcoming this situation and averting a split. While later on it was clear that this dispute foreshadowed or contained in embryo the big struggle of 1939-40 between the proletarian and petty-bourgeois wings of the party, at this point the issues were not clearly posed on principled grounds. A split on such a basis would not have been clear to either the CLA membership or the radical public. It would have shattered the authority of both groups and compromised the cause of the Left Opposition in the United States for a long time to come.

A split was averted and collaboration between Cannon and Shachtman was restored for a further seven fruitful years. When the great struggle of 1939-40 developed, the principled differences were of such depth to be clear to all.

A new situation

The political situation began to turn in 1933. In January Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Fascism had triumphed without any serious resistance from the powerful working class movement. The responsibility for this debacle rested, in the first place, with the pro-capitalist leaders of the Social Democratic Party, but also with the insanely sectarian policy of the Stalinist Comintern and its German section which rejected seeking to pressure the socialist leaders into a united front to resist the fascist onslaught.

The Militant came out three times a week, pounding away on the German question and getting out Trotsky's message. There was a new respect for the Trotskyists. Trotsky had been proven right: he had forseen the catastrophe and had urged the Comintern to change its policy.

Following the German disaster, the Trotskyist movement internationally made a sharp turn. In the US, the CLA turned away from the CP towards mass work and an independent party-but not without having to overcome a crisis of sectarian opposition from those members who had grown used to the enforced inward-looking existence and endless discussion.

As the depression eased slightly, labor struggles began to revive. In March 1933 Roosevelt was elected promising a "new deal" which had the unintended effect of stimulating workers struggles. There were three broad waves of labor upsurge in the 1930s. The high point of the second wave was the Minneapolis truck drivers and helpers strikes of May and July-August 1934. In these great struggles the native militancy of the US workers fused with the revolutionary leadership of the Trotskyist cadres,

including the central party leadership who worked in the closest contact with the local comrades.

The strikes were marked by a tremendous level of organisation: women were organised in a mass auxillary; a daily strike newssheet played a decisive role in countering the bosses' lies; and mass militant picketing met every attempt to break the strike. In one famous episode, thousands of unionists and their supporters went into action against cops, deputies and vigilantes trying to open up the central markets to scab trucks and chased them from the field. The struggle ended victoriously with the recognition of the union. It brought national-and even international-fame to the small CLA. These and other struggles in Minneapolis in the thirties are chronicled in Farrell Dobbs' four Teamster books.[14]

Splits & fusions

April 1934 saw another militant strike at the Auto-Lite plant in Toledo. Strikers and their supporters (mainly organised in unemployed leagues) held their ground in a six-day battle with the police and national guard. The strike was led by cadres of the American Workers Party. The main figure in the AWP was A.J. Muste, a former preacher. Even as the Minneapolis struggle was proceeding, the CLA moved to fuse with the AWP.

The AWP was a heterogeneous formation containing revolutionary-minded workers, preachers and academics. The well-known intellectuals James Burnham and Sidney Hook were members of its national committee. Timing was crucial to the proposed fusion as the Stalinists were also watching the AWP. Furthermore, Cannon and his supporters had to defeat a sectarian opposition to the proposed merger within the CLA led by Hugo Oehler.

Helped by the very generous organisational proposals made by the CLA, the merger took place in December 1934 forming the Workers Party of the United States. It represented the first significant fusion on the US left since 1921. Hitherto there had only been an endless process of splitting and splintering.

The fusion was obviously very important in building a bigger and stronger organisation. However, in some later remarks Cannon puts it in a much broader perspective:

> Trotsky once remarked that unifications and splits are alike methods of building the revolutionary party …
>
> We have seen, in our own experience, the same principle working out. We began with a split from the Stalinists. Unification with the Musteites in 1934 and later with the left wing of the Socialist Party were great milestones in the building of our

organization. But these unifications were of no more importance, and stand rather on an equal plane, with the splits of the leftist sectarians in 1935 and of the revisionist Burnhamites in 1940, and with the split of the new revisionists today. All these actions have been part of the process of building the revolutionary party.

This law enunciated by Trotsky, that both unifications and splits are alike methods of building the party, is true however only on the condition that both the unification and the split in each case is properly motivated. If they are not properly prepared and properly motivated they can have a disrupting and disorganizing effect. I can give you examples of that.

The unification of the Left Opposition under Nin in Spain with the opportunist Maurin group, out of which was formed the POUM, was one of the decisive factors in the defeat of the Spanish revolution. The dilution of the program of Trotskyism for the sake of unification with an opportunist group robbed the Spanish proletariat of that clear program and resolute leadership which could have made the difference in the Spanish revolution in 1936.

Conversely, the splits in the French Trotskyist organization before World War II, several of them, none of which were properly motivated — contributed to the demoralization of the party. It has been our good fortune that we have made no false unifications and no false splits. Never have we had a split in which the party did not bound forward the day after, precisely because the split was properly prepared and properly motivated.[15]

Into the Socialist Party

Following the events in Germany, Trotsky pointed out that internationally there was an influx of radicalised workers into the old social-democratic parties, despite their sorry record. In the United States a new left wing developed in the Socialist Party. This led to recruitment to the Workers Party dropping away since radicalising workers were attracted to the much larger SP.

It was essential for the WP to relate to this development. In collaboration with Trotsky the WP leadership proposed that their forces enter the Socialist Party and operate there as an organised tendency attempting to build a bigger revolutionary current. The French Trotskyists had earlier executed a similar maneuver with some success.

Cannon and his supporters had first to overcome a sectarian opposition led by Oehler and Muste who were opposed to "liquidating" the WP into another party — and a social democratic one at that. However, an overwhelming majority of the WP members were rallied behind Cannon's proposal. The WP negotiated with the SP

leaders on the terms of entry.

> They made very hard conditions,[explained Cannon]. We had to give up our press despite the fact that it had been the tradition of the Socialist Party to let any faction have its own press …
>
> They wouldn't allow us the honor and dignity of joining as a body and being received as a body. No, we had to join as individuals, leaving every local Socialist Party branch the option of refusing to admit us. We had to join individually because they wanted to humiliate us, to make it appear that we were simply dissolving our party, humbly breaking with our past, and starting anew as pupils of the "Militants" caucus of the SP. It was rather irritating, but we were not deflected from our course by personal feelings. We had been too long in the Lenin school for that.. We were out to serve political aims. That is why, despite the most onerous conditions, we never broke negotiations and never gave them an excuse to shut negotiations off from their side. Whenever they showed signs of indifference, of evasiveness, we kept after them and kept the negotiations alive.[16]

The WP suspended publication of *The Militant* and entered the SP in the middle of 1936. The Trotskyists spent about a year in the SP. That period saw the start of the big upsurge of the CIO — the industrial union movement — in the US; the huge French sit-down strike wave; the start of the Spanish civil war; and the Moscow purge trials and Trotsky's campaign to expose them. The Trotskyists were finally expelled from the SP in the latter part of 1937.

A conference of the expelled SP members was held in Chicago and on New Year's Day, 1938 the Socialist Workers Party was founded. The convention summed up the results of the work in the Socialist Party. They had won a majority of the SP youth and the best of the revolutionary workers; there had been a big development of their trade union work; the entry had facilitated their work with left and liberal elements in exposing Stalin's frameup trials; and finally, they had dealt the SP a fatal blow, leaving it a declining shell with little attraction for radicalising workers.

Struggle for a proletarian party

In 1939-40, on the eve of US involvement in World War II, a great struggle erupted in the Socialist Workers Party. Adapting to the pressure of capitalist public opinion, a minority led by Burnham, Shachtman and Abern sought to ditch the party's fundamental position of defence of the Soviet Union — Stalin notwithstanding — against imperialism. As Cannon explained:

> Even a revolutionary party is not free from the pressure of its bourgeois environment. In the case of Burnham and Shachtman this pressure was reflected in its crudest form.

> Stalin in alliance with the brigands of French imperialism, and prospectively with the United States, was acceptable to democratic public opinion; his frame-up trials and purges and his bloody work in Spain were passed over as the peccadillos of an eccentric "democrat". During all this time — the time of the Franco-Soviet pact — all the leaders of the opposition fully agreed with us that the defense of the Soviet Union is the elementary duty of every workers' organization. When the same Stalin "betrayed" the imperialist democracies by making an alliance with Hitler Germany, he became anathema to the bourgeois democrats. Immediately, as if by reflex action, our heroic Burnham, and after him Shachtman and the others, disavowed the defense of the Soviet Union by the world proletariat as an "outmoded" idea. This is the essence of the dispute they started in the party, and its immediate causes.[17]

The issues of the struggle can be followed in Trotskys *In Defence of Marxism*[18] and Cannon's *Struggle for a Proletarian Party*; the first focussing on the political and philosophical issues of the dispute and the latter on the organisational aspects.

There is no textbook or manual on the Leninist theory of party organisation. Most Marxist works take the form of polemics in specific situations. So it is in this case. But Cannon's work is a masterly exposition of Marxist teaching on the question.

The opposition was characterised by the majority as a petty-bourgeois faction. This designation was not an epithet but a scientific characterisation based on the minority's political positions, its social composition and its methods of struggle.

The minority was actually an unprincipled combination in which major political differences were subordinated to forming a faction to struggle against the party "regime". The opposition actually had three positions on the fundamental question of the USSR: Burnham repudiated defence of the Soviet Union; Shachtman abstained on the issue; and Abern was an orthodox Trotskyist on the matter. But all three united against the "Cannon clique", i.e., they subordinated political principles to organisational goals.

After a long and democratic discussion in which every effort was made to clarify the political issues in dispute and reduce to a minimum any organisational frictions, the minority split after the April 1940 convention. They took some 40% of the party and most of the youth and writers. Of the three central leaders of the last period — Cannon, Burnham and Shachtman — only Cannon remained. After the split the party had some 600 members.

In August of that year the party suffered another blow with the assassination of Trotsky in Mexico by a Stalinist agent. During the period of his Mexican exile the axis of the world Trotskyist movement had been Trotsky and the SWP leadership. All of the work in the US had been undertaken in the closest collaboration with Trotsky.

"Cannon, at the age of 50, was considered to be the most prominent leader of the world Trotskyist movement", Joseph Hansen recounted. "In his opinion it was unrealistic to believe that any single individual could fill the void left by the death of Trotsky. Most certainly no one should look to him to attempt it. He was no genius, he said, and he considered it pretentious and a mockery to play the role of being one."

> However, he did have a plan for carrying on the struggle in the absence of Trotsky. The plan was not an elaborate one. It consisted of closing ranks, of trying to keep the team together, of strengthening it, of expanding it, and of renewing it.
>
> In this way the continuity of leadership could be maintained. If another Trotsky appeared, that would be extraordinarily good luck. It would shorten the struggle for socialism. But if another Trotsky did not appear, we would continue to struggle on the basis of Trotsky's program and teachings, and eventually teamwork would win.[19]

Against imperialist war

As the United States prepared for war, patriotic hysteria mounted. In the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact, the brunt of government repression fell on the Stalinist CP. But with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the CP's switch to all-out support for the war effort, the main government efforts were now directed at the SWP.

