Working Papers of the
International Institute for Research and Education

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The circulation of the WPIRE is deliberately limited and may vary depending on the topic at hand. Their main purpose is to help the author by stimulating comments, suggestions and criticisms. These may concern the content as well as the form, the sources as well as the analysis. We hope the WPIRE will enhance international exchanges and contribute to a better collectivization of current theoretical, historical and political thinking.

The studies presented in this format generally retain an unfinished character. They are circulated to insure some exchange prior to completion and possible publication. It is therefore requested that they not be quoted or referred to in public without the formal authorization of the author.

Working Paper Number 27

Leninism in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Workers Party

Paul Le Blanc

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Introductory note

One of the most distinctive, vibrant, and controversial traditions in the history of the Fourth International, and also in the history of the left-wing and labor movements of the United States, is that which has been labeled "American Trotskyism."

Reprinted here is a long introductory essay, with appendices, which appeared in a book I edited—In Defense of American Trotskyism: Revolutionary Principles and Working-Class Democracy (New York: Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1992). This Working Paper, plus the materials mentioned above, indicate the approach and some of the content that would be included in a Notebook I have been asked to develop for the IIRE on the tradition associated with U.S. Trotskyism.

Other material on this topic that I have produced has appeared in several sources, including: publications of the old Fourth Internationalist Tendency (Trotskyism in America, the First Fifty Years and The Revolutionary Traditions of American Trotskyism); a number of entries in The Encyclopedia of the American Left, ed. by Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakis (New York: Garland, 1990; reprinted in paperback by University of Illinois Press, 1992); and C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism, edited by myself and Scott McMenemy (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993 forthcoming).

Those who are interested in the project of developing a Notebook on U.S. Trotskyism are encouraged to give attention to the sources indicated above plus the material contained in this IIRE Working Paper. I would appreciate hearing from all who want to share suggestions, criticisms, information, interpretations, etc. Please contact:

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As stated in Le Blanc's introductory note, this essay has already been published as part of a book he edited. We nevertheless decided to circulate it as a Working Paper to call for comments and help him in the preparation of a future Notebook of the IIRE. We hope this call for collective exchanges will be heard by those to whom this Working Paper is sent.

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The collapse of the bureaucratic dictatorships of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s have been hailed by defenders of the capitalist system as the collapse of socialism and definitive proof that the Bolshevik revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky in 1917 constituted "the road to nowhere." All attempts to establish the rule of the working class over society will lead to chaos and tyranny, we are told. Even many people who sympathize with socialist ideals are presently inclined to question the value of revolutionary Marxism, feeling that the strategic and organizational perspectives of Lenin and the Bolsheviks may indeed be responsible for the subsequent totalitarian nightmare during the reign of Joseph Stalin, followed by the stagnation and ultimate disintegration of bureaucratic "socialism." In the United States, this is certainly heightened by the fact that the so-called "Leninist left"—not only the Communist Party, but also what used to be its relatively substantial "Trotskyist" competitor the Socialist Workers Party—has been suffering a serious decline even before the recent collapse of so-called communism.

It may well be, however, that these years will come to be seen as a renewal period of the socialist movement—invoking the clarification of the actual meaning of the revolutionary socialist tradition, as bureaucratic and authoritarian crusts fall away under the impact of critical examination and the especially ruthless criticism of reality itself. Those who identify with the socialist tradition, and especially with the Marxism represented by such 20th-century revolutionaries as Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, etc., have no right to be taken seriously unless they are able to explain and help others learn the lessons of this complex experience. How did something that represented the most radical working-class democracy become so undemocratic and so alien to the actually existing working class—-not simply in the Soviet Union, but also in the left wing of the labor and social movements of the United States?

It is certainly not the case that no work has been done on these questions. The decline of the USSR and other such regimes has been the subject of a number of important studies—from Leon Trotsky’s The Revolution Betrayed to Ernest Mandel’s Beyond Perestroika and an important anthology edited by Marilyn Vogt-Downey, Marxism and the USSR. In the United States, the decline of the U.S. Communist Party has been documented by various participants from James P. Cannon in The First Ten Years of American Communism down to Howard Fast in Being Red, as well as by such historians as Theodore Draper, Harvey Klehr, Maurice Isserman, Paul Buhle, and others.\(^1\)

The crisis of American Trotskyism, which became manifest in the early 1980s, poses a more complicated problem. After all, the Trotskyists had always denounced the antidemocratic practices of Stalinism as being alien to the very essence of the revolutionary perspectives of the early Communist movement that had been led by Lenin and Trotsky. The foremost organizational representative of the Trotskyist tradition in the United States—the Socialist Workers Party—came out of the 1960s and early ‘70s as a very strong and vital group, with close to 2,000 adherents and an even wider sphere of influence in the radical movement. In less than a decade, however, it took its distance from the perspectives of Trotsky, aligning itself more closely with the perspectives (or a stilted understanding of the perspectives) of Fidel Castro’s Cuban Communist Party. In the course of carrying out this change, the new SWP leadership greatly tightened the organizational norms of their organization, creating what many would agree was a profoundly undemocratic internal life, and forcing hundreds of members out of the organization—especially through a dramatic wave of expulsions in 1983-84. All of this was done in the name of implementing “Leninist” norms. The present work represents part of a larger effort to provide an account and understanding of this development.

This book is part of a three-volume series, “In Defense of American Trotskyism.” The first volume, conceptually and logically, is The Struggle Inside the Socialist Workers Party, edited by Sarah Lovell, focusing on events of 1979 through 1983. Materials from 1983 through 1990, focusing on developments after the fragmentation of the Socialist Workers Party, are presented in the volume entitled Rebuilding the Revolutionary Party, edited by myself. The focus of the present book, Revolutionary Principles and Working-Class Democracy, is on the actual fragmentation of the SWP—the waves of expulsions which wrecked the organization in 1983-84; this is, logically, the middle volume in the series.\(^2\)

The bulk of the materials here consists of the testimony of disident members of the SWP who were driven out as they resented what they perceived as a wrecking operation directed against the revolutionary program and democratic norms of the organization to which they had devoted their lives. Some of the precedents facilitating this “wrecking operation” had developed in the 1960s, and were warned against at the time by the party’s founding leader, James P. Cannon, in materials reprinted here. A thorough report from a leading body of the world Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, is also reproduced
in its entirety, along with a critical analysis of the purge by Steve Bloom. Some of the political issues, which are dealt with at length in the other volumes of this series, are addressed here also, in various passionate voices that echo throughout these pages. In addition, there are retrospective evaluations of "what went wrong" by George Breitman, Evelyn Sell, and Paul Le Blanc. A major report by National Secretary Jack Barnes, providing an extensive presentation of "the other side of the story" is appended to this volume as well.

The SWP formally severed all ties with the world Trotskyist movement, represented by the Fourth International, in 1990—although a fundamental programmatic break began much earlier, as documented by the books in this series. Yet the American Trotskyist tradition continues to be reflected in three groups that still identify with the Fourth International: Socialist Action, the Fourth Internationalist Tendency, and the Fourth International Caucus of Solidarity. Each group has strengths and weaknesses, and together they represent less than 500 people. Obviously, if they were able to unify (in a manner accentuating their strengths and transcending at least some of their weaknesses), they could be a far more effective force. While still a small group, they would have a greater capacity to play a vital role in many struggles through the resurgent wave rising within the unions and in important social movements (against war and imperialism, against racism and sexism, against ecological and social deterioration), carry out serious socialist educational work, and contribute to the growth of an independent political movement of the working class capable of transforming society along the lines of a genuine socialist democracy.

As of this writing (January 1992), the fragmentation of revolutionary socialists in the United States is the predominant reality. The purpose of this book, and of the others in this series, is to help provide an understanding of our recent experience in order to contribute to establishing a basis for revolutionary socialist unity in the 1990s and beyond.

For some time to come, as students and practitioners of American radicalism seek to do their work, the question of what happened to the Socialist Workers Party will be something to wrestle with and learn from. These materials will be helpful in that process. Some of my own efforts to "wrestle and learn" make up the remainder of this essay.

One of the products of the struggle inside the SWP was a book I wrote at the request of George Breitman, Lenin and the Revolutionary Party. That study attempted to establish what was the actual historical experience of the original "Leninist party" as it became a powerful force for working-class revolution in Russia leading up to 1917. In this essay, as a kind of follow-up to that study, I want to suggest what are some of the lessons of the U.S. "Leninist" experience of the SWP. It should be borne in mind that the Trotskyist movement shuns "official" histories, and that the expression of a range of interpretation and opinion regarding historical questions is encouraged in order to facilitate the development of insights that will be valuable to revolutionary activists.

Here we will explore a number of questions—from essential aspects of the Russian Bolshevik tradition to ways this was applied by revolutionaries in the United States, from the great changes taking place in our world and in 20th-century America to internal organizational developments taking place in a fairly small left-wing group—in an effort to comprehend and learn from what was, for the Trotskyist movement (and for more than just that), a catastrophe. Hopefully this essay will be of some use to those who want to draw from the Leninist-Trotskyist tradition in advancing the cause of the working class and the oppressed.
1. The Bolshevik Tradition

It is impossible to understand the meaning of historical Bolshevism—the revolutionary wing of the Russian socialist movement—unless it is understood that it was a working-class current. This is so easy to say, and to forget, that it is absolutely necessary to give it special stress. In order to do this, I will list six memoirs by veteran Bolshevists that will—if read—make this clear (also providing a fascinating inside view of the history of Bolshevism): Semen Ivanovich Katanichkov, A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia; Cecilia Bobrovskaya, Twenty Years in Underground Russia; Osip Plantinsky, Memoirs of a Bolshevik; Aleksei E. Badayev, The Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma; Alexander Shlyapnikov, On the Eve of 1917; Fyodor F. Raskolnikov, Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917.3

Eyewitness accounts of the Bolshevik revolution, such as John Reed’s Ten Days That Shook the World, have been fully corroborated by more recent work of social historians—Leopold Haimson, Alexander Rabinowitch, Victoria Bonnell, Diane Koenker, David Mandel, and many others: the Bolshevik party was deeply rooted in the working class, and it had become the predominant political current in the Russian workers’ movement just before World War I and, after a fairly brief interruption, again by the late summer of 1917. The Bolshevik revolution of October/November 1917 was, in fact, a deeply democratic phenomenon, a proletarian revolution in terms of goals, participants, and popular support.4

Lenin sought to explain this reality to foreign revolutionaries at the World Congress of the Communist International in 1921, warning them against the illusion that a left-wing minority could simply seize power in the name of the working class in order to impose its own benevolent rule: “In Europe...we must win the majority of the working class, and anyone who fails to understand this is lost to the communist movement....We were victorious in Russia not only because the undisputed majority of the working class was on our side (during the elections in 1917 the overwhelming majority of the workers were with us against the Mensheviks), but also because half the army, immediately after our seizure of power, and nine-tenths of the peasants, in the course of some weeks, came over to our side.”5

This revolutionary democratic orientation of the Bolsheviks was in harmony with Lenin’s explanation of the history and success of Bolshevism, which he offered in Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder (1920). “Only the history of Bolshevism during the entire period of its existence can satisfactorily explain why it has been able to build up and maintain, under the most difficult conditions, the iron discipline needed for the victory of the proletariat,” Lenin wrote. Many hostile commentators as well as would-be imitators have become fixated on this “iron discipline” as the key to Bolshevism success, but Lenin warned that without certain conditions being met, “all attempts to establish discipline inevitably fall flat and end up in phrase-mongering and clowning.”6

The prerequisites for such discipline, in Lenin’s opinion, were three: (1) the class consciousness and devotion to revolution of significant elements of the working class (whom Lenin termed “the revolutionary vanguard”); (2) the ability of this vanguard layer of the proletariat to link up “and—if you wish—merge, in a certain measure, with the broadest masses of working people,” as Lenin put it; and (3) the correctness of the political leadership of the revolutionary vanguard, and the understanding of this by the broad masses on the basis of their own experience. There is no question that Lenin believed that revolutionary intellectuals were also vitally important to the revolutionary vanguard party—but he didn’t assume that intellectuals could only come from the “upper classes,” and he placed a high priority on assisting in the development of highly developed working-class intellectuals from among the layer of class-conscious workers developing in Russia. In any event, for Lenin a party of the revolutionary vanguard meant a substantial, “conscious” layer of the working class—not an elite of radical intellectuals who would do the workers’ thinking for them.

“Without these conditions,” Lenin insisted, “discipline in a revolutionary party really capable of being the party of the advanced class, whose mission is to overthrow the bourgeoisie and transform the whole of society, cannot be achieved.” He cautioned: “On the other hand, these conditions cannot emerge at once.” Here Lenin’s belief in the central importance of Marxism, and his open and creative approach to Marxist theory, becomes evident: “Their creation is facilitated by a correct revolutionary theory, which, in turn, is not a dogma, but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement.”7

Sometimes this is referred to as the program of the revolutionary party. “It goes without saying that every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs,” as Karl Marx said. Lenin acknowledged in 1899. “But neither Marx nor any other theoretician or practical worker in the socialist movement has ever denied the tremendous importance of a program for the consolidation and consistent activity of a political party.”8 Program involves an analysis of the realities one faces, a conception of what changes are desirable, and a perspective on how
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to change those realities. It involves utilizing theory (the accumulation of analyses of history and society, especially accumulated lessons from the class struggle) in order to work out general strategies leading to the socialist goal, and specific tactics that will advance those strategies.

There were three fundamentals at the heart of the program to which Lenin was committed: (1) socialism must become rooted in the struggles and consciousness of the working class in order to be relevant; (2) the working class must win its own freedom through its own efforts; and (3) the working class must become socialist if it is to bring about its own liberation and the forward movement of all society. Other essential aspects of the revolutionary program flow from this:

- The working class must form its own perspectives on all major issues and problems of society.
- The more “privileged” workers (those who are more skilled, better paid, with less exhausting work and more leisure time, more education, etc.) must concern themselves with the interests and needs of the more oppressed workers, not allowing themselves to be seduced into being an “aristocracy of labor” satisfied, for example, simply with bread-and-butter trade union gains.
- The working class must concern itself with the plight of all oppressed groups in society—forging alliances and linking their struggles to the general struggle for the triumph of the working class; thus the oppression of women, of subject nationalities, of racial and religious minorities, of dissident intellectuals and students, of impoverished peasants, etc. should be matters of intense concern to the workers’ movement.
- International solidarity of the working class is crucial, and socialism can only advance and be won as a worldwide process. This is especially true given the global (imperialist) character of capitalist production and economic organization.
- Practical struggles for democratic and economic reforms, to defend the immediate interests of working people and the oppressed, are essential, but such struggles must be integrated into a strategic orientation which advances the political independence and hegemony of the working class.
- If the political independence and hegemony of the working class is achieved on a significant scale, the result can be socialist revolution.

The programmatic orientation sketched here will not be realized automatically or spontaneously, but only through a considerable amount of serious work. Under normal circumstances, most people won’t do that work. Those who are prepared to do the work must organize themselves as effectively as possible—in a democratic, cohesive, coherent political collective: a revolutionary activist organization. Obviously, to the extent that more and more people can be drawn into doing such work, it will become effective. But the creation of a revolutionary socialist majority in society is a process which can only be advanced if the present-day revolutionary minority organizes itself to bring this about.

This indicates—if somewhat schematically—the meaning of the revolutionary vanguard party to which Lenin was committed. The internal functioning of such a party has been defined as democratic centralism, a term which has been subject to considerable distortion—including in the Socialist Workers Party during the 1970s and ’80s.
2. Democratic Centralism

The term democratic centralism was first introduced into the Russian socialist movement in 1905 by Lenin's factional adversaries, the Mensheviks, but Lenin embraced it and summarized it as "freedom of discussion, unity of action." In Lenin's opinion, the revolutionary party "must be united, but in these united organizations there must be wide and free discussion of Party questions, free comradely criticism and assessment of events in Party life." This would include, he stressed in 1906, "guarantees for the rights of all minorities and for all loyal opposition,...recognizing that all Party functionaries must be elected, accountable to the Party and subject to recall."9

In this period Lenin argued: "The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organizations implies universal and full freedom to criticize so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the unity of an action decided on by the Party."10 Some interpreters have asserted that Lenin didn't really mean this, and that he functioned differently, that he really sought to subject all discussion and activity in the vanguard party to his own control. Others interpret it as meaning: you can say, write, publish and do whatever you please, whenever you please, however you please—just so it doesn't disrupt a (narrowly defined) action, such as a demonstration, an insurrection, etc.

The historical evidence contradicts both interpretations. The Bolshevik party did indeed allow a very substantial degree of freedom for its members to express themselves to each other, to the party as a whole, to those not in the party, even if they held dissident views. Individual activists as well as local organizations also were encouraged to exercise a considerable amount of initiative in carrying out their activities. At the same time, there was an expectation that a significant degree of loyalty to the party, its program and its organizational statutes would guide these activities. In addition, there was provision that democratically elected leadership bodies would seek to ensure the functioning of the organization in a manner consistent with its democratically established program and organizational principles.

Democratic centralism was seen as involving a dynamic interaction between the individual and the collective, and as a means for generating the maximum amount of participation by the membership in deciding and carrying out the work of the organization. It was also viewed as a means of enabling the organization to be effective in carrying out and evaluating its work. Once a majority came to a decision, a minority which disagreed was to do nothing to undermine the decision. The decision would be tested in practice. The critical perspectives of the loyal minority, far from undermining party unity, would help the organization as a whole to clarify its orientation, learn from its experiences, stay in touch with complex realities, and correct its mistakes.

As if anticipating the danger of bureaucratic-authoritarian degeneration that occurred under the Stalin regime, a resolution on democratic centralism adopted by the 1921 World Congress of the Communist International warned against "formal or mechanical centralization [which] would mean the centralization of 'power' in the hands of the Party bureaucracy, allowing it to dominate the other members of the Party or the proletarian masses which are outside the Party." Instead democratic centralism was to be "a real synthesis, a fusion of centralism and proletarian democracy" that would facilitate "the active participation of working people" in the ongoing class struggle, in an eventual working-class revolution, and in the effort to create a socialist society.11

It may be helpful, at this point, to sum up the essential aspects of Lenin's organizational perspectives. As a Marxist, we have seen, Lenin believed that the revolutionary organization must be a working-class party. Beyond this fundamental starting-point, Leninist organizational perspectives can be summarized in the following eight points:

1. The workers' party must, first of all, be based on a revolutionary Marxist program and must exist to apply that program to reality in a way that will advance the struggle for socialism.

2. The members of that party must be activists who agree with the basic program, who are committed to collectively developing and implementing the program, and who collectively control the organization as a whole.

3. To the extent that it is possible (given tsarist repression, for example), the party should function openly and democratically, with the elective principle operating from top to bottom.

4. The highest decision-making body of the party is the party congress or convention, made up of delegates democratically elected by each party unit. The congress should meet at least every two years and should be preceded by a full discussion throughout the party of all questions that party members deem important.

5. Between congresses, a central committee—elected by and answerable to the congress—should ensure the cohesion and coordinate the work of the party on the basis of the party program and the decisions of the congress. (It may set up subordinate,
interim bodies to help oversee the daily functioning of the organization.) In addition, the central committee has a responsibility to keep all local units of the party informed of these various units' individual experiences and activities. Under conditions of severe political repression and in the midst of major struggles, the authority of the central party leadership may assume much greater weight than at other times; yet that leadership is always bound by the revolutionary Marxist program of the party, by the decisions of the party congress, and by a responsibility (and accountability) to the membership as a whole.

6. It is assumed that within the general framework of the revolutionary program there will be shades of difference on various programmatic, tactical, and practical questions. These should be openly discussed and debated, particularly (but not necessarily exclusively) before party congresses. Within limits—which vary depending on time, place, and circumstance—such differences can be aired publicly. All members should be encouraged to participate in this discussion process and should have an opportunity to make their views known to the party as a whole. It is assumed that, at times, groupings will form around one or another viewpoint or even around a full-fledged platform that certain members believe the party should adopt. This (as opposed to groupings based on personal likes and dislikes, and ill-defined moods and biases) provides a basis for ongoing political clarity and programmatic development, which are essential to the health and growth of the party.

7. All questions should be decided on the basis of democratic vote (majority rule), after which the minority is expected to function loyally in the party, and particularly to avoid undermining the specific actions decided on. The organization as a whole learns through the success, partial success, or failure of policies that are adopted and tested in practice.

8. Local units of the party must operate within the framework of the party program and of the decisions of the party as a whole, but within that framework they must operate under the autonomous and democratic control of the local membership.

These eight points describe a revolutionary vanguard organization functioning according to the principle of democratic centralism. They also describe the way in which Lenin thought an organization should function, and they also describe—more or less—the way that the Bolsheviks functioned from 1903 until the early 1920s.

In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, however, Russia suffered a foreign military intervention and economic blockade, a violent and brutalizing civil war, and the devastating collapse of the economy. Consequently, increasingly authoritarian expedients and bureaucratic distortions began to crop up in the practice of the Bolshevik party, as well as in the Communist International that had been established to assist revolutionaries around the world in working for socialist revolutions in their own countries. These distortions helped to lay the basis for the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist movement in the new Soviet Republic and throughout the world. The most clear-sighted and dedicated Bolsheviks, including Lenin himself, in the last years of his life, struggled against this degeneration—but they were overwhelmed.
3. Leninism in the United States

The Russian Revolution had a profound impact on the left wing of the U.S. labor movement. As Philip Foner demonstrates in his excellent documentary study *The Bolshevik Revolution: Its Impact on American Radicals, Liberals, and Labor*, the Bolshevik victory was embraced by the overwhelming majority of the substantial Socialist Party, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Socialist Labor Party, and also the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the Chicago Federation of Labor, the Seattle Labor Council, and others.12

Eugene V. Debs, the deeply loved and immensely popular spokesman of working-class socialism in the United States, expressed the feelings of many: "Lenin and Trotsky were the men of the hour and under their fearless, incorruptible and uncompromising leadership the Russian proletariat has held the fort against the combined assaults of all the ruling powers of earth...So far as the Russian proletariat is concerned, the day of the people has arrived...They are setting the heroic example of a world-wide emulation. Let us, like them, scorn and repudiate the cowardly compromisers within our own ranks, challenge and defy the robber-class power, and fight it out on that line to victory or death. From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet I am Bolshevik, and proud of it." The leader of the militant Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), "Big Bill" Haywood, responded similarly: "Here is the IWW all feathered out...The Russian Revolution is the greatest event in our lives....It represents all that we have been dreaming of and fighting for all our lives. It is the dawn of freedom and industrial democracy. If we can't trust Lenin, we can't trust anybody."13

Yet there was not a clear notion among the would-be American Bolsheviks about what, precisely, Bolshevism meant. One of the first conscious "Leninists" in the U.S. was the left-wing Socialist Louis Fraina—later known as Lewis Corey—who edited the first English-language anthology of writing by Lenin and Trotsky, under the title of *The Proletarian Revolution in Russia* (1918). In his introductory essays interspersed throughout the collection, he sought to communicate what was distinctive in the Bolshevik-Leninist perspective in this way: "The epoch of Marx developed the theory of Socialism, the epoch of Lenin is developing its practice: and this is precisely the great fact in Russia—the fact of Socialism and the revolutionary proletariat in action....The Bolshevik constituted the party of the revolutionary proletariat; in the words of Lenin, 'the class conscious workers, day laborers, and the poorer classes of the peasantry, who are classed with them (semi-proletariat),'...Representing the interests and ideology of the industrial masses, and in continual active contact with them, the Bolsheviks developed that general, creative and dynamic mass action out of which revolutions arise and develop uncompromisingly....The Bolsheviks constituted a practical revolutionary movement, not a group of theoreticians and mongers of dogmas. They worked out a program, a practical program of action in accord with the immediate problems of the Revolution and out of which would necessarily arise the struggle and power for the larger, ultimate objectives...."14

All of this was fine as far as it went, but it was also rather vague. In the first left-wing accounts by U.S. eyewitnesses there was almost nothing that went beyond this. "The Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks are branches of the same party, and until 1903 they worked together," wrote Louise Bryant in *Six Months in Red Russia* (1918). "They still have precisely the same program, but they differ as to tactics....The Bolsheviks are in power because they bow to the will of the masses." In the same year, Bessie Beatty's *The Red Heart of Russia* explained: "The Bolshevik believes in the shortest cut to socialism." John Reed's 1919 classic *Ten Days That Shook the World* offered a similar definition: "Bolshevik. Now call themselves the Communist Party, in order to emphasize their complete separation from the tradition of 'moderate' or 'parliamentary' Socialism, which dominates the Menshevik and the so-called Majority Socialists in all countries. The Bolsheviks proposed immediate proletarian insurrection, and seizure of the reins of Government, in order to hasten the coming of Socialism by forcibly taking over industry, land, natural resources and financial institutions."15

Albert Rhys Williams, in Lenin, *The Man and His Work* (1919), did make frequent references to Lenin's "iron discipline" and offered this suggestive passage: "The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party was organized in 1898. At the Second Congress held at Brussels and London in 1903 came the famous breach in the Party. Lenin fought for a centralised party with a central body directing all activities. On this and other points he was bitterly opposed by a determined minority. Agreement was impossible, and the congress split into two factions: the Mensheviks, which means literally 'members of the minority,' and the Bolsheviks, 'members of the majority.'"16

The earliest years of the Amerian Communist movement, from 1919 through 1921, such fragments of information as this—plus a sectarian notion by some activists that a truly Bolshevik party must function underground, as did the Bolsheviks in tsarist Russia—constituted the essence of "Leninism" in the
United States. Made up of substantial yet ragged splits from the Socialist Party, the IWW, some of the anarchist groups, etc., with numerous egos and factional currents vying for recognition from revolutionary Moscow, the pioneer Communists found it difficult to strike a balance that would allow them to play a significant role in U.S. labor and social struggles. The inclination of many historians has been to portray the Communist Party of the entire 1920s decade—quite inaccurately—as simply a bizarre sect with no connection to American life.

