

PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION



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Re-create the
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Working Class Needs a Revolutionary Alternative

Election '08 Won't Win Real Change

The word on every politician's lips this election season is "change." No wonder. The U.S. ruling class is stuck in a losing war in Iraq and the economy is tipping toward a devastating crisis.

Just months ago, few imagined that Hillary Clinton's coronation could be stopped, or that a Black candidate could be elected president. But Barack Obama has emerged as the image of change itself, and therefore the extraordinary is becoming possible.

Warning: the image is not the reality. Obama's charisma hides the fact that when it comes to policies, he has no important differences with Clinton. Both are typical Democratic politicians: they fake sympathy for the downtrodden to cover their loyalty to the banks and corporations that really rule this country.

On Iraq they promise to end the war, then vote in the Senate to keep it going; one moment they say they'll withdraw U.S. troops, the next they admit they'll keep tens of thousands there to "defend American interests." On the economy, they say they oppose the free trade policies that have killed jobs, lowered wages at home and pillaged countries around the world – and they then vote to maintain and extend such agreements.

Some say that Obama's success is proof the country is getting over its racist history. Far from it. Blacks, Latinos and immigrants continue to be oppressed by a ruling class that relies on racism to divide the working class – the better to rule and exploit all.

The willingness of millions of whites to vote for a Black candidate is certainly evidence of improved racial attitudes. But Obama's support among whites comes at a price: he ignores racism whenever he can and downplays it when he can't. This is symptomatic of his refusal to offer more than empty promises to *all* the victims of this system: the working class and poor of all races.



U.S. troops spread terror in Iraq. U.S. will menace world under any Republican or Democratic president.

ELECTION PROMISES VS. REAL CHANGE

While the country's political crisis is driving record numbers to the polls, the majority of workers and poor people are still sitting the elections out, just as they have done in the past. Those at the bottom of the economy sense that no matter who wins, they will not

see any improvements. And tens of millions have no vote at all: undocumented immigrants who work in some of the toughest and poorest-paying jobs, and citizens denied the right to vote by anti-worker and racist laws targeting prisoners and ex-prisoners. Not to mention the billions of people in other countries who are just as affected by American policies as are U.S. voters.

Nonetheless, millions of working class people desperate for relief from years of war and growing economic hardship, hope the elections will make a difference. The candidates' tight race for the Democratic nomination is forcing them to appeal more and more

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Letter: Revolutionary Program for Cuba

Below is a letter from the LRP to an Argentine correspondent. It was written before Fidel Castro announced his retirement, which has whet imperialist and governmental appetites for heightened capitalist attacks on the Cuban working people. A revolutionary defense of Cuba against imperialism is needed. This discussion is now clearly more urgent than ever.

You ask us what our program toward Cuba is. This is a very important question which we must take seriously.

As you know, we regard the Cuban state as capitalist. So our program for Cuba is the same as our program in every country in the world: proletarian socialist revolution. However, we would fail in our responsibility to provide leadership and guidance to the working class if we did not attempt to take account of the peculiarities of Cuba's history and society, and explain what the primary tasks of a proletarian socialist revolution in Cuba would be.

Likewise, as an organization based, for now, mostly in the United States, our primary responsibility with respect to Cuba is to defend the people of Cuba against the ongoing attacks and embargo imposed by the U.S. ruling class. We must do this precisely because we give no political support to the Castro government or the Communist Party of Cuba. It is necessary to demonstrate practically that authentic communist opposition to Stalinist rule has nothing in common with pro-imperialist subversion.

Yet we would be remiss in our internationalist duties if we did not use the theoretical gains we have made in understanding the class nature of Stalinism to help our fellow workers, in Cuba and elsewhere, develop a political program to combat Stalinism. Since our political program is permanent revolution, not socialism in one country, we recognize that the struggle for socialism is an international task. In contrast, while Cuba's isolation has been enforced by imperialist attacks, it has been deepened and sustained by the Castro government's self-serving, conservative discouragement of struggles elsewhere in Latin America – Chile, Nicaragua and El Salvador being just a few examples – from taking the revolutionary road.

As you know, we hold, with Trotsky, that, by the late 1930's Stalinism had become definitely counterrevolutionary. We hold that the counterrevolution in the Soviet Union was even more successful and thoroughgoing than Trotsky realized at the time, and that by 1939, the Stalinist bureaucracy had destroyed the last



Cuban revolutionary forces, 1959.

remnants of the proletarian dictatorship and fashioned itself into a capitalist ruling class, presiding over an extensively stratified capitalism which had usurped the workers' revolutionary gains. Russia's imperialist extension of this system to eastern Europe posed theoretical challenges to the post-war leadership of the Fourth International, which they attempted to resolve with the anti-Marxist concept of a "deformed workers' state" – that is, a so-called workers' state created without a workers' revolution.

Cuba is unlike most states of Eastern Europe but like China, Vietnam and the former Yugoslavia, in that Stalinism was established there not by Russian imperialism but as a result of a locally led and inspired revolution. In all these cases, the revolution was not proletarian in its leadership and methods and was led not by a proletarian revolutionary party but by a faction of the middle-class intelligentsia. Thus the gains of these revolutions were not fundamentally socialist; they were partial national and

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The Fight for the Revolutionary Party

Sy Landy, 1931–2007

by Walter Daum
and Dave Franklin

Sy Landy, National Secretary of the League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) since its founding in 1976, died of cancer at the age of 76 on November 28, 2007. In the past decade Sy had undergone two major heart operations and continuously battled the physical effects of heart disease.

Born into a Jewish working-class family in Brooklyn, New York on May 7, 1931, Sy (Seymour) Landy was a champion of his class's struggles to the end. He fought passionately for his revolutionary views and lived modestly, resisting the many pressures to accommodate to this imperialist world when so many of his contemporaries on the left did not. He left his comrades an example of incorruptible leadership on both a personal and political level. Sy left a note attached to his will: "Viva Socialist Revolution! That made my life worthwhile and is the only hope for our species."

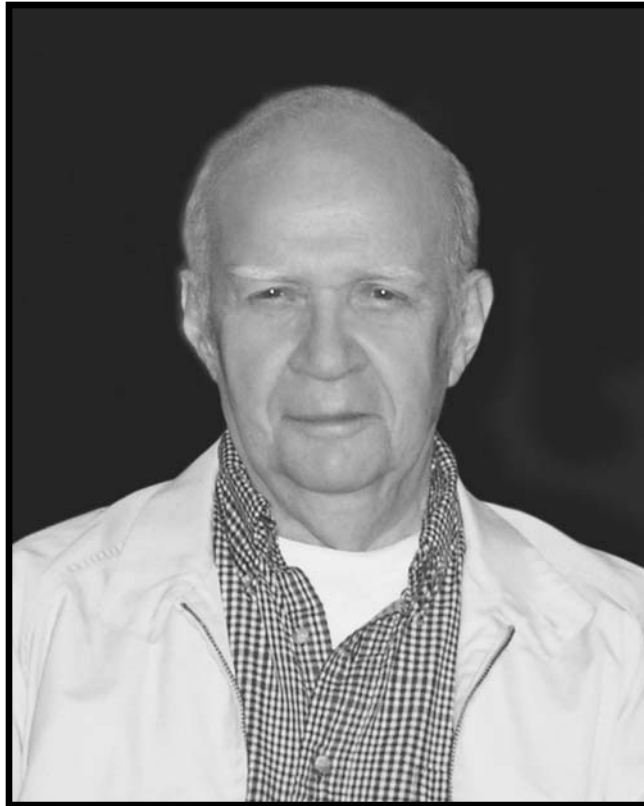
Sy was a socialist for over fifty years. He first joined the movement when its core belief in the self-emancipation of the working class had been trampled upon. "The tradition of all dead generations," Marx wrote, "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." Likewise, the accumulated falsifications of Marxism, and the organizations built to defend them, frustrated Sy's efforts to be a revolutionary socialist for years. But the great working-class revolts of the late 1960's drove him to break through their confusion and rediscover the key principles of authentic revolutionary Marxism.

He spent the following decades fighting tirelessly to further develop those ideas and give them organizational form. His contributions toward the resurrection of Marxist theory, strategy, tactics and organization are unmatched by any other individual in the post-World War II era. The story of Sy's political life is both highly educational and, we think, downright inspiring.

In this article we review Sy's formative years and go on to describe the political breakthrough he made halfway through his life. A second article will take up his work for over thirty years in the LRP.

I. The Political World Sy Entered

The early 1950's were a difficult and even dangerous time to become a socialist or communist. The Cold War divided the world between Stalinist dictatorships ruling over the working class in the name of socialism, and supposedly liberty-loving American impe-



Sy Landy, National Secretary of the League for the Revolutionary Party from 1976 to 2007.

rialism enjoying its domination of a vast and bloody unofficial empire enforced by local anti-Communist dictators. The novelist George Orwell summed up the ruling spirit of the time in his novel *1984*, in which the tyrant Big Brother ruled with the slogans "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength." In the U.S., McCarthyism was on the rise, and leftists of all stripes, not just Communist Party members, were being viciously persecuted.

Sy started his political life as a Democrat. In 1950 at Brooklyn College, he was head of the Students for Democratic Action (SDA), the youth affiliate of the Americans for Democratic Action. ADA was the most prominent liberal organization of the time, and despite its pro-U.S. attitude in the Cold War, it came under continual attack by the red-baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy. Sy's SDA chapter drew the wrath of the college's authoritarian president, Harry Gideonse, by fighting for students' right to distribute unauthorized publications – including ones, as

the administration charged, "espousing liberal causes such as the rights of the Negro in the South." Gideonse declared Sy and another student "bad campus citizens" – a designation meant to permanently stain their reputations and ruin their career opportunities. But Sy was embarking on a "career" of struggle and considered the title a badge of honor which he remained proud of years afterward.

It was not long before Sy saw through Democratic Party liberalism's hypocrisy, and in 1952 he embraced the socialist cause. The Communist Party in this country had long before become promoters of capitalist politics and apologists for Stalinist rule. But to its left, Sy could find no clear revolutionary alternative – only organizations whose proclamations of socialism masked practical and theoretical adaptations to reformism and nationalism.

Trotsky once remarked that reformists, along with "centrists" who vacillate between revolutionary rhetoric and reformist capitulation to capitalist power, transform the road to revolution into an "ideological maze." Like so many other would-be revolutionaries, Sy found himself trapped in that maze for years. To appreciate his extraordinary achievement in eventually fighting his way out, it is necessary first to understand the organizations and views Sy encountered and the dead weight they represented.