The blow came in Minneapolis. The party had strong positions in the labor movement there and used the N*orthwest Organiser*, an official Teamsters Union journal, for vigorous antiwar propaganda. In July 1941 a federal grand jury indicted a number of union and party leaders for "seditious conspiracy" under the Smith Act. In October, 18 SWP leaders — Cannon among them — were convicted in the most famous civil liberties trial of the war years.

The party was able to use the trial to further explain its real positions. Cannon's masterful courtroom testimony can be found in *Socialism on Trial*. The current edition also includes his later defence of the trial strategy: Cannon's "Marxism Versus Ultraleftism" is a classic exposition of Marxist tactics and can truly be regarded as a worthy supplement to Lenin's famous pamphlet on the same theme.

The defendants received 12-18 month jail terms. They remained free on bail for two years and then served their time in 1944-45, most of them in Sandstone prison in Minnesota. A substitute party leadership, selected in good time, took over and the party's work continued with very good results.

A collection of Cannon's wartime writings and speeches has been published as *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II*. Among many topics, it deals with the party's struggle to retain its legality and its paper without compromising its

revolutionary principles. Cannon was always mindful of the heavy — and often unnecessary — sacrifices made by the IWW in World War I: Its militants were jailed in droves for their refusal to be drafted and the organisation was crippled.

This volume also contains Cannon's speech on "The Problem of Party Leadership" and his *Letters from Prison* contains much more on the same topic. In Cannon's view, the party leadership stands — or should stand — in the same relation to the party as a whole as does the party to the class. Thus the continual selection, training and consolidation of the leadership of a revolutionary party is the decisive question of revolutionary strategy. Without solving this problem the socialist revolution is impossible and Cannon devoted a great deal of attention to it.

Theses on the American Revolution

As World War II ended, a huge labor upsurge developed in the US. In his introduction to Cannon's Speeches to the Party, Al Hansen gives a feel for its scope:

> At the end of World War II, the United States experienced the greatest strike wave in its history — far greater in scope than those of the 1930s …
>
> In 1935-39, the average yearly working days on strike was 17 million, in 1945 this jumped to 36 million, and in 1946 it was 116 million.
>
> The growth of the Socialist Workers Party and its activities reflected the rise in the class struggle. Its press expanded in size and circulation; it had fractions in the unions in auto, steel, maritime, rubber, packinghouse, railroad, longshore, painters, electrical workers, paper workers, shipyard, food handlers, etc; its racial composition altered dramatically with Black workers constituting about one-fourth to one-third of the membership. Many new branches were established; there were, for example, six branches in the New York City Local; the Trotsky School — a resident school of advanced Marxist study — was also established. With a firm proletarian cadre, the party began to think and plan in terms of developing from a propaganda group addressing itself to the most politically advanced workers into a much larger party which could undertake to lead masses of workers in action.[20]

It was to educate this growing membership in the basic Marxist revolutionary perspective of the party that Cannon wrote the "Theses on the American Revolution", adopted by the SWP's November 1946 convention.[21] They are a resounding declaration of confidence in the prospects for a socialist transformation in the United States and in the ability of the workers to carry it through led by the revolutionary party, the decisive nucleus of which already existed in the SWP.

Furthermore, following Trotsky, the "Theses" stress that "The issue of socialism or capitalism will not be finally decided until it is decided in the US … The decisive

battles for the communist future of mankind will be fought in the U.S." They reject any notion that US capitalism is immune to the laws of the class struggle. On the contrary, its drive for global supremacy means that it embraces and is vulnerable to all the contradictions of the world capitalist system.

Although the immediate situation evolved differently to that expected by Cannon in the "Theses", the longterm perspective remains valid and is the only sure foundation on which a revolutionary party in the United States can base itself.

Defending the revolutionary perspective

The party was soon confronted with a new reality. The labor upsurge came to a halt with great suddenness in early 1947 and a reactionary offensive developed all along the line as the Cold War got underway in earnest.

> On June 23, 1947, the Taft-Hartley Act was passed and the drive to housebreak the union movement in this country was underway in full force. All union officials were forced to sign noncommunist affidavits under the act and there was a general attack against radicals of all persuasions.
>
> Systematically, union by union, the government went to work on the radicals and militants in the labor movement, witch-hunting them out of the unions and out of their jobs. Most of the victims were members of the Communist Party, which was then no inconsiderable force in the unions …
>
> While the Stalinists were the easiest target of the witch-hunt, the government extended it to all radicals and militants, including members of the SWP. By 1950 SWP members had been excluded from practically all leading posts in the unions. An atmosphere of fear pervaded the union halls. Red-baiting by the government and the union bureaucrats, even by the companies, was encouraging a lynch spirit among the more conservative workers.
>
> In this atmosphere the powers-that-be took the country into the Korean War; and conditions went from bad to worse. The witch-hunt was extended to all walks of life-from actors to seamen, from miners to preachers. The Coast Guard screened every known radical and militant out of the maritime industry by taking away their seaman's papers, thus eliminating one of the SWP's strongest union fractions at one blow …
>
> This was the period of the Communist Trials, the passage of the McCarran Act and other reactionary legislation, the setting up of concentration camps on a stand-by basis. By the summer of 1952, 61 leaders of the Communist Party were either in jail or under indictment …
>
> The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) came to Detroit in the spring of 1952. This committee, in a bloc with UAW President Walter Reuther,

> succeeded in stirring up a real lynch atmosphere in the automobile plants throughout Michigan. The daily papers published long lists of the names, addresses, and places of employment of suspected reds. Gangs of right-wing workers roamed through the auto plants looking for those workers listed to beat them up and run them out of the plants. Some well-known Stalinists had to flee for their lives. Some of our own members were advised by their party fractions to stay away from their jobs until things cooled off, while others had enough support so that they didn't have to worry.[22]

In this grim period it was a fight to keep the party intact: one of Cannon's greatest accomplishments was the survival of the SWP despite the very heavy losses it sustained. In this context a great struggle took place in 1952-53 to defend the party's revolutionary perspectives against a minority led by Bert Cochran, a well-known trade union militant from the 1930s. The Cochran grouping was based in the party's auto fraction in Detroit and Flint in Michigan.

The political judgement of the Cochranites was clouded by the tremendous pressure of the witch-hunt. The minority was based on a conservatised layer of trade unionists-militants of the 1930s, now some 15 years further up the seniority ladder. They wanted to pull their heads in, go slow and wait for better times. They were defeated and split, taking about 20% of the membership with them. Cannon's speeches and articles from this dispute are to be found in *Speeches to the Party*.

At the end of 1952, with Farrell Dobbs taking over as national secretary, Cannon moved to Los Angeles. He remained the SWP's national chairperson but no longer had responsibility for the party's day-to-day running. A number of his writings and speeches from this latter period are included in this pamphlet.

The SWP survived the hard period of the fifties and slowly began to grow again. It participated in the Black civil rights movement. The party hailed the 1959 Cuban revolution and threw itself into defending it and publicising its achievements. From the mid-sixties on it played a major role in building the mass movement against the imperialist intervention in Vietnam. It renewed itself by recruiting significant numbers of radical youth. In the seventies the SWP was a small but impressive party, finally beginning to eclipse the CP in many areas.

However, due to errors made in the later 1970s, this promising development came to a halt. The long struggle to build a revolutionary socialist party in the United States is certainly not developing in a straight line and the way forward is not clear. But we are convinced that — in Australia no less than in the US — Cannon's teaching remains an absolutely indispensable foundation for such a project.

Some remarks by Rose Karsner, a founder of the Communist Party and the Trotskyist movement in the United States and longtime companion to Cannon, will

perhaps serve as a conclusion. She made them in 1962 at a celebration of the commercial publication (by Lyle Stuart) of *The First Ten Years of American Communism*.

> From the moment we threw our lot in with the socialist movement, more than 50 years ago, we have never wavered in our conviction that a socialist world will come into being. Whether we live to see it or not. That's immaterial. We never faltered in our devotion to this conviction, or in our allegiance to the party we believed was working toward that end. In times of personal difficulty, and we all had them, we sometimes took out time to straighten these matters. But never with the idea of dropping out.
>
> Never did we feel that we were sacrificing for the party. On the contrary, we were always conscious of the fact that to have to give up the party, that would be a sacrifice. Because through activity of the party, we got fulfillment of life and satisfaction and the confidence that we were working not merely for our own little selves, but for the entire human race.[23] ■

Cannonism Versus Barnesism

The degeneration of the SWP

By Doug Lorimer

Since the late 1970s the US SWP has degenerated into a bizarre political sect, which justifies its abstention from involvement in the mass working-class movement with the shibboleth that it is building a "communist party of industrial workers", i.e., of blue-collar workers.

The roots of the SWP's degeneration lie in the party's departure from a central tenet of James P. Cannon's political methodology, namely, that party-building tactics must be decided not on the basis of speculative hopes about the future course of the class struggle, but on the basis of actually existing circumstances. As Cannon observed in his 1942 lectures on *The History of American Trotskyism* "the most important of all questions for a political group or party, once it has elaborated its program, is to give the correct answer to the question: What to do next? The answer to this question is not and cannot be determined simply by the desire or the whim of the party or the party leadership. It is determined by the objective circumstances and the possibilities inherent in the circumstances."[1]

Propagandistic stage of party-building

The central task facing any small revolutionary organisation is to recruit, educate and train cadres. As a consequence the aim of its activities must be propagandistic. On the most elementary level such activities include the educational work of oral political discussions with interested coworkers, the production and circulation of printed propaganda, public forums, internal educational classes, running candidates for public office and so on. They also include participation along with others in strikes, strike support activities, public rallies and street marches, etc., where the Marxist forces gain opportunities to demonstrate in practice the relevance and correctness of their strategy

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Doug Lorimer (1953-2013) was a longtime leader of the Democratic Socialist Party.

and their capacities as leaders of the mass movement. The key objective, however, is still that of accumulating cadres.

To transcend the propaganda stage of party-building, to reach the position of being able to bring the objective situation under the conscious control of revolutionary forces, requires winning over massive forces — numbers so great as to make a qualitative difference. Once this qualitative point is reached, activities having an aim qualitatively different from those of the propaganda stage become both possible and necessary. The struggle for state power, previously excluded, is placed on the agenda of the day. In April 1917, for example, when the Bolshevik party had some 80,000 members throughout Russia, Lenin emphasised that the party's central task was still that of conducting propaganda work, of "patiently explaining" to the masses the Bolsheviks' policies and of "preparing and welding" the cadres of a mass revolutionary workers' party. In the months preceding the October Revolution, Lenin stressed repeatedly that the Bolsheviks' tasks were limited to the propaganda work of "explaining" their policies and of "criticising and exposing" the errors of their political opponents in order to win over to their side a class-conscious and organised majority among the workers. Only when the Bolsheviks had achieved this did Lenin signal that qualitatively new tasks had become possible and necessary. On September 25-27, 1917 Lenin called on the Bolshevik party to launch a struggle for state power, stating his premise and conclusion in one sentence: "Having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals [i.e., of Petrograd and Moscow], the Bolsheviks can and must take power into their hands."[2]

But a revolutionary party that lacks a mass base, which has not won over to its side the majority of the working class, still faces as its main task the recruitment and education of cadres through:

- Consistent propaganda advancing basic revolutionary socialist ideas around the burning political issues of the day in opposition to all other political currents.
- Appropriate and timely agitation directed to the mass organisations of the oppressed for mass actions to win reforms under the capitalist system.
- Persistent attention to the organisation of the party itself, particularly the development of professional revolutionary propagandists, agitators and organisers educated in Marxist theory, strategy, tactics, and methods of organisation.

