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Editor
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Dear Comrades:

I would like to thank you for publishing my article "James P. Cannon 1890-1974 -- In Defense Of A Great Revolutionary." I hope it will stimulate a study of and discussion about the history of the Socialist Workers Party and its relation to the construction of the Trotskyist movement in England and the Fourth International as a whole. Such a serious and objective study has been generally lacking in England and even more so on the Continent.

I wish to take this opportunity to clarify a little more certain questions on the relation of this question to British Trotskyism, a matter which should be of special interest to British readers.

This article was written a little over a year ago under very special conditions. It was part of an attempt to come to grips with the reasons for the degeneration of the International Committee and its dominant section the Workers Revolutionary Party. That degeneration had been posed to Nancy Field and myself rather sharply, and without any real theoretical preparation on our part, with the sudden move of Healy's in August of 1974 to purge us from the leadership of the Workers League. At that time we were not yet aware of the purge within the WRP of Alan Thornett and the comrades who today are building the Workers Socialist League.

After reading Michael Banda's slanderous series on James P. Cannon we became convinced that Healy was involved in a fundamental break with all the traditions of Trotskyism and of Leninism. It became clear to us that in order for Healy to develop a personal international clique, separated from the working class, based on idealism and not Marxism, carrying out sectarian and opportunist policies hostile to the interests of the working class, Healy had first to break the historical moorings of his group with the past of Trotskyism. He carried this out through his slanders of James P. Cannon combined with hiding from his membership the actual circumstances surrounding the development of his own tendency in England.

That this was a correct assessment is made even more clear today as Healy develops a fantastic slander campaign attempting to prove that Joseph Hansen and George Novack, who played leading roles in the SWP for a number of decades, were in fact all along "accomplices of the GPU."

The editors of Socialist Press raise an important criticism of this year old effort when they state: "And we feel Wohlforth has deliberately underplayed his own role in creating the same one-sided approach to Cannon as he now criticises in Banda."

Of course I, and Nancy Field who contributed much to this article, were aware that much of what Banda now said was a development of what I had written in The Struggle For Marxism in the Uni. In fact we saw the article as a way in practice to correct been wrongly stated in the past.

This article also represented only a stage in the development of our thinking. Today we can see more clearly than a year ago the roots on the idealist attack of Banda's on the history of the SWP in a position held in common with the leadership of the Socialist Labour League at least as far back as 1963.

This is not to say Banda's attack of 1974 represents the position held with the SLL leadership or our tendency in 1963. It represents a further development of the logic of that position to the point of a complete break with Trotskyism historically. Nor was the position taken in my earlier book on the SWP some sort of brainstorm of my own. It was the result, as the introduction to this new article explains of consultations with the leadership of the SLL. The basic thesis of that book came from Healy, Banda and Cliff Slaughter. The detailed development of that history was my contribution.

Nor was there a simply lineal development of the position of 1964 to that of 1974. The positions on the SWP's present and past developed in the IC in a far more contradictory way, and as we suggested unevenly within the Workers League and the membership of the SLL. The source of this contradictory development is, in my opinion, Healy's own inconsistency and ambiguity about breaking from so powerful a past.

Let us take the question of the 1953 split which the editors feel I presently give a "rather slanted view." I would hold that the slanted view is given in my 1964 book which is so concerned with finding grounds for criticism of Cannon that the historic importance of that split does not come through as clearly as it should. I might add that from 1961 until this very moment I have never veered from a defense of that split ~~was~~ necessary and historically important. However: there is no question that this side of the split gets pretty much the back of the hand in the 1964 book.