Closer to the truth is the observation of radical scholar Michael Goldfield, in a survey of literature on the history of American Communism, that “the most dynamic activists and leaders of the [Socialist Party] in 1919 left to form the core of the new Communist Party. Within a few years of its formation, the Communist movement, its chaotic and often unrealistic romantic expectations notwithstanding, attracted and absorbed many of the more radical elements of the IWW, the small socialist milieu, and the bulk of left-wing trade union activists.” Paul Buhle, in his uneven but interesting book Marxism in the United States, has also pointed to important trade union work done by Communists in the 1920s, and especially the base developed within many immigrant working-class communities: “The Party encouraged a close relationship between revolutionary politics and ethnic culture, providing the immigrants with essential services: labor defense, propaganda, English-language spokesmen and organizational contacts. The groups in return gave the bulk of funds for the Party’s operation, produced enthusiastic crowds, and formed an authentic radical proletariat. And by the thousands these immigrants proved doggedly loyal, unlike the ‘native-born’ American recruits who had few social settings in which to operate collectively.”

Yet this also underestimates the importance of a layer of native-born U.S. radicals that became an essential component of American Communism. One of these was the midwestern veteran IWW activist, James P. Cannon. He was one of the first new leaders of the Communist Party, remembered by another early CP leader, Alexander Bittelman, for “his skillful championing of the cause of Communist reorientation towards the daily struggles of the masses and to active participation in the trade unions of the American Federation of Labor.” In a 1924 talk to a CP conference of coal miners, Cannon commented: “The revolutionary aspirations of our Party comrades generate the enthusiasm and self-sacrifice that give the Party its driving power. Woe to us if we become so ‘practical’ as to forget this for one moment. All our work must lead toward the proletarian revolution. If we keep this always in mind and measure all our daily work by this standard we will keep on the right road.” Yet Cannon’s idealism was tempered by a seriousness in regard to practical-organizational questions. Bittelman’s comments are worth quoting at length:

As I became better acquainted with Jim, I began to notice and appreciate his skills in internal party politics. Because of this skill, he was able to play a very effective part in helping to bring unity into the warring groups of the Jewish Communist and left wing movements. He managed, by his political skill as well as charming personality, when he chose to be charming, to win the respect and also confidence of our group—the Jewish section of the Communist party—as well as of the Olgin-Salutsy group—formerly the Jewish part of the Workers’ Council [that split from the Socialist Party to join the Communists slightly later]. He seemed fully aware, not alone of the political differences between the two groups, but also of the individual and personal frictions and incompatibilities between, say, Salutsy and myself, or between Olgin and Schachno Epstein, by way of example.

These skills in intra-party politics, the playing of which he obviously enjoyed very much, were unquestionably a source of strength to Jim himself as well as to our party.... I remember a certain image of him that I acquired after a while. It was the image of a caretaker of a large experimental institution or laboratory, moving about the various machines, tools, gadgets, testing tubes, etc., making sure they operate properly, oiling, fixing, changing, improving and adjusting. That was Jim’s main contribution to our party; and, for the particular phase in its development, a very important contribution. His humor and wit played no small part in all of that.19

This blend of revolutionary socialist commitment and very practical, down-to-earth organizational seriousness, plus a genuine involvement in the practical struggles of the multifaceted, multiethnic U.S. working class—this represented an extremely promising start for American Leninism. The influence of the Russian Communists, within the framework of the Communist International (or Comintern), was quite important, of course. Cannon later recalled that he and his comrades “learned to do away forever with the idea that a revolutionary socialist movement, aiming at power, can be led by people who practice socialism as an avocation.... Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Radek, Bukharin—these were our teachers. We began to be educated in an entirely different spirit from the old lackadaisical Socialist Party—in the spirit of revolutionists who take ideas and program very seriously.” Another of the early Communists, Bertram D. Wolfe, noted that before 1925 it was not the case that “all important decisions for the American Communist Party were being made in Moscow.” Communications from Lenin, Zinoviev, and other Comintern leaders “were intended only as helpful suggestions, often exciting ones, and as successful examples to imitate after adapting them to American conditions, but not as categorical commands.”20

Indeed, as Paul Buhle comments, in this period there was considerable autonomy for local Communist Party activists: “Decentralization of political initiative,
with the inevitable persistence of old habits [from a heterogeneous Debsian-era radicalism], encouraged a wide experimentation at the local level that remained largely invisible to [national] Party leaders—and has so remained for most historians.” Writing about his own experiences in California, where the Party was remote from the CP national office but “had close linkage with the more progressive section of organized labor,” Bertram Wolfe later recalled: “If we agreed with an order from the high command, we tried to carry it out zealously and explain it carefully to our growing body of sympathizers and increasingly friendly progressive trade unions…. But if the instructions were unpalatable, poorly justified, or late in reaching us, we simply paid no attention to them and continued working as we had been working.” Nor were they ever called to account for it.21

As time went on, there was concern among U.S. Communist leaders and activists to develop a more cohesive revolutionary organization, and more attention was given to educating the ranks in Leninist organizational norms. In a 1924 pamphlet for the party youth group, for example, Max Shachtman explained the birth of Bolshevism this way: “It became apparent that a split [among the Russian Marxists] was to take place, Lenin insisting that every comrade must be an active member subject to the discipline of the party, while Martov was ready to leave the door open for vague elements which threatened to liquidate the revolutionary soul of the party.” In 1926 a volume of more than 200 pages was published by the CP national office, Lenin on Organization, gathering together much of Lenin’s writing on this question, along with an authoritative thirty-nine page essay by an old Bolshevik named Vikenti Mitzkovich-Kapsukas. This essay, hardly the work of a bureaucratic hack, nonetheless projected an image of “Leninism” that was already marred by authoritarian elements that had developed during the Russian civil war, creating dangerous preconditions for Stalinist degeneration, such as the banning of dissident factions and tendencies in the party. The conception of a monolithic party was advanced in the Comintern under the leadership of Gregory Zinoviev, who influenced Cannon’s own formulations in the early 1920s: “It [a Bolshevik party] must be a centralized party prohibiting factions, tendencies, and groups. It must be a monolithic party hewn of one piece.” Cannon was attempting to use this conception to combat the unhealthy situation inside the U.S. Communist Party: “At least one-half of the energy of the party has been expended in factional struggles, one after another. We have even grown into the habit of accepting this state of affairs.” He was to learn, however, that the prohibition of factions, tendencies, and groups not only runs counter to the historical model of pre-1921 Bolshevism, but that it fatally undercuts the possibility of democracy inside the organization.22

In fact, a policy of “Bolshevization” was being implemented throughout the Comintern, supervised by the old worker-Bolshevik Osip Piatnitsky, but increasingly distorted by the reactionary bureaucracy that was bringing the Russian Communist Party, the Soviet state, and the Communist International under its authoritarian control.23 A warped version of democratic centralism was established, designed to bring the activity of members under the control of party leaders, and to bring the leaders of the various national parties under the control of the Moscow bureaucracy headed by Joseph Stalin. Revolutionaries like James P. Cannon, who perceived a growing discrepancy between the triumph of Stalinism and the revolutionary ideals to which they had committed “the whole of their lives,” found themselves in opposition, followed by quick expulsion.

Of course, the Stalinized Communist Party continued to project itself as the only truly Leninist organization, and later would-be Leninists—especially those following the special Chinese version of Stalinism, the various Maoist groups arising in the U.S.—made similar claims. I have touched on these in my study Lenin and the Revolutionary Party, indicating that, despite their claims and rhetoric, their practice diverged dramatically from that of Lenin’s party. For our purposes here, it makes sense only to focus on those who did not subscribe to the Stalinist mutilation of the Bolshevik tradition.24

Cannon and others who were committed to the goal of creating an authentic American Leninism established the Communist League of America in 1929, following the lead of the exiled revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky. Trotsky was a rallying point for those committed to the original goals and methods of the Russian Revolution and the early Communist movement. His U.S. cothinkers were active in union struggles, the unemployed movement, anti-racist activities, opposition to war and imperialism, the fight against fascism, and also the defense of revolutionary Marxism against the distortions and vicious assaults of Stalinism. Through a series of organizational developments, involving a succession of complex splits and fusions, the Trotskyists in the United States grew from about 100 in 1928 to more than 1,100 in 1938, when they established the Socialist Workers Party.25

The SWP was predominantly a working-class party. George Breitman, in a discussion of its founding convention, has offered this description in the valuable book he edited, The Founding of the Socialist Workers Party:

Our chief union stronghold was Minneapolis, where our comrades in the Teamsters union led by [Vincent Raymond] Dunne, [Carl] Skoglund, and Farrell Dobbs, were showing the whole country what a union led by revolutionaries could do. It was our aspiration in Newark [where Breitman lived at the time], and I am sure elsewhere, to meet the high standards they were setting. The story of their activity can now be read in Dobbs’ books about the Teamsters.
Another gain of that time was the organization of our fraction in the maritime industry, starting on the West Coast. Although he was not at the founding convention, Tom Kerr was elected to the National Committee at this convention, partly in recognition of his work in this fraction, which also served as a model for the party.

Most of our other activity was centered in the new CIO unions that were being born at the time—steel, auto, electrical, and so on. We helped to sign up workers to join the unions, both in the plants and in their homes; we participated in strikes to win recognition and bargaining rights; we joined forces with others to gain, extend, or preserve democracy inside the unions.

The main difference was that the unions then were less bureaucratized and the workers had a greater interest in their unions than they do today [in 1978]. That made it easier for militants to get a hearing from the members in those days.

There were also left-wing intellectuals in the SWP from non-working-class backgrounds, and they were able to make important contributions to the work of the Trotskyist movement. But the working-class roots and commitments of the SWP were unambiguous from the time of its founding until the 1960s (which will be touched on in the next section of this essay).

Not only the proletarian composition of the party, but also the program and structure unambiguously conformed to the Leninist model that has been described here. "The Socialist Workers Party is a revolutionary Marxian party, based on a definite program, whose aim is the organization of the working class in the struggle for power and the transformation of the existing social order," one of the founding documents of the SWP explained. "All of its activities, its methods, and its internal regime are subordinated to this aim and designed to serve it." The very next sentence of this document is instructive: "Only a self-acting and critical-minded membership is capable of forging and consolidating such a party and of solving its problems by collective thought, discussion, and experience." The document, entitled "The Internal Situation and the Character of the Party," goes on to describe a Leninist party, functioning according to the principle of democratic centralism, as understood by its authors, Cannon and Max Shachtman, the SWP's central leaders. It is worth reading in full.

There is sometimes a distinction to be made, of course, between how an organization will function ideally and how people are actually able to live up to the ideal. In 1940 Cannon commented that "our party has not been a homogeneous Bolshevik party,...but an organization struggling to attain the standard of Bolshevism, and beset all the time by internal contradictions."27

Cannon's own background in the early Communist Party had left its imprint on him, as we have noted, although there were negative as well as positive aspects to this. "I was raised the hard way in politics," he noted. "I was raised in the Communist Party from 1919-28—you know that is nine years of uninterrupted factional struggle. That is, unless you call an interruption a peace to catch your breath and reorganize your forces. Nine years that devoured the energy of the party." Joseph Hansen commented that in this period "the Communist Party was something of a jungle—that is, as far as the internal struggles were concerned. At first, the Communist International under Lenin and Trotsky could play a role in ameliorating the situation and helping the comrades to learn the correct lessons from their mistakes. But later on the Comintern degenerated and itself became a real jungle, in which Jim was one of the best of the jungle fighters. He made errors from which he later learned and never forgot." Hansen added a significant point: "The main difference between Jim and some of the others who also had talents along this line was that Jim operated within the framework of principles, the principles of revolutionary socialism. Comradely pressure and assistance from Trotsky helped Cannon go some distance in allowing mature revolutionary qualities to transcend the factionalist aspect of his political background.28

Nonetheless, the supposedly undemocratic "Cannon regime" became a target of dissident currents in the U.S. Trotskyist movement. In the mid-1930s an ultraleft oppositionist going by the name George Marlen complained: "An unusually subtle, calculating demagogue, Cannon, without the backing of the world-famous figure [Trotsky], would have been an inconspicuous, average political adventurer seeking a field of action in a workers' organization." Adding that "Cannon's record in the Communist Party is as filthy as that of any of the Stalinist careerists," he concluded that "Cannon practices a spurious 'democracy' within the organization, exercising a factual control through his bureaucratic machine."29

A minority led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham in the bitter factional fight that wrecked the SWP in 1939-40 advanced the same accusation: "For the Cannon faction, Trotsky's politics function precisely as substitute for politics of their own. As a bureaucratic-conservative group, they merely utilize Trotsky's politics as they utilize politics in general, as an instrument of their regime....Politics, programs, are more or less routine matters for others to take care of; the business of the 'real Bolshevik' is—to cinch up the majority and retain party control." Even an ostensibly sympathetic (though somewhat factional) account by a later radical asserts: "Cannon was content to take his basic political line as something given to him from abroad, and devoted his energies to building an organization around that political line." Another latter-day commentator—the 1960s radical personality Tariq Ali, reminiscing about the years in which he was attracted to Trotskyism—writes that Cannon's The Struggle for a Proletarian Party "had shocked my sensibilities" because it documented "the single-minded and relentless pursuit of an oppositional current within the same organization until it was
defeated, demoralized, and expelled." Ali doesn't know what he's talking about here: while Max Shachtman, James Burnham, Martin Abern, and the others Cannon argued against were defeated, none of them were expelled—they split and set up their own rival party, taking many of the resources of the SWP with them. (Giving as good as they got in this tough factional fight, they were hardly the tender idealists and persecuted victims Ali seems to imagine: Shachtman and Abern were experienced political infighters from the early days of the Communist Party; the well-to-do Burnham quickly split from the new group and soon found a comfortable new role in the CIA and on the editorial board of the right-wing National Review.)

The denigration of Cannon's own abilities as a political thinker is belied by the impressive quality of his many writings and speeches. While his special talent lay in the extremely important area of effectively popularizing Marxist, Leninist, and Trotskyist ideas, he also demonstrated a genuine ability for developing down-to-earth, insightful, sophisticated political analyses on a variety of international, national, internal organizational, historical, and more abstractly theoretical questions. While making no pretense about being an original theoretician, he produced a body of work that holds up far better than that of many seemingly more intellectual left-wing leaders of his time. More than this, a strong case can be made for the proposition that his contributions to building a revolutionary organization were of extremely high quality, involving considerable internal democracy, despite the complaints of his factional adversaries. It is worth noting the judgment of C.L.R. James—the prominent Black Marxist theorist who had been part of the Shachtman faction—that "the existing documents of both the Majority and the Minority in 1940 prove that there was not the slightest basis for the charge being made today [in 1947] that the Minority of 1940 had been bureaucratically mishandled by the Cannon-led majority."  

It is necessary to go beyond the personality of Cannon, however, to take an accurate measure of the SWP which survived the 1940 split. The Shachtmanites listed those they considered the most prominent members of the Cannon faction in 1940: Morris Lewit, Sam Gordon, V.R. Dunne, Carl Skoglund, Jack Weber, Larry Trainor, George Clarke, Bert Cochrán, Felix Morrow, John G. Wright, Murry Weiss.  Other "Cannonites" of the 1940s could be listed: Milt Alvin, Sylvia Bleeker, Harry Braverman, Dorothea Breitman, George Breitman, Arthur Burch, Kay Burch, Grace Carlson, Anne Chester, Bob Chester, Charles Curtiss, Lillian Curtiss, Farrell Dobbs, Duncan Ferguson, Albert Goldman, Laura Gray, Joseph Hansen, Reba Hansen, Rose Karsner, Karolyn Kerry, Tom Kerry, Antoinette Konikow, Frank Lovell, Sarah Lovell, George Novack, Ruth Querio, Evelyn Reed, Ray Sparrow, Arne Swabeck, Augusta Trainor, David Weiss, Myra Tanner Weiss, Connie Weissman, George Weissman, and more. It would be necessary to produce a collective portrait of this cluster of revolutionaries to get a living sense of the reality that was the Socialist Workers Party in the 1940s. Even this would not be adequate, of course: one would have to trace the connections between their individual lives and the lives of the other comrades, the internal life of the various branches of the party, the cultural and occupational contexts of the membership, the involvement in trade union and community struggles, the SWP's theoretical and educational work, the interpenetration of the party and the larger social and political environment. Much could be learned from such a study.

Of course, not all of the "Cannonites" continued to agree with Cannon in the course of the complex realities arising with World War II and afterward (some of which are touched on in the next section of this essay). In 1945-46 a small grouping around Albert Goldman and Felix Morrow—deeply concerned about the postwar resiliency of Stalinism and affected by the "democratic capitalist" stabilization in Western Europe and the U.S.—developed sharp political differences with the SWP majority, and they articulated a critique of "Stalinist germs in the SWP" that should be critically examined.

Goldman, explaining his defection from the SWP to Shachtman's rival Workers Party, wrote that "the leadership of the SWP was turning away from a Leninist-Trotskyist conception of a revolutionary party and toward a Zinovievist conception." We have noted that in the early 1920s Cannon, along with other pioneers of American Communism, was influenced by supercentralist organizational conceptions propagated in the Comintern under Gregory Zinoviev. "It was Zinoviev who introduced the idea of a monolithic party," Goldman wrote. "Stalin developed that idea. In the days when Cannon was a member of the Communist Party, Cannon was an ardent defender of the monolithic party. He is far more careful now; he does not say that he wants a monolithic party as in his early days, but actually he is working to create just such a party. Some of his followers substitute the word 'homogeneous' for that of 'monolithic.'" Yet Goldman's own description of the actions of his own faction suggest that it was playing fast and loose with the democratic-centralist norms of the SWP: "Four members of the SWP were censured for organizing a discussion on the Russian question with some members of the WP....The Minority openly declared its intention to fraternize politically with the WP. It organized socials and classes, inviting members of the WP to participate. I spoke at meetings of the WP members....Under the circumstances, the Minority decided to continue political fraternization with the WP regardless of the policy of the Majority." In defense of such behavior, Goldman offered this theoretical rationale:

Our party must be a disciplined party but its discipline is not based on rules and regulations. It is the discipline of comrades devoted to a great cause
and conscious of the fact that without discipline in action they can achieve nothing. It is a discipline based primarily on the correctness of the leadership and not on the ability of the leaders to order people.33

There are elements of truth in Goldman's argument. We have seen that Lenin insisted on a form of discipline "in action" that is based on comrades being devoted to a common cause, not on arbitrary orders from leaders or formalistic rules and regulations. On the other hand, Lenin didn't counterpose such self-discipline to organizational rules and regulations—indeed, he took rules and regulations quite seriously. Nor did Lenin ever argue that the decisions of an elected leadership should simply be ignored or flouted if an individual comrade or a minority in the party believed such decisions to be incorrect. Whenever such things developed between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, or within the Bolshevik party, they constituted no kind of normal democratic functioning but instead an impending organizational split. The political decisions, and the organizational rules and regulations, democratically established by the party membership, provided the framework within which disciplined comrades were expected to function. The approach of Cannon reflected something more akin to the Leninist tradition:

Our conception of the functioning of the party is the Leninist conception, that not only do members have rights of free discussion in the party, but they have duties. And one duty is this: that all their political activity has to be carried on under the supervision and control of the party. Does that mean that they cannot talk to members of other parties, as has been alleged against us; that they cannot fraternize with them; that they cannot collaborate with them? Not at all. Our comrades in the trade unions are talking, fraternizing, and collaborating every day. Work could not be carried on without it. It is not the prohibition of talking, fraternizing, collaborating that has ever been at issue in our ranks. It is that the collaboration with other political elements—either Shachtmanites, or Socialists, or progressives, or labor parties—that the collaboration, which is absolutely indispensable for the development of our work in many instances, has to be done as a party task.34

The Goldman-Morrow group was not able to win, according to Goldman, because the SWP majority were "Cannonite cliquists to whom prestige is more important than political ideas." Yet Cannon and his cothinkers developed an innovative application of Bolshevik perspectives to the mid-20th century United States, the "Theses on the American Revolution," whose ideas are eloquently articulated in Cannon's "The Coming American Revolution." A clear analysis of key developments in 20th-century capitalism and a bold vision of the possibilities of revolutionary working-class struggles in the United States, the American Theses sought to underline the relevance of Leninist-Trotskyist conceptions in the most powerful capitalist country. Cannon insisted upon the central importance for the entire world of a socialist revolution in the United States, the nature of the U.S. working class and its capacity to make such a revolution, and the vital role of the Socialist Workers Party in this process. "At the bottom of all our conceptions was the basic idea that the proletarian revolution is a realistic proposition in this country, and not merely a far-off "ultimate goal," to be referred to on ceremonial occasions," Cannon explained. "Our part is to build up this party which believes in the unlimited power and resources of the American workers, and believes no less in its own capacity to organize and lead them to storm and victory."35

Unfortunately, the SWP failed to realize this promise. Various shortcomings of individuals, party perspectives, policies, and practices can be listed as contributing to this failure. Allegedly fatal flaws of "Cannonism" have sometimes been given the dubious credit for the subsequent development of new factional tensions in the SWP, and the party's partial fragmentation during the fifteen years following World War II: the split of the Goldman-Morrow group in 1946, the split of the Johnson-Forest group (C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya) in 1951, the split of the Cochrane group in 1953. But this is a superficial view, giving both too much and too little credit to Cannon and those around him. While there can be debates about the imperfections of Cannon, there is no controversy over the fact that he had imperfections. Yet none of these were of a nature that would wreck the effort to build a working-class revolutionary vanguard party. In fact, Cannon's great strengths were ideally suited to facilitate the development of such an organization. Great as his strengths were, however, and great as were the strengths of his comrades, the SWP found itself up against a larger reality that would necessarily overwhelm the labors of the most dedicated, farsighted, flexible, and effective revolutionaries that one might imagine.

We have noted that the existence of a class-conscious layer of the working class is an essential precondition for the kind of party that Lenin insisted was necessary for a socialist revolution. The Marxist concept of workers' class consciousness involves not simply whatever notions happen to be in the minds of various members of the working class at any particular point in time. It involves an understanding of the insight that was contained in the preamble of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1955: "A struggle is going on in all the nations of the civilized world, between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions, if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefit." Not all workers have absorbed this insight into their consciousness, but those who have done so can be said to possess at least an elementary form of class consciousness.36
Class consciousness, from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxists, embraces a range of perceptions and commitments including: an understanding that there is a distinct working class that one is part of, whose interests are counterposed to the capitalist class; a sense of solidarity with other members of one’s class; a belief in the need for and the possibility of successful struggles—political as well as economic—to advance the interests of one’s class; a conviction that the working-class majority can and should become the dominant political force in society (“winning the battle of democracy,” as Marx and Engels put it), reconstructing the economy so that it is collectively owned by all, democratically controlled by all, and operated in the interests of all—making possible the dignity and free development of each person in society.37

Such consciousness does not exist automatically in one’s brain simply because one sells his or her labor power for wages or a salary. But in the United States, from the period spanning the end of the Civil War in 1865 down through the Depression decade of the 1930s, a vibrant working-class subculture had developed throughout much of the United States. Often this “subculture” was more like a network of subcultures having very distinctive ethnic attributes, but these different ethnic currents were at various times connected by left-wing political structures (such as the old Knights of Labor, Socialist Party, IWW, Communist Party, etc.) and also, to an extent, by trade union frameworks. Within this context flourished the class consciousness that is essential to the success of Leninism. Cannon and many of his comrades were a product of this radical workers’ subculture. And they sought to make their own revolutionary contributions to it, and to help it become a revolutionary socialist force capable of transforming society.38

The “patriotic” hysteria and repression accompanying U.S. entry into the First World War, followed by the economic and cultural changes of the 1920s, represented a serious assault on this subculture—the effects of which were felt as many children of the radicals sought to assimilate into the seemingly more attractive “modern” culture of the American mainstream.39 Nonetheless, the shock of the Great Depression gave new life to working-class radicalism. With the Second World War and its aftermath, however, the distinctive realities that had sustained a proletarian class consciousness within a sizeable minority of the American working class eroded dramatically and seemed to pass out of existence.

The realities generating this dilemma posed an almost insoluble problem for the American Trotskyists. This brings us, first of all, to a question that has so far been given too little attention here but is, in fact, central to any serious discussion of Leninism—revolutionary internationalism. More than this, we must touch on the interplay between world events and unfolding realities inside the United States, and the impact of this on the consciousness of the American working class and on the membership base of the SWP.
4. The Changing World

The development of American capitalism has always been intimately bound up with international developments: from the first European explorers representing the tentative probe of a rising merchant-capitalism, to the establishment in the Americas of the European great powers' rival colonial-mercantile empires, to the development of the slave trade that was a key element, as well, in the triumph of the Industrial Revolution (slave-based cotton plantations supplying the English textile industry's "dark Satanic mills"). Both the American Revolution of 1775-83 and the American Civil War of 1861-65 were part of the global sweep of "bourgeois-democratic" revolutions. Industrialization and trade connected and transformed increasing numbers of peoples and cultures on all inhabited continents. The American working class was composed, and periodically reconstituted, of immigrant waves generated by the "push-and-pull" dynamics of the world capitalist economy. Capitalist developments and class struggles in Britain, France, Germany, and elsewhere had an impact on and found reflection in what was happening in the United States. And the United States, as it grew into the foremost industrial and imperial power, itself had profound impact on international developments.