THE DEGENERATION OF TROTSKYISM

The Fourth International (FI) had been founded under the leadership of the great Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky in 1938 as a world-wide vanguard party to champion the revolutionary

program abandoned by the Stalinist-led Communist (Third) International. The Trotskyists heroically fought for an independent working-class struggle for power in key revolutionary upheavals, from the Chinese and Spanish revolutions to the fight against fascism in Germany. But the counterrevolutionary force of Stalinism proved strong enough to betray those revolutions and finally overthrow the Soviet workers' state from within by the late 1930's. These defeats paved the way to World War II.

The FI lost many outstanding leaders to the counter-revolutionary violence and imperialist bloodletting. Trotsky himself fell to a Stalinist assassin on the eve of the war. Others perished in concentration camps and on battlefields. Those who inherited the FI's leadership in the post-war years failed miserably to maintain its revolutionary traditions.

As capitalism stabilized in the war's aftermath, cynicism about the working class's revolutionary potential grew. The post-war economic boom in the imperial centers saw a rapid expansion of the middle classes and labor aristocracy. This in turn fueled a range of illusions in capitalism's possibilities. Some on the left decided that socialism could be achieved peacefully through reforms. Others turned to different forces: Stalinist armies, middle-class guerillas, intellectuals. The FI's leadership increasingly adapted to such illusions.

STALINISM AND THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

A huge step in the FI's abandoning the cause of working-class revolutionary leadership came in response to the spread of Stalinist rule across Eastern Europe and Asia. On their road to power the Stalinist armies had crushed working-class uprisings and established regimes modeled on the USSR. These events severely challenged the FI's understanding of the world.

The workers' state created by the 1917 revolution in Russia was the international working class's greatest achievement. In the face of its degeneration under the rising Stalinist bureaucracy, Trotsky had led the FI to defend the workers' state while at the same time attempting to rally the working class to overthrow their counterrevolutionary Stalinist rulers. But the Stalinists whom Trotsky thought too weak to retain power for very long had in fact entrenched their rule in the Soviet Union.

The Great Purges of the late 1930's saw the Stalinists destroy



Bolivian miners during 1952 revolution that was betrayed by the Fourth International.

every last living connection to the workers' state of 1917. Until his death, Trotsky maintained his view that the USSR was a "degenerated workers' state" moving back towards capitalism. In our view, by the eve of World War II the counterrevolution had been completed: the workers' state had been smashed and turned into a statified version of capitalism. (Our book, *The Life and Death of Stalinism*, provides a full analysis.)

The Stalinist rulers pursued their own imperialist aims, first in a doomed alliance with Hitler's Germany and later in alliance with Anglo-American imperialism. Stalin realized his aims when he divided Europe in friendly negotiations with the U.S. and British imperialists Roosevelt and Churchill. "Defense of the Soviet Union" thus meant endorsing Stalin's imperial conquests. In the war, the Soviet working class had to defend itself against the Nazi invaders, but it also had to defend itself from the Stalinist state and oppose its rulers' own imperialist aggression.

After the war, Stalinism's expansion sharply raised the question: what was the class nature of the new Stalinist states? At first the leaders of the FI mocked as "absurd" the idea that the Stalinists were creating workers' states by crushing the working class. But when the Yugoslav Stalinist Tito broke with Stalin in 1948, the FI did an about-face: it labeled Yugoslavia proletarian, hailed Tito's alleged democracy and even invited him to join the FI. Soon the FI's Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel extended their new theory and concluded that a dozen new "workers' states," though "deformed," had been created.

Marx and Engels had taught that the emancipation of the working class could only be achieved by the working class itself. Trotsky understood that Stalinism was a thoroughly counter-revolutionary force. Now, in the names of Marx and Trotsky, these ideas were overturned by the proponents of "deformed workers' states" who absurdly styled themselves "orthodox Trotskyists." New walls of the maze were constructed.

Trotsky did not live to see the expansion of Stalinist rule. We share the opinion of Trotsky's comrade and wife, Natalia Sedova, that the only way to remain loyal to his revolutionary method was to recognize that contrary to his expectations, Stalinism had established itself as a new capitalist and imperialist ruling class. In an open letter announcing her split from the FI, she explained the "great bitterness" she felt in reading arguments in Trotsky's name that Stalinism could play a progressive role in supposedly creating new workers' states. (Her letter is on our web site.)

The death knell of the Fourth International as a revolutionary organization was finally sounded when it betrayed a working-class revolution itself, and didn't look back. This took place in Bolivia, where the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR) played a leading role in the revolutionary upheavals of the working class. But the FI and the POR supported a bourgeois nationalist government, in violation of the bedrock principle of working-class independence. No significant section of the FI objected, and the nationalist government paved the way for counterrevolution. (See our pamphlet *Bolivia: The Revolution the Fourth International Betrayed*.)

In the U.S., the FI was represented by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Its leader, James Cannon, at first denounced the idea that the counterrevolutionary Stalinists could create workers' states, warning that it would "open the door to all kinds of revisions of basic theory." But he soon embraced the Pabloite formula of "deformed workers' states" and proved his own warning true. Once a fierce opponent of class collaboration, he approved the FI's disastrous class betrayal in Bolivia. In the FI in general and the SWP in particular, the essence of the revolutionary ideas of Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky had been eviscerated.

THE “THIRD CAMP” SPLIT

The major left-wing rival to the SWP was the Independent Socialist League (ISL) led by Max Shachtman. The Shachtman group (initially named the Workers Party) had originated in a political fight inside the SWP in 1939-40. The dispute emerged over the nature of the Stalinist Soviet Union, after the Stalin-Hitler pact led to the joint invasion of Poland by Germany and Russia and the start of World War II.

The majority stuck with Trotsky’s mistaken belief that the USSR was still a workers’ state. The minority opposed Soviet defensism and eventually decided that the Stalinist system was “bureaucratic collectivist,” based on ideas proposed by James Burnham and others. But this was not a serious theory. It posed the birth of a new social system that had somehow escaped the underlying laws of capitalism which the isolated Soviet workers’ state had not been able to overcome. It could not explain what laws of motion drove the class struggle within the new system, and its proponents differed over fundamental questions: whether or not “bureaucratic collectivism” was progressive compared to capitalism, and whether the producers it exploited were proletarians or industrial slaves.

The Burnham-Shachtman bloc’s call for a “third camp” was another anti-Marxist concept. It was meant to declare opposition to both warring imperialist blocs. But the world was still fundamentally divided between two camps, the ruling classes with all their disputes in peace as well as war, and the international working class.

In the faction fight, the Shachtmanites were more united over their complaints about the party’s functioning than over the political issues, where they had their own disagreements. Trotsky challenged them to put politics first, and they were given every democratic right to try to convince the party and the FI of their perspective. He championed “party patriotism,” teaching his followers to prize the revolutionary party as a great gain of the working class. But the minority quickly split from the SWP over second-rate organizational complaints, depriving it of almost half the members – and losing most of those. Abandoning the revolutionary party and dividing its ranks on the eve of war, the Burnham-Shachtman split was one of our movement’s most treacherous betrayals.

THE POST-WAR SHACHTMANITES

Despite their sordid origins, the Shachtmanites maintained a rhetorical commitment to socialist revolution. The Workers Party claimed to stand for working-class independence from all capitalist parties by advocating a union-based labor party. And during the war, the WP led several militant rank-and-file trade union caucuses, in aircraft manufacture and other heavy industries, which fought against the no-strike pledge endorsed by most labor bureaucrats and the dominant left organization, the Communist Party. (Sy recounted how for years afterward many workers remembered these caucuses as the highlight of their lives.) It campaigned vigorously for civil rights against anti-left witch hunts, defending not only itself but also the Stalinists.

For all its militancy, the foundation of the WP/ISL’s politics was rotten and opportunist. Defining socialism as essentially the extension of bourgeois democracy, the Shachtmanites increasingly accommodated to the reformist union bureaucracy and to the “democratic” imperialism that labor supported in the Cold War. The “third camp” orientation failed to see that U.S. imperialism was far stronger than its Stalinist rival – it was displacing British and French imperialism as the main exploiter of ex-colonial nations – and that Stalinist imperialism played the role of proping up the imperialist system as a whole.



Leon Trotsky in 1940. By the early 1950's his “orthodox” followers had become centrists, covering reformist practice with revolutionary rhetoric.

In keeping with this rightward orientation, when the post-war Labour government in Britain nationalized some key industries, Shachtman drew the conclusion that Labour could open the way to a peaceful transition to socialism. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, the ISL officially backed no side but came to see the main danger as the victory of Stalinism, not U.S. imperialism – even though it was the U.S. military that had crushed Korean movements for national independence and unification since the end of the world war.

On the home front, in 1954 after much vacillation, the ISL breached the principle of working-class independence from the capitalist Democratic Party by supporting union activists running in Democratic primaries. Looking back years later, Sy would joke about the tortured Shachtmanite logic that approved of supporting Democrats against one another but not against Republicans.

Over the years there were frequent rightward splits from the WP/ISL, and several ex-members found niches in the expanding U.S. labor bureaucracy. The only left split was the Johnson-Forrest group (led by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya) in 1947, and they too refused to draw the lesson of the need for the revolutionary party – in fact they drew the opposite conclusion, that a vanguard party would only get in the way of mass militancy.

In sum, by the early 1950’s the ISL and the SWP were both centrist organizations, combining revolutionary rhetoric with reformist practice. Nevertheless, the ISL’s nominal opposition to all capitalist parties and ruling classes could be mistaken for a revolutionary alternative to both Western imperialism and Stalinism and its apologists.

II. Sy and “Independent Socialism”

For the young Sy Landy breaking from liberalism at Brooklyn College, the choice of what socialist group to join



Budapest, 1956. Hungarian revolutionaries beheaded statue of Stalin. Working-class revolution against pseudo-workers' state was crushed by imperialist Russian army.

seemed easy. To the left of the CP, the SWP had no campus presence. Moreover, their insistence that the working class held state power in the Stalinist states, albeit in a deformed way, could have little appeal to Sy. The driving force behind his radicalization was a search for answers to the real oppression of real people. He had already seen how liberalism's celebration of the abstractions of liberty and democracy hypocritically covered an indifference to the real suffering of the working class and oppressed. Embracing socialism, Sy took it for granted that the aim of a workers' state meant just that: the working class holding state power. He was not about to share in a more radical version of liberal hypocrisy by labeling countries workers' states where the working class was clearly not in power.

Unlike the SWP, the Shachtmanite ISL's youth group had a stimulating political life along with a high degree of activism during a conservative time. It had made a big effort at building groups on campuses, especially at Brooklyn College. The ISL recruiter there offered Sy a copy of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. It offered a clear explanation of the Marxist method on which socialists base their confident vision of the future.