However writing as late as 1971 in the pamphlet "Towards A History of the Fourth International" I state unambiguously:

"In breaking with Pabloism in 1953 the SWP took a long step in the direction of fulfilling its international leadership responsibilities, in beginning to take up a theoretical struggle. This is important and cannot be denied. An international break at that time would have been infinitely more difficult. The Open Letter of 1953 was the SWP's greatest service to the Fourth International since the death of Trotsky." (without the 54)

Then I returned to this very same question in 1972 in a pamphlet entitled "In Defense of Trotskyism--An answer To Those Who Vilify Our History." This pamphlet was a polemic against a document of a small opposition group within the SWP. The idea for the pamphlet came from Healy and he read and approved the text personally. I stated:

"The Open Letter was a wholely principled document, rooted in the whole history of Marxism, of Bolshevism, of Trotskyism. It stands up today as far more than 'partially correct.' It was correct in essentials. It reestablished the basics of Trotskyism. It offered world Trotskyism a new opportunity to move forward and prepare for the new period of class struggle ahead."

At a time when Healy is doing everything he can to finalize his break with the history of Trotskyism I feel it is very important to document the confusion, the ~~amb~~ ambiguity, yes and at times actual closeness, that existed in the early period of the fight between Healy and the SWP. In the 1961 period Healy's past was far closer to him and know/among his cadres and ours in the United States. At a time when the political differences over Cuba and over reunification with the International Secretariat were already clearly in the open Healy, at least in his correspondence with this American supporters, in no sense simply wrote off the SWP and its history as he would later do.

In a letter to a leading member of our tendency with the SWP he wrote on December 20th, 1961; about his movement in the 1950s:

"We were, of course, very closely bound to the SWP and it could be said that the basic education of our movement was gained through such a connection. This established us on matters of strategy, tactics and internal organization. Cannon and others made a very important contribution to the construction of the Trotskyist movement in Britain."

This is a statement of no little importance. First it makes clear that whatever the deficiencies of the SWP in international work in the postwar period its contribution to the building of a movement in England ~~was~~ is not to be ignored. In fact I believe it will prove to be of historic importance along with ~~the~~ Cannon's international intervention in 1953 because ~~the~~ British Trotskyism in the future will be restored to the historic foundations of that preparatory work of the 40s and 50s despite Healy's madden break from Trotskyism in the recent period.

It should also be noted Healy credits the SWP not simply with a bit of aid but ^{with} establishing the movement's basic "strategy, tactics and internal organization." This alone should make it clear why British Trotskyists need today to study Cannon's writings as well as of course the critically important Trotsky Writings series recently completed by the Pathfinder Press .

This is how Healy assessed the SWP in a letter written May 15, 1961:

"The ~~firm~~ firmness of the majority which you speak about is a firmness originated from the proletarian cadre. There can be no doubt that Dobbs is the leader of the proletarian wing of the SWP....

"Immediately we would propose a bloc between your tendency and that of Dobbs on two questions. One, that he recognizes the revisionist threat of Weiss in the youth movement and does everything possible to help with protecting the youth cadre, particularly in the preparatory work for the special youth convention.... Secondly you should discuss with Dobbs way and means to turn the young intellectuals who are supporting you in the direction of the trade unions and a plan for trade union activity."

The Weiss mentioned above was a leader of the SWP who left around 1964. Recently he has published a letter calling for full sup-

port to the BEA and the Portuguese CP hailing "Comrade Cuhnal".

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On June 5th ^{Healy} writes: "Comrades should be careful not to designate the majority as Pabloites. Not only would this be scientifically wrong, it would sidetrack the discussion."

And again on June 12th: "The revolutionary party even under a bad leadership still remains the revolutionary party and the SWP is the only force worthy of that name in the US today."

Finally on August 21st he gives us advice on how to function as part of the SWP:

"You must be extremely careful about the dangers of factionalism in New York. Do not allow people to pay lip service to party work and then proceed to have their circles in the evening. More damage can be done over coffee table discussion than anything I know. You have done a splendid job to have steered the thing so far. Keep any eye sharply on factionalism. Many things Cannon says in this connection are absolutely right. The permanent factionalist can never become a party builder, no matter if from time to time his policy is correct. We must combine our defence of principles with building the movement as it is, even with the deficiencies that prevail in the USA. That, I repeat, was the lesson we learned."

Looking over the correspondence of this period it is difficult to discern exactly what were the fundamental principled differences at issue in that sharp dispute. It is easy to see differences--different assessments of Castro and how Trotskyists should approach him as well as differences in how to approach the question of the reunification of the Fourth International. What is hard to see is the principled depth of those differences as Healy and we in the United States would pose them in a later period. After all very little was added to the SWP's position on Cuba and reunification after 1961.