The understanding of such international dynamics resulted in the creation of the first three working-class internationals—the International Workingmen's Association (1864-1876) led by Karl Marx, the Socialist International (1889-1914), and the Communist International (1919-43). In each case, momentous developments of international importance provoked crises that resulted in decline but also created the basis for new advances. The revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871, and the brutal repression generated by this heroic but ill-fated workers' government, frightened away trade union moderates and led to a furious split between anarchists and socialists in the First International. On the other hand, a self-consciously socialist Second International, representing mass parties and left-wing trade unions, soon took shape. The weaknesses and divisions within this increasingly reformist-dominated Second International became evident when the eruption of the First World War literally tore it apart. But revolutionary Marxists and working-class militants, in the wake of the devastating world war, and deeply inspired by the creation of a Soviet Republic in Russia, built the Third International.40

These three internationals—and also the world historic events with which they were connected—had a profound impact on the development of the left wing of the workers' movement, and on the development of class consciousness, in the United States. The degeneration and collapse of the Third International as a revolutionary force, and the realities with which this was connected, had no less of an effect. The accumulation of working-class defeats in Europe (Italy, Hungary, Germany, Austria, Spain) and in China, coupled with the rise of fascism and Nazism, combined with the murderous, totalitarian corruption of Stalinism in the USSR and the world Communist movement, and the approach of a new, more massive round of imperialist slaughter that was the Second World War—all of this necessarily undermined the strength of the U.S. working-class left, just as surely as revolutionary victories of the Chinese, German, or Spanish workers' movements would have generated soaring morale and renewed self-confidence.41

The seeming collapse of capitalism in the 1930s did not result in the working class coming to power in any country of the world, but the Great Depression did generate working-class upsurges in many countries—in some cases forcing through important social reforms beneficial to working people (such as the right to form unions, the winning of higher wages and other employment benefits, as well as unemployment insurance, social security, etc.). It also helped the more powerful capitalists to eliminate less efficient practices and competitors—resulting in a strengthened capitalism. More than this, it encouraged the competing capitalist classes to expand their overseas operations, compelling them to harmonize their different interests—or, when this proved impossible, to turn to militarism and war. The Stalinist and Social Democratic leaderships of the labor movements in the "democratic capitalist" countries of Western Europe and North America led the workers' organizations into a far-reaching alliance with their countries' capitalist classes during World War II.42

Small groups of workers and intellectuals throughout the world sought to preserve perspectives that had infused the revolutionary wing of the young Second International and the original founders of the Third International. They joined with Trotsky to form the Fourth International, which was formally proclaimed in 1938. Four years earlier Trotsky had expressed his hopes and fears regarding the future Fourth International: "It may be constituted in the process of the struggle against fascism and the victory gained over it. But it may also be formed considerably later, in a number of years, in the midst of the ruins and the accumulation of debris following upon the victory of fascism and war." After the founding of this "world party of socialist revolution," Trotsky optimistically predicted that the coming Second World War would generate an even greater wave of militant working-class insurgency than had been the case with
the First World War. Working-class revolutions would sweep away Stalinism in the USSR and would also break the power of the capitalists in the advanced industrial countries. "The new generation of workers whom the war will impel onto the road of revolution will take their place under our banner," he asserted on the eve of his death in 1940.43

The devastation of World War II did generate revolutionary upsurges throughout the colonial and semicolonial countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. But Stalinism took a renewed hold on life in the postwar period. It seemed as solid as ever in the USSR, given the immense authority gained through "the Great Patriotic War" which drove back and destroyed the Nazi aggressor. Stalinism also took advantage of radical ferment in Eastern Europe to establish its hold on this area, setting up Communist Party dictatorships loyal to the USSR, to form a buffer zone between the USSR and its erstwhile wartime allies of the capitalist West. In the capitalist countries of Western Europe, devastated by war, masses of workers flocked to the already existing Communist, Social Democratic, and Labor parties.

To prevent the "loss" of these lands, the unquestioned new world power—the United States of America—established the Marshall Plan to rebuild the economies of Europe on a firm capitalist basis; a North Atlantic Treaty Organization was fashioned to prevent the Soviet Red Army from expanding further westward, but also—and no less important—to prevent indigenous revolutionaries from replacing weakened bourgeois regimes with new workers' republics. The reformist Social Democratic and Labor parties still loyal to a reconstituted Second International decided to forge a firm alliance with what was left of their own capitalist classes, and with U.S. imperialism, as the Cold War set in. The world seemed divided between capitalist versus "Communist" superpowers: the "Free World" bloc (which included many right-wing dictatorships) led by the U.S. versus the "Iron Curtain" countries (with Stalinist dictatorships but postcapitalist economies) led by the USSR.

Anti-imperialist and anti-colonial ferment in the "third world" countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America created an equivocal and more-or-less left-nationalist "neutralist" bloc. The revolutionary stirrings in the third world and the renewed power of Social Democratic and Labor parties in Western Europe (not to mention massive Communist parties in Italy and France) gave many hope that positive possibilities existed to move beyond capitalism. But this was largely overshadowed by the fact that world politics appeared to be locked into a grim "superpower" confrontation that threatened to spiral into a new world war—an especially devastating prospect since both sides had developed nuclear weapons.44

This complex situation—combined with the obvious incorrectness of Trotsky's prediction regarding postwar realities—generated a sharp controversy inside the Fourth International. Some of the European leaders of the FI (the central one being Michel Pablo) predicted a third world war, with the Stalinist-led labor movement and bureaucratized workers' states on one side and U.S. imperialism on the other. In such a situation, they believed, the Fourth International must critically support the Stalinists. Trotskyists should recognize, they asserted, that the path to socialism would probably lie through an extended period of Stalinist-led "deformed workers' states" which would eventually become democratized partly through the work, on the "inside," of the Trotskyists. They argued that Trotskyists should not maintain an independent, "sectarian" small-group existence, but instead should carry out a "deep entry" into the mass workers' movements led by either the Stalinists or the Social Democrats. Seeking to impose a fairly rigid conception of "international democratic centralism," some of these leaders attempted to bring all the parties of the Fourth International into line with this general outlook.

The world Trotskyist movement was split by this issue. A minority in the SWP—in part agreeing with Pablo's perspectives, but in part feeling deeply demoralized by the disappointment of earlier revolutionary expectations—initiated a factional struggle in the U.S. which resulted in a large section of the party's trade unionists and other valuable cadres leaving the organization. The SWP majority, led by Cannon, helped to spearhead a struggle inside the Fourth International against what they saw as Pablo's adaptation to Stalinism and tendency to liquidate the program and organization of the world Trotskyist movement. This crisis and the 1953 fissure in the Fourth International forces—both in the U.S. and worldwide—greatly weakened the morale and capacity for effective political action by U.S. Trotskyists. Even after the reunification of the Fourth International in 1963, scars and partly unhealed wounds remained from the 1953 split.45

There were additional problems that undermined the ability of the U.S. Trotskyists to realize much of the potential for American Leninism that had been evident in the 1930s and '40s. One obvious reflection of the Cold War was the development of a far-reaching campaign of domestic anticommunism. During the Second World War, Social Democratic and Stalinist currents in the U.S., both of which enjoyed substantial influence in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), had helped to rally militant and socially conscious working people to a broad patriotic, class-collaborationist war effort against an expansionist "foreign menace" of German fascism and Japanese imperialism; this was facilitated by the earlier support which both had given to the Democratic Party's "New Deal" coalition for social reform headed by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Any notion that U.S. capitalism was also imperialist and expansionistic, fostering a foreign policy counterposed to the interests of the workers, was not consistently
voiced by any organized force in the workers' movement except for the small number of Trotskyists. The mind-set fostered during the New Deal and the Second World War facilitated the enlistment of the bulk of organized labor into a "bipartisan" crusade against a new "foreign menace," the USSR and the world Communist "conspiracy." The moderates and Social Democrats inside the labor movement took the lead in advancing this perspective, while the trade unionists of the Communist Party—which for more than a decade had failed to build a working-class socialist base politically independent from the (now fiercely anticomunist) Democratic Party liberals—suddenly found themselves isolated. Anticomunist hysteria and purges swept the labor movement, workplaces, educational institutions, and cultural life throughout American society, wrecking the organizations and obliterating the influence not only of the Communist Party but also of other left-wing currents, including the Trotskyists. Working people were intimidated, in many different ways, from giving serious consideration to any and all left-wing perspectives.  

This dovetailed with a double erosion of the radical working-class base that was also taking place. One aspect of the erosion was the fading out of immigrant radicalism, and of the vibrant working-class ethnic subcultures, that had been so important to labor's left wing since the mid-19th century. The closing off of immigration in the 1920s combined with powerful cultural-assimilationist dynamics. This, in turn, combined with another significant change—the fact that the working-class struggles which had been led by radicals helped to make capitalist society a better place to live for many workers so that, in fact, they came to have much more to lose than simply the "chains" of capitalist oppression. A Communist Party organizer with significant experience among foreign-born workers, Steve Nelson, described the realities he found in the late 1940s in a way that merits substantial quotation:  

"We asked ourselves what was happening to the foreign-born in this country. Were they becoming integrated into American society?...It was a fact of life—the older generation was not pulling the younger into the [Communist] movement. Increasingly, first and second generations not only spoke different languages but also opted for different lifestyles....World War II was a watershed. Sons who went to high school and then served in the armed forces thought in far different terms than their fathers. Daughters who worked in the shipyards and electrical plants were a world away from their mothers' experiences with domestic service and boarders. Industrial workers after the war were no longer just pick and shovel men. Machine tenders who enjoyed the security provided by unions with established channels for collective bargaining could not appreciate the chronic insecurity of the pre-CIO era. Life was changing, and we had to urge the old ones to understand and accept it."  

But despite our recognition of these changing cultural patterns, we were limited in what we could offer, for we were still trying to present a socialist vision based on the model of the Soviet Union. The sons and daughters of immigrants, often far better-educated than their parents, couldn't accept our claim that the Soviet [i.e., Stalinist] model represented a better life....  

Although I experienced the changes in working-class values and culture primarily in terms of the foreign-born community and their children, I can see now that the entire American working class was undergoing a transformation during and after the war. I was to learn this with a vengeance during the [anti-Communist hysteria of the nineteen] fifties. The Party, which had historically been rooted in a heavily immigrant working-class culture characterized by economic insecurity and political alienation, was unable to adjust to these changes. We could not evaluate the significance of the changing composition of the work force and its new patterns of community life and consumption. In a sense the activities of the Left were undercutting the role of the [left-wing] fraternal groups in the ethnic community. Gains such as unemployment compensation and social security as well as the greatly enhanced sense of security brought by the CIO unions made the fraternal organization less necessary in meeting the needs of working people. At the same time, participation in the labor movement and especially the war effort...eased the process of acceptance [into the "mainstream" of U.S. culture] of the foreign-born and their children.  

While Nelson's focus here centers on how the Communist Party was affected, this has obvious significance beyond that. "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life," Marx and Engels had argued. The description above traces the erosion of the material basis of class consciousness for an important sector of the American working class. It is also described in this 1953 discussion by James P. Cannon of developments within the once left-wing United Auto Workers union, led by the ex-socialist Walter Reuther:  

"It is now sixteen years since the sit-down strikes made the new CIO unions secure by the seniority clause. These sixteen years of union security, and thirteen years of uninterrupted war and postwar prosperity, have wrought a great transformation in the unprivileged workers who made the CIO....  

The pioneer militants of the CIO unions are sixteen years older than they were in 1937. They are better off than the ragged and hungry sit-down strikers of 1937; and many of them are sixteen times softer and more conservative. This privileged section of the unions, formerly the backbone of the left wing, is today the main social base of the conservative Reuther bureaucracy. They are convinced far less by Reuther's clever demagogy than by the fact that he really articulates their own conservative mood and patterns of thought...."
Some of the best militants, the best stalwarts of the party in the old times, have been affected by their new environment. They see the old militants in the unions, who formerly cooperated with them, growing slower, more satisfied, more conservative. They still mix with these ex-militants socially, and are infected by them. They develop a pessimistic outlook from the reactions they get on every side from these old-timers, and unknown to themselves, acquire an element of that same conservatism.49

“A new middle class arose which included a large number of young people of working-class background,” wrote one radical sociologist, John C. Leggett, a few years later, noting that many prosperous working people had moved out of traditional working-class communities to become homeowners in the suburbs. “The class struggle abated with the end of the post-World War II strikes, although repeated flare-ups between management and workers occurred during and after the Korean War,” he added in his description of the same auto workers discussed by Cannon. “At the same time, another trend pointed up this harmony. Governmental boards and labor unions often helped minimize class conflict as unions grew more friendly toward companies which were willing to bargain with, and make major concessions to, labor organizations. Prosperity reached almost everyone. Even working-class minority groups [e.g., some African-Americans] improved their standard of living and sent sons and daughters into the middle class.” A Black auto worker named James Boggs, who had passed through the Trotskyist movement in earlier years, asserted in 1963: “Today the working class is so dispersed and transformed by the very nature of the changes in production that it is almost impossible to select out any single bloc of workers as working class in the old sense.” By this “old sense” he meant class-conscious workers: “The working class is growing, as Marx predicted, but it is not the old working class which the radicals persist in believing will create the revolution and establish control over production. That old working class is the vanishing herd.”50

Similar developments were taking place in all of the “capitalist democracies,” of course. “Fear of revolution and a desire for social appeasement stimulated the governments of Western Europe,” explained one French scholar, Maurice Crouzet, in 1970, to “set themselves the aim of creating prosperity and expanding a prosperity which would benefit all classes” in the post-World War II period, through policies providing “higher wages, shorter working hours, paid holidays, full employment and the virtual disappearance of unemployment, construction of wholesome and cheap housing, social security protection against sickness, loss of work, and old age.” The dramatic development of the welfare state after 1945—in large measure won through the pressure of labor movements led by Social Democratic and Labor parties—did not fully live up to this idealized picture, let alone reform all capitalist oppression out of existence. The same writer offers some clues as to its limitations: “Generally speaking, the standard of living has risen in all European countries. Working conditions have improved—first, through the growing importance of mechanization which requires, on the whole, less muscular effort (though it increases nervous tension); and then through the reduction of working hours and through paid vacations.” The mechanization of labor under capitalism, it should be stressed, involves the degradation of labor—introducing greater control by the employer over the labor process, not only increasing nervous tension among those keeping up with assembly lines, but also eroding their skills and power in their daily work. More than this, there are some sectors of the working class—especially foreigners and non-whites—for whom more traditional forms of working-class oppression were maintained: “use [of] foreign labor...has become so important that the expansion of certain industries is closely dependent on it. Immigrant workers provoke grave problems, even in Great Britain where a liberal attitude towards foreigners and the absence of racism have been traditional...These immigrants constitute a proletariat, often leading a wretched type of life.”51

In the United States, too, there developed an increasingly severe stratification within the workforce, with African-Americans, Hispanics, and many Asian-Americans being pushed into substandard living conditions, more strenuous and lower-paying occupations, higher rates of unemployment, etc., this institutionalized racism being reinforced by cultural and psychological biases on the most personal level. (This had obvious implications for the rise of civil rights and Black nationalist struggles, but that brought to the fore a consciousness of race far more than of class.52

And for white workers as well as Black, technological developments imposed by the employers created increasing on-the-job alienation, undermining working-class power at the point of production. With little difficulty, astute social critics such as Harvey Swados were able to puncture the “myth of the happy worker” and the “myth of the powerful worker.” The myth that the working class was simply evaporating altogether, being absorbed into a nebulous middle class, was also effectively refuted with ample facts and figures by more than one critical-minded writer. There was also abundant evidence that the American working class had a sense of being different from other classes—even though many working people referred to themselves as “middle class” (certainly not “lower class”). Distinctive patterns of culture and consciousness continued to distinguish it in the larger society.53

On the other hand, there is something to the assertion of Stanley Aronowitz that there has been a tendency “toward the replacement of all the traditional forms of proletarian culture and everyday life—which gave working-class communities their coherence and provided the underpinnings for the traditional forms of
proletarian class consciousness—with a new, manipulated consumer culture which for convenience's sake we can call mass culture." Regardless of precisely what one wants to make of this, the fact remains that there had been flattening and fragmentation of much that had sustained the old radical working-class consciousness. This hardly meant that workers' minds simply turned to mush, or that they simply accepted whatever their bosses or televisions told them. The distinctive philosophy of many disaffected workers, one observer commented, was not any of the traditional left-wing ideologies but cynicism: "Cynicism is a variant of anarchism—anarchism without ideals or ultimate illusions, apathetic, easy-going instead of strenuous, non-sectarian, hence more broadly appealing and far more suitable to the conditions and mentality of contemporary workers than the older tradition of militant idealism and self-sacrifice." The class-conscious layers of the American working class—the key to understanding the Socialist Party of Debs and the IWW, the early Communist Party, and the pioneer Trotskyists—had, certainly by the end of the 1950s, ceased to exist as a distinctive social force. "The surest way to lose one's fighting faith is to succumb to one's immediate environment; to see things only as they are and not as they are changing and must change; to see only what is—before one's eyes and imagine that it is permanent." This had been Cannon's appeal to his comrades, and many were able to accept that—but this was only a tiny fragment of the U.S. working class.54

The social basis for the kind of revolutionary party that Lenin himself discussed in Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder had ceased to exist. All that remained for the stalwart veterans of the SWP in the 1950s was to maintain enough of an organization to keep alive the ideals and general theoretical perspectives of revolutionary Marxism, the understanding of history and the revolutionary tradition. If this could be accomplished, if the SWP could survive until the next radical upsurge that capitalism would inevitably generate, then American Trotskyism would have something to contribute to it, the Leninist-Trotskyist project would be renewed and revitalized, and a Leninist party could finally be built in the United States that would be capable of leading a working-class revolution.

The generation that came to young adulthood in the late 1940s and early '50s generated a few recruits for the SWP: Fred Halstead, Evelyn Sell, Nat Weinstein, Catarino (Dick) Garza, Al Hansen, Beatrice Hansen, Ed Shaw, Rita Shaw, and a handful of others. But for the most part, this was the "lost generation" in regard to left-wing activity. It was supplemented by a few recruits in the "regroupment" period of the late 1950s, largely from a dissident left-wing of the Shachtmanites' Young Socialist League and also from the Stalinist milieu—but this hardly made up for the losses of major trade union cadres that the party suffered several years earlier. The hopes for the party lay in the future, although it turned out not to be from the "class-conscious proletariat" that was central to the traditional conceptions of U.S. Marxists.
5. The Problem of Consciousness in SWP

The 1960s and '70s saw a new layer of radicalized youth come into the Socialist Workers Party. An interesting description of this phenomenon is given by Ben Stone's memoir of returning from the San Francisco to the New York branch of the party:

I had resumed my activity in the New York branch of the SWP and in the Painters Union, rejoining my old Local 442. The year was 1960 and I was 48 years old; getting up there, all right. One noticeable difference from the time I had left New York was the age level of the Party members. I remembered when I had come into the Party in 1945, at the age of 33. Most of the comrades were of my generation, most a little younger and some a little older. Now the rank-and-file member was much younger, a generation removed, most of whom I hardly knew. For the first time I began to feel like an old man in the Party, almost a stranger in my own house.

As the next years went by, the Party attracted even younger members, kids in their teens and early twenties. This was due to the fact that its youth organization, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) had been established a short while before. The 60s was a time of radical ferment on the college campuses and the Party attracted some of these youth, certainly in greater numbers than ever before. Within a few years, the YSA began to numerically equal the Party. As these YSA members got older and more politically experienced, most "graduated" into the Party. So it was not very long before almost all of them looked like my son or daughter (or even an earlier [i.e., younger] generation).  

This development has been analyzed in Frank Lovell's invaluable essay "The Meaning of the Struggle Inside the Socialist Workers Party," contained in the companion volume to this one, The Struggle Inside the Socialist Workers Party. Some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with this younger layer that became predominant in the SWP membership are also suggested in essays by Evelyn Sell and myself at the end of the present volume.

Here I want to concentrate on two interrelated questions: the social composition and consciousness of the new membership, and the relationship of this to the manner in which Leninist organizational norms came to be understood and practiced.

As I was joining the Trotskyist movement in 1972, I addressed the question of the class composition of the SWP and YSA. What I wrote then was only the beginning of an analysis:

The working class is defined, in Marxist terms, not simply as all manual laborers, but as those who, not owning the means of production, sell their labor power in order to make a living. The capitalist class, on the other hand, is that class which makes its living through the ownership of businesses. The "middle class" has been defined as an intermediate strata of small businessmen, small shopkeepers, independent craftsmen and artisans, and the small layer of professionals and white collar employees (doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, social workers, government workers, clerical workers, service workers, etc.)—all of whom are sometimes swayed by the workers' struggles, sometimes swayed by the pressures and influence of the capitalists. But this small layer of professionals and white collar employees has, in advanced capitalist society, grown to immense proportions. In the United States it represents over 40 percent of the labor force. The needs and dynamics of capitalism have resulted in a dramatic expansion and proletarianization of many white collar occupations, making them an important new section of the working class. Most students are being trained to assume roles in this new section of the working class.) While many white collar workers have little sense of class consciousness (the same being true, by the way, for many blue collar workers), the material conditions for a change in consciousness now exist, and the growth of white collar unionism indicates that a change is taking place. In short, the Trotskyists have a base in an important new sector of the American working class.  

All of this was true. But additional points need to be made in order to make sense of what happened to the SWP.

First of all, this was the layer of the SWP that I myself was part of. To a very large degree, although most of us were or had been students, my impression is that a majority of us came from working-class backgrounds. That is to say, our parents were neither big capitalists nor small-time business people (petty bourgeois), but instead sold their labor power to make a living, working for wages and salaries in either blue-collar or white-collar occupations.

On the other hand, this shouldn't be overstated. One highly questionable—in fact, slanderous—study that was made of several top SWP leaders of the 1960s generation (all of whom came to the movement as student activists) does have the merit of offering occupational information on their parents: a commercial tire salesman, the president of a small private college, a physician-surgeon, a professor of biochemistry, a Congregationalist minister, two lawyers, two dentists, a pharmacist. Of course, by itself this means little. Marx's father was a lawyer, Engels's was a manufacturer, Lenin's was a school
inspector, Luxemburg’s managed the family timber business, Trotsky’s was a commercial farmer—yet each of these revolutionaries became intimately and very fruitfully involved with the class-conscious workers’ movement.

Here is precisely the rub, however. Even those of us who came from more strictly “working-class” backgrounds, and who ourselves sometimes had to get jobs to support ourselves (which generally involved selling our own labor power to one or another employer)—even we were unable to be part of a class-conscious workers’ movement, because this didn’t exist in the sense that it existed for those from Marx through Trotsky. In terms of our objective class location, it could be said that many of us were indeed part of a broadly defined proletariat. But there are three complications, all relating to the complex question of class consciousness.

First, many of us came from working-class layers that saw themselves as being different, better than other layers of the working class, and as providing an upward mobility for their own kids that would provide permanent positions in well-paying and higher-status “professions” far removed from blue-collar drudgery. Such desired social positions had more in common with what we call the “petty-bourgeoisie” than with the proletariat. Most of us who rejected any such careerism still had no real desire (as opposed to romantic impulses) to turn away from our interesting intellectual and cultural pursuits in order to “waste time” (except for brief excursions) in the more mundane working-class reality of our parents or grandparents. The fact that much of this was permeated with illusion and “false consciousness” is less important than the fact that it affected how many of us viewed our world, our own possible futures, and our personal realities.

Second, in this period (i.e., the period in which we were growing up and joining the Trotskyist movement), the working class as a whole—including most of the organized labor movement—did not have a very highly developed sense of class consciousness. It was a time of genuine affluence and opportunity for many working people, and there was a general sense that “the working class” was fading away, that we were all becoming “middle class” now. George Meany, as head of the AFL-CIO, was expressing a common perception among his members when he said precisely that in 1972: “Our members are basically Americans. They basically believe in the American system, and maybe they have a greater stake in the system now than they had fifteen or twenty years ago, because under the system and under our trade union policy, they have become ‘middle class.’ They have a greater stake.”

Even today, in the early 1990s, a period of declining opportunities and diminishing illusions, many American working people will still more often refer to themselves as “middle class” rather than “working class.” What’s more, from the early 1950s through the late 1980s the bulk of the labor movement was embracing a narrow bread-and-butter unionism combined with an openly class-collaborationist “partners in progress” social vision. “I believe in free, democratic, competitive capitalism,” the president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Sol Chaikin, explained in 1979, concluding that “Managers should manage and then workers should sit down with them to collectively bargain for their share of the results of management efficiency and worker productivity.” It would not be stretching things too far to call this “petty-bourgeois ideology”—since it quite explicitly sees organized labor as a junior partner of the capitalist. The fact that “middle class” consciousness and ideology, as opposed to a clear sense of proletarian class consciousness, were predominant in the actually existing labor movement also affected the thinking and practice of many young radicals.