The objective of such activities is to expand the party and its influence. To accomplish this, its cadres must bring Marxist ideas into the spontaneous mass struggles of the oppressed, doing this as participants and not as outsiders. Since the central task at this stage of party-building is to recruit new members to its ranks, the focus of its work must be directed toward those social sectors that are most open to radical ideas and

thus provide the best opportunities for recruitment.

Rejecting dogmatic schemas

This approach, which had guided the SWP since its foundation in 1938, was summed up as follows in the perspectives resolution adopted by its 24th National Convention in August 1971:

> In the final analysis, the decisive question is the construction of a mass Trotskyist party. We proceed from the recognition that the SWP is not yet that mass party. We are a small but growing nucleus of cadres formed around the revolutionary-socialist program necessary to build such a party. Thus recruiting, training and assimilating such cadres are the indispensable preconditions for building a mass workers' party … Today our immediate goal is the recruitment of more and more of the young militants radicalized in the current political struggles, and the transformation of these recruits through education and experience into Trotskyist cadres.

The resolution went on contrast the SWP's party-building approach to that of its opponents within the radical movement:

> All our opponents to one degree or another act as if they already were mass parties whose central problem is the deployment of their forces. Thus the Communist Party has launched a daily newspaper, with a circulation below that of *The Militant* [the SWP's weekly paper], as if their size and ability to directly influence all areas of the class struggle required a daily paper. Progressive Labor [the main Maoist formation] has for several years "colonized" its members into various unions, under the illusion that they are going both to transform themselves into a mass proletarian organization by this and directly influence the course of the unions' development. The Workers League sect, which carries lack of appreciation of reality to the extreme, has formed committees of a few of its members previously "colonized" in the unions to "form a Labor Party now" …
>
> All revolutionary parties at different times selectively colonize members into promising political situations in industry. But the purpose of such colonization cannot be a shortcut in overcoming objective developments and artificially "proletarianizing" the organisation by transforming colonized individuals into workers. The key to becoming a mass working-class party, in composition as well as in program, does not lie in such individual transformations. It lies in the recruitment of politicalized workers to a party that has proven itself in the political and social struggles that are occurring, that has geographically spread and grown to a size that it is seen as a revolutionary alternative to the parties of the rulers and the programs of the workers' misleaders.
>
> All of our opponents are wrong about the way a socialist party obtains working-

class cadres. Workers become politicalized by the struggles they engage in, and radicalized by the important social and political issues facing the country and at the center of the radicalization. As this occurs they begin to look for an alternative political organization to support. Our own recruitment of politicalized workers in the 1930s and 1940s confirms this.

How many radicalized and politicized workers will be recruited in the future to a revolutionary program and organization or to a reformist or ultraleft dead end depends one key factor: the prior development of cadres capable of participating as revolutionary socialists in the struggles as they arise.[3]

In a report on the draft of this resolution, adopted by the SWP National Committee in March 1971, Jack Barnes, then the SWP's national organisation secretary, made the following criticisms of the approach advocated by the SWP's left opponents:

Our opponents … all counterposed to our perspective what they must think is a new discovery. Their strategy for party building is what the CP calls an "industrial concentration", what the IS calls "workers work'" what Wohlforth modestly calls his "proletarian orientation", what Progressive Labor calls the "colonization of selected key plants", etc. There are different names for it. But what they all come down to are subjective and arbitrary shortcuts by a handful aimed at bridging the objective gap between the pace and characteristics of the radicalization of the decisive sections of the working class and the growing radicalization of other oppressed sections of the population …

There are many rationalizations used and justifications raised by our opponents. One is what I call the "miss the boat" theory. That is, if we don't take this step now of sending large numbers into the factories, we'll miss the boat. But the problem of the revolutionary proletarian boat is a more complex one than that. What we must build is a large enough cadre, politically homogeneous, with collective experience in leading real social and political struggles, who have gained a reputation in the fighting mass movements, and thus be able to attract politicalized and radicalized workers to their party. That's the boat not to miss. There's no danger of missing the boat, any more than there's the danger of us not responding if there is a concrete opening where we can do political work in industry, where we can recruit some cadres, where we can make some political gains. No problem at all. We have been doing so; we intend to continue.

The second justification is what we call the "class composition" justification. That is, the idea that the central problem of a small group of cadres trying to increase their size and build the nucleus of a mass party is its class composition. The problem is "solved" by telling everyone to get a job in industry. In other words, this is an attempt to solve the problem of building a proletarian party through taking a small group of

> cadres and substituting a transformation of the social composition of these cadres through colonization in industry, for the construction … of a large enough cadre to be able to attract and recruit radicalized workers as the radicalization deepens, to be able to turn to real openings as they develop.[4]

By orienting toward the realities of the class struggle and toward those social sectors that were radicalising during the 1970s the SWP increased its membership from less than 400 in 1970 to around 1800 in 1977.

The turn to industry

Then, in February 1978, the SWP National Committee adopted a report presented by Jack Barnes (who had replaced Farrell Dobbs as SWP national secretary in 1972) which proposed that the party "subordinate everything else to immediately organizing to get a large majority of the membership of the Socialist Workers Party into industry and the industrial trade unions".

This turn toward the rapid colonisation of the SWP's membership into blue-collar jobs in industries producing and transporting commodities such as mining, manufacturing, construction and rail freight was not motivated on the basis that there existed greater opportunities to recruit to the party in these industries than in other sectors of the work force or among college students. Instead it was motivated by a version of the "miss-the-boat" argument the SWP leadership had rejected in 1971.

> Our judgment [Barnes said on behalf of the SWP Political Committee] that this political move is necessary and timely flows from the big changes in the situation facing the capitalist class on a world scale, the need of the American ruling class to drive forward their offensive, to more and more make the industrial workers and their unions the target. Our judgment flows from the changes in the attitudes of the working class in response to this offensive.
>
> We are still in a preparatory period — not a period when we are leading mass class-struggle actions. We must make no mistake about that. But is it a preparatory period in which the center of American politics has shifted to the industrial working class. That's the central political judgment we put before the plenum.

Nowhere in the report did Barnes seek to justify this particular claim, or even what he meant by it. However, its implication was that the "industrial" workers were not only radicalising but were the social milieu where the best opportunities to recruit to a revolutionary party would soon exist. If the SWP did not rapidly get a large majority of its members into "industry" it would miss big opportunities to expand its cadre force. This was the impression Barnes sought to convey with his next comments:

> If we do not bring about a significant and rapid change in the composition of the

> party, we would place ourselves, now unnecessarily, outside of the arena in which the decisive changes and developments are happening in the class struggle. We would not have our hand on the pulse of the working class, the real rhythm of its developments and changes. By not making this move quickly, now, we would unnecessarily cut ourselves off from the center of American politics …
>
> If we fail to do this, the party will regress, it will slide back on its accomplishments, and it will miss opportunities.

Elsewhere in the report, Barnes reinforced the impression that big opportunities for recruitment now existed in the blue-collar unions, which the party would miss out on unless it carried out a rapid and wholesale colonisation of these unions. He did this by arguing that such a move would have been a mistake if it had been undertaken before the onset of the long depressive wave in the world capitalist economy in the early 1970s, which was definitely signaled by the 1974-75 world capitalist recession:

> To make the move we're now deciding prior to this fundamental change would have been a blunder. It would have been a gimmick. It would have disoriented the party. It would have been built on guesses, not tied to the real developments in the working class and the political life of the country. Prior to 1974 much of the political activity took a course around and not through either the industrial unions or the workers in industry. But following Nixon's 1971 wage-price freeze that changed. As we got closer to the 1974-75 depression it changed more and more. Prior to this though, the best arena for recruitment to our working-class program was not in these unions.[5]

Thus the implication was that these unions would now provide the "best arena for recruitment" to the party. However, lacking any evidence to support such a claim, Barnes sought to justify the colonisation drive with the claim that the capitalist rulers would have to more and more centre their offensive against blue-collar workers since this was the section of the working class that directly produced surplus value, the source of capitalist profits. As the capitalists did this, the blue-collar unions would become the centre of resistance to the capitalist austerity drive against the working class as a whole, and thus, by implication, the centre of a new labour radicalisation. While denying that this prognosis was based on the 1977-78 110-day-long coal miners' strike, Barnes repeatedly utilised the coal miners' struggle to bolster his arguments in favor of a rapid and wholesale colonisation of SWP members into blue-collar jobs.

In his reply to the discussion on the report Barnes sought to assuage any concerns that the "industrial" colonisation drive would mean abandoning the work that the SWP was already doing among white-collar workers:

> Saying we are going into industry doesn't mean we are demeaning our AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] or teachers work.

> To the contrary, by building a more powerful proletarian party, better equipped, we will be strengthening this work, making it better, and increasing the rate of recruitment in it. We will build bigger and better fractions. If out of all this, five years from now, three years from now, two years from now, we don't have a bigger and more powerful teachers fraction, or an AFSCME fraction, due to recruitment and increasing influence, then we've messed up.[6]

'Proletarianising' the party

In his February 1978 NC report, Barnes stated: "What we propose is a political move, not a hygienic or therapeutic move for the party. We are not doing this to cleanse the party of petty-bourgeois elements or any such nonsense." By April 1979, however, the SWP leadership had decided that the "industrial" colonisation drive was indeed necessary for "hygienic" reasons. The draft perspectives resolution adopted by the April 1979 SWP National Committee plenum for submission to the party's 30th National Convention stated:

> The SWP's turn to the new political openings in the industrial working class marks the end of the relative isolation from our class imposed upon us by the political retreat of labor that began in the late 1940s. We are becoming a party whose members live, work, and struggle each day as part of the working class. We are becoming a party of workers whose neighbors, friends, and political collaborators are workers …
>
> The proletarianization of the party is essential to the recruitment and development of a party whose membership and leadership are multinational in composition … The proletarianisation of the party opens the door for growing numbers of socialist workers to bring a working-class strategy and political leadership to the struggles of the oppressed nationalities and women.[7]

The implication of these passages was that prior to beginning the drive to colonise its members into blue-collar jobs, the majority of the SWP's members had not been wage workers (which was patently false) or that the proletariat, the working class, consists only of blue-collar workers. That latter view began to be fostered from December 1978 on.