May 15th

On Cuba the letters reveal total confusion. On ~~April 22nd~~ Healy wrote: "The question of Cuba should be more or less dropped." Then on July 24th he writes again in response of an attempt of ours to get some clarity on the questions among ourselves: "I have received your draft on Cuba. I sincerely hope that this is for our internal discussion and not to be thrust into the SWP at the moment. We certainly don't object to a discussion on these matters and you can rest assured that we will examine the points you raise very carefully. However, we don't say that Cuba is a state capitalist country and we shall return presently and write to you on this matter." And finally on August 14th: "We refuse to be rushed on this question of Cuba not because we are slow to take political positions or faster than other people. The education of a revolutionary cadre needs time and not ~~frantic~~ adaptation to frenzied debates."

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It would seem that since Duba was the main issue between the SLI and the SWP and the main point of agreement between the SWP and Mandel's international formation, and since it was at any rate a major new development of the world revolution, some effort towards some clarity would have been in order. Healy would prove to be far more "hasty" in his organizational break with the SWP than he would be in seriously probing the theoretical roots of the differences of that period.

Even the question of reunification was never posed very clearly. On May 30th Healy wrote: "We have never excluded a unification in which Pablo would function. What we say is that the political discussion should go on until the international cadre is clarified and thereby educated."

Thus Healy held, at least at times, at least in letters to us, to a position which did not exclude reunification in principle. He wanted a discussion of historical questions to precede it. The SWP wanted unification first and a discussion later. This was an important difference but certainly not a principled one.

Was there, perhaps some big difference on British issues with the SWP? Certainly there was with the local supporters of the IS as far as critical tactical matters within the Labour party. Healy's position at the time is summed up in a letter of June 2nd: "Needless to say we have no intention of pulling out of the Labour Party. Our conference adopted a resolution unanimously calling for the broadening of our work inside the Labour Party in alliance with all sorts of Left centrists who would be prepared to work with us. We have maintained predominant control in the youth movement on the same basis. In fact, our work in the Labour Party is today much stronger than it has been at any time since we entered in 1947. We feel that we now can organize the forces necessary to stiffen up the Left wing along Marxist lines. "

Perhaps the SWP leadership disagreed with this course because Cannon had written at the time criticizing Healy of Opportunism. But this was never brought out in the open as a clear issue in dispute by either Cannon or Healy. Of course a year later Healy would break from the Labour Party without leaving a single person in it after almost two decades of work inside it. However when he carried out this tactic he never openly admitted that he had done so nor defended this position internationally in a dispute with the SWP.

I wish on this basis really only to make one preliminary point in relation to this period. Can we really today say that the break between the SLI and the SWP in 1963 represented a higher stage of clarity than the break between the SWP, Healy and the French on ~~his~~ side and Pablo's center on the other side in 1953? It appears to me far more confused, far less clear than that original break--without in any sense having a "slanted view" of that break as resolving all theoretical problems in the movement.

It seems to me the conclusion we must draw from this long experience is that we must see the problems of the post-Trotsky Fourth International in a materialist way. We must see theoretical clarification

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within an historical context. Under conditions of the relative quiescence of the masses in the advanced countries, which limited the Trotskyists to a propaganda existence, theoretical clarification could only proceed in a very limited and confused way. We could not resolve all the theoretical problems of post-Trotsky Marxism by lifting ourselves up by our boot straps, by mental hoop jumping.

Today, however, the world capitalist crisis has reached a stage of development which propels the working class into struggle in all countries. The problems of the working class in action pose themselves most sharply to us. The objective conditions are thus just beginning to be created which provide a basis of resolving the historical problems of Trotskyism.

This is why serious study of the past combined with real efforts to reach workers today can bring fruitful results in building the Fourth International if we proceed with a good deal of flexibility and patience on organizational matters placing the freest discussion ahead of all more narrow considerations.

Comradely,

Tim Wohlforth