Third, many of us were, for all practical purposes, déclassé. We went through an extended period in which we were supported by our parents or by scholarships and financial loans as we went to college. Those of us who dropped out of college to do political work may have supported ourselves through various jobs, but in many cases these jobs (often economically marginal) were peripheral to our “real” lives. Our “real” lives were immersed in a peculiar political subculture of the YSA and SWP that, being composed of “students, petty-bourgeois radicals, a few older workers facing retirement, and functionaries,” as Frank Lovell puts it, had little in common with the actual daily lives of U.S. working people. To the extent that we stepped out of that peculiar subculture, we tended to be involved in the broader student-and-youth-centered radical movement of the time, which was not distinguished by any highly developed sense of class consciousness.

In fact, a pernicious form of elitism developed among many radicals of the 1960s and ’70s in the absence of a powerful, vibrantly class-conscious, self-activated working-class movement. Looking to “third world” revolutions (especially Cuba) where “a small minority of activists did learn to mobilize broad masses,” some of the new student radicals constituted what two perceptive analysts of a similar phenomenon in France described as an “frustrated intellectual elite, the representatives of a modernist petty bourgeoisie whose increasing importance in demographic, economic and cultural terms was in contradiction to its marginalization at the political level.” The vision that they could somehow become Castros and Guevaras of a U.S. revolution—a vision of “Leninism” projecting them as “a small group to lead a potential revolt and harness the energy of the masses”—resulted in a heedless combination of idealism and self-interest: “As suffering humanity liberated itself, a minority which was intellectual, dissatisfied and sometimes humiliated would find its own road to success.”

There was a cynical attitude toward people that could be fostered by such an outlook. In 1972, I was told by a young SWP national staff person at the time,
a film that fascinated many of the new leaders in the party's national headquarters was Francis Ford Coppola's classic "The Godfather," about the brutal, far-ranging, Machiavellian strategies patiently developed by tight-knit Mafia organizations to outwit, humble, and eliminate their rivals and achieve—by the end of the film—the ultimate victory. There was clearly a note of admiration in the way some of them jokingly repeated the key phrase of the film: "I want to make you an offer that you can't refuse." I was later told by another comrade that the new national organization secretary Jack Barnes (viewed by some as an "American Lenin") commented: "In case you feel bad, just remember what shit Lenin made the Russian Revolution with."

It is hardly a fair generalization that the new layer of Trotskyists admirably fantasized over the warped operations of murderous gangsters, or that they viewed Lenin's comrades (and their own) as "shit." That such attitudes existed, and that they could not have been so much in evidence in an organization infused with a genuine proletarian class consciousness, also seems a fair statement. Such consciousness implies a deep commitment to the struggle against all forms of oppression and to the egalitarian ideals that would permeate the socialist future, a devotion to doing all that is necessary to advance the self-emancipation of the working class, an elementary respect for and honesty among one's comrades—what Trotsky called "the revolutionary morality of the Bolsheviks." 61

The notion of revolutionary morality might have seemed "corny" or "un-Marxist" to some young YSAers and SWPers, but Trotsky believed in the importance among professional revolutionaries of relations which were devoid of "a single reprehensible, contemptible act, a single deception or lie," an atmosphere that Lenin referred to as "a close and compact body of comrades in which complete, mutual confidence prevails." Nor had such feelings been alien to those close to Cannon. "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," Cannon had argued. "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 undercapitalism according to the higher standards of the socialist future." 62

The limitations of the consciousness within the new layers of Trotskyist cadre doesn't minimize the importance of the objective class location (proletarian or near-proletarian) of a majority of SWP/YSAs membership in the 1960s and '70s, but that has to be balanced with the essentially petty-bourgeois consciousness that was no less a defining characteristic of the membership. In referring to consciousness I mean not just ideas; our ideas, in fact, tended to be strongly influenced by the highly proletarian class consciousness that is intimately associated with Marxism. But these vital ideas coexisted uneasily with assumptions, habits, ways of seeing things and understanding ourselves that could be appropriately referred to with the shorthand term "petty bourgeois." It should be added that this was not simply the case with the SWP and YSA. It was generally true throughout the "new left" and the younger layers of all the existing left-wing groups. It inevitably affected the manner in which "Leninism" was interpreted and applied—leading to no end of what Lenin had warned against in Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder: "phrase-mongering and clowning."

Elements of the older generation, in various ways, formed a powerful counterinfluence in the SWP to the misinterpretation and misapplication of Leninist norms, and some of these seasoned veterans finally sought—again, in various ways—to organize a resistance, with the support of a minority of the younger comrades, to the increasingly severe distortions of democratic centralism that were becoming an integral part of party life (and that were also intimately associated with the covert programmatic revision being carried out by the new leadership of the SWP). The fact that they found it necessary to carry on that fight, and that they lost, is related to the great weakening of American Trotskyism that took place under the impact of the developments examined above. At the same time, certain very serious organizational mistakes in which some of us who later became oppositionists had acquiesced, or which we failed to challenge, also contributed to our own later defeat.
6. The Erosion of the Cannon Tradition

The meaning of the Cannon tradition is reflected in the comments of Harry Braverman, author of the latter-day Marxist classic Labor and Monopoly Capital, many years after Braverman had broken from the SWP during the Cochran split of 1953:

He spoke to us in the accents of the Russian revolution and of the Leninism which had gone forth from the Soviet Union in the twenties and the thirties. But there was in his voice something more which attracted us. And that was the echoes of the radicalism of the pre-World War I years, the popular radicalism of Debs, Haywood, and John Reed. And he spoke with great force and passion....

Cannon invested the full force of a not inconsiderable personality in his convictions, as if to say that one could not hope to convince others of ideas which inspired in oneself only lukewarm feelings. This, I think, is useful to remember at a time when the ideas of socialism and the critique of capitalism are too often treated as mere mathematical exercises, the outcome of formulas, or the comparison of alternative models. It seems to me that the ruling force of Cannon’s political life, insofar as I know it, was the passion for the political principles spread by the Russian revolution in its early years. He lived by these principles and by these alone, and he became expert at separating every other impulse that plays a role in socialist politics from the thing that mattered most to him—adherence to these principles. Now, I would not pretend that this kind of dedication to principles, taken by itself, and without reference to all other requirements, theoretical and practical, is a sufficient basis for sound socialist politics. It can also be the basis for sectarianism, and usually is. But without it the politics of even the best-meaning people can become a swamp and a tangle.

Cannon’s adherence to the principles that inspired him in his youth was a manifest thing that shaped his whole life and life’s activity. The emphasis that he gave to what he called principal principles was clear in every speech and every article. He tried to have his every political act and association reflect his principles and reflect them clearly and unambiguously.

Cannon’s political principles involve an understanding of socialism that is indistinguishable from a revolutionary approach to the question of democracy. He expressed it in this way in 1957, at a time when Stalinism was wracked with crises:

We will not put the socialist movement of this country on the right track and restore its rightful appeal to the best sentiments of the working class of this country and above all to the young, until we begin to call socialism by its right name as the great teachers did. Until we make it clear that we stand for an ever-expanding workers’ democracy as the only road to socialism. Until we root out every vestige of Stalinist perversion and corruption of the meaning of socialism and democracy, and restate the thoughts and formulations of the authentic Marxist teachers....

Socialists should not argue with the American worker when he says he wants democracy and doesn’t want to be ruled by a dictatorship. Rather, we should recognize his demand for human rights and democratic guarantees, now and in the future, is in itself progressive. The socialist task is not to deny democracy, but to expand it and make it more complete. That is the true socialist tradition. The Marxists, throughout the century-long history of our movement, have always valued and defended bourgeois democratic rights, restricted as they were; and have utilized them for the education and organization of the workers in the struggle to establish full democracy by abolishing the capitalist rule altogether....

In the United States, the struggle for workers’ democracy is preeminently a struggle of the rank and file to gain democratic control of their own organization. That is the necessary condition to abolish capitalism and “establish democracy” in the country as a whole....So the fight for workers’ democracy is inseparable from the fight for socialism, and is the condition for its victory. Workers’ democracy is the only road to socialism, here in the United States and everywhere else, all the way from Moscow to Los Angeles, and from here to Budapest.

These principles come through in Cannon’s orientation toward party building and internal democracy. In one of his letters from the mid-1960s, reprinted in this volume, he notes: “Probably the hardest lesson I had to learn from Trotsky, after ten years of bad schooling through the Communist Party, 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.” He added 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.” This meant discussing differences inside the party—even when a dissident minority might impatiently act in an undisciplined manner—“in an atmosphere free from poisonous personal recriminations and venomous threats of organization discipline.” The maintenance of a democratic atmosphere when there were sharply disputed questions was essential, Cannon felt, for the party to
educate its cadres in rich lessons of the past as well as complex new realities. This was especially important as the party sought to renew itself through recruiting new members, and through training these new members in the method of principled politics and democratic centralism. "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," he wrote. "The fact that some of them probably think they already know everything, only makes it more advisable to turn the plenum sessions [of the National Committee] into a school with questions and answers freely and patiently passed back and forth."

The entire spirit of this letter, as well as the specifics, stand in stark contrast to what we see in the long, grim exposition by Jack Barnes, "The Organizational Norms of a Proletarian Party," delivered in 1982 and reprinted in this volume. Barnes described the reason why "the organization question" was coming to the fore in the early 1980s. First of all, there was the turn to industry: "our determination to lead the large majority of our leadership and membership in building fractions of the party in industry...[and] in the industrial unions." Second, there was the primacy of Cuban revolutionary leadership: "our turn to industry was only a year before the victories in Grenada and Nicaragua. That is, only a year away from the extension—after almost two decades—of the Cuban socialist revolution, which had opened the socialist revolution in our hemisphere and brought to power the first genuinely revolutionary leadership...since the Bolshevik Party in the time of Lenin." It was now necessary to strengthen the "proletarian organizational norms" of the SWP:

"Regardless of what any member thinks of the political positions and other decisions of elected leadership bodies of the party, those are the decisions that have full force and effect. All decisions they make are binding on all members unless and until they are changed by that body or overturned by a higher one...."

We have...had a series of challenges to our organizational norms [involving whether] an individual party member can unilaterally decide to organise the party's internal life [by circulating] private polemical discussion articles [among friends in the party] when no discussion has been opened by the [National Committee]....

This now comes to a halt. Totally....

We are a political organization with elected bodies, and we function through those elected bodies, not as individuals and not as groupings of friends and like-minded people....

We don't need norms for disloyal members....The party just catches them and throws them out. We have organizational norms for the cadre of the party, because that's the only way we can build a workers' party....

There is no absolute right, at any time and under any circumstances, to organize tendencies in our party or in the YSA. A higher right than the rights of tendencies exists: the right of the party, through its elected leadership bodies, to regulate its internal affairs....

[A revolutionary centralist party]...means a party that does not tolerate private discussions and decisions by self-selected groupings, open to some and closed to others, defined by friendship, past relationships, or other subjective and arbitrary criteria....

At the same time, another new SWP leader, Mary-Alice Waters, misquoted one of Cannon's comrades, Tom Kerry, making it sound like the revolutionary party is a religious fetish: "Without the party we are nothing; with the party we are all." Garbling party history and distorting Kerry's and Cannon's ideas, she spoke of the way that Kerry allegedly helped lead the SWP, beginning in the late 1950s, to "more disciplined, centralized functioning," away from functioning "as a discussion circle...to return to the norms of a politically homogeneous Leninist party." Waters's obvious implication was that Kerry (who shortly before his death had, in fact, declared war on the Barnes leadership) was an initiator of the "Bolshevization" process that was now being continued and stepped up by the Barnes leadership.65

"The worst and most reprehensible single thing about the article, in my opinion, is the myth it concocts about some golden age in SWP history (during the 1940s evidently) when the party functioned through the norms of a politically homogeneous Leninist party, that is, with strong proletarian organizational norms that enabled it to be disciplined and centralized." This was the irritated reaction of party veteran George Breitman at the time. His criticism of Waters's historiography intertwined with his anger over what he saw as the authoritarian and bullying policies of the new top SWP leaders in pushing through the "turn to industry" and programmatic revisions:

"But there never has been a time in SWP history when our norms were like the ones now being introduced. Not in the 1940s, not in the 1930s, not at any time. We built industrial fractions in the 40s and 30s but we did it through political persuasion and education, not through administrative directives, pressure, castigation of comrades who were slow to go into industry or did not want to go into it at all; nobody was made to feel like a pariah or encouraged to drop out of the party for being unable or refusing to go into industry.

"We sold our press at plant gates, in greater numbers than today, but we did it by convincing the members that it was politically necessary, not by administrative rules that make sales mandatory for members. We were a centralized party but not an overcentralized one that is afraid to leave initiative to the branches and fractions or to let them learn through their own experiences. We were a disciplined party, carrying out the decisions of conventions and plenums, but we never had rules that prohibited a
loyal member from showing other members of the party an article he had written for our press merely because the officials of the party didn’t like it.\textsuperscript{56}

There have been some suggestions that the tradition of Cannon included undemocratic practices against, for example, an opposition led by Hugo Oehler in 1934-35 and another opposition led by Bert Cochran in 1952-53, similar to the undemocratic practices of the Barnes leadership against the oppositionists of 1983-84. A careful examination by Breitman in early 1984 indicates that there are only the most superficial grounds for such assertions. It is worth giving some attention to these two historical incidents, since they were first alluded to in a 1984 document by one of the most serious historians of American Trotskyism, Alan Wald. The views of Wald and Breitman are represented in a separate appendix to this essay, but the well-reasoned conclusions presented by Breitman highlight a vital norm in the Trotskyist movement: democracy requires that disciplinary organizational measures not be permitted to short-circuit a full educational discussion and political clarification among the membership; even when a minority is perceived as violating democratic-centrist norms, it is essential to place the highest value on having it fully express its views, in order to have a thorough and serious discussion of those views. “You can’t learn much from expulsions, [or] from personal fights, except that one person is good, another bad, etc.” Cannon once noted. “That creates demoralization and discouragement. But from the discussion of great political issues...the whole new generation of party members can learn great lessons.”\textsuperscript{67}

Wald himself has suggested that “anti-Cannonism is a disease in the anti-Stalinist left that has disoriented, among others, all the Shachtmanite and state capitalist groupings, and that it is often a mask for what is really a resistance of some rather large egos to organizational discipline.” He has maintained that “Cannon’s record on the organizational question balances out on the positive side, and I see no evidence for the charge that, under his leadership, the SWP was monolithic (at least in the sense that the term ‘monolithic’ is ordinarily used).” This is clear, Wald argued, in light of some of the factional struggles inside the SWP: “In the case of the 1940 split, it seems to me that he made the Shachtmanites fair and reasonable organizational offers, and in the Goldman-Morrow dispute there was a good deal of latitude on the organizational side of things (with minority documents appearing in the theoretical magazine and repeated warnings to the minority about their open collaboration with a rival party).”\textsuperscript{68}

Breitman’s views were even stronger, reflecting the lived experience of a seasoned revolutionary cadre. “My idea is not that we’re going to go back to the beginning of the Marxist movement and try to find out what is wrong with Marxism in order to discover what Barnes did,” he concluded. “And it’s not my idea that we should go back to Lenin and to Leninism in order to find out what’s wrong with Barnesism. I am very satisfied with Marxism and Leninism and with the American version of that, which came to get the name of ‘Cannonism’ in our movement...We have to say that Barnesism is a negation of ‘Cannonism,’ not its continuation.”\textsuperscript{69}

A former member of the SWP who had been one of the most prominent female leaders, Myra Tanner Weiss, recalled that the American Trotskyist movement of the 1930s practiced a “real socialist freedom” in which “no one could, or to my knowledge would even try to repress discussion or confine it to a particular time or place. We discussed with anyone at any time whatever differences we discerned. Differences were welcome. There was creative excitement, and comradeship, in controversy.”\textsuperscript{70}

There were some tensions and problems around the role of women in the SWP, she noted, but male prejudices were actively challenged. Weiss recalls one controversy which she believes demonstrated a conflict between the rights of women comrades and the inclinations of some members of the party’s substantial maritime faction, a controversy in which Weiss intervened and drew sharp criticism from certain male comrades. She writes, “Jim Cannon, at that time the ‘head’ of the Party, defended me and did so by flatly accusing the men of male chauvinism. ‘Seamen are notoriously chauvinists,’ he charged and the matter was dropped. But I often wondered if anyone had learned anything from the incident. Discussion of it simply went underground.”\textsuperscript{71}

This relates to another problem that Weiss perceived as developing in the late 1940s: “When Cannon spoke the discussion tended to come to an end. Was everyone convinced? Or were differences just being dropped, suppressed? At the very least there was evident a lack of security, a lack of confidence that differences could be batted around freely without any adverse consequences. As a result, not everything that should be said got said. The discussion was constricted.” The period to which she refers was that preceding the 1952-53 split and split inside the Fourth International, which included a struggle between a Cannon-led majority (of which the Weisses were an integral part) and a minority faction led by Bert Cochran and George Clarke. There was a strong inclination by many, including the new SWP national chairman Farrell Dobbs, to avoid this conflict. It was largely through Cannon’s pressure that the political differences were brought into the open and debated. Many of the cadre “came to fear splits that resulted from differences,” as Weiss puts it—but the Cochran split and split were probably unavoidable. (See Appendix II.) During the 1950s and early ’60s Murry and Myra Tanner Weiss themselves became the center of a current that was increasingly at odds with the Dobbs leadership, although the peacekeeping efforts of the partially retired Cannon helped to overcome some of the tensions for a time. The Weisses initially enjoyed considerable popularity and played a major
role in the SWP’s "regroupment" efforts in the U.S. left in the late 1950s, orienting especially to elements which were breaking (or partially breaking) from Stalinism in that period. They became somewhat marginalized as a growing number of party cadres concluded that too great an adaptation was being made to Stalinism; even Cannon pointedly complained against making too great a virtue of "political togetherness." This culminated in the Weisses' open opposition to the Dobbs leadership around various political and organizational questions.72

Whatever problems and differences existed, well after her angry mid-1960s departure from the SWP, Myra Tanner Weiss has stressed that the functioning of the SWP of the 1950s was similar to its functioning in the 1930s and '40s in regard to a fairly high degree of democracy. She describes the inner life of American Trotskyism over those three decades as being marked by substantial openness, diversity, and a capacity for learning and growing. Different SWP branches maintained distinctive norms on how branch executive committees functioned, how restrictively internal bulletins were (or were not) circulated, how flexibly majority positions were carried out (and in some cases how minority positions were allowed to be tested in practice alongside majority positions).73

On the other hand, the objective realities inevitably warped these democratic traditions in various ways. The SWP suffered a serious deterioration in the 1950s, due to the anti-communist repression and the Cold War mentality that became prevalent in the popular consciousness, plus the prosperity-induced consumer culture and de-radicalization of the working class. An entire generation of the 1950s was lost to recruitment, and veteran party members either fell away in discouragement or dug in to maintain what they could of American Trotskyism. Tim Wohlforth, who had been involved as a young activist first in Max Shachtman's Independent Socialist League and then the SWP during the late 1950s, later recalled:

Dues were paid and the Militant was always sold.

The party was run in a modest, but smooth and professional manner. The problem was that the party was comprised of a generation of workers and intellectuals—those recruited in the 1930s and during World War II—which was getting old and tired. Cannon did a better job than Shachtman in holding on to his aging cadres and, on the whole, he and his followers kept the revolutionary faith. But as will and energy departed, faith was about all they had left. Cannon could not defy the general trends affecting the working class in the 1950s.74

As we have seen, Cannon sought to turn over the leadership of the SWP to cadre younger than himself—Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry. The Political Committee included these two plus Arthur Burch, Joe Hansen, Morris Lewit (Stein), Dan Roberts, Murry Weiss, and Myra Tanner Weiss. Wohlforth, as the leader of the Young Socialist Alliance (in the process of formation in the late 1950s, reflecting the ferment and vitality of the early youth radicalization), was added to this body and offers this recollection:

The Political Committee functioned reasonably well in those days; its regular, brief meetings reflected the overall organizational efficiency of the Dobbs-Kerry regime...It concerned itself with organizational matters and dealt with these matters largely in a routine fashion. World events were rarely discussed; one wonders if they were even thought about. Unlike the YSA, the Socialist Workers Party in general in the late 1950s was a rather dull place and Dobbs' PC was no different. A typical PC meeting was a two-hour battle to keep awake. I had arrived at the very top of the most revolutionary party in the United States and had trouble not falling asleep.75

From the West Coast, Cannon sought to maintain some critical perspectives and generate discussions (among National Committee members in California, and also—through letters and personal contacts—at the party center in New York) that would help keep the political juices flowing. In the center itself, some top leaders such as Joseph Hansen continued to make outstanding contributions to the intellectual life of the movement, especially in his analysis of the Cuban revolution and in preparing the reunification of the Fourth International, and George Novack also played a role in the development and dissemination of Marxist ideas. In other areas, leading party activists also worked to help the organization grow. Between 1954 and 1967, to take one case, George Breitman not only made pathbreaking theoretical contributions to the party's understanding of the Black liberation struggle, but also made immensely creative and innovative party-building contributions through his work to rebuild and lead the Detroit branch of the SWP—for example, through the institution of the Friday Night Socialist Forum, a politically and sometimes culturally exciting weekly series, which was successfully adapted in other cities as well. In a 1958 letter he explained his approach, which was also that of an important number of these older comrades:

Those who sent me to Detroit didn't intend that I should stay there; they thought in terms of a year or two, an improvement in the internal situation, etc. I told them I was going for good...I had set my heart on...helping the younger comrades, so far as I could, to develop all their powers, to realize their potential. I think I made a beginning at it. I know I helped some a little, some substantially, some not at all. I know that I helped to create a healthier climate in the branch, in which development could be encouraged in the right direction.76

Not all innovations in every branch were particularly positive. A phenomenon of "branch-factions," under the distinctive political leadership of one or another strong personality, developed in some cities. In Milwaukee a cult developed around James Boulton, in Seattle Dick Fraser and Clara Kaye developed the branch into what would soon split off to
become the Freedom Socialist Party, and in Buffalo
Sam Marcy built the branch into a center-piece for
what would become the Workers World Party.

In addition, there were powerful undercurrents, in
the repressive (and therefore, for leftists, ingrown)
political atmosphere of the 1950s, of intense
personality conflicts and rivalries which assumed
political proportions and took organizational form.
Perhaps related to deep resentment against the “dual
center” that Cannon had created in California, for
example, Farrell Dobbs and those close to him
came into sustained conflict with a group in New York
around Murry Weis. There were also particular
personality traits that had an impact. Tom Kerry, a
tough-minded political thinker and an organizational
tower of strength, also “approached a political dispute
with the subtlety of a barroom brawler,” as Tim
Wohlfirth has put it. “For Tom there was the party,
with which he completely identified, and the
opposition, which he viewed as ruff-ruff to be
summarily dealt with.”

While this trait sets a tone inconsistent with
the best elements of the Cannon tradition, Wohlfirth’s
complaint is related to the fact that he was on the
receiving end of Kerry’s wrath. This was because in
1961-64 Wohlfirth helped lead a bitter and somewhat
irresponsible factional conflict, culminating in a ten-
year political adventure as the founder and leader of a
sectarian split-off called the Workers League (with
fellow youth leader and SWP co-factionalist James
Robertson founding the Spartacist League). This self-
elimination of a top layer of new youthful recruits to
the SWP poignantly raised a fundamental question for
the SWP leadership: How can the party leadership be
renewed in a manner that will ensure the continuation
and relevance of the SWP’s revolutionary traditions?
The problem was especially pressing with the
blossoming youth radicalization of the 1960s.

The most serious errors by the SWP “old guard”
were made after Cannon’s retirement from the central
leadership. These were associated, in part, with the
selection and grooming of Jack Barnes as the new
central leader of the SWP. He was allowed to
assemble his own leadership team, and the kind of
authority that Cannon, Dobbs, and Kerry had enjoyed
was conferred upon him. It may have seemed
reasonable that this talented young militant, with a
sharp mind and powerful personality, should be raised
into the upper echelons of the party. But Barnes did
not rise through the ranks to a position of central
leadership by virtue of his abilities in mass struggles,
in party building, and in applying and developing
Marxist theory. He was not elevated over time by his
peers on the basis of what he actually accomplished.
He was elevated by his elders, by the Dobbs-Kerry
leadership, on the basis of what they believed he
represented and on the basis of what they believed he
would be able to accomplish.

Barnes wrapped himself in the mantle of
“Cannonism,” modestly claiming the role of someone
maintaining the continuity of American Trotskyism,
and doing this in a manner that was alive to new
realities. In a 1968 introduction to Cannon’s Letters
From Prison, he seemed to strike just the right
balance:

Letters From Prison does not challenge each of us
to be a Marx, a Lenin, or a Trotsky. We are simply
challenged to be ourselves, to study what went on
before, and to apply the discoveries of our
predecessors to the problems of our time. By standing
on the shoulders of the earlier working-class fighters,
American Marxists, as a team of revolutionists, can
accomplish the tasks before them....

The current struggles in Latin America, Vietnam,
and America’s Black communities testify to the
contradictions and continuing decline of imperialism.
These struggles bear witness anew to the combativity
and courage of the working masses. The central
question remains the same as when Cannon was
viewing the United States and the world from prison in
1944: How are revolutionists going to build a party
equal to the task of leading the working masses to the
conquest of power?