In a report to the December 1978 meeting of the SWP National Committee, Political Committee member Mary-Alice Waters claimed that since the late 1940s the SWP had been forced to live a "semi-sectarian existence" isolated from "our class" and its battles. At the same time she affirmed that throughout those decades the SWP had its "fingers on the political pulse of our class in every possible way, and we took advantage of every opening to build the party". But, she argued, "the conditions created by the postwar boom meant that confrontations between the real class giants

— the industrial working class of the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialist rulers —were limited. Especially in the United States they were few and far between. After the postwar upsurge, the 1946-47 battles, we had to wait three decades for conditions to bring the giants into head-on collision again as they did during the coal miners' strike last winter." According to Waters, the 110-day coal miners' strike was "a taste" of the "class combat that is coming". In this context, "We need no longer be physically isolated from our class."[8] Waters thus implied that the term "our class" referred not to the US working class as a whole but only to a minority sector of it-the "industrial" or blue-collar workers.

In his report to the April 1979 SWP NC plenum on the draft perspective resolution for the SWP's 30th national convention, Jack Barnes made an attempt to clarify what was meant by his February 1978 claim that the "industrial working class is at the center stage of American politics":

> Of course, it's important to understand what we mean when we say that the working class is moving to center stage in American politics. As we've explained, in one sense it is the American ruling class that is at center stage. Because of the misleadership of American labor, the bosses still hold the offensive today …
>
> When we say that American workers are moving to center stage, we mean two closely intertwined things. First, the industrial workers are the central target of the rulers' offensive. As we explain in the political resolution, that's who the employers are after. To drive up their profits they have to take on the big industrial unions which are the most powerful institutions of the oppressed and exploited.
>
> Second, we mean that the working class is moving to the center in the resistance to the offensive in the fight back.

More important than Barnes's sleight of hand in changing the formula from "the industrial working class is *at* the centre stage" to "is *moving to* centre stage", was his interchangeable use of the terms "working class", "American workers" and "industrial workers". Earlier in the report, Barnes had introduced the new "hygienic" justification for the colonisation drive:

> The turn is a vital necessity. A party that doesn't center its political work in the most powerfully organized and strategically located components of its class, when the possibility to do that exists, can only degenerate …
>
> Our overall goal in deepening the turn, of course, is for the turn to wither way. It's a short-term tactic to accomplish a decisively important political goal: bringing the composition of our party into harmony with our proletarian program.[9]

The colonisation of the SWP's members into blue-collar jobs was thus dictated by the supposed need to safeguard the party from "degeneration" due to an alleged

discrepancy between its "proletarian program" and the class composition of its membership. But since most SWP members, like most other US wage workers, were employed in non-blue-collar jobs, in order to justify such an argument it was increasingly necessary for the Barnes leadership to equate the blue-collar sections of the working class with the working class itself and all other sections of the working class with the petty-bourgeois middle-classes. The corollary of this thoroughly non-Marxist line of argument, of course, was that the rapid and wholesale colonisation of SWP members into blue-collar jobs would not be a "short-term" tactical move, which within a few years would enable it to recruit radicalising workers in other occupations and thus lead to a strengthening of its implantation in other sectors of the work force. Instead, the colonisation of its members into blue-collar jobs would become a permanent feature of the SWP's life.

'Petty-bourgeois pressures' &'revolutionary continuity'

As the unions began to retreat in the face of the intensification of the capitalist austerity drive and hopes of a mass labor fight-back, led by the blue-collar unions, began to fade, the "hygienic" justification for the colonisation of blue-collar jobs increasingly came to the fore in the reports of SWP leaders. For example, in a report to a November 1980 SWP NC plenum, Barnes explicitly stated that this was the main reason for the "turn" to colonise blue-collar jobs. He claimed that during the 1950s and 1960s the SWP "was not immersed in our class" and that since its big gains in recruitment in the late 1960s and early '70s had been among college students this had "led to a significant petty-bourgeois composition of the party", adding this "naturally created tension between our proletarian political program and inevitable pressures to look for petty-bourgeois nostrums that seek to leap over the organization and consciousness of the working class." These pressures had been effectively resisted only thanks to the "leadership continuity of the SWP".[10] This latter theme — that Barnes himself embodied the continuity of proletarian revolutionary leadership from the founding of the communist movement by Marx and Engels in the 1840s — would become a core article of faith within the SWP by the mid-1980s.

The rhetoric about the danger of degeneration stemming from petty-bourgeois political pressures transmitted via the alleged "petty-bourgeois composition" of the bulk of the SWP's membership recruited in the 1970s soon became a means to isolate any critics of the Barnes leadership. Since this leadership embodied "revolutionary continuity" anyone who disagreed with it must be acting as a transmission mechanism of non-proletarian political pressures on the party.

The rhetoric about "proletarianising" the party through colonising blue-collar

jobs also served another purpose: it became a means to justify overturning the democratic organisational norms and practices it had inherited from the period of Cannon's leadership. In a report presented to the SWP National Committee in March 1982, Barnes set down the rationale for this course by claiming that: "Until the conditions existed for us to be able to begin transforming the social composition of the party and ending the enforced isolation from the working class imposed upon us by the course of objective events, we could not possibly have known all of the aspects of party life, party institutions, and party functioning that we would have to transform and adjust in the process."[11] By the time of its 32nd national convention in August 1984, the SWP was a very different organisation from the one that Cannon had led in the 1930s and '40s. Despite its rhetoric about "revolutionary continuity" the Barnes leadership itself acknowledged that the "implementation of the turn to the industrial unions has resulted in some of the biggest changes in the Socialist Workers Party in its history".[12] Despite having nearly all of its members in blue-collar jobs, its political influence within the union movement was negligible. Nor was this compensated for by expanding influence in any other sector of the working-class movement. Its main public activities were sales of books and pamphlets-an activity that would come to dominate its life in the 1990s and be rationalised as the fundamental task of "communists" confronting a world rapidly "marching to fascism and World War III".

In a letter written in 1955, Cannon observed that "Every tendency, direct or indirect, of a small revolutionary party to construct a world of its own, outside and apart from the real movement of the workers in the class struggle, is sectarian. Such tendencies can take many forms, and we should not delude ourselves that the well-known illustrations exhaust the possibilities."[13] Tragically, the party that Cannon founded has, under the leadership of Jack Barnes, provided another example of the sectarianism that can befall a small revolutionary organisation.■

Don't Strangle the Party

By George Breitman

Introduction

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

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George Breitman (1916-1986) was a founding member of the SWP and a longtime editor of *The Militant*. This introduction and the four documents by Cannon were originally published as a pamphlet by the Fourth Internationalist Tendency and Socialist Unity in 1986.

"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 non-existent 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. lncreasingly 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 18 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 90% 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 preworld congress discussions by suspending the one articulate critic of the party's positions and actions. He therefore urged that Swabeck's provocations 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 3l, 1982, in a talk entitied "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 re-evaluation 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.■

Don't Strangle the Party: Documents

1. Don't Try to Enforce a Non-Existent 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 37 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, 26 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 37-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 24 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.

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.[3] 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 37 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 24 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" letter of Jan. 28.
Fraternally,
James P. Cannon

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

[September 6, 1966]
The party that we represent here had its origin 38 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 & the SWP

First of all, and above all, we recognized 38 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 alonc. 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 continuators.

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 continuators." 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 19th 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 20 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 in the SWP

Not the least of our reasons for remaining alive for 38 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*, 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 musn'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 leam. 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.

3. A Trend in the Wrong Direction

November 12, 1966
Copies to: Ed Shaw, New York;
Jean Simon, Cleveland;
Reba Hansen, New York, NY

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. 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 38-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 90% 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

4. 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 1944-45-46.[4]

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■

The Socialist Opposition to the American Bourgeoisie

It is worth noting that in 1951 the leadership of the SWP proposed that the label of "Trotskyism" be set aside, that instead the party designate itself "in broad public political agitation as 'Socialist' or 'Socialist Workers' or 'Revolutionary Socialist', alternatively, as the occasion may demand." Cannon explained that a "Trotskyist" self-designation could cause thoughtful workers to view the Socialist Workers Party "as a sectarian movement, as followers of some individual, and a Russian at that. It is not a suitable characterization for a broad American movement. Our enemies will refer to us as Trotskyists, and we will, of course, not deny it; but we should say: 'We are Trotskyists because Trotsky was a true socialist.' What we are presenting against American capitalism and the labor bureaucracy is the principle of the class struggle of modern socialism …"

> Let our enemies within the movement, that is in the narrow framework of the more political movement, call us Trotskyists. We will not protest. But then we will say we are Trotskyist because he represented genuine socialism and we, like him, are the real socialists …
>
> "We have to think of ourselves more and more as representing the socialist opposition to the American bourgeoisie. I don't think we should do it under the handicap of what appears to the workers as a sectarian or cultist name. That is what the term "Trotskyist" signifies to them.

George Breitman has commented that "there was a relapse from the wise decision of 1951, starting in 1952 with the fight against the Cochranites and their slogan, 'Junk the Old Trotskyism'," so that throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the Trotskyist label was definitely attached to the SWP.■

From "Trotskyism in the United States: The First Fifty Years" by Paul Le Blanc in *Trotskyism in the United States*, p. 51. Cannon's remarks quoted here were made at the SWP Political Committee meeting of April 10, 1951.

Engels on the American Question

Los Angeles, Calif.
January 14, 1955

Dear Vincent,
… I have been spending a lot of time with Engels. Previously, some of his letters to Sorge and others in the United States were included in the *Selected Correspondence of Marx and Engels*.They are now all brought together in the new volume, *Letters to Americans* by Marx and Engels, published last year by International Publishers. During this lull in production I have taken advantage of the opportunity to make a thorough study of them. This volume really should be required reading for all party activists, including especially the students of the Trotsky School.

Engels's letters are the original and best prescription against sectarianism. They are more than that, however. Engels, in his letters to Sorge, combined his pot-shots against the sectarian socialists in the United States and Britain with withering blasts against the British Fabians and the petty-bourgeois opportunists in the German party. The innovators and neo-liquidationists-who are all referring to Engels these days-quote only the first part and ignore the second.

I can see a big controversy blowing up around this volume of letters and I intend to take a hand in it. It seems that all the ex-revolutionists, reformed Trotskyists, backsliders and runaways are leaning on Engels. They didn't get their impulse to capitulate from him; that originated in their own bones, and they are seeking corroboration from Engels after the fact.

They claim his support for their contention — the one thing they all agree on-that

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A letter to Vincent R. Dunne in Minneapolis, *SWP Discussion Bulletin*, A-19, June 1955. Cannon did not succeed in writing his projected "Theses on the Party".

it is wrong to try to create a revolutionary party under the present conditions when the number of conscious revolutionists is so limited. This, they all say, is sectarian — not merely the policy and practice of such a party, but a small party's claim of the right to exist, regardless of its aims and actions.