In spite of Trotsky's condemnation of the Shachtmanite split from the Fourth International, the ISL claimed to represent the revolutionary traditions of Marx and Engels, the Russian revolution and Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism. For him, the ISL's "Third Camp" of "independent socialism" was the only political force fighting to overthrow both Western capitalism and the Stalinist dictatorships of the East. Sy was attracted to the most revolutionary-sounding aspects of ISL politics, but he accepted for years some of the Shachtmanites' accommodations to democratic liberalism.

Sy joined the ISL's youth group in the early 1950's and was elected to its leading committee after it became the Young Socialist League (YSL) in 1954, when it absorbed a good part of the Socialist Party youth. Sy flourished in this milieu. Tim Wohlforth, then a YSL leader, caught some of the flavor of Sy's role when he wrote in his political memoir:

Sy Landy was our leftist. While adhering quite rigidly to a Shachtmanite view of the world, he favored a more radical tactical course. Sy was the consummate New York radical. He ate and breathed politics, speaking authoritatively and endlessly on any matter. (*The Prophet's Children*, p. 34.)

During the 1950's the ISL's numbers dwindled. In 1957

Shachtman and his protégé Michael Harrington, the head of the YSL, called for the dissolution of the group into the larger but openly reformist Socialist Party (SP). The reasons given were the new opportunities opening up with the rise of the civil rights movement in the South, along with the political shattering of the Communist Party after the Khrushchev revelations of Stalin's crimes in 1956 and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution the same year. Shachtman and Harrington claimed that their aim was to break out of sectarian existence and create a broad multi-tendency party like the early 20th-century Socialist Party of Eugene Debs.

But Shachtman wouldn't stop there. He had given up on the idea of working-class revolution and was heading toward an alliance with the liberal left-wing of the Democratic Party. Dissolution into the SP offered the opportunity to break the last remnants of the ISL's tradition of class independence.

SAVING SHACHTMANISM FROM SHACHTMAN

Hal Draper was the most prominent ISL leader to argue against the move. A founding member of the group when it split from the SWP, Draper enjoyed particular stature as the editor of the ISL's press, having single-handedly authored many of its newspaper articles for years. Draper was attempting to remain loyal to the "third camp" perspective. Sy looked to Draper to lead a struggle against Shachtman's turn, but when Draper failed to go beyond words and organize opposition to the rightward course, Sy deferred to Draper's age and greater experience – a decision he subsequently regretted. Years later, particularly in discussions with younger comrades, Sy would use the experience to draw important lessons about the necessity of decisive leadership. He would add that revolutionaries should never defer to age or authority, including his.

A "Left-Wing Caucus" in the YSL, led by Tim Wohlforth along with Shane Mage and James Robertson, opposed the merger, pointing to the SP's support for labor bureaucrats allied with the Democratic Party. The Caucus refused to join the SP and affiliated instead with the nearly moribund SWP (Wohlforth's description). In the process they adopted the "deformed workers' state" analysis, which ironically meant adhering to a theory that labeled Stalinism progressive – right after it had again proved in blood its anti-working class nature in Hungary. The Caucus leaders subsequently formed a left faction in the SWP, were expelled and then diverged into rival "orthodox" groups: Robertson and Mage founded the Spartacist League, and Wohlforth became the head of the Workers League and years later a reformist social-democrat.

The merger of the ISL into the SP took place in 1957-58, with their youth groups merging to become the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL). While the reformists had the upper hand in the enlarged SP, the YPSL was a different story. Larger, more actively engaged in struggles and enjoying a great deal of autonomy from its parent organization, the YPSL had a more dominant left wing, including a "Labor Party Caucus" in which Sy was a leading figure.

The YPSL's National Executive Committee, on which Sy served, was the scene of hopeless debates over whether to support Democratic "peace" and "pro-labor" candidates as Harrington advocated, or independent reformist and/or pacifist socialist candidates, as left wingers proposed. The "labor party" caucus title was purely nominal, since there was no movement for such a party. Rather, it was a signboard signifying opposition to the Democratic Party – and also implicit opposition to building a revolutionary party.

A rising level of mass struggle in the U.S., particularly the

growing militancy of the Black masses in the face of intractable racism, strengthened the YPSL but pushed the SP further to the right. By 1960, Shachtman and Harrington were heading a move to “realign” the SP into open support for the Democratic Party. They argued that the U.S. labor bureaucracy was firmly attached to the Democrats – but if the Party would ditch its Southern reactionary wing, it itself would become a labor party standing for genuinely liberal politics.

Adhering to the capitalist Democratic Party meant a decisive crossing of the class line that surrendered the organizational and political independence of the working class. The “independent socialism” tradition had previously vacillated between revolutionary rhetoric and a capitulation to reformism in practice. Shachtman and Harrington’s realignment strategy represented the final step from vacillating centrism into outright pro-capitalist reformism.

“DEMOCRATIC FOREIGN POLICY”

Sy was regarded in YPSL as an expert on international matters. He celebrated the blow U.S. imperialism received with the Cuban revolution and traveled there soon after, before Castro had turned to Stalinism and was still proclaiming himself simply a nationalist revolutionary. He was struck by the corruption that was already obvious at the top of the new government and later recalled meeting young officials who enthusiastically defended the idea of a future top-down introduction of socialism. Given Sy’s hostility to Stalinism, he knew this “socialism” would mean a dictatorship over the working class.

A resolution he wrote in 1959, “A Democratic Foreign Policy,” illuminates the contradictory nature of his views at the time. It demanded the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Europe and supported the right to national self-determination – specifically, it denounced the reactionary coup the U.S. perpetrated in Guatemala in 1954 and the British, French and Israeli imperialist invasion of Suez in Egypt in 1956, and supported the Hungarian Revolution (“that heroic struggle that pointed the way to the working-class and anti-imperialist forces of the world”). But it also called on the U.S. to take steps toward disarmament, as if the world’s leading imperialist power could ever do such a thing.

One excerpt from the document illustrates the left Shachtmanites’ orientation to liberals and their reliance on bourgeois democracy as the universal solvent.

Many liberals, certainly, accept most or at least a goodly number of the democratic foreign policy steps that we have outlined. While we do not believe that a democratic foreign policy can be carried out through the national party [that] the majority of liberals and American trade unionists pay allegiance to, the Democratic Party, nevertheless we think it urgent that they, within this political entity, attempt to fight for these democratic demands. If they do make such a fight, we feel that they will soon become convinced that they must help create a labor party, which would be more consistent with their political purposes.

Calling on the U.S. ruling class to carry out a democratic foreign policy without explaining up front that such a thing cannot happen creates major illusions. Further, the labor party that Sy advocated here was clearly a reformist party akin to Labour in Britain, which promotes imperialism even more treacherously – in the name of the working class. It took a series of struggles over this question before Sy understood that reformist working-class leaders are counterrevolutionary, and that for revolutionaries the labor party demand must be used as a tactic for creating a revo-

lutionary working-class party, not a reformist one.

The issue of supporting U.S. imperialism finally boiled over in 1961, when Shachtman welcomed the CIA-backed “Bay of Pigs” invasion of Cuba. When they heard of his position, the YPSL group in Berkeley disinvited him from speaking at a scheduled public meeting and replaced him with Draper. Sy of course solidarized with his California allies and regarded this incident as his political break with Shachtman.

Shachtman continued his rightward trend, becoming a stalwart of the imperialist interventionist wing of the Democratic Party and in the end a progenitor of the neo-conservative trend now prominent in the Republican Party. As Sy put it, only Shachtman’s death halted his rightward course.

DEBATES OVER THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE

Sy was especially influenced by the monumental struggles of Black people against racism. The civil rights movement had begun to win important gains against Jim Crow in the South, but was frustrated at every step by its leadership’s strategy of using passive protests to beg liberal Democrats to support reforms. Martin Luther King Jr.’s insistence on pacifism in the face of murderous racist violence aimed to avoid threatening the ruling class or alienating white liberal allies.

But a large and growing number of Blacks rightly saw that a more uncompromising struggle was needed. In the South, a movement for armed self-defense against racist attacks was led by Robert F. Williams of the Monroe, North Carolina NAACP and spread like wildfire. In the North, the masses of Black workers and poor had few illusions that an end to legal segregation would solve racism: leaders like Malcolm X were gaining in popularity as a result of their condemnations of King’s accommodations to the ruling class and for their stress on independent Black struggle.

Sy actively supported the struggle of Black people against oppression. He was an organizer for the Youth March for Integrated Schools in 1959 that drew 25,000 people to the White House. He visited several cities in the South to study and support the movement. He organized the Civil Rights Discussion Group, a loose group of Black and white activists seeking to better understand racism and the struggle against it, and took part in tenant organizing with the Congress of Racial Equality, then the most radical of the civil rights groups.

The realignment debate became decisive in relation to civil rights. The SP and YPSL were very involved in the struggle, and the Shachtmanites, with their recent convert Bayard Rustin, were close to the movement leadership around King and played a role in crafting its strategy. The realignment strategy was particularly aimed at ensnaring civil rights activists and confining the political struggle to the Democratic Party.

The left wing of YPSL and the SP understood that the Black movement needed to turn away from appealing to the benevolence of the ruling class and move toward organizing outside the Democratic Party. They envisaged a “Negro-labor alliance” and an independent labor party in which Black people would have equal rights. But this was only a more militant version of the King strategy: insisting on a labor alliance meant holding back the struggle while trying to push the pro-capitalist and often racist leadership of the unions to lend their support.

Sy and his comrade Dave Melamed looked at the struggle differently. With an insight that would foresee the impulse behind the future growth of the Black Power movement, they recognized that Black people’s oppression, as well as white liberals’ betrayals of the struggle, had created great distrust among Blacks of the idea of unity with whites and also undermined



Sy in the 1960's was taking steps toward the political break that led him to revolutionary Trotskyism.

Black people's sense of their own power and abilities. So they advocated independent organization by Black people as a road to a future united class struggle. In a 1965 draft document that Sy preserved, Dave wrote:

Should the socialist – the kind of socialist whose side is always that of the oppressed, whose heart always beats with the oppressed and their struggle, and who sees the struggle from below as the motive force for a new humane society – urge the Negro masses to wait until the labor movement, until the white worker, is ready? This would run counter to everything taught to us in the past about the struggles of classes and peoples impelled by their condition into motion, who cannot complete the revolution alone but whose struggle is vital for putting into motion the ultimately revolutionary class.

As Sy wrote in his memorial tribute to Dave on our website, he and Dave saw this development in the light of the history of the Jewish Socialist Bund in Tsarist-ruled Poland early in the century, which in spite of its separatist politics had organized self-defense against pogroms, fought on the barricades in the 1905 revolution and thus laid the basis for the great role Jewish workers would play in the revolution of 1917.

The idea that mass action is the seedbed for revolutionary consciousness is one that Sy would develop further, as the movements of the 1960's erupted in the U.S. and abroad, and their lessons became clarified in conflicts among the would-be socialist revolutionaries themselves.