This approach reassured his elders and exercised a
strong attraction to those of his own generation. The
role he played in helping, behind the scenes, to lead
the SWP’s immensely successful antiwar work during
the Vietnam war seemed to vindicate those who
placed such high hopes in him, as did the intensity
with which he approached organizational questions.
Barnes also demonstrated an impressive ability to
articulate, clearly and forcefully, substantial political
analyses at party gatherings. There was a great
personal charm—a directness and unpretentiousness—
that he was able to employ in dealing with comrades,
yet also an underlying toughness, even a ruthlessness,
that sometimes came to the surface. This latter quality
was seen by some as an essential “hardness” for a
revolutionary leader prepared to go all the way.

The impact of Barnes in the SWP is a reflection
not of Leninist principles or the tradition of Cannon,
but of basic human psychological dynamics. The
functioning of some SWP members, responding to the
powerful personality and tremendous authority that
Barnes assumed, bring to mind Freud’s insights on
group psychology: “the individual gives up his ego-
ideal [i.e., individual sense of right and wrong, duty,
and guilt] and substitutes for it the group-ideal as
embodied in the leader.” The authority of the leader
(in the minds of at least many members) becomes
essential for the cohesion of the group, and the
approval of the leader, or a sense of oneness with the
leader, becomes a deep-felt need that is bound up with
one’s own sense of self-worth. The member of the
group enjoys “a feeling of triumph” when his or her
thinking coincides with this leader’s judgments, and is
vulnerable to “delusions of inferiority and self-
deprecation” whenever inner doubts arise about the
leader’s authority. Indeed, “opposition” is perceived to
be “as good as separation” from the group and is
“therefore anxiously avoided.” The compelling “group
ideal" that Barnes symbolized for such members involved a powerful mix of strongly held values, accumulated theoretical wisdom, and hopes for the future triumph of socialism. His authority flowed from the continuity that he seemed to represent with previous revolutionary generations.  

The continuity turned out to be quite illusory. Cannon and Barnes were the products of quite different experiences. The nature of "the working masses" to which Barnes referred in his commentary on Cannon was, in fact, quite different in 1938 and 1968, and the relationship of these two men to these working masses was qualitatively different. Their understanding of Leninism, and their capacity for applying this to their own particular contexts, also proved to be worlds apart. The erosion of the Cannon tradition was not reversed but completed as Barnes took control. Moving into positions of central leadership in the late 1960s and early '70s, Barnes helped to shape new norms that further undermined the party democracy that is essential to Leninism.
7. Anti-Leninist Precedents and Organizational Degeneration

The phenomenon of "Barnesism" in the SWP, we have argued here, can only be understood adequately as arising from a broad constellation of social, economic, political, and cultural developments. It cannot be attributed to fatal flaws in one or another organizational precedent of American Trotskyism. On the other hand, from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, as Barnes was assuming leadership of the SWP, organizational norms evolved which undermined the party's traditional Leninist principles. Some of these are suggested in the critical letters offered by Cannon, and it is clear that Jack Barnes was not responsible for all of them. On the other hand, they did contribute to the degeneration of the SWP, in certain cases being utilized and further developed by the Barnes leadership to transform the organization. Something can be learned from such organizational mistakes, as we seek to build a revolutionary socialist movement. There are five that can be listed here.

1) Problems in the 1965 organizational resolution.
In the struggle against the Wohlforth and Robertson factions in the early 1960s (which were expelled from the SWP and went on to become the Workers League and the Spartacist League), there were certain positions taken by the majority of the SWP leadership, later codified in a resolution adopted at the 1965 national convention of the SWP entitled "The Organizational Character of the Socialist Workers Party." Much of this resolution simply restates the long-standing organizational norms of the SWP—in some sections repeating word-for-word the 1938 resolution "The Internal Situation and Character of the Party." There are also significant additions, however. One of the innovations involves prohibition against something called "double-recruitment." Another innovation established a stricture limiting members' right to advocate dissident views inside the party. Related to this is a third innovation regarding private discussions between comrades.

Double-recruitment was defined as recruiting new members "first to their tight faction, then formally to the party, on the basis of the faction's own program and methods; indoctrination of contacts against the party program, convention decisions, and organizational principles before they applied for party membership."80 As defined, this certainly involves an extremely unhealthy form of factionalism, and it came to be prohibited behavior for party members after the adoption of the 1965 resolution. This prohibition against "double-recruitment" developed into a cure that was worse than the disease. It came to be interpreted as a prohibition against telling non-members what you really think (even in a manner not designed to subvert the party's program, decisions, and organizational principles), especially if you are trying to recruit those non-members, if you happen to disagree with one or another party policy or position. It became an undemocratic device for marginalizing, intimidating, and driving out dissidents.

"Some opponents of the disciplinary action [against the Robertsonites] have argued...that in principle anyone can advocate anything he pleases within the party," the 1965 resolution noted. It responded:

As a voluntary and revolutionary organization the SWP has the right to define the basis for its existence. The party exercises that prerogative by putting distinct limits on the right of advocacy within its ranks, as determined by majority decision through the official bodies, acting in compliance with the party's program, principles and convention decisions. Disloyal people not only cannot advocate anything they please within the party; they cannot be allowed to carry on their advocacy behind the back of the party. Those who don't want to comply with the party's democratically-decided definition of the basis for its existence have the right to withdraw from the organization and form one of their own.81

This raises serious questions. How is the term "disloyal people" to be defined? Is it disloyal to believe that a particular convention decision undermines the party's program and is contrary to its principles? Should someone who believes that the party program is in need of revision, in the light of new realities, be considered "disloyal" to that program, and should they be expected to withdraw from the organization and form one of their own? Who decides whether a member is disloyal? It may be necessary to bar from membership any member who wants to advocate racist or sexist doctrines inside the organization, but the vague and open-ended language of the 1965 organizational resolution can be (and was) misused to intimidate and eliminate dissenters in a manner that greatly damaged party democracy.

Another innovation relates to the issue of "factionalism and party unity," and is expressed in a manner that starts off well and ends up with a dubious formulation:

A properly conducted discussion of internal political differences contributes to the good and welfare of the party. It facilitates the hammering out of a correct political line and it helps to educate the membership. These benefits derive from the discussion provided that every comrade hears all points of view and the whole party is drawn into the thinking about the questions in dispute. In that way the membership as a whole can intervene in disputes, settle them in an
orderly way by majority decision and get on with the party work. This method has been followed by American Trotskyism throughout its history and has resulted in an effective clarification of all controversial issues.

Concentration on private discussions of disputed issues, on the other hand, tends to give the comrades involved a one-sided view and warps their capacity for objective political judgment. Inexperienced comrades especially are made the target of such lopsided discussion methods. The aim is to line them up quickly in a closed caucus, and prejudice their thinking before they have heard an open party debate. When dissenting views are introduced into the party in that manner groupings tend to form and harden, and the dissenting views tend to assert themselves in disruptive fashion, before the party as a whole has had a chance to face and act on the issues in dispute.82

The importance of a full discussion of internal differences, explained in the first paragraph, has already been stressed. Yet the second paragraph appears to counterpose such full, party-wide discussion of differences, on the one hand, to private discussions about such differences that might take place between two or more comrades. Of course, there are different ways to read this. Concentration on private discussions (not any or all private discussions) tends to give (not inevitably gives) comrades a one-sided view. A reasonable way to read this passage could be as a warning about a danger, not as any kind of prohibition. But there is a real ambiguity in the passage, which soon fed into an authoritarian trend. The Barnes leadership took this even further, eventually prohibiting private discussion, whose dangers were hypocritically inveighed against, while at the same time preventing the party-wide discussion through which critical perspectives could be communicated.

2) Factional organizational maneuvering against a minority tendency in 1971. In the period leading up to the 1971 national convention of the SWP, a minority tendency developed which called itself the Proletarian Orientation Tendency, with about 100 supporters. (The SWP had close to 1,000 members at this time.) The P.O.T. claimed to stand closer to an “orthodox” Trotskyist position, questioning some SWP policies regarding the antiwar, feminist, black nationalist, student movements, and centering its struggle “against the SWP’s abandonment of a proletarian orientation, of its abandonment of viewing the working class as the revolutionary force in history,” in the polemical words of one P.O.T. supporter. According to former adherent Alan Wald, it “only argued for an augmentation of the campus orientation with the establishment of a viable trade union faction and the voluntary colonization [into industrial jobs] of non-campus comrades, plus increased work on Third World and working-class community college campuses and among GIs.”83

The P.O.T.'s loyalty to the party was questioned in the ensuing internal debate, although committed party veterans such as Larry Trainor had been associated with it. On the basis of an allegation that it was an "unprincipled combination," the tendency was denied representation on the SWP National Committee, although minority representation on leadership bodies had been a tradition in the Trotskyist movement. In fact, National Committee members who had been associated with the P.O.T. (including 1968 vice presidential candidate and Black activist Paul Bouteille) were not reelected to that body. Far more serious was the treatment accorded members of the chapter of the Young Socialist Alliance in Oakland-Berkeley. One SWP majority supporter described the situation in this way in the summer of 1971:

About a year ago a number of the comrades in the present sectarian tendency [the P.O.T.] became the majority in the Berkeley YSA, though they remained a minority in the party branch. They were hard workers, some of them quite talented, and did good work...

This was not a healthy situation, but we managed to do our work fairly well because the national leadership and this branch—leadership and membership—followed a good organizational policy. We tried to involve all the comrades in the work, regardless of their opinions or personal characteristics. We tried to build a collective leadership for the branch, with comrades from both sides on the executive committee and in the fractions. Everyone was given a fair shake and the opportunity to put their abilities to work. There were difficulties in this, of course, but we managed.84

Unfortunately, this exemplary manner of functioning broke down after the national convention. Major credit for the breakdown would seem to be due to the national organization secretary at the time, Jack Barnes. Eleven additional majority supporters had been transferred into the Oakland-Berkeley area to become part of the YSA before the convention. After the convention, however, forty-nine more majority supporters were transferred in. Two P.O.T. members' bitter memory was that these new arrivals "came laughing and giggling into the [Oakland-Berkeley party] headquarters, at a rate of five or six a day, acting as if they had arrived at summer camp. They gave smart sleazy responses to questions asked about their presence by the indigenous branch members, and they rapidly moved to shut P.O.T. members not only out of the political life but the social life of the branch as well." The consequences were destructive:

The record shows that—despite intentions or beliefs of various individuals involved in the operation—the purpose was precisely to drive supporters of the minority view out of activity, and out of the party itself. Prior to this swamping operation the leaders and members of the P.O. had carried out major assignments in all areas of party work: Comrade Graumann as YSA Organizer, Comrade Levitt as SWP Education Director, Comrade Wald as SWP candidate, Comrade Stodola as full-time NPAC
Regardless of any mistakes or malfunctioning that might be attributed to the P.O.T., this episode stands as a model of how a responsible, politically mature party leadership should not function. Instead, it became a model for how other minorities were dealt with in the future.

3) The prohibition on comrades’ democratic right to communicate with each other without leadership permission. A party member named David Keil wrote an article on working-class organizing and trade union activity in Europe (with implications for the party debate on “a proletarian orientation”) which, because it was unpublished, he showed in manuscript to various comrades. One of the people he showed it to was his branch organizer. In a letter to the Political Committee of the SWP dated February 25, 1971, Keil described what happened next: “He told me that, since it is not a preconvention discussion period, it might be best for me not to show the article to comrades, since the other side had no chance to answer.” He asked the Political Committee, “do I have the right or permission to show this article to comrades before the preconvention discussion starts? In any case, I would not distribute it to any and all comrades, just those I think might agree with it or to better show my position to comrades with whom I get into a discussion.” He also asked whether—as someone had told him— comrades living in different cities did not have the right to co-author a document, for reasons similar to that given him by his branch organizer. A March 22, 1971, response from National Organization Secretary Jack Barnes did not give a direct answer to his questions, but simply referred him to the 1965 organization resolution, “especially the section of ‘Factionalism and Party Unity’ which deals with the problem of selective discussions prior to our regular pre-convention discussion period.”

In a letter dated July 11, 1971, Keil wrote to the Political Committee indicating that he was circulating among some party members, “in order to obtain suggestions and sponsors,” a draft of an amendment to the leadership’s draft political resolution. He asked if the amendment would be considered friendly or as representing a counter-line. Barnes wrote back to him that his question represented “asking the Political Committee to make a private political commitment to you behind the back of the party.” This and the private circulation of the amendment were “entirely out of line.” Barnes asserted, quoting the two paragraphs on “Factionalism and Party Unity” from the 1965 resolution which we examined earlier. He concluded:

“In keeping with the discussion norms set forth in the above quotation, any amendments you may wish to offer concerning the National Committee draft resolutions should be submitted directly and openly to the party as a whole through the internal bulletin.”

In a letter dated February 13, 1979, Keil informed the Political Committee that he had sent copies of a document disagreeing with the party’s position on Cuba to several members of the SWP as well as to several members of sections or sympathizing groups of the Fourth International in other countries. He received a letter signed by Larry Seigle, for the Political Committee, telling him: “The party’s organizational principles prohibit the private circulation of discussion articles and other forms of political activity outside normal channels.” Quoting two familiar paragraphs from the 1965 resolution, “The Organizational Character of the SWP,” Seigle went on to explain that “circulation of ‘drafts’ to arbitrarily selected individuals has nothing in common with the normal process of leadership collaboration and discussion that is the responsibility of the elected leadership of the bodies of the party to carry out.” He concluded: “Until such time as the 1965 organizational resolution is amended or superseded, all comrades are bound to abide by it as a condition of membership. This means you must cease any private circulation of documents. The place for such discussion is in the [internal preconvention] discussion bulletin.”

This increasing restriction of the right of SWP members to communicate with each other was alien to the actual ideas of Lenin and the practice of the Bolshevik party, nor did it have anything to do with the manner in which James P. Cannon functioned or expected his comrades to function. Many SWP members did not believe that this was the way in which the 1965 organizational resolution should be understood, and—in many cases unaware of the correspondence with Keil—they were not inclined to curtail their communications with each other. But a growing number of the members did come to understand this prohibition, and to function accordingly. By the early 1980s there was no longer any room for misunderstanding.

4) The expulsion of the Internationalist Tendency. In 1974 a sizeable dissident faction, the Internationalist Tendency (IT), was expelled from the SWP in a manner that severely undermined party democracy. The fact that so damaging an act was endorsed by the overwhelming majority of the SWP leadership and membership— including “old guard” veterans who should have known better, and independent-minded activists who would later become oppositionists—can only be understood if we briefly examine the nature of the IT itself. As was the case with the Proletarian Orientation Tendency, in the course of this factional fight some very unhealthy organizational practices were employed against the IT. On the other hand, members of this oppositional current were themselves not above employing a
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Paul Le Blanc

The IT consisted of a somewhat heterogeneous collection of oppositionists, some of whom were former members (now somewhat embittered) of the Proletarian Orientation Tendency. The IT as a whole identified with positions of the International Majoritarian Tendency (IMT) in a factional dispute that had arisen inside the Fourth International. The SWP majority, on the other hand, including the overwhelming majority of the party’s “old guard” plus the emergent leadership around Barnes, helped to organize the Leninist-Trotskyist Faction (LTF) in this international dispute. The IMT represented a current that was adapting to “far-left” trends arising out of the worldwide youth radicalization of the 1960s, influenced by the Vietnamese revolution, Maoism, and the guerrilla warfare strategy articulated by Che Guevara and Regis Debray. The LTF represented a current that sought to maintain traditional Trotskyist perspectives, a refusal to adapt to what it viewed as dangerousultra-leftism, and an insistence on maintaining what it termed “the Leninist strategy of party building.” In addition to endorsing IMT positions in the international dispute, the IT advanced an extremely sharp critique of SWP perspectives in the United States—denouncing the party’s student orientation, its approach to building a broad-based (and thus insufficently “revolutionary”) antiwar coalition against the Vietnam war, its support of Black nationalism, and its alleged capitulation to “bourgeois feminism.” The IT represented about 150 people in the combined membership of 2,000 that made up the SWP and YSA.89

The IT mistakenly believed that the factional fight between the IMT and LTF would culminate in a new split in the Fourth International. It almost enthusiastically favored this split, and it expected to become the U.S. representative of the IMT-led Fourth International. Its critique of the SWP was quite fundamental. It argued that “the Barnes leadership’s grotesque mutations” were rooted in “negative features of the Cannon tradition,” including: “an over-emphasis on the administrative side of politics and the apparatus side of the party,” at the expense of real experience in struggles and the development of program; an organizational sectarianism in union work; an irrational, obsessive fear of Stalinism; and a dogmatic approach to theory. The Barnes-dominated leadership amplified these weaknesses, according to the IT. Abandoning “the specific historic role of the party, that of injecting revolutionary class consciousness into the working class,” the SWP had reduced itself to chasing after non-proletarian mass movements which it sought “to control administratively and liquidate politically,” according to IT leader Bill Massey. This was combined with concentration in these mass movements on selling SWP literature (and treating other radical groups in a sectarian manner), as a substitute for building a revolutionary proletarian party. Characterizing the entire SWP leadership as “a monolithic social club” composed of “a handraising chorus of political eunuchs,” the IT concluded that “the party has programmatically divorced itself so completely from the proletariat that there is little hope for any...regeneration.” A retrospective look by some of the less virulic IT supporters asserted: “In sum, the SWP, in spite of its Trotskyist veneer, must be characterized as centrist [midway between revolutionary socialism and reformism] politically, monolithic and bureaucratic organizationally, sectarian and dishonest in its methods and style of work.”90

It is hardly surprising that SWP members holding such opinions would have difficulty functioning in anything like a disciplined manner in the party, or even discussing disputed issues in a comradely fashion. Considerable ill-will among the great majority of SWPers was consequently generated against the IT members by the attitude many of them displayed in the debate and in their manner of functioning in SWP branches and YSA chapters. Given the increasingly tightened organizational norms referred to earlier, the IT faction felt compelled to organize itself in partial secrecy: a covert IT national conference was held, complete with IT internal discussion bulletins, to discuss its perspectives in the SWP fight and beyond. All of this was discovered by the SWP leadership—which had little difficulty in persuading many serious party members that the oppositionists were utterly disloyal to the SWP.

A case can be made for the expulsion of the IT. This is mitigated by the substantial contribution of the Barnes leadership in creating, maintaining, and intensifying a highly factionalized atmosphere. There is also the important question of the extent to which extreme administrative measures would cut across the necessary process of political clarification within the party, also creating an internal atmosphere far less tolerant than before to the consideration of any dissident views. The fact is, however, that the IT was not formally expelled. To expel the ITers would, according to the SWP constitution, make it necessary to allow them to appeal their expulsion—a lengthy and potentially complicated (and, given the relationship of the IT to the majority current in the Fourth International, politically delicate) piece of business.

Instead, the SWP Political Committee announced, on July 4, 1974, “that the Internationalist Tendency’s status as a separate, rival party be recognized and that the members of the Internationalist Tendency party be informed that this status places them outside the constitutional provisions of membership in the Socialist Workers Party.” It also decided “to instruct each branch to re-register its membership by removing from its rolls as of this date all of the 69 known members of the Internationalist Tendency party.”91 This “re-registration out of the party,” as opposed to expulsion, denied IT members any right to appeal. It made unnecessary any discussion whatsoever. This maneuver was based on a fiction: the IT was certainly a hardened faction on a split trajectory, but it had not decided to split, and it was by no means “a rival
party.” The Political Committee was also playing fast and loose with the SWP’s traditional organizational norms and formal constitutional provisions. The “re-registration” nonetheless seemed to many like a clever move to avoid a debilitating factional discussion inside the party.

The entire manner in which this expulsion was carried out, and the manner in which the factional dispute with the IT was handled by the party leadership, helped to further codify supercentralist norms and strengthen uncritical attitudes toward the Barnes leadership. Little effort was made to reach out to some of the more reasonable ITers, to give any sense that IT comrades or their concerns should be taken seriously, or to defuse the situation in any way. Instead, throughout the entire factional struggle, the opposition was treated in a manner that would encourage unhealthy attitudes of suspicion or intolerance among many members toward any criticisms or dissent arising within the SWP.

5) The development of “leadership body discipline.” As we can see in the February 8, 1966, letter by Cannon in this volume, a norm exists in the American Trotskyist tradition regarding a “higher body”—such as a branch executive committee, the party Political Committee, and at least to some extent the broader National Committee—tending to keep its deliberations (that is, comments and disagreements of committee members) to itself. The logic of this, in part, is to allow each member to speak with complete candor, and to develop certain thoughts tentatively, without these remarks in any way being used against them in an intimidating manner; it facilitates free discussion and collective give-and-take within leadership bodies. Another aspect of this norm’s logic is that it is best not to try “line up” members behind (or against) one or another position expressed in such a leadership body; that such “lining-up” can best take place in the course of a full discussion in the party, with each comrade having the opportunity to express—or in some cases to revise—their positions in their own words, as opposed to being quoted or misquoted by another member of the leadership body.

Another norm that evolved in the SWP was an inclination of comrades, especially those in leadership bodies, to consult with each other informally if some problem or disagreement arises, as opposed to openly expressing differences. Sometimes a misunderstanding can be eliminated or a disagreement narrowed in this manner. This was seen as an especially useful procedure in regard to possible differences with a central party leader. After all, it is far better to quietly help strengthen the leadership than it is to undermine its authority unnecessarily. If significant differences continue to exist, then they should be openly confronted and presented—but a premature confrontation in the party can cut across the clarification of real differences.

As the Barnes leadership consolidated its position in the SWP during the 1970s, these norms became warped into new and restrictive rules that undermined party democracy. This became a means by which even a significant number of leading Barnes supporters were marginalized and finally pushed out of the party. One example involves Peter Camejo, the SWP’s candidate for president in the 1976 elections. “I noticed over time that whenever I attempted to raise questions that differed from the leadership’s opinion, it resulted in a heated organizational atmosphere,” he wrote in 1982. “Only if I limited myself to informing Jack Barnes or some other officer of the Party in private could hostilities and organizational conflicts be avoided, or at least minimized.” While stressing the value of such informal discussions about political differences, Camejo added: “Looking back, however, I can see that I would often use such a discussion as a substitute for what I should have said at a formal meeting.” His elaboration on this deserves attention:

For instance, when I privately met with Jack Barnes to inform him that I thought it was wrong to project that the YSA should be permanently student-oriented, I should have so stated in the Political Committee and voted accordingly. I didn’t. But the prevailing mode of operation in the SWP leadership is to consider such private meetings as an act of loyalty, of “teamwork.” In my case, it wasn’t working out too well because I would periodically raise differences in the PC or in local executive committees and even, though rarely, vote against the majority or make my own proposals, if only on minor matters.

As relations began to deteriorate, I had various meetings with Jack Barnes and Mary-Alice Waters, at my request, to try and reverse the drift I sensed toward a policy of non-collaboration with me (after 1979). I made various efforts to try to maintain comradeship and collaborative relations, but they did not work.

I continue to feel, as many other comrades do, that once you begin to voice differences, real collaboration stops. This makes comrades hesitate to function in a correct Leninist manner.

Any party functioning under full Leninist norms would have differences and conflicting votes over at least some questions once in a while. To believe otherwise is non-materialist. Yet the SWP leadership has gone for years upon years with the central leadership voting on every question in unison even when the votes meant a sharp reversal of what they had voted for only a short period before.

Every leader, almost without exception, who has voted against a majority proposal at a PC or NC meeting in recent times has ended up having strong difficulties being able to function on a normal collaborative basis with the present core of leaders. This is true, in my opinion, whether they are experienced proletarian leaders coming out of the 1930s and 40s, such as George Breitman, Frank Lovell and Nat Weinstein, or NCers recruited in more recent decades, such as Les Evans, Ray Markey, Lynn Henderson, myself and many others.

Among those who were part of the Barnes “leadership team” in this period were Barry Sheppard and Malik Miah, each of whom had held—at one point
or another—various top positions, including that of SWP national chairperson (subordinate, however, to national secretary, Barnes). Within a few years they too found themselves marginalized and stumbling over increasingly restricted interpretations of organizational discipline. In 1987, after he had been pushed out of the central leadership, Sheppard raised a difference with a position adopted by the National Committee about a report which was to be given at a membership conference; a motion was then adopted stating that all members of the National Committee had to support this report at the membership conference. By 1988, profoundly demoralized, he resigned from the party. Miah was expelled in 1989 for expressing his disagreement with the party leadership at a national trade union fraction meeting. “I must put forward the views of the PC in the fraction even if I disagree with them. That’s correct,” Miah commented. “But I also have the right to say I don’t agree with that line and will raise my views in the proper manner. That’s been our tradition when differences have arisen in the past.”

Citing the 1965 organizational resolution, the Political Committee responded that “no minority in the National Committee has the right to decide when to open a discussion in the party membership, nor do they have the right to organize around a counterline. It is up to the party, through its democratically elected bodies—not individual members who place themselves above party democracy—to decide when and under what circumstances discussion on party line is in order.”

The retrospective comment by Sheppard and Miah, although still formulated in a too restricted manner, is to the point: “The National Committee has every right to determine how its positions will be reported to the party. But it is a violation of all past practice of the SWP to interpret this right to mean that NC members who happen to be members of a body lower than the National Committee cannot speak freely about their opinions on whatever subject is on the agenda of a meeting of that lower body. Such ‘committee discipline’ obviously violates the democratic rights of the entire membership to be fully informed of the opinions of the other members of whatever body is in session.”

In fact, in the party of Lenin, and also in the era of “real socialist freedom” in the American Trotskyist movement under Cannon, all comrades had a right to speak freely about their opinions not only in meetings under the appropriate agenda point, but also in communication with each other outside of meetings. In these organizations there was, of course, a leadership which consistently showed good judgment about when inner-party discussion was necessary.