The Shachtmanites, as well as the Cochranites, refer to Engels on this point. I also noticed an article in the same sense in the new literary-political magazine called *Dissent*, published by a group of graduate Shachtmanites, professional abstainers, homeless socialists and other political vagabonds who call themselves intellectuals. These birds of passage vary the theme by quoting Marx, having first checked to make sure he is safely dead and unable to take them by the throat.

* * *

Well, as you know, I am on the warpath against any sign or symptom of sectarianism myself. I intend to write about it too, in a "preventative" way, and to appeal to Engels for help. I know that sectarianism — in one form or another — is an ever-present danger to any small organization of revolutionists condemned to isolation by circumstances beyond their control, regardless of their original wishes and intentions. The moment such an organization ceases to think of itself as a part of the working class, which can realize its aims only with and through the working class, and to conduct itself accordingly, it is done for.

The key to Engels's thought is his striking expression that the conscious socialists should act as a "leaven" in the instinctive and spontaneous movement of the working class. Those are winged words that every party member should memorize. The leaven can help the dough to rise and eventually become a loaf of bread, but can never be a loaf of bread itself.

Every tendency, direct or indirect, of a small revolutionary party to construct a world of its own, outside and apart from the real movement of the workers in the class struggle, is sectarian. Such tendencies can take many forms, and we should not delude ourselves that the well known illustrations exhaust the possibilities.

We have come a long way, I think, from the adventures of the earliest American socialists with separate, self-sufficient colonies of their own outside the prevailing economy, and the experiments of the SLP with pure socialist unions outside the existing labor movement, with all its imperfections. But a self-perfecting "political colony", attempting to live a life of its own in a world of its own devising, would not be any better.

Engels's words of wisdom on this subject deserve discussion and application to modern conditions. But when I enter the controversy around Engels's letters, I am not

going to limit myself to the question of sectarianism. The real issue, as it is evolving, is the attempt to use the authority of Engels to liquidate the conception of a party of socialists, based on a definite program — a party which under present conditions can only be a small one — in favor of some prospective "big" party, to be constructed some time in the future by some people whose names and addresses are unknown, as a result of further development of the spontaneous process. That is dead wrong because the very idea of a party— large or small — presupposes a program and therefore consciousness.

Incidentally, this misunderstanding and misuse of Engels is not new. It is a striking commentary on the belatedness of American political thought that Engels's letters to Sorge, which were published in Germany 49 years ago and translated into Russian a year later-and became the subject of controversy in the Russian movement as far back as 1907 —are only now available in full in this country, and are now becoming a factor in the same controversy here!

Lenin's introduction to the 1907 Russian edition of these letters (reprinted as an appendix to the new American edition) is a sustained polemic against the opportunists who cited the authority of Engels for their proposal to liquidate the Social Democratic Party, based on a strictly defined program, in favor of an amorphous "Labor Congress". That in essence is what all the assorted ex-es and revolutionists-turned-opportunists are trying to do in the United States today.

My polemics against the present-day liquidators will restore Lenin's defense of Engels against the Russian liquidators of half a century ago, but will not stop there. Engels did not say the last word on the question of the party, and neither did Lenin ìn 1907. A great deal happened since, and if one wishes to be true to the spirit and method of Engels, these events of living history must be noticed and appraised; and the appraisal should add something to what was said then.

Sixty years have elapsed since Engels laid down his pen. From what he saw and knew at the time he thought the German party of Bebel was good enough, by and large. On the other side, Lenin, in 1907, was content to take the Bebel party for a model. He said-in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* — that he was "not creating any special variety of Bolshevik tendency" but simply adapting "the viewpoint of the revolutionary Social Democracy", as represented in the Second International, to Russian conditions.

But the German Social Democratic Party proved inadequate to its historical task and collapsed ignominiously in the test of 1914. Can there be any doubt that Engels would have drawn some radical conclusions from this catastrophe? Lenin, for his part, was compelled later to recognize that his concept of the vanguard party, which he had

originally intended as nothing more than a Russian version of the German party, was in fact something new — a development and application of the Marxist theory of the party in the epoch of the actual struggle for power.

This conception was vindicated positively in the Russian Revolution, and negatively by the defeat of the revolution in other countries where the old forms held sway. The leitmotif of Trotsky's great struggle in the post-Lenin epoch, summed up and restated in his thesis on the crisis of leadership in the Transitional Program of 1938, was precisely this Leninist contribution and extension of Marxism in the theory and practice of the party.

If one merely wants a "big" party, just to have a party, then any kind of a party will do; but nothing less than a Bolshevik party is good enough for war and revolution. That, I think, is the conclusive verdict of historical experience. Moreover, the construction of such a party cannot be postponed until everybody recognizes its necessity. The project has to be started by those who are ready, willing and able. That's the way it was done in Russia, and nobody has yet discovered a better way.

We have plenty of ammunition for polemical warfare against the liquidators in the controversy around Engels's letters to Sorge; and the subject should certainly have an absorbing interest for the new generation entering the movement at a time when theory and practice have a good chance of being telescoped. It may be that our projected "Theses on the Party" will gradually evolve first in controversy before they are formally codified. That is ". I wonder if this subject could not be profitably added to the curriculum of the Trotsky school.

As ever,

J.P. Cannon■

Intellectuals & Revolution

Dear George:
This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter and Evelyn's lively note of February 9 about your meeting with M. This is certainly interesting and important news. It is also gratifying to hear that a conversation between us about M. a year or so ago led, in a chain of actions and reactions, to your visit at his home.

But you are not quite accurate when you attribute my earlier suggestion that you undertake a serious and critical evaluation of M.'s work to my "customary generosity." This explanation is a bit too generous on your part. The truth, which I began to love and revere in my earliest youth and which, in my later years, I am beginning to worship, compels me to admit that my motive was a little more complicated and devious than you make it. If I had anything to do with it, two other reasons for my proposal strike me as more plausible and closer to the truth.

In the first place, I recognized that you had studied M.'s writings and related material more attentively and thoroughly than I had and were better qualified as a Marxist scholar to analyze them. In the second place, when there is a big job of work to be done my lifelong reflex has been to look around for someone else to do it. In this instance, as in many others, you happened to be the one I pointed at.

Now don't get the idea that this disclaimer is another example of my well-known modesty. My general procedure in these matters is just a sly, Irish trick of turning the defects of ignorance and laziness into merits. I have been getting away with this sort of thing for years and years. And, strangely enough, the movement has benefited most of the time, while I have acquired a reputation as a nice guy who finds jobs for other

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This 1961 letter to George Novack was found among the papers of the late George Weissman. The "M" referred to is the well-known radical sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916-62). Mills was the author of numerous works including *The Power Elite* (1956) and *The Marxists* (1962). The book discussed here is his controversial best seller, *Listen Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960). The letter is taken from *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism,* New York, No. 100, Oct-Nov 1992.

people. In addition, as a sort of bonus, I have had the special indulgence to loaf and ruminate without being harried too much by my Irish conscience.

* * *

I think I agree entirely with everything you say in your letter in evaluation of M. He is different. As you know, I have always had a low, not to say contemptuous, opinion of the contemporary American intelligentsia. And that is not simply a carryover of the anti-intellectualism of my young Wobbly days. After I became a communist and recognized that the thinkers and leaders of the Russian revolution, like their own mentors before them, were all intellectuals, I made a serious effort at "thought reform" on the subject. But I must say that the intellectuals of our time in this country, particularly those who have made pretensions to radicalism, have done their best to keep me from going overboard.

Experience and observation over a long time have taught me two things about the American intellectuals in general, and the academicians in particular. They lack modesty, which is the precondition for learning things they don't already know, especially about the dark interiors of social problems which have been explored by others but remain an undiscovered country for them. Supplementary to that defect, and holding them back from serious exploration, is the plain and simple fact that they have no guts. They want to keep out of trouble.

In the book of Catholicism, which I studied as a boy, there are three types of sins. The first are venial (small) sins, such as my own — work-dodging, procrastination, self-indulgence, shooting pool on Sunday, etc. — which are easily forgiven and which one can even forgive oneself after a few prayers, if a priest isn't available. Then there are mortal sins, such as murder, blasphemy, adultery, etc. These can be forgiven by a priest if serious penance is done, but the mortal sinner must still serve time in purgatory before entering heaven. The third sin is the sin against the Holy Ghost. For that there is no forgiveness, and there is no place to go but to hell. Well, cowardice is a sin against the Holy Ghost! Or, to turn it around and switch from the catechism to Ben Johnson: "Courage is the first virtue,"

* * *

For quite a while I have regarded M. as a maverick on the academic range; his manifest courage and honesty seemed to separate him from the herd. Then his book about Cuba showed another and most attractive side of his character. I read it attentively, and kept assessing it as I went along, on two levels.

On one level it is an absorbing and moving exposition of the revolutionary process

in Cuba, as the leaders of the revolution see it. And, to my mind, reading between the lines of their letters transmitted through M., they see more, and have studied and thought and reflected more about what they are doing, than they explicitly acknowledge in the letters.

They explain that they represent a new generation, starting from scratch, without the weariness and disillusionment that paralyzes the older generations of the radical movement. But they couldn't have said that if they had not previously thought and reflected about it. They must have noticed that their youth gave them the energy and drive that youth alone can give, and that their simple ignorance, in contrast to the miseducation and disillusionment of their elders, had a certain positive side. They had less to unlearn.

They frankly say they are improvising as they go along. But the remarkable thing is that they have made the right improvisations almost every time, and keep in step with the revolution as it continues to develop. And this course has been continued since the book was written. Castro's speech at the United Nations on the mainsprings of imperialism was the speech of a man who has picked up Lenin's theory somewhere; maybe from the book itself. Then, in the press reports the other day Castro was quoted as saying-for the first time explicitly, as far as I know-that the socialist system is superior to the capitalistic system, and that in a resumption of normal diplomatic relations the United States would have to take this Cuban position into account.

From all this I got the impression that the Cuban leaders knew more about revolutionary theory than they claimed to know when they were talking with M., and that they know even more now, and are still learning.

* * *

On the other level, M. revealed himself as a man more clearly in this book than ever before. I kept saying to myself as I turned the pages from his introduction to his summary: "This intellectual really cares about the hungry people of the world. He worries, as he says himself, not about the sweeping revolution, but with it. He is even capable of anger-that holy emotion of rebels and revolutionists-about injustice, oppression, lies, and hypocrisy. What a dangerous wild man to be running loose on the American campus!"

His book moved me deeply. I kept thinking of writing him a note of thanks and appreciation. But with my usual procrastination and bashful reluctance to intrude on strangers, I put it off.

* * *

I would like here to make a brief comment on the important point dealt with inconclusively at the end of your talk with M. For convenience I will first quote a paragraph from your letter:

"If the Soviet economy is more productive, is it not then historically superior?" I asked. "What do you mean by historically superior?" he asked. "That it can produce more goods, more wealth, in less time with less labor per person." "Yes, I think it can be more efficient but that is not for me the only test of historical superiority. More important is the moral, cultural, and intellectual superiority." The discussion ended when I added that without a superior capacity for material production there couldn't be a superior cultural superstructure.