The real meaning of "realignment" became clear in the 1964 election, when Shachtman and Harrington led the SP into endorsing the re-election of President Lyndon Johnson. Johnson's victory was followed by his escalation of the imperialist war in

Vietnam, which Shachtman endorsed on the grounds that U.S. domination was a lesser evil than a Communist victory.

And the Black struggle brought to a head one of the Shachtmanites' greatest political crimes, which they committed in practice, not just theory. At the 1964 Democratic national convention, the Mississippi Freedom Democrats had challenged the racially exclusive selection of their state's delegates. The Shachtmanites, through Rustin, played a leading role in convincing them to accept a token "compromise" of two delegates alongside the sixty-eight officially chosen whites. In effect, once the Shachtmanites were committed to the Democratic Party, they rejected the idea of splitting what was now their party. The strategy they conceived to drive the racists out of the Democratic Party had led straight to an all-out effort to keep them in. Black people once again were told to sit in the "back of the bus."

SHACHTMANISM WITHOUT SHACHTMAN

The YPSL dissolved in 1964 into a menagerie of factions. Those like Sy who regarded themselves as the true inheritors of the best of Shachtmanism were organizationally adrift. What was needed was a formation aiming for a revolutionary working-class party, not for a reformist labor party or "independent" politics. Instead, Draper and others founded the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC) in California; Sy founded and led the club in New York. The ISC was organized as a "non-sectarian" caretaker of the heritage of the ISL, but it made no attempt to come to grips with the roots of the Shachtmanites' political crimes or to recover the proletarian and internationalist heritage of Trotskyism.

The ISC was active in the burgeoning movement against the Vietnam war, and it played a leadership role in the pace-setting campus struggle, the Free Speech Movement at the University of California in Berkeley in 1964-65 in support of Southern civil rights. Although it grew rapidly, it made only a belated effort to work inside Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which led a sizeable anti-Vietnam war demonstration in 1965 and grew to a membership of 100,000 by 1969.

Instead, at the height of the Black ghetto rebellions (which shook the political establishment far more than the civil rights marches) and the anti-war movement in 1967-68, the ISC was instrumental in founding the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP). The PFP stood for a "minimal radical program" – immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and support for Black liberation (a goal it left undefined) – but it did not stand for working-class independence or socialism, and certainly not revolution. Draper argued in the ISC's paper that "The 'revolution' that is on the agenda for Peace and Freedom today is not yet overthrowing the whole System, but something a little more modest for the day: viz, overthrowing the two-party system ...".

Moreover, the PFP rested on a base of middle-class and largely white activists. It left the task of winning over Black radicals to its ally, the Black Panther Party, the militant Black Power group that despised the Democratic Party for its racism and bourgeois character. The ISC worked with and defended the Panthers, but it did not build on its close collaboration with Black radicals to try to form the interracial revolutionary organization that it nominally stood for. At a key historical juncture when class and race conflicts were boiling over which only a revolutionary program and leadership could resolve, the ISC abstained.

The PFP shattered in mid-1968, when it lost most of its followers to the liberal Democratic politicians Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy who came out against the Vietnam war. Just as the early Shachtmanites had lost many working-class followers to labor leaders like Reuther who could talk militant and also wield union muscle, the PFP could not compete with anti-war

Democrats who promised real political power. In both cases the would-be revolutionaries subordinated their subjective revolutionary ideas in the hope of winning masses to a reform program – and ended up building up reformist or liberal forces that were major obstacles to a real revolutionary program.

The political scene was swinging leftward throughout the eventful year of 1968. The events of that year included: the militant radicalization of the student movement symbolized by the building seizures at Columbia University; the student upsurge in Paris that triggered a general strike by French workers; the Tet offensive in Vietnam that inspired the anti-war movement in the U.S. and helped force President Lyndon Johnson to withdraw his candidacy for re-election; and the riots in Chicago as the Democratic Party rejected anti-war candidates and nominated Johnson's sidekick, Hubert Humphrey. In this season of political turmoil and rapid radicalization, the ISC bet everything on an electoralist strategy, in the hope that disgusted voters would turn away from the Democrats into a revitalized PFP.

Instead, the disgruntled liberals returned to the Democratic fold in order to prevent the election of Richard Nixon, while thousands of Black and Latino activists along with SDS activists declared themselves revolutionaries. Thus the “one step to the left” PFP strategy took the ISC out of the running for the leadership of the liberation and student movements, whose most radical adherents ended up looking to Maoism for revolutionary answers.

THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS

Looking back on it, Sy regarded Peace and Freedom as a disastrous venture. What was necessary was raising a clear pole of attraction for those who were ready to see through the limitations of middle-class radicalism and Black nationalism, and to make the leap in consciousness to a revolutionary working-class perspective. Unfortunately, few others learned that lesson; the Peace and Freedom strategy was repeated in recent years by the support for and entry into the pro-capitalist and far less radical Green Party, by the largest descendants of the ISC today, the International Socialist Organization and the Solidarity group.

The ISC changed its name to the International Socialists (IS) in 1969, in part to mark its fusion with a group of “new leftists” led by Ron Taber who escaped the imploding SDS, and also to acknowledge its fraternal relation with the British organization of that name led by Tony Cliff. The IS also moved its headquarters to Detroit in order to carry out its “orientation to the working class” – sending former college students into blue-collar jobs and trade unions to do political work as well as make a living. In this the IS was a step ahead of most other radical groups like the Maoists and the SWP, which turned to the working class after student radicalism had died down.

But the IS retained the Shachtmanite and Cliffite “rank-and-file” approach to union work, in which socialists presented themselves to their fellow workers – and ran for leadership posts – simply as militants and democrats, not revolutionaries. For the ISC/IS and



Mass rally in France, May 1968. French workers' general strike proved revolutionary potential of working class in imperialist countries.

many middle-class leftists of the time, the thing to do – in Sy's words – was not to frighten people with talk of socialism but to “lie in wait for the workers with a program of democratic demands.”

III. Sy's Political Breakthrough

The decisive turning point in Sy's politics was inspired by the explosion of working-class struggles of the late '60s – the Black ghetto uprisings that shook major cities of the U.S., along with widespread international upsurge, especially the general strike of the working class in France in 1968. Many on the left saw in these events the potentially revolutionary power of the working class in advanced industrial countries, as well as the vanguard role that could be taken by Black and other racially oppressed workers. But Sy qualitatively changed his world view: he interpreted the upheavals as showing that masses of workers and oppressed people were seeking a new alternative and in effect demanding revolutionary leadership.

The IS had organizationally survived Shachtman's betrayals and was growing. But Sy knew that his decades of schooling in the “Third Camp” tradition had left him politically unprepared. While the working class had confirmed its revolutionary potential, those claiming to offer revolutionary leadership, including himself and the rest of the IS, were still operating on centrist foundations. Rather than bringing the IS's ideas to the working class, the lessons of the class's struggle had to be brought into the IS to challenge its fundamental method.

THE CRISIS OF REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

Sy had always depended on others like Draper to take the lead in theoretical work, but he now knew he would have to challenge himself to become a theorist. While he had always studied history and theory, he returned to study with a new vigor, in particular re-reading Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, in the light of the struggles that he had lived through. He also studied Hegel, from whom Marxists had drawn their schooling in dialectics, the method of understanding the world in a single, interrelated and constantly changing whole.



Newark, 1967. Black uprisings in U.S. cities demanded liberation, which only working-class revolution can provide.

Thus Sy, just shy of his fortieth birthday, an age when many people have grown complacent and resistant to change, was questioning everything. To help gain perspective, for the best part of a year in 1970-71 he traveled in Europe in search of a wider outlook. He held discussions with leaders of both the British IS and “orthodox” Trotskyist groups in Britain, France, Germany, Italy and beyond. But to one extent or another they were all trapped in the familiar patterns Sy was trying to break from.

Sy did meet one person who had a profound and lasting impact on him: Jim Charleson. From among the poorest of Scotland’s working class, Charleson had joined the Communist Party as a young man and then joined the Trotskyists in their struggle against Stalinism. He shared with Sy his many stories from a life dedicated to revolution and his intimate connection with working-class communism before its Stalinist degeneration and counterrevolution.

As a dockworker in the 1920’s and ’30’s, Charleson had been able to get a taste of the revolutionary movement from Scotland to South Africa and from Russia to New York. Charleson told how he was imprisoned in South Africa and, as a white man, was automatically offered an African servant while in prison. His refusal established a bond of solidarity with the African prisoners. He also spoke of his experiences working with Russian sailors, and described how he knew that the degeneration was under way. Whereas after the 1917 revolution both sailors and officers would speak to one another in the familiar forms of Russian, after the rise of Stalinism class divisions were strictly enforced and the sailors would have to address their officers with formal terms of respect, while the officers would address them in familiar terms as if they were children. Through Jim Charleson, Sy made a living connection to the authentic Trotskyism he was searching for.

Sy’s time away had given him the chance to study, discuss and reflect. Meanwhile, the American SWP – which later openly give up its claim to Trotskyism – was publishing yearbooks of Trotsky’s writings of the 1930’s. Sy and others in the IS devoured these books as they came out. Trotsky’s letters of advice to supporters in different countries about building small revolutionary organizations spoke directly to Sy’s concerns.

Trotsky demanded clear revolutionary principles, insisting that revolutionaries always “say what is” rather than water down the revolutionary program in the interests of quick popularity; he

called for an open and relentless political struggle against reformist misleaders while fighting for the broadest unity of the working class in action. Trotsky’s cutting descriptions of the centrist groups of his time had the greatest effect. Trotsky was describing the whole IS tradition, as well as the other left groups that littered the political scene.

In the *Transitional Program*, Trotsky had written that “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.” Sy now understood that this was no mere rhetorical exhortation but a statement of scientific fact. He regarded the great upheavals of the late 1960’s as fundamentally expressions by the working class of the need for revolutionary political leadership. The task therefore was to do everything possible to make sure that the next time the working

class rose up in revolutionary struggle, it would find a leadership prepared to show it the way to victory.

BLACK LIBERATION AND SOCIALIST REVOLUTION

On his return to the U.S., Sy spearheaded an effort to create a revolutionary Trotskyist organization, first by trying to convert the IS politically and organizationally. The goal could not be accomplished without major political advances that would inevitably provoke internal disputes. Some of these became factional battles, which helped concretize the necessary turn.

The first major advance was over the question of the Black struggle for liberation. What was the character of the Black population in the U.S. – a nation? a race? a class? – and with what strategy would Black people win equality and freedom?