From 1965 to 1990 we can see a process in the SWP in which organizational norms which seemed reasonable, if understood broadly and interpreted flexibly as suggested modes of behavior, came to be interpreted with increasing restrictiveness and transformed into strict rules whose violation would result in expulsion. More than this, the notion of a “leadership team” came to involve a conception of leadership body discipline which had the effect of transforming the “team” into a permanent and undeclared faction organized around the person of Jack Barnes. Any openly expressed (let alone organized) disagreement with this Barnes leadership became exceedingly difficult to harmonize with continued party membership.

It sounds reasonable to say that “the party as a whole” has the right to regulate its internal discussions. It sounds quite democratic to add that this should be done “through its elected leadership bodies.” But the interpretation of the 1965 organizational resolution developed by the Political Committee under Barnes meant that the phrase “the party through its elected leadership bodies” became equivalent, for all practical purposes, to investing decision-making power in the hands of the SWP national secretary.

Such functioning is alien to the tradition of Lenin, Trotsky, and Cannon. Despite the Barnes leadership’s repeated stress on “proletarian organizational norms,” it is alien to the traditions of working-class democracy and labor radicalism out of which the revolutionary socialist movement arose. It has, instead, gone in the direction of creating a small, secure, totalitarian universe buoyed up with grand illusions. With no authority in a genuinely class-conscious working-class movement, artificial attempts to elaborate and enforce rules to establish “the iron discipline needed by the revolutionary proletariat,” as Lenin put it, “invariably fall flat and end up in phrase-mongering and clowning.”

“Great energy has been expended by the leadership,” Miah and Sheppard observe, “in working through intricate reasoning on exactly what the true proletarian norms are in matters such as members holding baby showers, proper times and places for breast feeding, when children can be present at political events, and other such ‘critical questions’ of world revolution.” Unfortunately, this is not a caricature.

Such “proletarian norms” have nothing to do with working-class life, or with Marxist theory, or with what it will take to make a working-class socialist revolution. They reflect a tragic degeneration of an organization that once represented a high-point in world Trotskyism and in the history of American radicalism.

These negative lessons of the SWP experience must be learned by serious revolutionary socialists who seek to become a relevant force not in some mythical working class that embodies Barnes’s “proletarian norms” but within the working class as it actually is. Only by taking root in this real working class can Leninism take on life and can the proud tradition of American Trotskyism be renewed. There are indications that objective conditions in the actual experience of the U.S. working class may be creating the basis for such a development as the 20th century nears its end.
8. Leadership, Membership, Revolutionary Democracy

There are also positive lessons to be learned. The Socialist Workers Party, even as it was beset by the growing problems indicated in the previous section of this essay, had tremendous strengths. In the 1960s and ’70s—in part through the earlier theoretical and programmatic acquisitions of revolutionary Marxism and American Trotskyism, in part through the richness of experience encompassed in the lives of the older comrades, and in part through the idealism, energy, and creativity of new young members—the SWP made important contributions. Some of these are indicated in materials gathered in this book.

It is important to recognize that “Barnesism” finds its antidote from resources within the tradition of American Trotskyism. This should be clear from an examination of materials by James P. Cannon already discussed, and also from an examination of Trotsky’s own advice on essential aspects of building a revolutionary party. Consider the conception of party leadership that shines through in Trotsky’s discussion of party democracy:

a. The strictest observance of the party statutes by the leading bodies (regular conventions, necessary period of discussion, right of the minority to express its opinions in the party meetings and in the press.

b. A patient, friendly, to a certain point pedagogical attitude on the part of the central committee and its members toward the rank and file, including the objectors and the discontented because it is not a great merit to be satisfied “with anybody who is satisfied with me.” When Lenin asked for the expulsion of Ordzhonikidze from the party (1923), he said very correctly that the discontented party member has the right to be turbulent, but not a member of the central committee. Methods of psychological “terrorism,” including a haughty or sarcastic manner of answering or treating every objection, criticism, or doubt—it is, namely, this journalistic or “intellectualistic” manner which is insufferable to workers and condemns them to silence.

c. The solely formal object of the democratic rules as indicated under (a) and the solely negative measures—not to terrorize, not to ridicule—under (b) are not sufficient. The central committee as well as every local committee must be in permanent, active, and informal contact with the rank and file, especially when a new slogan or a new campaign is in preparation or when it is necessary to verify the results of an accomplished campaign. Not every member of the central committee is capable of such an informal contact, and not every member has the time for this or the occasion, which depends not only upon goodwill and a particular psychology but also upon the profession and the corresponding milieu. In the composition of the central committee it is necessary to have not only good organizers and good speakers, writers, administrators, but also people closely connected with the rank and file, organically representative of them.

Trotsky also had much to say on the responsibility of the party membership in guaranteeing the effectiveness of party democracy, for example:

A Bolshevik is not merely a disciplined person; he is a person who in each case and on each question forges a firm opinion of his own and defends it courageously and independently, not only against his enemies, but inside his own party. Today, perhaps, he will be in the minority in his organization. He will submit [to the majority decision], because it is his party. But this does not always signify that he is in the wrong. Perhaps he saw or understood before the others did a new task or the necessity of a turn. He will persistently raise the question a second, a third, a tenth time, if need be. Thereby he will render his party a service, helping it to meet the new task fully armed or to carry out the necessary turn without organic upheavals, without factional convulsions....

What...a fighting mass organization needs is not sycophantic functionaries but people who are strongly tempered morally, permeated with a feeling of personal responsibility, who on every important question will make it their duty to work out conscientiously their personal opinion and will defend it courageously by every means that does not violate rationality (that is, not bureaucratically) understood discipline and unity of action....That is why bureaucratic obsequiousness, spurious docility, and all other manners of empty well-wishers who know which side their bread is buttered on, cannot be tolerated. What is needed is criticism, checking of facts, independence of thought, the personal elaboration of the present and the future, independence of character, the feeling of responsibility, truth toward oneself and toward one’s work.

Trotsky’s description of the revolutionary party stands as an eloquent rebuttal of authoritarian organizational norms propagated by the Barnes leadership. It is this revolutionary democratic spirit, forging a bond between the traditions of Bolshevik-Leninism and American Trotskyism, that permeates the struggle of the many SWP dissidents reflected in this volume. As a unified sympathizing section of Trotsky’s Fourth International is recomposed in the United States, and to the extent that class consciousness and a revolutionary socialist movement take root in the U.S. working class, this spirit and tradition will be an invaluable resource.
Appendix I

The Internal Situation and the Character of the Party
by James P. Cannon and Max Schachtman

[Resolution adopted at the founding convention of the
Socialist Workers Party, 1938. In The Founding of the
Socialist Workers Party, pp. 160-163.]

The Socialist Workers Party is a revolutionary
Marxian party, based on a definite program, whose
aim is the organization of the working class in the
struggle for power and the transformation of the
existing social order. All of its activities, its methods,
and its internal regime are subordinated to this aim
and are designed to serve it.

Only a self-acting and critical-minded membership
is capable of forging and consolidating such a party
and of solving its problems by collective thought,
discussion, and experience.

From this follows the need for assuring the widest
party democracy in the ranks of the organization.

The struggle for power organized and led by the
revolutionary party is the most ruthless and
irreconcilable struggle in all history. A loosely knit,
heterogeneous, undisciplined, untrained organization
is utterly incapable of accomplishing such world-
historical tasks as the proletariat and the revolutionary
party are confronted with in the present era. This is all
the more emphatically true in the light of the
singularly difficult position of our party and the
extraordinary persecution to which it is subjected.
From this follows the party’s unconditional demand
upon all its members for complete discipline in all the
public activities and actions of the organization.

Leadership and centralized direction are
indispensable prerequisites for any sustained and
disciplined action, especially in the party that sets
itself the aim of leading the collective efforts of the
proletariat in its struggle against capitalism. Without a
strong and firm central committee, having the power
to act promptly and effectively in the name of the
party and to supervise, coordinate, and direct all its
activities without exception, the very idea of a
revolutionary party is a meaningless jest.

It is from these considerations, based upon the
whole of the experience of working-class struggle
throughout the world in the last century, that we derive
the Leninist principle of organization, namely,
democratic centralism. The same experience has
demonstrated that there are no absolute guarantees for
the preservation of the principle of democratic
centralism, and no rigid formula that can be set down
in advance, a priori, for the application of it under any
and all circumstances. Proceeding from certain
fundamental conceptions, the problem of applying the
principle of democratic centralism differently under
different conditions and stages of development of the
struggle can be solved only in relation to the concrete
situation, in the course of the tests and experience
through which the movement passes, and on the basis
of the most fruitful and healthy interrelationship of the
leading bodies of the party and its rank and file.

The leadership of the party must be under the
control of the membership, its policies must always be
open to criticism, discussion, and rectification by the
rank and file within properly established forms and
limits, and the leading bodies themselves subject to
formal recall or alteration. The membership of the
party has the right to demand and expect the greatest
responsibility from the leaders, precisely because of
the position they occupy in the movement. The
selection of comrades to the positions of leadership
means the conferring of an extraordinary
responsibility. The warrant for this position must be
proved, not once but continuously by the leadership
itself.

It is under obligation to set the highest example of
responsibility, devotion, sacrifice, and complete
identification with the party itself and its daily life and
action. It must display the ability to defend its policies
before the membership of the party, and to defend the
line of the party and the party as a whole before the
working class in general. Sustained party activity, not
broken or disrupted by abrupt and disorienting
changes, presupposes not only a continuity of tradition
and a systematic development of party policy, but also
the continuity of leadership. It is an important sign of
a serious and firmly constituted party, of a party really
engaged in productive work in the class struggle, that
it throws up, out of its ranks, cadres of more or less
able leading comrades, tested for their qualities of
endurance and trustworthiness, and that it thus ensures
a certain stability and continuity of leadership by such
a cadre.

Continuity of leadership does not, however,
signify the automatic self-perpetuation of leadership.
Constant renewal of its ranks by means of additions
and, when necessary, replacements, is the only
assurance that the party has that its leadership will not
succumb to the effects of dry-rot, that it will not be
burdened with deadwood, that it will avoid the
corrosion of conservatism and dilettantism, that it will
not be the object of conflict between the older
elements and the younger, that the old and basic cadre
will be refreshed by new blood, that the leadership as
a whole will not become purely bureaucratic
"committee men" with a life that is remote from the
real life of the party and the activities of the rank and
file. Like leadership, membership itself in the party
implies certain definite rights.

Party membership confers the fullest freedom of
discussion, debate, and criticism inside the ranks of
the party, limited only by such decisions and provisions as are made by the party itself or by bodies to which it assigns this function. Affiliation to the party confers upon each member the right of being democratically represented at all policy-making assemblies of the party (from branch to national and international convention), and the right of the final and decisive vote in determining the program, policies, and leadership of the party.

With party rights, the membership has also certain definite obligations. The theoretical and political character of the party is determined by its program, which forms the lines delimiting the revolutionary party from all other parties, groups, and tendencies in the working class. The first obligation of the party membership is loyal acceptance of the program of the party and regular affiliation to one of the basic units of the party. The party requires of every member the acceptance of its discipline and the carrying on of its activity in accordance with the program of the party, with the decisions adopted by its conventions and with the policies formulated and directed by the party leadership. Party membership implies the obligation of 100 percent loyalty to the organization, the rejection of all agents of other, hostile groups in its ranks, and intolerance of divided loyalties in general. Membership in the party necessitates a minimum of activity in the organization, as established by the proper unit, and under the direction of the party; it necessitates the fulfillment of all the tasks which the party assigns to each member. Party membership implies the obligation upon every member to contribute materially to the support of the organization in accordance with his means.

From the foregoing it follows that the party seeks to include in its ranks all the revolutionary, class-conscious, and militant workers who stand on its program and are active in building the movement in a disciplined manner. The revolutionary Marxist party rejects not only the arbitrariness and bureaucratism of the CP, but also the spurious and deceptive "all-inclusiveness" of the Thomas-Tyler-Hoan party, which is a sham and a fraud. Experience has proved conclusively that this "all-inclusiveness" paralyzes the party in general and the revolutionary left wing in particular, suppressing and bureaucratically hounding the latter while giving free rein to the right wing to commit the greatest crimes in the name of socialism and the party. The SWP seeks to be inclusive only in this sense: that it accepts into its ranks those who accept its program and rejects from membership those who reject its program.

The rights of each individual member, as set forth above, do not imply that the membership as a whole, namely, the party itself, does not possess rights of its own. The party as a whole has the right to demand that its work not be disrupted and disorganized, and has the right to take all the measures which it finds necessary to assure its regular and normal functioning. The rights of any individual member are distinctly secondary to the rights of the party membership as a whole. Party democracy means not only the most scrupulous protection of the rights of a given minority, but also the protection of the rule of the majority. The party is therefore entitled to organize the discussion and to determine its forms and limits.

All inner-party discussion must be organized from the point of view that the party is not a discussion club which debates interminably on any and all questions at any and all times, without arriving at a binding decision that enables the organization to act, but from the point of view that we are a disciplined party of revolutionary action. The party in general not only has the right, therefore, to organize the discussion in accordance with the requirements of the situation, but the lower units of the party must be given the right, in the interests of the struggle against the disruption and disorganization of the party's work, to call irresponsible elements to order and, if need be, to eject them from the ranks.

The decisions of the national party convention are binding on all party members without exception and they conclude the discussion on all those disputed questions upon which a decision has been taken. Any party member violating the decisions of the convention, or attempting to revive discussion in regard to them without formal authorization of the party, puts himself thereby in opposition to the party and forfeits his right to membership. All party organizations are authorized and instructed to take any measures necessary to enforce this rule.
Appendix II

George Breitman and Alan Wald on the History of Trotskyism in the United States

A little-known controversy between George Breitman and Alan Wald in 1984 on aspects of U.S. Trotskyist history is worth some attention for more than one reason. First of all, both have a well-deserved reputation—by the painstaking accumulation of hard-to-obtain information and the development of insightful interpretations—as having made invaluable contributions to an understanding of the history of the Trotskyist movement. They collaborated for many years, although this particular controversy, occurring at a stressful moment after both had been expelled from the SWP—resulted in a temporary interruption to that collaboration. This is related to the fact that both viewed their researches and interpretations not as some antiquarian diversion, but as having meaning for the understanding that revolutionary socialists have of their recent experiences, with direct implications for what they should do (and avoid doing) in the future.

Wald had written a searching essay entitled “Paulism Versus Critical Consciousness” which was circulated privately and also in Socialist Action Internal Discussion Bulletin (Number 1 in 1984), an internal discussion bulletin produced by an organization formed by Trotskyists expelled from the Socialist Workers Party. SA was the group to which he briefly belonged before finally becoming part of Solidarity (and a member of the Fourth International Caucus in that organization). Breitman was still a member of the SWP at that time, and after his expulsion became a founding member of the Fourth Internationalist Tendency.

Breitman was concerned that Wald was drawing the wrong conclusions both from his experience and also from the history of the Trotskyist movement, and that this would contribute to the dissociation of many comrades. He was also upset that Wald had solicited from him information without telling him what it was being used for, and that no draft of the essay was shown to him for comment before being circulated. He told Wald that he would no longer collaborate with him, which resulted in an angry break in their relationship. This rift was finally repaired, in part because the mutual respect of these two revolutionary scholars transcended their sometimes sharply divergent perspectives.

What is of interest to us here, however, are the different interpretations they offered on two important moments in the history of American Trotskyism. These relate to the question of whether “Cannonism” in any way organically led or contributed to the rise of “Barnesism”—whether there were undemocratic precedents in the earlier history of American Trotskyism paving the way for the later policies of Barnes. Wald argued that, in fact, there were “unfortunate connections between past and present” (p. 29). He also suggested that, after the 1940 split, “Shachtman’s party may well have been more internally democratic than Cannon’s in some respects” (p. 31).

Of course, this raises questions about what is meant, precisely, by the word democratic (different people often mean different things by it), and the relationship of such democracy to the building of a genuinely revolutionary party. Such a question becomes especially poignant if we consider the critique by C.L.R. James of the Workers Party that Shachtman led (and in which James was, for a time, the leader of the Johnson-Forest tendency). “Given the perspectives of the W.P. leaders, the ‘all-inclusive party,’ concerned only with sects, grouplets, and shades of opinion, is exactly the kind of party they want,” James commented. “They are concerned with the party not as an instrument of struggle for the proletariat but for the protection, as they say officially and unofficially, of the ideological life of minorities.” Before moving on, it is worth giving a longer look at James’s portrait of Shachtman’s group:

Equally self-deceiving is the W.P.’s interminable accusation against the S.W.P. that it practices the “leader-cult.” In reality, the “leader-cult” in the W.P. is of the most pervasive and comprehensive type. The Johnson-Forest tendency, the S.W.P., the Fourth International, have a clear political line on most issues....The W.P. has no policy, neither on the character of the epoch nor the nature of the Stalinist parties nor on American perspectives nor on the Negro question. There is most complete “democracy”—a perfect example of a democratic jungle. But in politics at a given moment, it is necessary to say something decisive. The party learns then from Shachtman what the line is and in its uncertainty and confusion must follow. Behind all the anarchistic freedom of speech, the one solid political reality is Shachtman’s political response at a given moment to the political and organizational pressures by which he decides the political line for today. The result is the leader principle and clique politics carried to an extreme degree. [Trotskyism in the United States, 1940-47: Balance Sheet (Johnson-Forest Tendency, August 1947), p. 18.]

This is not, however, the focal-point of the sharp dispute over factual and interpretative questions between Wald and Breitman. These centered around the split of a faction led by Hugo Oehler from the earlier Workers Party of the United States led by Cannon and Shachtman in 1935, and with a split of a
faction led by Bert Cochran from the Socialist Workers Party in 1953. These will be presented, essentially without commentary, in the remainder of this appendix.

On the Oehler split, Wald wrote as follows:

The expulsion of a minority tendency before a national convention and before the political discussion of a change in line occurs among the SWP membership is not unprecedented in our movement.

...the Oehlerites were expelled prior to the convention, and prior to a political discussion being held outside the NC [National Committee] among the party ranks. Up until the November 1935 plenum, Cannon and Shachtman insisted that it was a "principle" that the Workers Party not enter the Socialist Party, but the fact is that Cannon and Shachtman had already begun to take steps in the direction of changing their minds. Since the Oehlerites saw this as a change in the founding principles of the party (which it was), occurring between conventions, they became disruptive. Consequently, at some point Cannon and Shachtman decided that they wanted to oust the Oehlerite opposition just a few months before the discussion in the ranks occurred, and before the convention was held to decide the issue. [p. 29]

Wald goes on to quote from Cannon’s brief mention of the expulsion of the Oehlerites during the Goldman-Morrow factional dispute in 1945 (on page 208 of The Struggle for Socialism in the "American Century"). He concludes that the Oehlerite experience, rather than "an isolated incident or the extreme exception," was in fact "brought up again by Cannon in 1945, and today Barnes is consciously or unconsciously carrying out a similar policy" (p. 30).

In addition to rejecting this linkage of Cannon and Barnes, Breiman complained about Wald’s "general impartial attitude. He doesn’t seem to understand that most of these struggles he’s talking about—the fight with the Oehlerites, the fight with the Cochraneites, the fight with the Shachtmanites—were life-and-death struggles to attempt to save the SWP as a Leninist organization, that in each case we were fighting hostile forces that were trying to take us off the road of Leninism... These were forces that would have destroyed our movement. I don’t pretend everything we did or said was perfect. But this was a struggle to save the movement, and it’s very hard to get such an understanding from what Wald is doing in this article.” He also made specific points on factual inaccuracies. Here is the account that he dictated into a tape recorder (an incapacitating illness prevented him from writing or typing at this time):

First of all, the political discussion that Wald is referring to began long before the fall of 1935. The political discussion was around the question of the "French turn." This occurred in the late summer and early fall of 1934, before the Workers Party had been formed. In France Trotsky had proposed the French turn. A plenum of International Communist League, as it [i.e., the world Trotskyist organization] was then called, was held in October 1934, endorsed the entry of the French section into the Socialist Party of France. The National Committee of the CLA [Commmunist League of America] in the United States began discussing the French turn in August, September, October 1934, and the Oehlerites had a full opportunity to present their point of view to the membership prior to the convention which was held at the end of November 1934. And there they opposed the French turn on principle, after having had a preconvention discussion in which their point of view was fully presented.

The convention—the last convention of the CLA, the third convention—in November 1934 overwhelmingly rejected the position of the Oehlerites. There was another discussion that took place after that convention. A day after that convention the Workers Party of the United States was formed through the fusion with the Musteites [i.e., the American Workers Party led by A.J. Muste]. The Oehlerites then took it on themselves in the new party [the Workers Party of the United States] beginning in December 1934 to conduct a struggle around the French turn. Nobody in the leadership of the CLA—Cannon, Shachtman or anybody else—was proposing that we enter the Socialist Party of the United States. They defended the entry in France. They opposed the sectarian position of the Oehlerites, who were opposed to any such entry in principle, and they said: we are not proposing at this time any entry into the Socialist Party.

However, it is simply ridiculous to say that Cannon and Shachtman insisted that it was a principle that the Workers Party not enter the Socialist Party. They never said any such thing. They said it was not a principled question (the question of entry), it was a tactical question. So they never did say and they never could have said that it was a principle that the Workers Party not enter. They only said that they were not in favor of an entry at that time—that is, the end of 1934, the beginning of 1935, during the three plenums that were held where the Oehlerites presented their position fully on the French turn. [Cannon and Shachtman were a minority in the NC] because the Oehlerites made a bloc with the Musteites and the Abernites against the Cannon-Shachtman positions. For three plenums—in March 1935, in June 1935, and in October 1935—Cannon and Shachtman continued to say (and this was the truth) that they were not in favor of an entry into the SP. There was no "founding principle" involved... up to the time when the Oehlerites "saw this as a change" and "became disruptive," according to Wald. In fact, Cannon and Shachtman did not propose entry into the Socialist Party until after December 1935, two months after the plenum which gave the Oehlerites their final warning to cease disrupting the party.

Now you must understand that Muste and [Martin] Abern had been in a bloc with Oehler against Cannon and Shachtman up to the October 1935 plenum.
Nevertheless, the procedure of the Oehlerites was so disruptive and so provocative and so undisciplined that the Abernites and the Musitees were forced to join with Cannon and Shachtman in making this final warning to the Oehlerites, who had begun before the October 1935 plenum to issue a journal of their own publicly....So they were acting in a not merely disruptive but in a most undisciplined way, and the October plenum told them to cease and desist. And when they didn't, by the end of October or the beginning of November, they were expelled.

Now at this time no date of any convention had been set. In December something happened: there was a split in the Socialist Party. The right wing which had dominated the Socialist Party in New York split away from it in New York State, which indicated a general split [and]...led eventually to the formation by the right wing of the Social Democratic Federation. This created an entirely new situation in the Socialist Party, as far as Cannon and Shachtman were concerned. They now saw an opportunity for entry into the SP, which they had not considered possible previously. They now saw the American SP as containing the possibility for an entry similar to that which the French section had seen in their country. Therefore, in the first week of January 1936, they made the first proposal for entry into the SP. The convention was set for two months after that. And there the overwhelming majority of the party voted to enter the SP.

So the situation is as follows: there was a convention, [but] the Oehlerites had been expelled long before the issue of the convention was even raised; they were insisting on a principled opposition to any kind of entry and were out of the party before the specific proposal was made by Cannon and Shachtman more than two months after the Oehlerites were gone.

So what is the similarity? What is the precedent? None whatever. The concrete truth of the matter is that here was a disruptive group that would not abide by discipline. To compare that to the Opposition Bloc in the SWP last year is a monstrous thing. We abided by discipline. We did not do anything provocative. We did not want to get out of the party. We wanted to stay in the party. What this does is to give a mantle of legitimacy to Barnes, to compare the opposition of 1983 to the Oehlerite group of 1935. I say it's monstrous because such a comparison is completely invalid.

The differences between Wald and Breitman in regard to the Cochran split of 1953 were no less sharp. Wald's account, on pages 25-26 of his document, follows:

The abrogation of the right of party members to trial during the Cochranite expulsions

An authentic discussion for a National SWP convention was never held to air the differences between Cannon's faction and the Cochranites; instead, the New York local held a city-wide convention and a national literary discussion was opened. Then, at the November 1953 plenum, the NC members of the Cochranite faction were expelled because they had admittedly participated in a boycott of the Militant's 25th anniversary meeting. After this, all members of the party were asked to denounce the New York Cochranites for their action; those who balked were expelled on the spot. No trials were held for either the NCers or rank and file members; the claim of the Majority faction was that by admitting participation in a boycott, the faction members eliminated the need for a trial.

Breitman commented on this section of Wald's essay, "the complaints it expresses are much more numerous than that single point" highlighted in the "abrogation of trials" heading. His point-by-point critique follows:

"An authentic discussion for a National SWP Convention was never held." A convention had been held in 1952. There was no provision for a convention in 1953, and nobody proposed a convention in 1953, including the Cochranites. But when the differences manifested themselves clearly in 1953 (the differences had been discussed in a muted way in the 1952 national convention, but came out into the open clearly in 1953 around the New York City convention), this led to an opening of a national literary discussion, as he says. But that was an authentic discussion....There were nineteen thick [internal discussion] bulletins....It is one of the fullest discussions that ever took place in the SWP in a non-preconvention period. So the impression that's given that Cannon was avoiding "an authentic discussion for a National SWP Convention" is misleading. He did not try to avoid a discussion. In fact, he insisted on initiating it. And the discussion was held, even though there was no convention scheduled....