I don't think the apparent disagreement should be left in that stalemate. The question is more subtle, more complicated. And, for my part, I can see merit in both your criterion and that of M. They should be reconciled, not contrasted.

It is elementary that "a superior capacity for material production is the necessary basis for a superior cultural superstructure." Even the Cuban leaders, who don't profess to be practicing Marxists, know that and are working night and day to improve productive capacities to provide the means for all the other things. But in my opinion, there is also merit in M.'s concern for "moral, cultural, and intellectual superiority," because it cannot be taken for granted that this will follow automatically from the reorganization of the productive system. This aim must be deliberately stated and consciously fought for all the time.

The fullest democracy in the transition period, institutionalized by forms of organization which assure the participation and control of the working people at every stage of development, is an indispensable part of our program. This has to be not merely stated, but emphasized. It distinguishes us from, and puts us in irreconcilable opposition to, the "economic determinists" and the totalitarians. It is the condition for the most efficient and rapid development of the new productive process.

And no less important, perhaps even more important: This full and free democratic participation of the working people, in all stages and all phases of the social tranformation during the transition period between the old society and the new, is the necessary condition for the preparation of the people for citizenship in a genuinely free society. It is not enough to learn to read and write and produce material things in abundance. That's only the starting point. People have to learn how to live abundantly. That means they have to leam how to be free in body, mind, and spirit. Where else can they learn that but in the school and practice of ever-expanding democracy during the transition period?

In view of the way things have turned in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and

China, this part of our Marxist program — workers' democracy as the only road to preparation for the socialist society of the free and equal — must be given particular emphasis in all our propaganda and all our arguments with people who are dissatisfied with capitalism, but don't want to exchange it for totalitarian slavery.

If we fail to emphasize this fundamental feature of our Marxist program; if we omit it or slur over it in our expositions of the superiority of nationalized and planned economy; if we neglect to speak of freedom as the socialist goal — we will never win the American workers and the new generation of intellectuals for the revolutionary fight. And we won't deserve to.

* * *

My thoughts have turned increasingly to this side of the problem of social transformation in recent years. My speech on "Socialism and Democracy" at our 1957 convention (later repeated at the West Coast Vacation School and subsequently published as a pamphlet) was a first response to the questions troubling many people shaken up by the Khrushchev speech and the Polish and Hungarian events. Our discussion of the Chinese revolution during the past two years has pushed me to think more deeply on the subject, and I will probably have more to say later.

Here I will briefly state my settled conviction, as an orthodox Marxist, in one question and one answer: Will the development of the productive forces by a system of planned economy, under a totalitarian regime of regimentation and thought control, automatically lead to the socialist society of the free and equal?

My answer is No, Never! The workers must achieve their own emancipation; nobody will do it for them and nobody can. If anybody is looking for a fight on this basic postulate of Marxism, just tell him to knock the chip off my shoulder.

From this point of view, it appears to me that M.'s concern, which I fully share, for the "moral, cultural, and intellectual superiority" of the new society — and by that I have to presume that he means a free society — contradicts his denial of the role of the working class.as the decisive agency of social change. This stands out all the more glaringly if we recognize that the transformation of society is not accomplished by the single act of revolution, but requires a transition period during which people change themselves while they are changing society.

If the workers are unable to carry through this historical task, it has to be assigned to some kind of elite. But then we come to the embarrassing questions: Will this uncontrolled elite be benevolent? Will it extend freedom, purely from goodness of heart and nobility of intentions? Or will it curtail freedom until it is stamped out entirely? Experience so far in the history of the human race in general and of this

century in particular, speaks powerfully for the latter assumption.

I don't know whether George Orwell's 1984 was intended as a prophecy or a warning. But if one grants or assumes that the workers are unable to take control of public affairs and keep control, it is most logical to assume that Big Brother will eventually take over. This is not a new thought of mine, or even of Orwell's. Trotsky bluntly posed this alternative 21 years ago in *In Defense of Marxism*.

He didn't believe it would happen that way, and neither do I. The working class cannot be written off until it has been definitively defeated on a worldwide scale. That hasn't happened yet in Europe and America, or in the Soviet bloc, as the events of 1956-57 gave notice.

In this country, where the issue will finally be decided, the working class in basic industry, previously atomized and without experience in organization, showed great power in the thirtes. That is too recent to forget. The uprising which culminated in the constitution of the CIO was a semi-revolution. It could have gone much farther if there had been adequate leadership. The workers — who need an "elite" to lead, but not to substitute — have marked time and even lost some ground since then; but they gave not been defeated in open conflict.

In my opinion, it would be rash and "unscientific" to assume, in advance of the showdown conflict, that they will be defeated. But if one does assume that, he should not shrink from recognizing the horrifying alternative which first Trotsky, and later Orwell, posed-and quit talking about the future good society of the free and equal. Under such a regime it would be unlawful even to think about such things.

Fraternally,

James P. Cannon■

New Revolutionary Forces Are Emerging

May 22, 1961
To the Political Committee
New York, NY

Dear Comrades,
I have carefully studied the PC minutes of May 3. The remarks of Morris Stein, Murry [Weiss] and Bob Chester on the world movement are very much along the line of my own thinking. I also agree with the remarks of Dobbs to the effect that our international resolution now being drafted, giving a positive statement of our own views at the present time, is the best way to begin our contribution to the international discussion.

I think it should be frankly presented as such —as our contribution to the international discussion — and, consequently, as Farrell indicates in his remarks, that it will be subject to possible modification later on in the light of that discussion.That is simply another way of saying that we are willing to learn as well as to teach; that we do not begin a discussion with ultimatums.

I am not entirely sure right now, but I incline more and more to the idea that this international resolution, as it eventually may be adopted by the Convention, should be published in our magazine. We want to reach the widest possible audience in all sectors of the international movement. This will not be possible if we simply pass it

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The background to Cannon's letter is the split in the Fourth International during the height of the Cold War. In the early 1950s the Fourth International split into two factions, the International Commitee — to which the SWP and the British group led by Gerry Healy adhered — and the International Secretariat — among whose prominent leaders were Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. The political positions of the two wirgs grew closer together from the 1956 Hungarian uprising on and they reunified in 1963 (minus Healy and Pablo). First published in *SWP Discussion Bulletin,* Vol. 22, . 17, June 1961.

back and forth among a few people in mimeographed form.

The "fragmentation" of the international movement, which Murry spoke about in his remarks, is in my opinion, not entirely, nor even mainly, a negative manifestation. It appears to me that the whole international movement, in all its branches and affiliations and independent sectors, is in a process of fermentation and re-examination of the problems of party building. That puts a serious discussion on the agenda. And that, in turn, can lead to a broader eventual unification of the international Trotskyist forces, and others who do not yet recognize themselves as Trotskyists.

* * *

Unification is definitely not on the agenda now, and it would be unrealistic to talk about it in concrete terms. But the perspective of a broader unification than we have ever known before has to be kept in mind all the time as the goal toward which the discussion is aimed. The unification we foresee and aim at must not be simply the unification of those organizations or groups formally affiliated to the International Committee and the Intemational Secretariat, and those other Trotskyist groups which at present remain independent.

New revolutionary forces are emerging, notably at present in Cuba, and probably throughout Latin America, which have never had previous international affiliation or even formal organization on national grounds. We also know of several split-offs from the Stalinist party in Mexico. There are deep divisions in other Stalinist parties in Latin America. The Indian independent Trotskyists have recently made a fusion with a group of former Stalinists. There is a group of former members of the CP in Japan. Etc.

If our movement should fail to foresee and consciously aim at collaboration and eventual unification with new people who are actually engaged in carrying through a socialist revolution, or striving toward it, it would brand itself as a futile sect and not a living, expanding revolutionary movement, as Trotsky envisaged it.

The aim of the discussion is not to produce new splits and splinters until there is nothing left but a sterile little church of self-satisfied scholastics. To be sure, the discussion of obvious differences will, in its first stage, draw clear lines of differentiation. But the aim of this method of procedure is not simply to freeze old splits and to manufacture new ones. The object, rather, is to get all points of view on the table for consideration and discussion, with the expectation that some, if not all, of the participants in the discussion will change and learn from the arguments and the unfolding events and come closer together in a broader unification.

* * *

In working out our tactical approach to this complex problem, we should draw on all the experiences of the past, not simply the experiences of yesterday or the day before. The history of our own movement since 1928 is very rich in these experiences. But the principal guiding lines go back much further than that. The struggles of Bolshevism, from its beginning in 1903 up to the October Revolution, and through the first years of the Comintern until the death of Lenin, are an important part of our heritage.

The idea of a monolithic international and monolithic national parties cannot draw any support from these experiences. The history of Bolshevism, from its beginning up until the October Revolution, was a history not only of splits but also of unifications and attempted unifications with the Mensheviks. It was not until 1912 that the Bolsheviks formally constituted themselves as an independent party and no longer as a faction of the Russian Social-Democracy. And after that, it shouldn't be forgotten-because the fate of the revolution depended on it-the Bolsheviks made a unification with Trotsky and his group after the March Revolution, and also kept the door open for any signs of a revolutionary turn on the part of the left Mensheviks.

* * *

The Communist International was not built into a mass movement in its early days by simply proclaiming the need for new parties in each country. There was a rather prolonged process of unifications and splits in the different countries before the national sections of the Comintern were firmly established.

The Communist Party of Germany originated with the Spartacus group of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. But this was followed two years later by a unification with the left wing of the Independent Socialist Party which gave the Communist Party of Germany for the first time a mass base. In England, the Communist Party was established through a fusion of a number of sectarian groups, none of which had been Bolsheviks originally. In France and Italy the syndicalists were invited. In the United States, the Comintern invited the Socialist Labour Party, the IWW and the left wing of the Socialist Party to participate in the Second Congress of the Comintern.

The same process of splits and unifications took place in practically every other country in the early days of the consolidation of the parties of the Comintern. In the early congresses of the Comintern deep and serious differences on the most important questions were freely discussed. Lenin and Trotsky didn't try to eliminate them by expulsions and splits. “Monolithism” began with Stalin, not with Lenin.

* * *

The Left Opposition of the Russian Communist Party was first organized in 1923. But in 1926, when Zinoviev and Kamenev broke with Stalin and Bukharin, the Trotskyist Left Opposition made a bloc with them and gained a much broader base as a result.

Trotsky's method in creating the first cadres of the international Left Opposition, after his deportation to Turkey in 1929, was to draw clear lines of demarcation for the new movement; and then to build it, not only by splits, but also by unifications with other oppositional groups. And then, after the original cadres of international Trotskyism had been consolidated, Trotsky initiated a new series of discussions and negotiations with left-centrist elements in independent parties and others still remaining within the parties of the Second International.