Sy wrote a document, “Black Liberation,” for the 1972 IS convention that embodied his search for revolutionary Trotskyism. It was counterposed to the IS’s existing position, an amalgam of the most prominent views on the left: integrationism and nationalism. The integrationism perspective rejected the Jim Crow lie of “separate but equal” treatment of Blacks, but it embraced liberal illusions. “Integration” into the dominant capitalist economy and culture could only end up being another way of accepting the status quo. Black nationalism, on the other hand, recognized that racist oppression had formed Blacks into a distinct people, but proposed the way forward to be a struggle of Blacks of all classes.

Against both these perspectives, Sy argued that Blacks formed an oppressed race-caste, containing people of all classes but based on the superexploitation of the Black working class. He advanced a simple but bold thesis: that Black oppression was characterized by the denial of bourgeois-democratic rights, and

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that because racist oppression was a fundamental part of capitalism only the workers' revolution could win these rights in the process of achieving socialism.

The American working class now included a large component of Black workers, and much of its militancy was spearheaded by their struggles. Thus the democratic and class struggles were already interrelated in reality. Not only was the fight for socialism necessary for Black people to secure genuine equality, but the working class as a whole could not fulfill its material interests without championing the anti-racist struggle. Sy wrote:

Blacks differ from most other minorities in that they have never been permitted to achieve most of the gains and rights of bourgeois democracy. ... By law, custom and force the chasm between blacks and others has been maintained. ... The bourgeois democratic revolutionary gains for blacks cannot "evolve" as they did for others, but must be achieved through revolution and the fusing with class-wide or socialist demands. There is little more room at the top, or the middle, in capitalism – only the bottom. ...

The coupling of the black bourgeois democratic revolution with class socialist demands can be the flame that ignites the American Revolution. The confluence of the bourgeois democratic revolution for the Russian peasant and the socialist revolution for the Russian worker ignited the Bolshevik Revolution. The even more entwined and fused revolutions of black and white workers on the American scene will be an even greater historical step.

This was in effect a deepening and updating of the strategy of permanent revolution that had originally been fashioned by Trotsky to advance the struggle for proletarian power in Tsarist Russia, counterposing it to the "orthodox Marxist" notion that the fight for socialism should be postponed until a stage of liberal bourgeois democracy was reached. Trotsky later applied that strategy to broader situations internationally, including the Black struggle in the U.S. Sy's advocacy of the Trotskyist method on this vital question had wider implications. For example, Puerto Ricans in New York, Chicago and elsewhere, and Mexicans mainly in the Southwest, also faced extreme racism. Largely inspired by the Black struggle, they were engaged in a similar radicalization. The permanent revolution perspective was also vital to a solution to the deeply entrenched oppression of women and gays. If socialism was the only real answer to all types of oppression under capitalism, then promoting revolutionary class consciousness was the primary task. (The most thorough presentation of Sy's analysis as it developed is his pamphlet, *Marxism, Interracialism and the Black Struggle*.)

At the 1972 convention a majority bloc was formed that included Sy and his co-thinkers, the Taber-led group of ex-SDSers based in Chicago, plus groupings around Kim Moody and Steve Zeluck in New York. The bloc was vaguely united around the goals of cohering the IS politically and tightening it organizationally, in opposition to the more politically conservative leadership headed by Joel Geier and the group's habitual sloppiness.

Sy and Moody had previously written a joint article which, among other things, argued for the use of transitional demands (class-wide political demands on the state), not just calls for economic, day-to-day reforms, in the trade unions. ("The Unions under Monopoly Capitalism," *International Socialist*, May 1970.) At that time Sy taught that the Transitional Program drafted by Trotsky was a handy tool for presenting the content of socialism without actually using the word. This was not a pedagogical adaptation to mass consciousness but a political adaptation to reformism. Unlike Moody and Zeluck, however,

Sy was moving away from that perspective. The differences then were barely visible, and as the leader of the new majority bloc, Sy was elected National Secretary of the IS, replacing Geier, and moved to Detroit to work in the group's national headquarters.

"NEXT STEP" VS. TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM

Determined to try to fit the IS to meet the working class's need for revolutionary leadership, in the months following the 1972 convention Sy formed an active collaboration with Ron Taber and others to continue to rediscover revolutionary Trotskyism and campaign for it within the organization. The strategy he advocated for Black liberation demanded not just a fight for the immediate demands of the Black masses but also open advocacy of socialism. But this method was missing from the rest of the IS's work.

The IS Convention had also adopted a document on the economic crisis that forecast continued stagnation with rising unemployment and inflation. Already under these conditions it was proving increasingly difficult for the working class to defend and improve its living standards through the methods of protests and strikes. The IS approach, typical on the left to this day, held that socialists can best lead the working class by raising demands that are no more than a "step to the left" of where workers' consciousness is at a given time. There are many problems with this approach. The working class does not all think in one way – there are radical and conservative workers and many gradations between – and the "next step" method inevitably tails the consciousness of the more backward layers of the class. Moreover, as was seen in the explosive struggles of the 1960's, working-class consciousness does not develop by steps; at times of struggle it can advance in leaps. And the "next step" method is totally subjective: it bases itself on a guess of what workers are ready to support, and not on what they need based on the objective conditions of capitalism.

An opportunity to overcome this approach was presented when Joel Geier wrote a document defending it following the IS convention. Geier maintained that the period would be dominated by struggles for "'minimal' or 'immediate' demands ... that can be won under capitalism," and in that situation:

The job of revolutionaries is to take part in such struggles and relate them, in whatever small or large way we can, to [advance] revolutionary politics through propaganda ... We try to be the best fighters, those that don't have to bow to any capitalist pressure (Democratic Party, union bureaucracy, bourgeois legality, etc.), in order to be able to gain the confidence of the masses, to convince them that it is the revolutionaries and not the reformist leaders who struggle most for their interests, and in order to be able to introduce into the reform struggle revolutionary methods and ideas.

That is, Geier was advocating that revolutionaries prove themselves the best fighters for reforms. In response, Sy collaborated with Taber in writing a document, "On the Transitional Program," which elegantly exposed Geier's contradictions. First, it pointed out that Geier had voted for the IS perspectives' forecast of deepening economic stagnation, but he still proposed an approach that saw workers' struggles for reforms having the same sort of success as during boom times. On the contrary, they argued, under such conditions the working class would find it increasingly difficult to win if its struggles remained limited to minimal reform demands. For example, workers might win wage raises only to see their gains lost to rising inflation. Worse still, widespread crises like bankruptcies, factory closures and rising

unemployment could not be addressed by the specific reform demands by this and that group of workers, but only by class-wide political demands on the state. By limiting the role of revolutionaries to fighting for minimal reforms, revolutionaries would not be leading the working class to adopt demands that really addressed the crisis. Instead, they would be raising illusions in the possibility of reforming an increasingly unreformable system, and helping to demoralize workers by encouraging limited struggles that could not win.

Sy and Taber pointed out that Geier had revived quite explicitly the old division of a minimal program of reforms and the maximum program of socialism that characterized the reformist social democracy – which Trotsky had sought to overcome with the demands in his Transitional Program. The answer, they argued, was Trotsky’s approach: supplementing support for minimal reform demands with arguments for broadening the struggle by making class-wide political demands that could answer the workers’ needs. For example, in the face of rising inflation, workers should be encouraged to demand not just wage raises but also cost of living increases in step with rising prices. In response to bankruptcies and rising unemployment, workers should call for the nationalization of failing industries and for public works programs and reduced working hours to create jobs and eliminate unemployment.

Such a method would prove transitional, they explained, because it would be able to help advance the workers’ struggles beyond minimal reforms to a fight for policies that showed the need for socialism. This was an active means to raise socialist consciousness – as opposed to Geier’s approach, which combined raising reformist illusions with abstract propaganda for socialism. They added:

Nowhere ... in the entire document, is there any mention of the need to speak to the illusions of the rank and file participants in these struggles, to convince them that even those gains that are won will be tenuous, since in this period systematic gains for the whole class can only be won by smashing the limits of capitalism. ... Geier’s failure to address himself to this function indicates a general approach ... toward soft-pedaling our criticism of a given strategy or leadership or to put forward in as clear and precise a manner as possible the real road forward, for fear of “isolating ourselves from the movement” or “inhibiting struggle.” Instead of forthright criticism (which can be friendly or unfriendly) there is a tendency to act as cheerleaders, to applaud the fact that workers do indeed struggle.

Whatever gains this method appears to offer are only illusory, for without forthright criticism and open statements about what is, we will be incapable of winning the trust of the most militant, alert, and disciplined workers, who will look to a party that pulls no punches and that demonstrates that it has the backbone to lead the struggle to the very end.

BATTLE OVER “CRITICAL SUPPORT”

Resistance to the developing authentically revolutionary politics in the IS was fierce – not only from the Geier forces but from the Moody wing as well. The dispute spread over a growing series of political questions, but what blew the lid off was the issue of how to approach the upcoming dramatic elections in the United Mine Workers (UMW). Although the IS had no direct presence in the mines, the issue was intimately connected to strategies for union work in general, and indeed all arenas of activity.

Arnold Miller was a reformist leader running for UMW president against the murderous thug incumbent, Tony Boyle.

Miller headed a mass movement, Miners for Democracy (MFD), that appealed to miners who hated the corrupt Boyle regime. How to orient to this movement? Sy, Taber and others argued that a pro-capitalist reformist like Miller would inevitably betray the miners that supported him. “Saying what is” meant warning the workers of this danger. But they also recognized that the miners viewed the prospect of Miller’s victory as a way to advance their struggles. To support Miller uncritically would help set up the miners for a later betrayal. To refuse to support Miller would mean standing aside from the effort to oust the corrupt bureaucracy that was the miners’ main obstacle to struggle against the bosses.

Sy and Taber advanced the Leninist tactic of critical support. Lenin had advocated that British communists vote for the Labour Party in Britain in the 1920’s in order to prove to the workers the truth of their criticisms of Labour. This, Lenin said, would be support “in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man.” Thus Sy and Taber urged a vote for Miller to align with the miners in struggle and defeat Boyle, and to put the IS in position to warn the ranks that the pro-capitalist Miller was also bound to sell them out – as he did big time in the 1974 contract.

Applied to the MFD, this position horrified Geier, Moody & Co., who could not fathom that a militant like Miller and an organization like MFD could be considered obstacles. Moody outlined the approach that he shared with other IS centrists:

The MFD program is the opposite of “misleading” because it points toward a struggle against the mine owners. ... Thus it may be necessary to make our own amendments to the MFD program. But we do not pose these as an alternative program. ...

If it is true, as Ron says, that the MFD played a role in keeping the struggle of the miners in “acceptable” channels, that is, in one way or another holding back the struggle, then we should have opposed MFD.