Then, after that discussion in the [internal] bulletin, there was a plenum in May where an attempt was made to reach a truce, to find a way to reduce the heat of the discussion, and an attempt to find a way of collaborating. This truce lasted around a month, maybe two. By the end of the summer the fight was in full force again.

That's the background of the November 1953 plenum. And there, yes it is true, "the NC members of the Cochranite faction were expelled because they had admittedly participated in a boycott of the Militant's 25th anniversary meeting." That occurred. (Actually, I think they were not expelled at the plenum, but suspended. But that's a minor point.) They did not deny that they had instructed the members [of their faction] in New York to boycott the meeting. There was no question of fact that was in dispute. They had boycotted the meeting. They had done it deliberately. They held another meeting the same night. So the facts are not in question at all. This is not something that can be compared to the charges that Barnes made against us, which consisted of lies. This was
admittedly the truth and was conceded to be the truth by the people who had engaged in this action against the party....

You must remember the context [of the 1953 expulsions]. Nobody disputed the facts. [Regarding the expulsion of those refusing to denounce the boycott,] this was not a case of members being asked to repudiate some action or inaction about which they did not know anything or could not be expected to know much. This was a case where they were asked to condemn or denounce an attack on the party which nobody denied and which nobody could condone....

"No trials were held in this case." That's true. Nor did anyone at the time make the slightest complaint about this. That is, the members of the minority never raised this point that Wald raises thirty years later— that they were being treated improperly by being denied a trial. I think that's an important factor. Having been expelled, they had the right to appeal. If they wanted to be in the party, the very least that they would have done would be to make an appeal. And yet, as far as I can recall, not one single person appealed the expulsion. That should be pondered. Why was that? It was because all of the members of the minority, with no exceptions that I know of at the time, any longer wanted to be in the party.

A couple of months later, three or four decided that they had made a mistake and asked for admission to the party, not in the form of an appeal but a statement that they felt they had made a mistake and had not understood that the Cochranites were playing a game with them, which they caught on to when the Cochranites cut off their relations with the International Secretariat [of the Fourth International]. But outside of these three or four people (two of them were in the Newark branch [Breitman's branch at the time], so I remember that quite clearly), none of the other members of the minority that were expelled in November or December of 1953 ever appealed to be reinstated to the party. That's evidence of how far the struggle in the party had gone, how polarized the situation was.

Without a convention, and you might say without trial, they decided that they did not want to be in the party anymore. I don't think that this is like the situation in the SWP in the last years at all, and I strongly disagree with Wald's method, which consists of showing some similarities in a situation and failing to show the basic differences that exist at the same time that there are some minor similarities. We were not at all like the Cochranites. We wanted to be in the party, and they wanted to get out of it as strongly as possible, and there was nothing that could be done to get them back into it once they were out, because they were breaking with Trotskyism, and they soon ended the pretense that they wanted to be in the Fourth International. So the comparison is very misleading.

Breitman also complained:

Wald...seems consistently to overlook the political context of these things. When somebody is fighting in behalf of Trotskyism and the Fourth International, and is subjected to disciplinary measures because of that, it is not comparable to those who are fighting against Trotskyism and against the Fourth International who may be subjected to disciplinary measures. It is not the same thing.
Appendix III
Snapshots of American Trotskyism
by Paul Le Blanc

The first Trotskyist whom I came to know and
love was Ruth Querio, a down-to-earth working-class
revolutionary who inspired me and many others. For
me, she has much to do with the best qualities of
American Trotskyism.

I met her in October 1965, when I was getting
involved in the antiwar movement. In fact, she was
with us at one of the earliest demonstrations protesting
the war, when a drunken mob attacked us, and she
proved as brave (and as scared) as the rest of us. In
March 1966 she stood with us—when there were more
of us—at a rally in freezing weather, when I made my
first public speech clutching a scribbled text in the
wind, and she helped to warm my hands afterward.
She explained her Trotskyism to me as we drank wine
at a party that night, sitting on the floor after a
spaghetti dinner, and we hugged each other as we
shared our dreams of peace and justice. When I finally
joined the Trotskyist movement six years later, she
told me she believed from the start I’d get around to
that eventually.

Ruth died in 1978. A sense of her comes through
in this article from the January 26, 1979, issue of the
Militant:

Ruth Querio, veteran Trotskyist
By Kipp Dawson

PITTSBURGH—After forty-five years as a socialist
fighter, Ruth Querio died here November 26 at the age
of seventy-two. On December 13 many of her
comrades, family, and friends met at the Socialist
Workers Party hall to celebrate her life.

Frank Lovell, a national committee member of the
Socialist Workers Party, spoke of Querio’s first
experience with politics in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

“Like many thousands of working-class families,
Ruth, her husband, and young daughter were destitute
in 1933 when this country was in the depths of the
depression.

“Her husband had been a mill worker, a silk
weaver. When the workers began to organize for their
own protection against overwork and low pay, the mill
owners at first blacklisted those they thought were
ringleaders and later began closing down the mills
altogether.”

With no work available and no money to pay rent,
the Querios were evicted from their home.

“Members of the National Unemployed League
learned about the eviction of the Querio family and
came to their aid,” Lovell said. “This taught Ruth that
she and her family were not alone.”

Lovell described how Ruth became an activist in the
unemployed movement and through her work
there came into contact with the Conference for
Progressive Labor Action, then led by A.J. Muste.

Querio became involved in the CPLA’s
discussions about the need for a working-class
political party. In a 1973 interview, she said she
learned during the depression that since nothing
is given to working people, “you have to fight every
inch of the way. I believe that workers must have their
own world.”

“Ruth was no idle dreamer,” Lovell continued.
“She wanted to make things happen.” This propelled
her to joining the Workers Party of America. The
Workers Party, forerunner of the Socialist Workers
Party, was formed in November 1948 when the CPLA
[which had changed its name to the American
Workers Party] fused with the Trotskyist Communist
League of America.

Querio helped steer the Allentown branch of the
Workers Party through difficult times, including a
raiding action by agents of the Communist Party.

In a message to the meeting here, SWP leaders
Farrell Dobbs and Marvel Scholl recalled that “Ruth
lived in and for the party. Despite years of untold
suffering from several physical ailments, she never let
her illness stand in the way of self-imposed
assignments—unable to march in antiwar
demonstrations she often stood in the cold of a
Pittsburgh winter to sell the Militant.

“For many years Ruth helped keep the idea of
socialism alive in Pittsburgh, working in almost total
isolation, after the former Pittsburgh branch was
dissolved. And then, when she found a few young
people responsive to her revolutionary ideas, she
contributed as much as possible to the building of a
new branch.”

One of those young people was Paul Le Blanc,
who helped to found the new Pittsburgh branch of the

Le Blanc told the memorial meeting, “Through the
1950s and early 1960s the Trotskyist movement and
the organized left in general had shrunk down to
almost nothing in Pittsburgh. There were intense
pressures to conform to the seemingly affluent and all-
powerful capitalist status quo. But Ruth refused to
give up the insights, the understanding, or the hopes
that she had developed in the revolutionary socialist
movement....

“It was such a joy for those of us who were young
radicals in the mid-1960s to discover that there was an
old fighter like Ruth who hadn’t been beaten, who
hadn’t given up, who was still there—expecting us,
waiting for us, an older person ready to join us and
encourage us and share with us as much knowledge
and energy as she could in the fight against war.
racism, and all forms of injustice.

"And the fact that a new generation was ready to struggle for a better world was, I know, a source of great joy for her too. It was a case of love at first sight."

Many of Querio’s comrades sent messages to the meeting. Some described her enthusiasm over the new women’s movement and the Socialist Workers Party’s active participation in it. Veteran Trotskyists, including Sam Gordon, Anne Chester, and Regina Shoemaker, hailed Querio’s long and ever-optimistic dedication to her party.

Le Blanc summed it up. “Ruth was lucky to be so valued. But she was lucky, also, to be a revolutionary socialist.

“Adds a rich meaning to a person’s life to struggle for socialism—a society in which our class, the masses of working people, are in charge of the economy and running the government to make sure that each person is valued and has the opportunity to grow and develop for himself or herself a richly meaningfullife, a community in which each person gives according to their abilities and receives according to their needs.

“Ruth was lucky to have been animated by this goal. And so are we. And we’re very lucky to have known and been a part of the life of this fine and wonderful person.”

I remember Ruth often speaking with great affection about her many comrades of years gone by. Art Preis, a young leader of the Unemployed League, had come to her rescue when she was about to be evicted; later she became the organization’s treasurer and helped to organize militant demonstrations that converged at the state capital in Harrisburg; in Preis’s Labor’s Giant Step (it made her so proud!) he mentioned her by name, Sam Gordon, who moved to England, was definitely one of her favorites; he later wrote her about the British Labour Party, recommending a book that she very much wanted to read. Other names often rolled off her tongue—Regina Shoemaker, Louise Simpson, Anne Chester, and others. Her daughter once told me that Ruth had a soft spot in her heart—almost in spite of herself—for Max Shachtman, but I know she also had bitter feelings for some of the Trotskyist intellectuals such as James Burnham and Dwight Macdonald who, she felt, used to look down on working-class rank-and-file like herself, preferring instead to socialize with their own kind. C.L.R. James had appealed to her until, during a 1939 visit in her Allentown home, he suggested that perhaps Trotsky was getting a bit senile, at which point she threw him out. She always spoke glowingly of Farrell Dobbs and Marcel Scholl, but Jim Cannon was without a doubt the party figure for whom she felt the greatest enthusiasm. She would often talk of her memories of “Jim” relaxing at the party-owned Mountain Spring Camp, rolling up his sleeves in the midst of a factional conflict at a party convention, cracking jokes with close comrades, passionately explaining the meaning of socialism at a public meeting, or taking time to reach out to an individual comrade.

It may be that sometimes she idealized those she liked—so that when Marcel Scholl (Dobbs’s wife) expressed to her a deep hostility toward Cannon, Ruth was shocked, didn’t know what to think, and was so troubled that she told me about it and asked my opinion of why Scholl would say such things. Not knowing either Scholl or Cannon personally, I didn’t have a clue at the time. Ruth’s own lack of interest in internal party gossip was related to her own immensely warm, generous, and idealistic outlook. These were qualities highly prized in the party of Cannon, and to which Cannon himself would invariably appeal as he sought to build the revolutionary organization. One of Ruth’s most prized possessions was a letter which Cannon wrote to her in the 1930s when she still lived in Allentown. She let me have a photocopy of it. (Additional background on “the Allentown situation” can be found in James P. Cannon, The History of American Trotskyism [New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972], pp. 228-231.) Reading Cannon’s letter to Ruth gives a sense of the movement to which she committed her life:

New York, January 17, 1936
Ruth Querio
Allentown, Pa.

Dear comrade Querio:

I received your letter and was glad indeed to hear from you. I fully appreciate the extraordinary difficulties which confront the comrades in the Allentown situation, and have the warmest admiration for those who persist in the struggle to develop the branch into a revolutionary organization, worthy of the name. Nobody is born a Bolshevik. It takes time and great effort and travail to weld a group of people of different personalities and temperaments into a homogeneous organization. When, as is the case in Allentown, one has to begin with a membership which, as a whole, is comparatively new to the political movement, the difficulties are only magnified. That is what we always have to keep in mind about the Allentown situation. It excludes a quick solution of the difficulties; similarly, it makes it impossible for the Political Committee to solve the problem by means of single decisions or disciplinary measures. Time and education and experience are all necessary factors.

On the other hand, it is very obvious to us that we are making headway. The fact that you have succeeded in organizing 20 odd comrades into a grouping which really attempts to face the political issues, and to carry out the party line, and that this group grows in political understanding and self-confidence as the struggle develops—this is a positive gain. You must not underestimate it. Whatever happens, we are now assured of a serious political nucleus in Allentown. In the end it is bound to prevail. For political ideas and a political line are far more
powerful than all the intrigues and tricks and prejudices of a transitory majority. If our group there really assimilates the ideas and methods of Bolshevism, we need have no fear for the future.

We are now going thru a period of the richest political experience, and we are all learning from it. Perhaps we, ourselves, were not free from mistakes in the Allentown situation. It seems to me that some very good comrades, who have the making of Bolsheviks, have taken a position against us in Allentown. We must hope that their antagonism is temporary and we must aim to win them over. Above all, we have to convince them by our personal attitude that we do not pursue personal aims and that we are not animated, in any way, by sentiments of personal antagonism or personal revenge. On the contrary, we have to make it clear, we have to convince those comrades who have good faith, that we want to advance a political line which is necessary for the building of the party and the mass movement, and that we want to unite every possible comrade on the basis of that line. We must look ahead; we have a long work before us. It will do us no good to lose our heads and cry for immediate and final solution of the situation, which is still maturing. We must persist and persevere and take consolation in the fact that we are gaining, and will continue to gain as long as we act like Bolshevik politicians and not like chickens with their heads cut off. Danton said that audacity was the first merit of revolutionists. He might have added that patience comes next in order. Please don’t think that I am simply lecturing you. I am really directing this just as much at myself, because impatience is my own fault, also.

We are going to have a party convention February 28th. It will be a historic affair, a turning point in the development of our movement. We want to keep our movement united, if it is possible. The trend of the national party sentiment is on our side. That will make its influence felt in Allentown and will help you. We do not want any explosions or splits before the convention, if we can avoid them. We will have the majority and that will impose upon us the duty of conciliating the minority. Once the political line is established by the convention—and we must not make any compromises when it comes to a question of principled lines—then we must try to keep the movement united on the basis of that line. Above all, we must not let personal antagonisms reach the point where they provoke artificial splits.

In this next period, as I have suggested to comrade Gordon, much attention should be devoted to the caucus group which we have organized around our political platform. You should have frequent meetings, devoted to a discussion of political problems, so that the group will become further strengthened and consolidated, on a political basis. That is the most profitable work that can be done now, and it is also the best way to insure your eventual victory in the branch and in the mass movement. I hope to come to Allentown, at least once, before the convention for a branch discussion meeting and also for a discussion meeting with the group. I also hope that the most active comrades will begin to plan far in advance to attend the party convention which will be open to all party members.

With Bolshevik greetings and personal regards
J.F. Cannon"
Notes

I would like to acknowledge here the direct influence on this essay of the following people: Tom Biax, Steve Bloom, Frank Lovell, Sarah Lovell, Carol McAllister, Dave Riehl, Dan Rosenhine, Evelyn Sell. Some contributed more, some contributed less, and responsibility for what I have done in this essay is mine alone— but I want to thank each of them for information and/or insights shared.


23. "Bolshevization" is discussed in Draper, American Communism and Soviet Russia, pp. 169-185. A report on the progress of "Bolshevization" can be found in O. Platastidukis, The Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma (London: Bookmarks, 1989). A key figure in this process was O. Platastidukis, who was expelled from the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1928, but in ways more illuminating can be found in the work of Karl Kautsky and Jules Humbert-Droz, writing under the pseudonym of Tityon, in Pattern for World Revolution (Chicago: Ziff-Davis, 1947), pp. 71, 102-103, 108-111, 112, 116-118, 300-301. Cannon also made interesting reference to this years later, in a 1941 political report at an SWP convention, contained inpage

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35. Ibid., pp. 291, 304.


41. These realities are movingly captured by the revolutionary novelist Victor Serge in The Montage of the Century (London: Writers and Readers, 1982), The Case of the Golden City, NY: Doubledlay and Co., 1950), and The Long Dusk (New York: The Dial Press, 1946)—read in this order, moving from 1934 to 1940. It is also worth examining the 1941 analysis of a former Trotskyist leader, the wealthy intellectual James Burnham, who captured this dilemma in his own particular way in The Managerial Revolution (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 33, 54:

“The important social groups having as their profession the transition to socialism are the various Marxist political parties.”
Practical success for such parties does not at all guarantee the victory of socialism as the Russian experience showed in general, there is not always any clear cut between the political and the social forces involved. The political power of a political party and what happens when it takes power. But practical failure of these parties is additional, and strong, evidence against the possibility of socialism will come, since it removes one of the chief social forces which have been pointed at as motivation for the prediction. The fact is that during the past two decades (1923-1943) Marxist parties have collapsed on a world scale. Their fate can be pretty well summed up as follows: they have all either failed socialism or abandoned it, in most cases both.

These parties, it should be recalled, comprised in their ranks and systems the bulk of all political parties throughout the world. During the past twenty years, they have simply disappeared from existence in nation after nation. Wherever fascism has risen, the Marxist parties have gone under, usually without even a fight for survival. The clearest examples are those of All-Italy, that of Germany, bowed to Hitler (1933) without raising a hand. The massive German/Communist and Social Democratic parties failed to form a united front that would obviously have stopped Hitler’s rise to power, and they were not prepared for the fact that he would rapidly destroy them once he took control of Germany’s state apparatus in 1933—P.I.

"But the physical elimination of many Marxist parties is not the only form of their collapse... In Russia a Marxist party took power. Within a short time it abandoned socialism, if not in words at any rate in the effect of its actions. In most European nations there were, since the last months of the first world war and the years immediately thereafter, social crises which left a wide-open door for the parties on the left, which were unable to take and hold power. In a large number of countries—Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Austria, England, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, France—the reformist Marxist parties of the Second International, without any significant internal crisis, have uniformly failed to introduce socialism or make any genuine step toward socialism; in fact, have acted in a manner scarcely distinguishable from the policies of the governments administering the government. The Trotskyist and other dissident opposition wings of Marxism have remained minute and ineffective sects without any influence upon general political developments. The last dislocated partial upsurge of the Marxist parties coincided with the Popular Front movement (which was, in origin, simply a device of the Communist International for implementing one side of the Kremlin policy of the moment), shows a record of utter incompetence and weakness (France) and disaster, no matter how heroic, defeat (Spain) and ended with a whimper at Munich.”


Nonetheless, the factual thrust of Burnham’s account is quite accurate, the impact of these realities wore down the revolutionary moral not only of many left-wing intellectuals but also of some left-wing proletarians.


The class—collaborationist policies of Stalinists and Social Democrats during the “People’s Front” period (1935-59) is discussed in Trotsky’s works on France and Spain cited in footnote 41, but also see Martin S. Alexander and Helen Graham, eds., The French and Spanish Popular Fronts, Comparative Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)—in particular, essays by Tom Kemp, “Trotskyist and left-wing critics of the popular front” (pp. 104-115), and Paul Heywood, “The development of anti-Francoism in Spain and the French Popular” (pp. 116-130). On World War II, see U.S. Labor’s War at Home, The CIO in World War II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). We can see the ultimately self-destructive evolution of Communist Party trade union policy from the 1930s to the early 1950s in Bert Cookman, Labor and Communism, The Conflict That Shaped American Unions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).


51. Maurice Crouzet, The European Renaissance since 1945
Leninism in the United States and the Decline of the SWP

Paul Le Blanc


56. "Leaving the New Left," International Socialist Review, November 1972; reprinted in Le Blanc, Trotskyism in America, p. 52. This approach to class analysis coincides with that suggested in Frederick Engels’ 1888 footnote to the Communist Manifesto ("by proletariat is meant the class of modern wage-laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live"), elaborated in such works as Braverman’s Labor and Monopoly Capital, cited in footnote 53 above, as well as, for example, Louis B. Boudin, The Theoretical System of Karl Marx (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1967), pp. 203-207, 271-272; in E. Mandel and George Novack, The Revolutionary Potential of the Working Class (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974).

57. Workers League, The Carleton Twelve (New York: Labor Publications, 1981), pp. 15, 18, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30. This publication was part of a vicious international smear campaign, orchestrated by a factional adversary of the SWP, the British Workers Revolutionary Party under the leadership of Gerry Healy, claiming that the SWP leadership had been in the employment of the CPUSA. The charges are effectively refuted in a substantial collection issued by the Socialist Workers Party, Healy’s Big Lie, The Stander Campaign Against Joseph Hansen, George Novack, and the Fourth International (New York: Education for Socialism, National Education Department, Socialist Workers Party, December 1976). Healy’s own organization expelled him in 1985 (see Doug Jennes, “The shattering of a British sect,” International Socialists, December 2, 1985, pp. 725-730). The organization went on to expose the spurious nature of the slander campaign (see Doug Jennes, “Giant blow to agent-baiting campaign. Workers Press” repudiates Healy’s big lie,” and related material, International Press, March 10, 1986, pp. 147-154). Only the Workers League in the U.S., a tiny and pathological sect, continued to maintain these charges into the 1990s. From the standpoint of Marxism, the evolution of the SWP cannot be understood by reference to these conspiracy theories, but only by reference to the workings of much larger social forces. The class background of new SWP leaders, on the other hand, does have some (though by itself minimal) relevance.


63. Braverman in Leo Evans, ed., James P. Cannon As We Knew Him, pp. 205-204.


66. Updated memo from George Breitman (February 1982), photocopy in author’s possession.


74. Tim Wohlforth, "In the Mainstream of Trotskyism" (Chapter Four of his unpublished manuscript The Prophet’s Children), manuscript in author’s possession, p. 29.

75. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

76. Naomi Allen and Sarah Lovell, eds., A Tribute to George Breitman (Writer, Organizer, Revolutionary Socialism) (New York: Fourth International Trade Unionist, 1987), pp. 21-22. Sell notes that Breitman’s exemplary approach in the SWP “was not the norm in the 1950s.”
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77. Wohlfarth, "In the Mainstream of Trotskyism," p. 7. Frank Lovell indicates that from 1951 to 1975, the Dobbs-Kerry leadership was "solidifying in the broadest sense of the word"—suggested by Cannon himself, [or] a June 6, 1955, letter to Dobbs. Cannon wrote of "the political trend of both classes toward maintaining the status quo and avoiding any showdown struggles," adding: "This does not improve the prospects for the existing or revolutionary party in the next period. But that's the way it is, as it looks from here. The hell in the class struggle gives us more time to prepare for the stormy future. That is the real thing to remember—and make the most out of." Quoted in Frank Lovell, letter to author, January 27, 1992.


79. Sigfried Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), pp. 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66. The "ego ideal," as Freud said, the "ego ideal" is where the "group" is quite appropriate. The developing mental structure of people, according to Freud, involves incorporating the values, structures, and expectations of outside authorities—beginning with parents—in order to secure affection, acceptance, and approval; this is the basis of our "conscience" which begins to develop in our earliest years within the family, but other authority figures can later assume the function of parents in larger social contexts, especially in tight-knit political groups.


It is interesting that Fromm attempts an explanation of the way that revolutionary character differs from the kind of authoritarian personality (whether leader or follower) suggested here. "The most functional of the revolutionary character is that of the group he is independent—that he is free," in the sense in which the "individual thinks, feels, and decides for himself of herself." More than this, "the revolutionary character is one who is identified with his own society, transcends the narrow limits of his or her own society, and who is able, because of this, to criticize this or any society from the standpoint of reason and humanity." In addition, "the revolutionary character thinks and feels in what one might call a critical mood—in a critical key, to use a term from music...He will be particularly critical when he bears the judgment of the majority, which is that of the market place, of those who have power. This critical-minded humanism is then translated into action, the life-activity of the revolutionary within the personal sphere as well as in the larger society—but also within the revolutionary group. Related to this, although not "underestimating the role and functions of power," the true revolutionary is in no way "morally impressed by power." One must instead be true to one's self, to one's own critical mind and humanist commitments, to an elemental honesty and dignity in regard to one's self and others. See the essay "The Revolutionary Character" in Erich Fromm, The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 151-171.

This coincides with Trotsky's own views on "revolutionary morality" cited above, and his description of how revolutions should function, quoted at the end of this essay. Readers of this volume will see that it also corresponds to the views of Cannon, similar in Lenin, as shown in Ronald W. Clark, Lenin, A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) and my own Lenin and the Revolutionary Party. On yet another example, see Paul Pfeifer, "Life and Work (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972) and Hannah Arendt, "Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919," in Men in Dark Times (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), pp. 33-56.


81. Ibid., pp. 11-12.

82. Ibid., p. 12.


85. Alan Wald and Celia Stodola, Memorandum to International Control Commission, November 13, 1974 (typed manuscript; copy in author's possession), pp. 11, 4-5.


87. Ibid., pp. 109-110.

88. Ibid., pp. 107-108.


93. Socialist Workers Party, Leadership Lessons From 1988-90: Defending the Turn and the Party, Information Bulletin, August 1990, pp. 7-8, 11; Malik Miah and Barry Sheppard, Where Is the International and therefore transcends the narrow limits of any of (or her) own society, and who is able, because of this, to criticize this or any society from the standpoint of reason and humanity." In addition, "the revolutionary character thinks and feels in what one might call a critical mood—in a critical key, to use a term from music...He will be particularly critical when he bears the judgment of the majority, which is that of the market place, of those who have power. This critical-minded humanism is then translated into action, the life-activity of the revolutionary within the personal sphere as well as in the larger society—but also within the revolutionary group. Related to this, although not "underestimating the role and functions of power," the true revolutionary is in no way "morally impressed by power." One must instead be true to one's self, to one's own critical mind and humanist commitments, to an elemental honesty and dignity in regard to one's self and others. See the essay "The Revolutionary Character" in Erich Fromm, The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 151-171.

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95. Ibid., p. 3.