* * *

Trotsky never envisaged the Fourth International as a monolithic, purely Trotskyist organization, but as a broad revolutionary movement in which we, orthodox Trotskyists, might possibly, under certain conditions and for certain periods, be a minority. He stated this explicitly in one of his letters prior to the Founding Congress in 1938.[1] He proposed that Chen Tu-hsiu, who at that time was in sharp conflict with our Chinese section over some important questions, should be invited to be a member of the Intemational Executive Committee.

The internal regime of our international movement during the lifetime of Trotsky never tried to enforce monolithism. That began with Pablo. The discussion bulletins of our international movement throughout this period show that differences of opinion on the most important questions arose again and again and were freely discussed. A large part of our education in fact was derived from these discussions.

The recognition of the Soviet Union as a workers state, and of the obligation to defend it against imperialist attack, was a central principle of our international movement at the time. This characterization and this attitude was challenged time and again, year after year, and freely discussed without expulsions or threats of expulsion.

* * *

In the classic battle of 1939-40 with the Burnham-Shachtman faction, they were about as wrong as it was possible for a faction to be in America under conditions of that time. Shachtman thought we were engaged in a "polemic" and conducted himself like a high school debater scoring points. He didn't really know that he was dealing with a question of a revolution and that it was dangerous to play with such a question. He didn't know

it because he didn't feel it.

It was a red hot question for us at that time, just as the Cuban Revolution is at present, because public opinion was being mobilized every day by all the imperialist agencies against the Soviet Union. It was particularly reprehensible for Shachtman to choose that period to wash his hands of it. But despite this deep and terrible difference on such a burning question as one's attitude toward a revolution in existence, Trotsky did not advocate a split, not even if we should turn out to be a minority in the Convention struggle. The split followed only after the minority refused to accept the Convention decision.

That is still not the end of the story. Seven years later we conducted serious negotiations for unity with the Shachtmanites, despite the fact that they had not changed their position on the Soviet Union in the meantime. Those who may be playing with the idea of a "monolithic" party and a monolithic international will have a hard time finding any support for it in the teachings and practice of the Old Man.

* * *

I suppose all the participants in the present discussion know that the American Trotskyists made a fusion with the Musteites in 1934, and then joined the Socialist Party in 1936. But it should not be forgotten that these tactical turns, which contributed so greatly to the expansion of our movement in members and influence during the Thirties, were not smoothly accomplished. We first had to settle accounts with the Oehlerites. They gave us very stern lectures about the principle of the independent revolutionary party and accused us of liquidation, betrayal and other assorted crimes. The Oehlerites diagnosed our position incorrectly, as further developments amply demonstrated. But when a real threat of liquidationism confronted us in 1953, we showed that we knew how to recognise it and how to deal with it.

* * *

All this is part of the experience of the past which should be borne in mind, and even studied, in the present period. The real problem, now as then, is not to recognize the necessity of new parties and a new intemational — we have known that for a long time — but rather how to build them and broaden them into a strong revolutionary force.

Fortunately, the problem now under discussion is not academic. It centres, at the moment, on Cuba and the Cuban Revolution and the leaders of this revolution. In exceptional circumstances, these people have changed Cuba and changed themselves. They have carried through a genuine socialist revolution, and armed the working population, and defended the revolution successfully against an imperialist-backed

invasion. And now they openly proclaim themselves socialist, and say the 1940 constitution is out of date and that a new constitution is needed.

In my opinion, that's pretty good for a start — and I am talking here about the leaders as well as the masses who support them. If such people are not considered as rightful participants in a discussion, and possible collaborators in a new party and a new international — where will we find better candidates?

Trotsky, in the middle Thirties, initiated extensive discussion and collaboration with left-centrists who only talked about the revolution, and even that not very convincingly. The Cuban revolutionists have done more than talk, and they are not the only ones on trial from now on. We are also on trial. What would our talk about revolution be worth if we couldn't recognize a revolution when we see it?

Fraternally,

Jim■

Happy Birthday Arne Swabeck

Birthday parties in ordinary life are pretty much the same, but this gathering in honor of Arne Swabeck is different, a sort of upside-down birthday party.

For most people a birthday is a good excuse to lay off and eat cake and let others do the work. It was characteristic of Arne to book himself for an educational lecture at a branch meeting on his birthday, so that the celebration had to be held up until he finished his party chores.

This birthday party is different in another respect, too. Usually friends assemble to present gifts to one who has passed another milestone, the implication being that he needs something to help him up the hill that gets a little steeper every year. Here the birthday celebrant is the giver and the assembled guests, present in person or in spirit-all his party comrades throughout the country and throughout the world-are the grateful beneficiaries.

What we offer him tonight, in the way of trinkets and mementos, are not so much for his benefit as for our own. They are intended not as material gifts to sustain him, but rather as receipts, as acknowledgments of all that he has given to us, to help us, to instruct us by his teachings, and above all to inspire us by his example, and thus to sustain us in the long fight for socialism to which our lives, like his, are committed.

This is a gathering of friends. The word "friend" is one of the biggest words ever spoken, but it is often used too lightly. Friendship formed in fair weather is an unknown quantity. It takes the test of adversity to measure its true value.

We used to have a saying in the old IWW, that you never know a man until you have been in jail with him, or broke and on the bum with him. That was just another

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Arne Swabeck (1890-1986), a Danish immigrant, was a leader of the US Communist Party from its inception and later of the Trotskyist movement. He was a longtime close collaborator of Cannon. (He is referred to as "Ben Webster" in *The History ofAmerican Trotskyism.)* In the 1960s he became a supporter of Maoism — which he identified with revolutionary Marxism — and was expelled from the SWP for violations of discipline in 1967. Cannon's speech is taken from *The Militant,* September 21, 1953.

way of saying that you can't really tell what a man is made of until you see how he conducts himself when the road gets rough, when the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune fly at him from all directions.

Such were the conditions under which I first got acquainted with Arne Swabeck 32 years ago at an underground convention of the Communist Party. We met as comrades of a persecuted band at a rough spot in the road. We have travelled together ever since, always sticking together, with our eyes on the goal ahead, no matter who else might falter and fall by the wayside. In the course of the long journey we became friends.

The road we have travelled together has had many twists and turns; we have seen and experienced many things, and the goal we saw 32 years ago is clearer than ever in our vision; but we haven't found a smooth road yet. They don't run that way this side of socialism.

The firmest bond of sustained personal association is allegiance to common ideas and ideals. That is what makes the difference between someone you know and someone you can depend on in hard and heavy struggle. That is the iron bond which unites Arne Swabeck with those who celebrate his triumphant birthday tonight.

It has united some of us with him over the long stretch since the pioneer days of American communism; and this association, in turn, has maintained the unbroken continuity of the movement, its tradition and its leadership. This allegiance to common ideas and ideals unites the old guard with the party youth — the leaders of tomorrow.

Arne Swabeck has always believed in this primacy of ideas and taught others to believe it. He took Marxist theory seriously, studied it attentively, and taught it to others. That has been his chief service to the party, and especially to the younger generations of the Chicago branch, who have learned from him and who gratefully acknowledge their indebtedness at this birthday gathering tonight.

But the lesson would be barren without its correlative. Our theory is a guide to action, not only for the party but for each individual member. It is only by action that one can give valid testimony to his theoretical convictions. Faith without works is dead. The true revolutionist lives and acts the way he thinks and talks.

Here, too, Arne Swabeck has set us the perfect example. He has taught us, by the consistent example of his entire life, what it really means to be a socialist, not only in theory, but also in practice; not only in words but in deeds.

The true art of being a socialist consists not merely in recognizing the trend of social evolution from capitalism to socialism, and striving to help it along and hasten on the day. It consists not merely in the prophetic vision that life will be better and fairer under socialism; that human nature, crippled and deformed in the class society,

will assert itself and change for the better; and that people in the socialist society will be different and better.

The true art of being a socialist consists in anticipating the socialist future; in not waiting for its actual realization, but in striving, here and now, insofar as the circumstances of class society permit, to live like a socialist; to live under capitalism according to the higher standards of the socialist future.

The comrade whom we honor tonight has helped to teach us this art of being a socialist by the method of the good teachers who teach by example: by living a socialist life himself.

His contributions and achievements in many fields of work have been gratefully acknowledged here tonight. But his greatest achievement of all, that which we honor above all, is the simple fact of his consistent socialist life — not just on special occasions, but every day in the week and twice on Sunday.

And that is the main reason he has turned out such good pupils, who in turn have become teachers, here and in other sections of the party. For Arne has taught not only from the books, important as that is, but also from life, by the example of his own life.

I understand that the Chicago branch has decided to demand less active work from Arne in the future and give him more time for writing. You can afford to do that now, precisely because he has done his work as a leader well — by the highest socialist standards, not as an individual performer, crowding others from the stage, but above all as a teacher, teaching and inspiring others by precept and example.

Those who have been so taught and so inspired-and that includes every one of us-will be well able to take care of things if Arne obeys the command of the branch to ease up his strenuous activity a bit. This is not an underestimation of his leadership, but the highest possible compliment to it; for the best socialist leaders are those who teach and inspire others, and prepare them to take their place.

If the leaders do this, as Arne Swabeck has done so well, and still stick around to lend a hand once in a while, it is all the better. The comrades of Local Chicago are doubly fortunate in this respect. They have the benefit of his past teaching and example-and still have Arne, too. Thus equipped, they can confidently face their great future.

In toasting Arne Swabeck, and all that he stands for, they are saluting their future victory.■

James P. Cannon: A Chronology

1890	Feb 11	Cannon born in Rosedale, Kansas
1908		Joins Socialist Party
1911		Quits SP to join International Workers of the World
1917	Nov 26	Russian Revolution
1919		Founding of US Communist Party
1921		Cannon first chairperson of Workers Party
1928	Jun	Sixth Congress of Comintern in Moscow
	Oct	Cannon, Shachtman and Abern expelled from CP
	Nov 15	First issue of *The Militant*
1929	May	First national convention of Communist League of America
1933	Jan	Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany
	Mar	Roosevelt president. Promises "New Deal"
		CLA turns away from CP to work in mass movement
1934	Apr	Toledo Auto-Lite strike led by Muste group
	May	Minneapolis strike
	Jul-Aug	Second Minneapolis strike victorious
	Dec	CLA and Muste group fuse to form Workers Party of US
1936	Jun	Entry into SP
1937	Late	Departure from SP
1938	Jan 1	Chicago: founding of Socialist Workers Party
1939	Aug	Hitler-Stalin pact
1939-40		Struggle in SWP over defence of Soviet Union
1940	Apr	SWP convention. Minority splits
	Aug 21	Trotsky assassinated
1941	Jun	Hitler invades USSR
	Jul	SWP leaders indicted

	Oct	18 SWP leaders convicted
1943	Dec	SWP leaders enter prison
1945-46		Huge postwar strike wave
1947		Reactionary offensive, cold war
1950-53		Korean war
1952		Cannon moves to LA; Farrell Dobbs national secretary
1953		Stalin dies
1952-53		Struggle against Cochran minority
1956		Khrushchev denounces Stalin
1959	Jan	Cuban revolution
1974	Aug 21	Cannon dies in Los Angeles

Bibliography & Further Reading

Books

James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism *Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920-1928* (Prometheus Research Library: New York, 1992). A useful companion volume to Cannon's *First Ten Years of American Communism*. The Prometheus Research Library is associated with the ultra-sectarian Spartacist tendency but this is nonetheless a very well-put-together collection. It contains Cannon's 1924 speech on "Our Aims and Tactics in the Trade Unions" and an article on "How to Organize and Conduct a Study Class" from the same year, both of which are well worth reading.