Moody’s approach expressed the “common sense” attitude that sees no distinction between the bureaucrats at the top of MFD and the ranks below. Nor could Moody see the difference between the struggle for reforms that the workers wanted and the reformist perspective of the leaders, who supported reforms so long as they didn’t threaten the bosses or their own privileges. Miller’s betrayals would prove these differences soon enough. The critical support tactic was designed to expose the gap between the leaders and those who followed them. Moody’s attitude flowed from a conception of the class struggle that deemed it essential to complete a separate stage of democratic reforms and militancy before a fight for revolutionary program and leadership could be seriously contemplated.

But limiting the fight to union democracy and militancy means supporting reformist leaders who inevitably prove a barrier to the struggle advancing further. For the many on the far left who share this sort of perspective, the revolutionary stage never comes. The stagists become defenders of the reformist leaders against more radical critics; sometimes they become the actual misleaders themselves. Indeed, a number of IS unionists have since become important figures in the secondary labor bureaucracy – if not as high up as the older generation of Shachtmanites. And the strategy of building “rank and file” groups on reformist programs has been tried repeatedly since, and every time it has ended with the same disastrous results: reformist bureaucrats have come to office, betrayed the workers’ struggles and destroyed the “rank and file” groups that put them there. This has been the story in the UAW, the Teamsters and the Transit Workers in New York City.

Looking back at this period in a 1995 document, Sy

described the process by which these new positions were fought for in the IS:

Very little of what we did was planned more than vaguely. We did not have full-blown positions on most of the questions at the outset of the fight. It was the struggle itself which clarified most of the positions. One thing led to another; the inner connections between different “questions” became apparent to us as the fight developed. We were forced to read and re-read the past history of the movement in a highly concentrated way and with an angle of vision we never had before. We learned new lessons from old texts we had grown up with.

Now that process would accelerate tremendously.

THE REVOLUTIONARY TENDENCY IN THE IS

The fight over critical support for the MFD in the miners' elections proved the trigger for factional struggle inside the IS. At the April 1973 National Committee meeting, a new majority bloc was formed by Geier and Moody. It removed Sy from his leadership post and affirmed uncritical support of Miller in the miners' union as IS policy.

In response, the Revolutionary Tendency (RT) was organized to continue the work of resurrecting Trotskyism that had been begun. While the RT never formally changed its name to a faction, it quickly began to act like one in the best sense of the word, advancing other important differences with the Geier-Moody leadership that amounted to a counterposed world view. We date the re-emergence of revolutionary Marxism in the U.S. (and, as far as we know, the world) to the creation of the RT.

In a heated factional whirlwind of three short months, the RT brought up a variety of issues, all revolving around the need to fight for the revolutionary program and revolutionary leadership in its arenas of activity – most notably the unions but also in the Black liberation struggle and the women's movement. Although it did not win a majority of the IS to its views in the brief time it was afforded, it won a level of support beyond what it expected. Through the debates inside the IS, the RT was able to sharpen and further develop some of its ideas.

In contrast, Geier, Moody & Co. were anxious to end the political debate. (Some in the RT also showed “revolutionary impatience” and were too eager to leave.) While a politically healthy leadership would have organized a convention to settle the political disputes by democratic discussion and majority vote, the leadership had other ideas. When in the course of the fight the RT labeled the IS leadership centrist, Geier and Moody took this as an excuse to hastily convene a National Committee meeting in July and expel the RT.

IV. The Revolutionary Socialist League

The expelled ISers of the RT immediately formed a new organization, the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), dedicated to the resurrection of Trotskyism and a revolutionary Fourth International. It had about a hundred members, and Sy's leading role was recognized by his election as the founding National Secretary. With tremendous enthusiasm, the RSLers set about the tasks of establishing a functioning communist organization. The pride and efficiency with which these tasks were carried out were a striking and welcome change.

But there were enormous problems that the faction fight had not solved. Programmatically, there were still strategic areas with wide gaps in understanding, most prominently in political economy: understanding the growing capitalist crisis as well as overcoming the IS's inadequate theory of the nature of the Stalinist

states. But the split had occurred too fast for new ideas to be adequately developed.

There were also objective hurdles. The RSL's forces were small and isolated from the working class in general and people of color in particular. Moreover, the long-term lull in the class struggle had begun. To be sure, there were still strong elements of rank-and-file upsurges, including sit-down strikes in Detroit auto plants by rebellious workers. But much of this activity was extinguished by the mid-1970's recession, which hit the workforce in the Midwest particularly hard. No one foresaw that it would begin a decades-long reformist-led retreat before waves of capitalist assaults.

On the international level, there were more inspiring class battles and successful anti-imperialist struggles during this period, as in Vietnam. There were also devastating setbacks, like the crushing of the Chilean workers by the Pinochet coup. No new revolutionary leadership, so far as we could tell, was surfacing. But while the RSL attempted to find such forces and build an international presence, the organization did not give international relations the attention demanded by the overarching need to re-create a revolutionary Fourth International.

Internally the RSL had inherited political weaknesses, reflected above all in its leading group, the Political Committee (PC). Of the original members, all but two would either quit, be expelled or be removed within a year and a half of the RSL's creation. Those two were the only ones capable of the needed leadership in the organization, Ron Taber and Sy.

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Taber was extremely talented, organized and determined. He could elaborate theory even if he was not particularly effective in creating it, and had an activist orientation that won the loyalty of much of the membership. On the other side, he was also extremely defensive and suspicious to the point of paranoia. And though many were unaware of it at the time, he had a penchant for maneuverism, preferring to resolve political problems through administrative means and to use personal ties for advancement in the organization.

Sy was the most politically and theoretically experienced, and he hated cliquish behavior and political intrigues. But not long after the RSL's founding, he made what he would later acknowledge to be the biggest political mistake of his life. He stated his intention to resign as National Secretary while remaining a member of the leading committee. Among other things, he was frustrated by the long time it took him to write articles and documents, and by other shortcomings. He had a mistaken confidence in other leaders of the RSL to assume the top responsibilities. This serious mistake led to his removal as National Secretary at the end of 1973 and would dog him politically for the rest of his time in the RSL.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND STALINISM

In the two and a half years that Sy (and other future founders of the LRP) spent in the RSL, the organization made some key achievements. It advanced the application of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution to the Black liberation struggle, as previously discussed. And it developed its understanding of the tasks of a revolutionary propaganda group in prioritizing the training of the most politically advanced workers, a necessary prerequisite before attempting to lead great masses of workers in struggle.

Major steps forward were made in political economy. For example, in the IS the dominant explanation of capitalism's post-war boom was the theory of the "permanent arms economy" that was first advanced by the Shachtmanite T.N. Vance and later by one of Tony Cliff's co-thinkers and a friend of Sy's, Mike Kidron. They argued that the boom had been created by the stimulus of massive arms spending following the war. This idea suggested that the capitalists had found a means to spend their way out of crisis and the ravages of the class struggle. The RSL countered that the post-war boom was the result of the international domination of U.S. imperialism, which took advantage of the greater exploitation made possible by the smashing defeats of the working class in the wave of counterrevolution before and after the war, and by the war itself. Not only did this explanation return the class struggle to the center of capitalism's dynamics, but it pointed to the system's future stagnation and crisis as well.

But this progress was not achieved easily. Much of it was accomplished in the course of bitter faction fights, which consumed a good portion of the organization's time and energy. In all of the fights, Sy was concerned not only to promote his own positions but also to use the disputes to further political understanding. As in the IS fight, he emphasized that Marxist theory is forged in political combat. Sy wanted to defeat internal opponents through political debate, resorting to organizational measures like expulsion only when absolutely necessary to maintain the unity of the organization against severe disloyalty.

On the nature of Stalinism, the IS had inherited Shachtman's "bureaucratic collectivism" formula, but most of the RSL by this time had rejected it as unserious. The "degenerated workers' state" theory had been Trotsky's last view, and this fact carried some weight because of the young RSL's identification with Trotskyism. But it had never been able to explain Stalinism's post-war conquests and so it too was rejected by most members.

Tony Cliff's theory of "bureaucratic state capitalism," which was held by the IS's British allies, conflicted formally with bureaucratic collectivism, but the two were fundamentally alike in denying that the law of value was inherent in the Stalinist system and therefore providing no underlying law of motion. So the RSL tentatively raised the position that the Stalinist societies were state capitalist and aimed to work out a genuinely Marxist theory as opposed to Cliff's.

The first fight, in early 1974, was against a faction that adhered to the "orthodox Trotskyist" definition of the Stalinist states as degenerated and deformed workers' states. Their central argument was that nationalized property automatically made a state proletarian, which they justified by misread quotations from Marx and Engels. Refuting this theory forced RSLers to examine more closely both Marxist theoretical works and the reality of Stalinist economies, which made clear that nationalized property did not preclude exploitation. Despite the lessons to be gained, the PC leadership attacked the group solely as a disloyal clique – which it was, having been organized secretly via personal loyalties rather than in open political debate – without seizing the opportunity to gain from political discussion. It resorted to piecemeal expulsions, beginning with the group's leadership, a method that would later be used with even greater venom against Sy and his cothinkers.

PROPAGANDA GROUP VS. STUDY GROUP

Shortly afterward there began a drawn-out dispute with a sizeable minority of the organization led by Political Committee members Bruce Landau and Shelley Kramer in Detroit. This grouping reacted to the lack of external successes by essentially proposing, under the rubric of building a propaganda organization, that the RSL become a study group, developing political ideas while walling itself off from outside struggles until a future time.

Members of this grouping in Los Angeles, most prominently Eric Olson, began to advocate new ideas concerning the class nature of Soviet society. The rest of the Landau group did not share their views but held back their differences in order to pursue their shared organizational aims. For the majority, it proved a challenge to focus debates on the political questions when the unprincipled factional bloc was interested in subordinating them.

Sy was the first and most vociferous opponent of their study group conception. He collaborated with Taber (with whom he now had terribly strained relations) and Jack Gregory to write a document that defined the RSL as a propaganda group primarily concerned with cohering an advanced cadre of workers. They noted that even at this stage in the development of a revolutionary organization, aspects of the mass work of the future must come into play. Agitation and action are important even in a lull because they open up the opportunities for propaganda.

The positions that Olson advocated on Soviet society contained both gains and weaknesses. His document explained well, for example, that for Marx "private property" did not mean just the property of individual capitalists but primarily referred to the capitalist class as a whole holding property "private" – out of the hands of the working class. But the weaknesses were more significant. Most importantly, it argued that the existence of state capitalism showed that competition between capitals was not an essential attribute of capitalism; thus it concluded that the Stalinist societies were a purer form of capitalism because they limited competition. This understanding not only ignored the very real economic competition that existed under Stalinism, but also the role that competition played in carrying out capitalism's inherent drive to expand.