Footnotes for Historians*
- by Alan W., Ann Arbor

I. SOME INACCURATELY LABELED GOODS

In September 1992, a 412-page book appeared under the imprint of the Fourth Internationalist Tendency in a paperback edition. It is called In Defense of American Trotskyism: Revolutionary Principles and Working Class Democracy and is edited by Paul Le Blanc. While three-fourths of the volume consists of selected documents from the climactic stages of the political struggle in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the early 1980s, the body of the collection is introduced by a sixty-page essay by Paul on "Leninism in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Workers Party." Also preceding the body of the volume are three appendices of material to which Paul makes reference.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the longest of these, Appendix II, was titled "George Breitman and Alan Wald on the History of American Trotskyism in the United States"! I had no idea that George and I had ever engaged in a specific, on-the-record debate on the subject.¹

Imagine my further surprise when I discovered that this book’s appendix contains 26 lines excerpted from a fifty-page internal political document I wrote in early 1983, counterposed to 156 lines from a previously untranscribed tape recording made by George Breitman for private circulation to a few friends around the same time.

One would think that anyone with a scintilla of shame about appearing to “stack the deck” might be a bit embarrassed at this unequal, seventy-to-one apportionment of space to two allegedly counterposed positions—especially when appearing in a book replete with denunciations of the SWP leadership for stacking the deck against its own political minorities.²

However, lest anyone imagine that the editor had gained enlightenment from the suffering he had experienced at the hands of Jack Barnes, Paul goes even further. He “introduces” the Wald/Breitman quotations by giving us six highly-partisan paragraphs of his own (and an additional one, quite misleading, by C.L.R. James³) to construct a dramatically inaccurate context for the “controversy” that follows.

Most distressing, however, is that Paul claims that the excerpts from George’s tape recording “correct” factual errors in my document—and yet George’s remarks contain no factual corrections! Only in one, relatively minor case, involving whether or not James P. Cannon ever held in the early stages of the Workers Party of the U.S. the view that entry into the SP was a “principled” rather than “tactical” question, does George offer a different opinion, although it is undocumented.⁴

The appearance of this material in paperback book (not a bulletin) for public sale that constitutes one of the few references available on SWP history of that crucial period, puts me in a difficult situation. If only in bulletin form, I could ignore the whole matter as a waste of my own and the reader’s time. But the form of the book makes it a reference source for potential use by “innocent” as well as malicious participants in discussions of U.S. Trotskyism.⁵

Of course, I have no objection to references to any differences I had with Breitman coming to light; indeed, I discuss our occasionally tumultuous relationship in my memorial memoir of Breitman that I recently republished in a collection of my essays.⁶ In addition, as a Marxist, I can hardly object to the editor’s decision to place a controversy within a context, since, after all, it is only in a context that meaning can accurately be reconstructed.

The problem is that the context is factually inaccurate and highly misleading. Thus, I am forced to refute a caricature, and, as any experienced debater knows, the result makes for tedious reading: I have to prove the existence of the caricature; then I have to demonstrate the actual context; and then I have to explain the difference this makes for the interpretation of the contested events!

Thus we have a sure fire formula for transforming what ought to be lively political discussion into something that will strike many as arcane, petty, and Byzantine.

Beyond this, the charge that a writer has created a caricature brings along the question of “motive.” Why would Paul create a caricature? Is it because he is corrupt or stupid? This, of course, provides the opportunity for much outraged grandstanding, defense of “honor” and personal integrity, etc. All in all, here are the makings of one of those pseudo-political debates that are more about ego than history or theory.

Although it probably won’t make any difference, let me say two things at the outset to readers of this document:

1) If you did not read Paul’s original appendix, please skip this response. It is my conviction that neither one brings any serious enlightenment about the history of the SWP, a subject that needs to be explored with a lot more rigor than occurs in either text. Moreover, the great attention given to a minor, three-week episode in the ten-year personal relationship between George Breitman and myself, is also misleading, since we had many more disputes that were far more significant and important.⁷

2) As for motives, I do not believe that Paul, a
longtime personal friend, was out to malign me. And
my intention here is not to accuse him either of
corruption nor stupidity. Frankly, I have no
explanation as to why he handled things the way that
he did, other than that he was the victim of a poor
political education for some years, and also was
perhaps seeking to find a short-cut to dealing with
very challenging issues.

2. THE CONTEXT

Paul states that the context for the dispute was as
follows:

Wald had written a searching
e ssay entitled "Fatalism Versus
Critical Consciousness" which was
circulated privately and also in
Socialist Action Internal Discussion
Bulletin (Number 1 in 1984). . . . SA
was the group to which he briefly
belonged before finally becoming
part of Solidarity. . . . Breitman was
still a member of the SWP at that
time, and after his expulsion became
a founding member of the Fourth
Internationalist Tendency. (p. 77)

First, Paul abbreviates the title of my 50-page
discussion article, eliminating the words "A Rejoinder
to Robin David." In other words, what I wrote was
not a manifesto, exchange with George, study in SWP
history, etc., but simply an answer to the views
presented by another comrades, Robin David.
Robin's opinion—which was basically that the
transformation of the SWP in the early 1980s was
completely without precedent in Party history, and
that all organizational/political practices before then
were fine and dandy—was what determined the form,
content and emphasis of my remarks about SWP
history in my "Rejoinder." 8

However, the major problem with Paul's
constructed "context" is that it is based on a significant
factual error: It is not true that I was expelled from
the SWP before George, and then went to Socialist
Action before ending up as a founder of Solidarity,
while George went directly in transit from the SWP to
FIT!

As is well documented in various appeals, George
and I were charged with disloyalty on the exact same
day, we responded in the exact same manner, and
were probably expelled at the exact same meeting of
the SWP political committee in NYC (or at least within
the same two or three day period). From there, we
both hooked up the Socialist Action, as all oppositions
from all the dissident currents were urged to do. 9

This "moment" in which George and I were part
of Socialist Action is, in fact, the all-important context
for explaining the character of the dispute to which
Paul refers. According to Paul, the dispute was simply
a consequence of George's reading my essay while we
were already residing in two separate organizations:

Breitman was concerned that
Wald was drawing the wrong
conclusions both from his
experience and also from the history
of the Trotskyist movement, and that
this would contribute to the
disorientation of many comrades.
He was also upset that Wald had
solicited from him information
without telling him what it was
being used for, and that no draft of
the essay was shown to him for
comment before being circulated
[See the last part of my Footnote 4.
AW] He told Wald that he would no
longer collaborate with him, which
resulted in an angry break in their
relationship. This rift was finally
repaired, in part, because the
mutual respect of these two
revolutionary scholars transcended
their sometimes divergent
perspectives (p. 77)

Incredibly, Paul follows this sensational (and
inaccurate) paragraph with the statement that his
(Paul's) only interest is in the divergent views of
Wald and Breitman on historical/factual matters, not
the dispute itself. If so, why in the world did he
elaborate on all the details of the dispute, especially
in distorted form? This is like telling a jury to merely
"disregard" information it has just heard that
impugns the honesty, integrity and reliability of a
defendant!

In any event, here are the actual reasons for the
dispute and what actually occurred:

1. George's close collaborator Frank Level had
recently resigned from SA because he was not able to
win a majority to his perspective (shared by
Breitman), that SA should orient toward winning over
SWP members rather than combining this with
external organization-building activities. I wrote an
Open Letter to Frank, which outraged George and
made me fear that George, too, would pull out of SA,
thus ruining any chance of demonstrating to the SWP
membership that the opposition provided a viable
alternative. 10

On Jan. 23, 1984, I phoned George and expressed
my fear that he was really going to resign from SA,
even though he had told me he wouldn't. He insisted
that I was totally wrong, that he had no intention of
resigning. By Jan. 24, I had heard from friends that
people close to George were preparing to split and
form their own organization with Frank. That
evening, very distressed, I called George in the hope
of influencing him against joining this move.
However, when I asked him directly if he still had no
plans to split, he shocked me by responding, instead,
with a bitter denunciation of my Rejoinder to Robin,
which he had just received from someone.
As I sat there wanting to know what was happening in regard to the possible split, George delivered a paranoid tirade, claiming that I was not really writing a book about Trotskyism and intellectuals, but had been actually soliciting information for this document! In addition, he offered a bizarre interpretation of the document by taking certain secondary phrases and episodes out of context, and ignoring the main points and principles, to claim that it was totally anti-Cannon and aimed at destroying his life’s work, etc. The conversation ended with George never responding to my question about his possibly leaving SA. However, the next morning I received in the mail a document in which George and others declared the formation of their own organization! It was already in the mail while George and I were having our conversation in which he managed to evade answering my question by going on the offensive.

Naturally, in response to all this, I bitterly denounced George to my wife and others as every kind of a son-of-a-bitch imaginable. In a paranoia that matched George’s own, I was convinced (or at least allowed myself to temporarily believe) that he knew all along that he was going to split from SA, and that he had manipulated me over the course of weeks by using trick words (after all, simply announcing the formation of a new group is not technically the same as a “split,” and other such double-talk). I also felt he had abused me by his wildly distorted interpretation of my Rejoinder (which had not, as George later admitted, relied on a single bit of information that he had given me, and which was not, obviously, my “real” literary project, undertaken through the guise of writing a “book”). At 4:00 a.m. on Jan. 25, I wrote George a note listing and deploring the outrageous charges he had made against me, and (in a P.S. added at 11:00 a.m., after the mail arrived) expressing my opinion that they were occasioned by his guilt over lying to me about his split from SA. I sent a copy of that note to my good friend Paul—never imagining how it would be used years later!—so that Paul is, in fact, fully aware that the precise context of George’s charges against me (as well as George’s “reading” of my Rejoinder to Robin) was intimately connected with the split in SA.

In the following days, after some other comrades queried George about his reaction to my document, he made a tape recording that was privately circulated in which he “refuted” his interpretation of things he thought I was saying in the Rejoinder on some historical matters. George’s interpretations were made possible by focusing in great detail on a few phrases, often on secondary points, while being blind to the numerous qualifying statements that surround them—a kind of selective reading that all of us have experienced when our emotions are inflamed against the author of a text for one reason or another. But mostly George just adds in more details about the faction fights, none of which I was unaware, to reach dubious conclusions such as the one that a tendency isn’t really being expelled “before” a convention, if the date of that convention has yet to be announced... Sadly, in his Appendix, Paul shamelessly follows George’s construction of my views, collaborating in this process by omitting passages that directly contradict George’s assertions, and certainly giving the impression that he believes that George has “corrected” my facts.

Within about three weeks (a brief period not exactly suggested by Paul’s statement that “the rift was finally repaired”), George and I were back in regular correspondence and were exchanging information, and eventually acting as if nothing had ever happened! The reason for turn-about this was not abstract because of “mutual respect” transcending differences, etc., but concretely because, once the political rupture was unalterably settled, and two organizations existed, the fury that animated our mutual attempts to influence each other had died down, along with the exaggerated interpretations of each other’s opinions and motives. If it had not been for the split in SA, any disagreements we had about my Rejoinder would have taken the same form as our much bigger disagreements about World War II, Pierre Frank, Leninism, etc.—sharp letters back and fourth, but no wild personal charges or secretly circulated tapes.

Moreover, George never gave any indication to me or anyone else that he wanted this tape recorded comments or the dispute itself put into the record. 11

When we discussed the same historical matters later on, the differences seemed virtually non-existent. This is not because we changed views; it is because, in reality, the differences on the disputed issues were always minor—they were only constructed as major by George’s premise during those three weeks that I had been exploiting him to destroy his life’s work, etc.

George and I went on disagreeing in major ways over the history of the PI, SWP policy in WWII, the legacy of Leninism, etc., yet never were there charges remotely resembling those made over this minor dispute, let alone a break in relations for any period. Paul’s resurrection of these charges as a preface to presenting a biased interpretation of the dispute is unjustified and mis-educational. Whatever Paul’s intentions, the role this one-sided version plays is to prejudice a reader against my work—after all, if George Breitman, the world authority on U.S. Trotskyism, thought Wald was “disorienting” radicals and had lied about the purposes of his solicitation of information...! If Paul thinks George’s exaggerated remarks made in the heat of passion are so valid, why didn’t he allege resurrect our charges against George, made in the same heat of passion, about double-dealing, etc.? But, of course, to do so would have meant acknowledging the actual context of the dispute, which was George’s walk-out from SA.

Well, at least I can be thankful that George never called me a “phrasemonger” in Paul’s presence....
3. THE DIFFERENCES

The argument of my rejoinder to Robin is identical to many other writings of mine on the SWP. The basic approach rejects the straight-line thesis from Canon to Barnes, insisting that controversial policies and views must be understood in the complex context of the times. However, I also reject the argument (promoted by Robin at that time, but never by George) that Cannon’s policies and practices were devoid of ambiguities and problematic features that could lend themselves to abuse by different leaders under other circumstances.

From that point of view, I gave examples where, in a technical sense, two of the bureaucratic maneuvers used by Jack Barnes against his 1983 oppositions bore surface resemblances to the events of the Oehler (1934) and Cochran (1953) oppositions. My most significant points are that the Oehler group was expelled prior to a national convention that collectively voted on the decision of whether or not the Workers Party of the U.S. should enter the Socialist Party, and that members of the Cochran group were expelled without trial from the SWP (also prior to a national convention to decide the dispute).

A major concern of George in his tape recorded remarks is to refute my alleged claim that the earlier oppositions in the SWP somehow resembled his own: he repeatedly points out how they were disloyal, anti-Trotskist, and wanted out, while his tendency was loyal and represented true Trotskyism against the revisionists, etc. However, it never occurred to me that there was any resemblance in the political character of George’s opposition and these two others, only a resemblance in the way all were treated by the SWP majority on questions such as expulsion before conventions and absence of individual trials for most of the adherents. That would be clear if the reader of Paul’s excerpts had more quotations from my Rejoinder. So I don’t see any legitimate “factual corrections” in this area.

When George comes to what I think are the more crucial “factual” matters, all he can claim is that:

1) We can’t say that the Oehler group was expelled before the convention because the date of the convention had not yet been announced.

Well, of course, I never say that an exact date had been set at the time of the expulsion, but, nevertheless, it was clear that a convention to make a decision was going to be held at some point! Even Cannon, in raising this episode as a precedent to expel Felix Morrow and Albert Goldman ten years later, acknowledged that the expulsion of the Oehler group was an expulsion prior to a convention, date set or not, and believed that this was something unfortunate, forced upon him and Shachtman. This opinion of Cannon, which I was more or less echoing, was documented in a crucial passage in my Rejoinder that Paul mentions briefly but does not reproduce. However, Cannon’s words seem to me to sum up the reality of the situation:

We have to recognize a certain time when we call a halt. That is the way we preceded in the past. We didn’t begin with disciplinary action against the Oehlerites, but we finally expelled them from the party. That was before the decision [to enter the SP] was taken by the party. The convention was not held until March of 1936. The Oehlerites were expelled in November 1935 following the plenum at which they were given a warning. We had to do that because they were disorganizing and demoralizing the party.

2) George’s other main objection on the substantial issue is his belief that one can’t say that the Cochran group was expelled without trials because (a) the Cochranites didn’t deny the fact that they had boycotted an event (the basis for the expulsion), and (b) the Cochranites, following expulsion, did not demand trials. In my view, neither of these statements refute the “fact” that they were expelled without trials. It does prove that the Cochranites behaved differently than the Breitman (and other) oppositions—but that issue was never in dispute, at least on my part. Again, what we have in George’s tape-recorded remarks is not a scholarly study of history, but selective and subjective “interpretations” by George of my “real” meaning based on his preconceptions about my “real” objectives at that heated moment in our political lives. The situation is similar with his attempt to refute my statement that the Cochran group, too, was expelled prior to a national convention on the disputed issues; George says this isn’t true because there was “no provision” for a convention that particular year, because there was an NYC local convention, because there was a written discussion, etc. But, of course, no one was claiming that a provision for a convention that year did exist, or that these other forms never occurred.

If George had thought it was worth having his taped comments published in printed form, I believe he would have modulated his arguments. In their present form they give too much credence to the conclusion that George felt organizational abuses were entirely “justified” when used against his opponents (all disloyal revisionists), but not so when used against himself (a true Trotskyist), an impression that I think oversimplifies his real thinking.!!

Moreover, neither my hastily dashed-off Rejoinder nor George’s hastily recorded remarks contain documentation for our claims about other concerns, such as whether Cannon and Shachtman evolved from holding that it was a “principle” not to dissolve the Trotskyist Party into the Socialist Party, or whether they always saw this as a tactic. My own conclusions
were based on a study of a variety of official documents of the National Committee of the Workers Party of the U.S., especially those published in the Militant. George's appears to be based on memory. However, if he and I had had a "serious" scholarly exchange on the matter, there might have turned out to be no difference on "facts" at all, as happened in other instances. Since we both agree that Cannon and Shachtman were correct about the change in the political character of the SP after the split of the right wing, why couldn't it have been the case (as my reading of WPUS material suggests) that Cannon and Shachtman thought it was a principle not to enter a pro-capitalist party—but, after the change, no longer assessed the SP as pro-capitalist, thereby switching to a view of the entry as a tactic? George's position, as formulated on the tape, is that entering a pro-capitalist party was always a tactical matter for Cannon (since he considered entry tactical in the period when he still considered the SP pro-capitalist), but George might have reformulated this if he knew his remarks were going to be published.

4. SUMMARY

Due to the complex character of Paul's construction of the materials in his Appendix II, I have had to expend a great many words to make a few simple points:

1. There never was an exchange between myself and George on the history of the SWP. The exchange was between myself and Robin David. George, incensed by our bitter personal conflict over his split from SA, did not communicate his view to me in our "normal" fashion (private letters), but secretly circulated a tape attacking some parts of my document to a few of his associates. Neither George nor I ever indicated that we felt this material constituted the basis for any kind of public, published "controversy." Paul simply cobbled this "controversy" together for his own reasons.

2. There was a bitter argument between George and myself in which my Rejoinder to Robin David played a role. However, it occurred in the context of our fight about George's splitting from SA. Paul omits half of the charges (the ones against George) in the fight (of which Paul has a written copy), and claims inaccurately that George went directly from the SWP to the FIT. Without reference to the SA period, one can then present George's attack on me as if it flowed simply from a reading of my Rejoinder.

3. No disagreements about my "facts" appear in George's comments about my Rejoinder, except, possibly, his undocumented claim that entry into the SP was always a tactical question for Cannon, regardless of the changing character of the SP. The substantive difference is that George believed I was claiming that the Oehler and Cochran oppositional minorities were similar to George's own oppositional minority, a view that never occurred to me. In the matter of expulsions before conventions, the absence of trials, etc., anyone who reads George's remarks ought to be able to see that, despite the additional details he includes because of his preconceptions about what I am "really" saying, the facts are the same as mine—expulsions before conventions and no trials. Most of his effort goes toward trying to show that the earlier oppositions were all "bad guys," thus getting what they deserved; my Rejoinder to Robin David was not based on the "good guy"/"bad guy" schism, although I do offer my assessments about the merits of the factions in more complex ways.


NOTES

1. Of course we privately corresponded over the years, but the relationship was one of student (me, with a more specialized knowledge only in literary/cultural matters) to teacher (George was the undisputed world authority on this subject). That correspondence was ongoing and evolving; sometimes we played devil's advocate, and other times what began as a disagreement eventually turned into a shared perception (and vice versa)
2. In my own document, Paul pruned those 26 lines from over 150 lines directly discussing the matters that George's tape criticizes, although the issues are indirectly part of many more pages. Of course, all these line estimates are approximate, due to differences in type size, etc.
3. To rephrase my one-sentence heretical opinion that "Shachtman's party may well have been more internally democratic than Cannon's in some respects," Paul reproduces 14 lines from a 1947 statement by C. L. R. James claiming that Cannon, like James himself, operates on the basis of principles, while the Shachtman party is a confused clique. Paul does not bother to inform the reader that James' remarks were produced as a justification for his split at that very moment from Shachtman's WP, and his entry into Cannon's SWP. Four years later, James broke with the SWP even more bitterly than the WP, and spread the slander that Cannon had collaborated with the FBI to leave the Caribbean-born James deported from the U.S. It is fine for Paul to quote an independent assessment by James or anyone else on the merits of the SWP versus WP; but it is poor scholarship and misleading to excerpt just one brief, momentary frame from the middle of a much larger sequence. When, in fact, the totality of James' revelations with Cannon totally contradicts that fleeting assessment. Unfortunately, Paul uses this method elsewhere in the book. For example, in justifying the view that the Internationalist Tendency of 1973-74 was basically disloyal to the SWP, he quotes a statement by one of its leaders, Bill Massey, in which Bill writes off the revolutionary potential of the SWP majority (p. 50). While it is true that Massey made this statement, and many worse ones, Paul does not acknowledge that it came at the end of a long line of bureaucratic abuses, and that Massey had actually begun his opposition, prior to the abuses, with a loyalty to the SWP and a belief in the strategy of winning over its majority no less fervent than that of Paul's Fourth Internationalist Tendency in the early stages of its own struggle. Moreover, the frustrated opinions of one individual can hardly be attributed to an entire tendency, many of whom completely disagreed with Massey's assessment. To "back up" Bill's quote, Paul also uses a quotation written by several of Bill's co-thinkers from the period after they were expelled and
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Internationalist Tendency Appeals were rejected.

4. Of course, I have no objections to people offering factual corrections of my writing, just as I am here offering factual corrections to Paul's.

5. Those with first-hand knowledge of the Left might be amazed to realize how frequently academics at arm's length rifle whatever sources happen to be available in order to get some "facts." A recent neo-conservative polemic by Harvey Klehr on The Far Left bases its entire critique of the recent SWP on the Bullets in Defense of Marxism—not because Klehr judged BIDOM to be the best source (he makes no comparisons of the BIDOM Interpretation with others), but because that was what was available. A recent book about Jewish-American Intellectuals, The Conversion of the Jew, has a concluding chapter called "The Last Trotskyist," about a writer who has become James P. Cannon Incarnate (who turns out to be myself!), based on some inaccurate gossip that the author happened to pick up.


7. Indeed, I feel rather dismayed that Paul's appendix has forced me to write an essay of this nature about George; I would much rather devote the time and energy to disseminating information about his many neglected achievements. And I believe George would have felt a similar dismay that Paul and I are devoting pages to this subject.

8. Paul also makes a peculiar claim about the "private circulation" of my document, for reasons I don't quite understand. My memory is that I dashed it off in a white heat in early January, after receiving Robin's document; I was very anxious to get my own opinions in circulation because I feared that Robin's ideas would appeal to those seeking simple explanations for what had happened, and I may not have even shown a draft of my rejoinder to anyone. Moreover, when I sent rejoinder into the national office of Socialist Action, I knew there would be a delay of perhaps a month before the official bulletin appeared, so I probably ran off several extra copies and sent them to a few comrades I wanted to reach right away, or whom I knew were anxious to know my views. The reason I didn't send either a draft or advance copy to George Breiman was twofold: I was already pestering George to read hundreds of pages of draft manuscripts and answer many questions for the early stages of the book I was writing (at that time conceived to be a study of Trotskyism and intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s; later on transformed to a broader study of the anti-Stalinist left up to the 1980s), and didn't want to do anything to distract him. In addition, he and I were engaged in a separate political debate about our relationship to Socialist Action, and I wanted to concentrate my political interactions with him on that subject alone, figuring that a dialogue with George on my disagreements with Robin was far less urgent.

9. Steve Bloom told me at a Fall 1992 meeting of the Solidarity National Committee meeting, which I attended as an observer, that George was never actually a "member" of SA. If so, this is news to me. Perhaps for tactical reasons concerning his appeal to the SWP, or connected with the split perspective from SA of some of George's associates who had been expelled from the SWP earlier and were already disillusioned with SA, he may not have gone through the formalities of membership. Nevertheless, from the day we were both expelled from the SWP until George announced his adherence to FIT, we spoke and related to each other as if we were members of the same organization, SA. I frequently asked the question, "Are you going to stay in or leave SA?" and he replied that he would "stay in," until, of course, the moment he left.

10. At the time I was adamant in this belief, and was overly aggressive in trying to convince George and Frank of it. Years later I realized I made two important mistakes, which I hereby acknowledge. One was that I thought it would carry a lot of weight with SWP members if we could construct an organizational alternative that contained various democratically-functioning tendencies within it. The reality was the contrary: the turn of the SWP majority toward an uncritical adulation of Castroism brought with it a total disparagement of the idea of vital internal democracy, meaning that what I had imagined to be attractive feature was actually regarded as repulsive—proof of our "non-revolutionary" character. A second error was my belief that the central leaders of SA, people I much admired (and still admire, although this time, thankfully, from afar) such as Nat Weinstein and Jeff Mackler, were undergoing an evolution toward a vision of a more diverse and less monolithic kind of Trotskyism, and could be loyal partners in a broader kind of group than they ultimately chose to create. I am now embarrassed about the intensity and certainty with which I hammered Frank and George about my views at the time.

11. Again, this lack of interest by George is not suggested by Paul's statement that "an incapacitating illness prevented him from writing or typing at this time"; in the months and years that followed, any number of us would have been honored to transcribe that tape, as we did other tapes, should George have indicated that he still felt his remarks on it to be a worthwhile for study. Moreover, George continued to type letters during the period that the tape was made.

12. Ibid., p. 30.

13. Moreover, he might well have re-read my rejoinder in a different context and seen that, in fact, some of his claims about my "general impartial attitude" are not accurate, in light of the fact that the rejoinder continually shows me taking "positions" (in fact, probably too many positions in light of my distance of four to seven decades from the events).