The First Ten Years of American Communism (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1972). The main part of this book consists of letters written in the 1950s to the historian Theodore Draper. It also contains an introductory overview of the early US Communist Party — "The First Ten Years in Perspective" — plus several appendices: "The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement", "Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Movement of His Time" and "The IWW — the Great Anticipation".

James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1928-31 *The Left Opposition in the US 1928-31 (*Monad Press: New York, 1981). Covers the hard early years of the US Trotskyist movement (dealt with in chapters 3-5 of *The History of American Trotskyism*). As with all the four volumes in this series, there is an extensive and very useful introduction.

James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1932-34 *The Communist League of America 1932-34* (Monad Press: New York, 1985). Covers the period of the triumph of fascism in Germany, the CLA's turn to mass work and the construction of an independent party, the Minneapolis strikes and the fusion with A.J. Muste's American Workers Party (all treated in chapters 6-9 of *The History of American Trotskyism*). The early struggle between Cannon and Shachtman — and Trotsky's decisive intervention to help overcome it and avert a split — are dealt with here

and four letters by Trotsky are included in an appendix.

The History of American Trotskyism (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1972). Originally a series of lectures given in 1942, this is a wonderful primer in revolutionary politics. A rich record of the arduous struggle to build a real socialist movement in the United States, it contains a wealth of political lessons for activists today. Essential reading.

James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1940-43 *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1975). Covering the wartime period up to Cannon's imprisonment, this volume deals with the party's military policy and its struggle to retain its legality and its press in the face of government harassment. Also contains his speech on "The Problem of Party Leadership".

Socialism on Trial (Resistance Books: Sydney, 1999). Cannon's courtroom testimony during the famous 1941 Minneapolis "sedition" trial is a masterful presentation of the principles and aims of revolutionary socialism. Also included is Cannon's "Defence Policy in the Minneapolis Trial" ("Marxism Versus Ultraleftism"), his classic polemic against ultraleft tactics .

The Struggle for a Proletarian Party (Resistance Books: Sydney, 2001). Along with Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism*, this is indispensable reading for a study of the great 1939-40 struggle in the SWP against the petty-bourgeois Burnham-Shachtman opposition. It contains Cannon's essay of the same name plus a number of his letters to comrades and various documents of the dispute.

Letters from Prison (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1994). Cannon's time served in Sandstone prison in 1944-45 for his opposition to the imperialist war was certainly not wasted. This collection of letters is an invaluable handbook of partybuilding for socialist actvists.

James P. Cannon Writings and Speeches, 1945-47 *The Struggle for Socialism in the 'American Century'* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1977). Covers the end of the war and the tumultuous years immediately following, marked by a huge labor upsurge and a significant and promising expansion of the SWP. Also falling in this period is the dispute with the Goldman-Morrow tendency and the ultimately fruitless unity discussions with Shachtman's Workers Party. Included here are "The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki", Cannon's powerful indictment of the crimes of US imperialism, and the "Theses on the American Revolution".

Speeches to the Party *The Revolutionary Perspective and the Revolutionary Party* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1973). A record of the 1952-53 struggle in the SWP with the Cochran grouping, this complilation contains "Trade Unionists and Revolutionists", "Internationalism and the SWP", "Factional Struggle and Party

Leadership" and much more.

Speeches for Socialism (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1971). An inspiring collection of speeches over four decades covering a wealth of topics. A must for every socialist bookshelf.

Notebook of an Agitator (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1973). Socialist journalism at its best covering a wide range of topics, from defence of Sacco and Vanzetti, the Korean War, crime, the Catholic Church, boxing and a lot more.

America's Road to Socialism (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1975). In 1952-53, at the height of the Cold War and the McCarthyite witchhunt, Cannon presented a series of lectures in Los Angeles on the prospects for socialism and what a socialist United States might look like. This is indeed the big picture.

The Struggle for Socialism in the 'American Century' (Resistance Books: Sydney, 2000). A great collection of Cannon's articles, talks and speeches spanning the decades.

Other material by or about Cannon

Aspects of Socialist Election Policy (Education for Socialists/SWP: New York, 1971). A useful compilation, includes three pieces by Cannon, two of which are not available elsewhere.

Background to *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* by James P. Cannon et al (Education for Socialists/SWP: New York, 1979). Contains several Cannon articles not avalaible elsewhere plus other material on the topic, including a selection of Trotsky's writings on the problems of the SWP.

The Founding of the Socialist Workers Party *Minutes and Resolutions 1938-39* (Monad Press: New York, 1982). Edited by George Breitman, the material presented gives a very interesting picture of the positions and character of the SWP. It also contains two Cannon articles, one not in print elsewhere.

Leon Trotsky: The Man and His Work (Merit Publishers: New York, 1969). Contains Cannon's essay, "Trotsky on the United States" (based on lectures given in 1956).

James P. Cannon *A Political Tribute* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1974). Put out shortly after Cannon's death, the personal reminscences have been incorporated into *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him* but it contains other material not readily available elsewhere from 1974, the year of his death. His final speech — "Internationalism is the Central Principle of Our Movement" — and the four interviews — on defence work, youth work, black liberation and socialism and US radical history — are well worth reading.

James P. Cannon As We Knew Him by Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1976). This is a truly inspiring collection. For anyone

who has gained an appreciation of Cannon from his writings, these reminiscences are absolutely essential reading.

James P. Cannon the Internationalist by Joseph Hansen (Education for Socialists/SWP: New York, 1980). As well as the title piece by Joseph Hansen, this bulletin contains an extensive selection of Cannon material relating to problems of the Trotskyist movement in Europe, especially in France. Many of the items are not in print elsewhere.

The Revolutionary Party by James P. Cannon (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1975). This short pamphlet is an excellent presentation of the case for the vanguard party. This edition contains a useful guide to Cannon's writings on the party question.

The Revolutionary Perspective for the United States by James P. Cannon (Education for Socialists/SWP: New York, 1975). A compilation of material from Cannon with a selection of Trotsky's writings on the topic. All the items are available elsewhere but this is a very handy collection. The centrepiece is the "Theses on the American Revolution".

Revolutionary Strategy in the Antiwar Movement (Education for Socialists/SWP: New York, 1975). Contains a 1965 speech by Cannon on strategy in the antiwar movement.■

Notes

An Introduction to James P. Cannon

1 *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, pp 13, 18.
2 *The Making of a Sect* The Evolution of the US Socialist Workers Party (Pathfinder Press Australia: Chippendale,1984).
3 *Trotskyism in the United States* Historical Essays and Reconsiderations by George Breitman, Paul LeBlanc and Alan Wald (Humanities Press: New Jersey, 1996).
4 *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, pp. 268, 270.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 271.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 288.
7 *The History of American Trotskyism*, pp. 13-14.
8 *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 23.
9 *The Third International After Lenin* by Leon Trotsky (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1970).
10 *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, p. 310.
11 *The History of American Trotskyism*, pp. 63-64.
12 *Ibid.*, pp. 90-92.
13 *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1929)* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1975).
14 *Teamster Rebellion* (Monad Press: New York, 1972), *Teamster Power* (1973), *Teamster Politics* (1975), *Teamster Bureaucracy* (1977).
15 *Speeches to the Party*, pp. 173-174.
16 *The History of American Trotskyism*, pp. 226-227.
17 *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II*, p. 33.
18 *In Defence of Marxism* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1976).
19 *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, p. 17.
20 *Speeches to the Party*, pp. 7-8.
21 *The Struggle for Socialism in the 'American Century'*, p. 256.
22 *Speeches to the Party*, pp. 9-11.
23 *Speeches for Socialism*, pp. 279-280.

Cannonism Versus Barnesism

1 *The History of American Trotskyism,* p. 118.
2 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p. 19.
3. "Perspectives and Lessons of the New Radicalisation", *International Socialist Review*, Vol. 32, No. 10 (New York, November 1971).
4 Barnes, "Report to the SWp National Committee", *ibid.*, p. 55.
5 Barnes, "Leading the Party into Industry", *Party Organiser*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (New York, April 1978).
6 *Ibid.*
7 "Draft Political Resolution", *SWP Discussion Bulletin*, Vol. 36, No. 8 (New York, March 1979).
8 Waters, "Building Party Fractions in Industry", *Party Organiser*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (New York, March 1979).
9 Barnes, "A New Stage of Revolutionary Working-Class Politics", *SWP Discussion Bulletin*, Vol. 36, No. 6 (New York, June 1979).
10 Barnes, "Branches, Fractions and Party Leadership", *Party Organiser*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (New York, February 1981).
11 Barnes, "The Organisational Norms of a Proletarian Party", *SWP Internal Information Bulletin*, No. 1 in 1982 (New Yor, September 1982).
12 "Political Committee Draft Political Resolution", *SWP Information Bulletin*, No. 4 in 1984 (New York, July 1984), p. 25.
13 See Cannon, "Engels on the American Question", p. 58 of this booklet.

Don't Strangle the Party

1 An antiwar convention and demonstration at the White House were held in Washington, DC, November 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 the October 1974 *International Socialist Review* and reprinted in *Revolutionary Strategy in the Antiwar Movement.*
2 *In Defence of Marxism* by Leon Trotsky and *The Struggle for a Proleatrian Party* by James P. Cannon.
3 Cannon's two speeches at the SWp NC plenum in February 1948, analysing the new Progressive Party led by Henry Wallace and proposing that the SWp run its first presidential campaign that year, are reprinted in *Aspects of Socialist Election Policy* (Education for Socialists/SWP, New York, 1971).

4 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. 1977).

New Revolutionary Forces are Emerging

1 "Chen Tu-hsiu and the General Council", *Writings of Leon Trotsky Supplement (1934-40)* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1979).■

James P. Cannon was a pioneer of the Communist Party of the United States and one of its central leaders in the 1920s. Breaking with the Stalinised CP in 1928 he founded the US Trotskyist movement and played a decisive role in building it for over three decades.

The outstanding figure produced by the Marxist movement in the US, his efforts to build a revolutionary workers party in the heartland of world capitalism are without precedent in their sheer duration over so long a period and in the face of such tremendous pressures.

The achievement of world socialism, to which Cannon dedicated his life, remains before us but socialists everywhere can gain inspiration and learn invaluable lessons from a study of the rich legacy of his writings and speeches.

This booklet provides a brief introduction to Cannon's life and work. It also contains a guide to his published material and presents a number of his writings from the 1950s and 1960s otherwise not readily available.

Resistance books