In effect, Olson denied that decay was the essence of capitalism's imperialist epoch, and that Stalinism was an aspect of that decay. The majority responded that Stalinist Russia exhibited in pronounced form the dominant tendencies of capitalism in this epoch; it was not only capitalist in its underlying features (like the law of value), but because it brought monopoly to an extreme and preserved some working-class gains, it was a deformed variety of capitalism. Looking ahead, the LRP's extension of this understanding enabled us to foresee in the mid-1970's that Stalinism would have to overcome this deformity and devolve in the direction of traditional competitive capitalism.

Further, the majority's document made a major advance on the "date question": at what point was the workers' state decisively destroyed in the Soviet Union? Cliff, Shachtman and others said that the workers' state had ended when the Stalinists ousted their rival factions in the late 1920's. In contrast, the RSL majority pointed to the Great Purges in the late 1930's, which decisively smashed all sections of the Bolshevik leadership that stood for the gains of the 1917 revolution – those who opposed in however muted a form the regime's growing attacks on working conditions and economic equality, and the separation of the state from the proletariat. In the purges the last elements of proletarian consciousness were eliminated from the state apparatus. This interpretation of events not only offered a coherent explanation for the behavior of the Stalinist state and parties before and after the purges, but also was consistent with Sy's emphasis on the centrality of working-class consciousness for socialism.

The battle with the Landau minority lasted into early 1975. During that time, the majority put its perspectives into practice, increasing its involvement in working-class struggles, especially in the unions. The fight ended with the minority's abrupt resignation a month before the convention that was scheduled to settle the issues. It went on to maintain a brief independent existence, and then flipped from its study group perspective to join the SWP, which by then had become a right-centrist organization with few radical pretensions.

THE LABOR PARTY DISPUTE

Despite the political gains from the Landau fight and its increased interventions, the RSL's objective situation had not improved. Layoffs were mounting in industry, and the ruling class was gathering forces its sustained class offensive. There would still be some inspiring struggles by the working class as it groped for a defense despite its betraying leadership – notably the mass protest of New York city workers against cutbacks imposed during the fiscal crisis in the summer of 1975.

Under these circumstances the primary danger for working-class revolutionaries was not the abstentionism of the recent minority but a growing trend to search for shortcuts to party building. In fact, the organization had some successes, including a defense campaign for five young Black men accused of murder during a riot in Detroit. In New York, the RSL branch had actively participated in the tumultuous workers' protests and had found that its propaganda about the need for a general strike against the capitalist attacks had struck a responsive chord.

Yet the overall retreat in the class struggle led Taber to moderate some of the RSL's positions. Anticipating that Sy would oppose him on this, he built a secret faction, including the majority of the wider leadership body, the Central Committee, and sprung a new "CC Resolution" on the organization in late summer. Its most significant provision seemed innocent enough – a call for "continued emphasis on the Labor Party slogan." But it was in fact a step backward.

The labor party tactic had been abused for decades since



UMW Miners on strike. Reform union leadership under Arnold Miller was elected in 1972 but caved in to bosses in 1974 contract.

Trotsky urged it upon the SWP in 1938. Ever afterward, most would-be Trotskyist groups favored a labor party, by which they had in mind something like British Labour – a reformist mass party that embodied working-class organizational independence and claimed to stand for workers' interests within the framework of capitalism. Trotsky, however, had understood that the bureaucracy would organize a reformist labor party only if it feared mass struggles that were pushing the working class further to the left, toward revolutionary conclusions. While the bureaucrats would try to turn the party into a reformist defender of capitalism, revolutionaries would fight to expose any compromise of workers' demands and prove the need for a revolutionary party.

To counter the reformist party interpretation the RSL had initially called instead for a "revolutionary labor party." But this notion confused a revolutionary working-class party, which might not have a mass base at first, with a mass party led by the union officialdom. It did not allow for the development of a revolutionary wing through the experience of mass struggles that did not originate with a revolutionary program. Trotsky had posed the call for a labor party as a united front slogan with labor leaders pushed into action by their base. He reasoned that a labor party growing out of a mass class struggle would, at least at first, engage in a debate over program without automatically emerging under a pro-capitalist banner. Calling for a "revolutionary labor party" in effect demanded agreement on a revolutionary program in advance.

THE "GENERAL STRIKE" SLOGAN

But now the RSL was returning to the standard reformist version. Behind this retreat was not only a pessimistic perspective toward the class struggle but an opportunistic adaptation to those low expectations. At the same time the leadership debunked consistent use of the general strike slogan, when the New York City workers' struggle was still on – and right after the RSL branch had found great enthusiasm among workers for its "general strike" placards and headlines in the RSL's paper, *The Torch*.

Elevating the labor party demand and downplaying the general strike served factional purposes as well as a political retreat. Sy had proposed the downplaying the labor party demand and raising the general strike to a position of tactical prominence. He explained that while the League's strategic principles were socialist revolution and the revolutionary party, it was necessary tactically to "tack and veer" with slogans in order to convince people of the overall strategy; slogans would vary according to the

objective situation facing the working class.

Sy noted that when Trotsky had proposed the labor party tactic the working class was strong and strategically organized. But in 1975, unlike the 1930's, it was divided and misled by a bureaucracy that increasingly counterposed electoralism to mass action; emphasizing the labor party slogan would play into the electoralist strategy. Further, since the bureaucrats were in fact doing a fine job of detouring or snuffing out struggles, Sy argued, echoing Trotsky, that advocating a united front with them then would be disastrous. In place of the leading labor party slogan, Sy proposed to maintain the general strike in propaganda to the more politically advanced workers, to show how the working class could defend itself against the mounting attacks and prove to itself its own strength. Propaganda for the general strike would also serve to raise the need for revolution and the revolutionary party.

While this was being debated, a related dispute had broken out in the New York branch. The RSL was involved in a caucus of public employees, but the local leadership proposed building the caucus on a politically murky basis. They called for neither a united front over practical actions nor a caucus around the RSL based on a revolutionary program – but instead advocated its transformation into a “front group” based on a program that did not go beyond trade union militancy. The Taberites were beginning to promote the reformist stagism that the RSL was born in struggle against.

A portion of the New York branch, led by Bob Wolfe, protested the proposed maneuver and was drawn in Sy's direction. Bob proposed a real united front to bring pressure on the labor bureaucrats for a genuine fightback in the festering public



RSL paper called for general strike in 1975 New York City fiscal crisis. But conservatizing RSL leaders turned against general strike slogan despite workers' enthusiastic response.

workers' situation – by means of mass actions in preparation for a general strike. This was a call for joint action by several left groups and union caucuses, not a fake political agreement that hid important differences. The majority rejected this proposal for factional reasons, but all it could think of to counterpose was research into the unions and their contracts. Thus they painted themselves into the study-group corner they had fought against earlier in the year.

It is worth noting that all the political disputes of this last faction fight revolved around the united front. Sy and his comrades argued that united fronts were practical blocs that allowed revolutionaries to put forward their independent revolutionary program. The point was to show how the working class could unite to take forward its immediate struggles, while putting the revolutionary solution to the test of experience in opposition to the reformist programs. The majority was proposing a necessary reformist stage – even if it meant that they had to act in place of reformist leaders (as with the union front-group proposal) or call for reformist leaders (as with the labor party slogan).

THE FINAL FACTION FIGHT

Sharp as these conflicts were, Sy and his supporters held that the RSL's degeneration to the right could be stopped and the Taberite leadership itself reformed. But the leadership's reaction called these assessments into question. By the time the fight had broke into the open in the fall, Taber had succeeded in cementing his control of the staff, local leadership and Central Committee. He was particularly effective in raising the false argument that any attack on the political adaptations of the organization meant criticizing the organization's recent successes. Such demagogic attacks on political debate are typical of bureaucrats looking to turn their groups into unthinking followers rather than organizations of independent-thinking leaders.

The Central Committee meeting in October that took up the Resolution became a forum for vicious slanders, diatribes and threats against Sy and his sole CC supporter, Walter Daum. During a trip Sy made to the Midwest branches shortly thereafter, the venom was even greater. In a branch meeting in Detroit, a recent ex-Stalinist recruit who had evidently not left behind all his baggage spoke of executing Sy – to the laughter and applause of most of the branch.

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One lesson stood out. The majority leadership had brought out the worst in its followers by setting a standard of using lies and personal attacks as a substitute for political debate. In contrast, the cohering opposition group that Sy led seized the opportunity to develop its own cadre: practically every one of its dozen or so adherents submitted documents on the struggle as they saw it.

The final stage arrived when Sy and Walter wrote a long document on the labor party question. (See "The Labor Party in the United States" in *Socialist Voice* No. 6 or on our website.) It called for withdrawing the labor party slogan in the present conjuncture and use instead the general strike slogan to concretize the need for a united class fightback. It also revealed the conservatism behind the militant posture of "fighting for a labor party":

The League majority chose the labor party slogan because they themselves have fallen victim to electoralist illusions – for this stage, they think. Trotsky posed the labor party as a way of breaking illusions in anything but a revolutionary solution. He did not consider it as part of a stage in which a head-on confrontation between workers and the state was to be avoided because he thought the workers would lose. On the contrary, he pointed to the fact that the formation of a labor party would accelerate a confrontation, "immediately, immediately." The majority comrades chose the labor party as their slogan because they accept the weakness of the class and wish to avoid a confrontation. Above all, they want to avoid posing the revolutionary solution except in the second stage.

The Taber leadership lampooned and distorted the positions of Sy and his supporters (now organized as the Revolutionary Party Tendency), while piling on personal attacks and slanders. Sy was expelled from the organization in November on truly wild charges of disloyalty and disruption, capped by the assertion in *The Torch* that he remained a Shachtmanite – while in the same breath acknowledging that "Landy undoubtedly made theoretical and programmatic contributions to the League." Walter was expelled a few weeks later on equally absurd charges.

After beheading the RPT leadership and only days after receiving the labor party document, the RSL banned further discussion and refused to circulate this and other documents by the remaining tendency members. The Taberites assume that the RPT would quickly quit, but the comrades stayed on to keep up the fight and to demonstrate loyalty to the revolutionary program and organization. However, their refusal to go along with the gag rule became grounds for the expulsion of the whole tendency, which

took place in February, 1976.

This entire episode was stress-ridden and heart-breaking, for Sy especially. The revolutionary organization that had held such promise in 1973 had turned against the spirit and dedication that had empowered it to survive in a period of downturn and isolation. Throughout the faction fight, Sy kept his political composure. He put forward his political arguments with precision and consistency. The minutes of the debates and the RPT's *Documents of Struggle* show a consistent devotion to political issues in the face of provocation upon provocation.

The expulsion of the RPT accelerated the RSL's degeneration. It maintained for a few years a formal adherence to Trotskyism while progressively gutting its content. The organization formally dissolved in 1989, a signal for much of its dwindling numbers to disengage from active politics. Taber and some others ended up designating themselves as anarchists, and most of them too have disappeared from radical politics. It is bitterly ironic that people who in their final political incarnation denounced first Leninism and then Marxism as inevitable precursors of Stalinism are the same ones who adopted thuggish and bureaucratic methods of their own to drag through the mud the revolutionary principles they once stood for. Somehow in their lengthy reconsiderations of the history and practice of Marxism they forgot to account for, or even mention, their own destructive role.

Our fight in the RSL was not a glorious moment but a desperate rearguard action to preserve revolutionary cadre and traditions. To that end the expelled comrades formed the League for the Revolutionary Party in February 1976. The nastiness of the final RSL fight did not corrupt or cynicize its survivors. The LRP has had political disputes over the years but has learned well the lesson that these have to be carried out openly and honestly, aiming for the utmost clarification.

It is a great credit to Sy's leadership that he built an organization that has remained fully committed to its founding principles and spirit. The LRP bases itself on the advancing class consciousness of our fellow workers. Therefore we have always understood that our growth would be tied to the resurgence of class struggle and the desire of more workers to look for genuine communist politics as a result of their own experience.

The history of the LRP under Sy's leadership will be taken up in a subsequent article. We are extremely proud of Sy and our theoretical and practical accomplishments. The full importance of writing this history will become even clearer as all the "old" questions become "new" again. ● March 1, 2008

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Cuba

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democratic gains, in that they won a certain breathing space with respect to imperialism.

Cuba, however, was unlike China, Vietnam and Yugoslavia in two important respects. The first difference is that the middle-class leadership of the Cuban revolution was not yet Stalinist at the time of the revolution, though certain figures (Raúl Castro, Che Guevara) had a definite sympathy for Stalinism. The second, and more important for the purposes of this letter, is that the Cuban working class played a significant though subordinate role in bringing about the revolution.

The Stalinization of the Cuban middle-class leadership was essential for bringing the Cuban working class under control. This was a historical process that is very interesting and instructive. The role of workers in the revolution meant that the middle-class leadership had to make extensive concessions to the working class to avoid the threat of workers' revolution. These gains have been significantly eroded over the course of nearly half a century of Stalinist rule, and they are coming under accelerated threat; they must be defended. As Trotsky explained, a class which cannot defend its past gains will not be able to conquer new ones. To understand the real gains pertaining to the Cuban working class, it is necessary to put aside the clichés that are routinely trotted out to defend the idea of the "deformed workers' state."

NO PLANNED ECONOMY

For example, the "planned economy." Contrary to Castro's apologists, that Cuba has never had an overall economic plan but rather a series of micro-plans governing various industries and enterprises and thrown together in an ad hoc fashion. A monopoly of foreign trade, which is a necessary condition for a



Castro and Khrushchev embrace. Cuban workers now pay for repayments of debt from Soviet economic aid.

planned economy, has never existed in Cuba. Various state-owned enterprises in "non-strategic" industries are able to secure their own arrangements for foreign trade, alongside central government treaties covering major commodities like sugar or oil. And since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba has seen the expansion of the tourist industry, the establishment of joint ventures with various imperialist and other foreign-owned corporations (Canadian and Spanish, primarily, but also Latin American enterprises from Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, etc.), and the growing role of remittances in the Cuban economy. Whatever centralized control once existed over the extensive trade that is essential to Cuba's survival is now greatly attenuated. It never made sense to speak of a "planned economy" in Cuba, but it makes even less sense now.

Consider "full employment." It is true that official unemployment figures in Cuba are very low, and that, on paper, every Cuban has a right to a job. In practice, however, much unemployment in Cuba is masked. The labor force participation rate in Cuba – that is, the percentage of the adult population counted as either being employed in wage labor or seeking it – has stagnated for most of the fifty years since the revolution, and is well under 50 percent. Where once Cuba had one of the highest rates in Latin America, now it has one of the lowest. This is especially notable for women workers. Before the revolution and for the first couple of decades thereafter, Cuba had the highest percentage of women active in the economy of any Latin American nation, rivaled only by Argentina. In recent years, this crucial index of women's social status has declined in Cuba, while it has risen elsewhere in Latin America.

Furthermore, the very low level of wages in Cuba allows the government to mask unemployment through underemployment. The basic wage of 250 regular pesos per month has very little purchasing power. For a labor force of less than 5 million, this totals 15 billion a year in regular pesos. That is 600 million in convertible peso terms, or about US\$556 million at the official exchange rate. Compared to Cuba's nominal GDP of US\$39 billion, this means that workers' basic wages account for less than 2 percent of the economy. Many workers receive more than the basic wage, though not much more, and some receive additional payment in convertible pesos.

But for workers in less productive industries and enterprises, it costs the state very little to keep them nominally employed at the subsistence level represented by the basic wage, in order to prevent the greater costs of social instability associated with mass unemployment. The old bitter joke of Polish workers under Stalinism – "They pretend to pay us, we pretend to work" – still applies for many Cuban workers, while a privileged minority get both real pay and real work. The small portion of the Cuban economy comprised by workers' wages indicates a startlingly high rate of exploitation.

Extensive state property is a gain for the Cuban working class, though it was not won by the working class directly. Were the working class to take state power in Cuba, the fact of state ownership of major enterprises would make the establishment of a real planned economy easier, though it would still be necessary to establish adequate statistical controls and a monopoly of foreign trade, and conduct a thorough reevaluation of productive priorities in light of the masses' urgent material necessities. This is why we recognize state property as a "proletarian property form" – though we also recognize that this form, in order to result in a transformation of property relations away from capitalism, must be filled by the content of proletarian state power.

Furthermore, the statification of Cuban industry was a blow to imperialism, since before the revolution most Cuban industry

was either owned by or in debt to imperialist finance capital. As the Castro government has sought over time to repair its relations with imperialist powers other than the U.S., various agreements have been reached for the compensation of the non-U.S. capitalists for their losses in the revolution, which has been paid for by Cuban workers through their exploitation by the state. Yet the much greater losses of U.S. capital have not yet been compensated, and this represents a sore point for U.S. imperialism and a victory for the Cuban working class and the Cuban people as a whole.

Any attempt by this or any future Cuban government to negotiate a compensation deal with U.S. imperialism, or to privatize state property, must be fought wholeheartedly. Likewise, the extensive debts which the Cuban government has accumulated to imperialist banks and governments – both debts to Western Europe and the large debt to the Soviet Union on which the current Russian state has begun to collect – represent a persistent burden on the working class. They should be repudiated, as should the massive debts that bleed the life out of Latin America and the rest of the “third world.”

Other important gains are matters of basic consumption or social services which are provided not to workers as a class, but to the population as a whole, primarily benefiting the working class. Some of these, such as the right to affordable housing, are made a travesty by conditions of scarcity – by the Cuban government’s own statistics, there is a shortage of 500,000 housing units, no trivial amount in a nation of 12 million people.

Yet other benefits, such as the national health care system, are justifiably famous. Even in this case, however, there are vicious inequalities. The best doctors and technology are reserved for the tourist hospitals, open only to members of the top bureaucracy and to foreigners bearing large sums of hard currency. And within the national health care system open to the public at large, there is the problem of scarce medicines available only in the special convertible peso stores.

The main class contradiction in Cuba today is between the working class, and the top echelon of the bureaucracy, which acts as a “regent class,” a transitional class standing in to rule on behalf of the absent bourgeoisie. Increasingly it is a partner with the international bourgeoisie, through the joint venture industries, and it shows signs of spawning a new Cuban bourgeoisie, similar to what has already happened in different ways in Eastern Europe, Russia and China.

There is an additional division that is politically very important – that between those with access to significant sums of the convertible peso and those without. Such access can come through a job in the tourist industry, a professional position in a high salary echelon or through remittances from relatives abroad. In most cases, membership in the Communist Party is helpful to getting a job in the tourist industry or access to the level of education necessary to secure a middle-class professional position. Thus, Party membership serves as a means toward upward social mobility, and the division between the regular peso economy and the convertible peso economy has helped to solidify a middle class and a labor aristocracy with a material stake in the regime’s stability. Further, there is substantial evidence that access to the tourist industry jobs has been confined to Cubans of mostly European descent, thus deepening the longstanding color line in Cuban society.

REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM

From these facts we can sketch a rough outline of some of the key demands that revolutionary workers in Cuba would raise:

First, there are the democratic demands. The monopoly of

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– Al Richardson, *Revolutionary History*

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the Communist Party over political power, and especially over control of the trade unions, must be ended. This is not for the sake of building up bourgeois liberalism, but so that the working class may be free to organize in defense of its own class interests – most importantly, so that politically advanced workers can have better opportunities to cohere their own vanguard revolutionary party. The right of free speech and freedom of assembly, without the vigilance of the political police, must be conquered.

Second, there are the defensive demands: No to privatization. No to compensation. No to the imperialist embargo, or any form of imperialist intervention. Third, there are the immediate economic demands. The distinction between the regular peso and the convertible peso has clearly served as a mechanism for deepening the masses’ exploitation and the accumulation of capital by the state. It must be ended.

Yet the economic difficulties faced by Cuba could never be solved within the boundaries of Cuba alone. Take, for example, the imperialist debt. In the mid-1980s, when Cuba was cut off from Western financing for defaulting on its debts, Fidel Castro made some demagogic noises about the need for a debt moratorium. Within a few years, as Cuba reached agreements to get back in the good graces of European capital, such talk was quietly dropped. Yet debt repudiation would be an urgent task of any workers’ states in Latin America, Africa or Asia, allowing those states the opportunity to reorganize their economies to produce for the masses’ urgent needs, not debt service.

If a few Latin American nations were to repudiate their debts and develop an international economic plan, it would dramatically improve the masses’ standard of living and deal a tremendous blow to imperialism. This will not happen under any of the existing regimes, including those of “socialist” Cuba and Venezuela. That is why our program is proletarian socialist revolution. Moreover, such action could accelerate the rebirth of class consciousness in imperialist nations like the U.S. and thereby advance the final victory of socialism internationally. ●

Election

continued from page 1

to working-class concerns. This is a dangerous game for them. The longer it goes on, the more expectations will be raised that a Democratic president will create jobs, raise wages and improve healthcare and education. And the election of a Black president would further raise expectations for greater justice and equality.

But the stagnating economy means that the next president will inevitably dash such hopes. The capitalists will demand efforts to make the working class pay for the crisis, and the president will endeavor to oblige. We can already imagine the politicians' appeals for common sacrifice for the national good.

However, the popular shift against war abroad and free market attacks at home will not be easily undone. Decades of unchallenged right-wing ascendancy in this country are ending – no thanks to the Democrats. When the politicians' promises of change prove to have

more of the naked imperialism that defined the Bush years will trigger greater struggles of the oppressed abroad, threatening their investments from the Middle East to South America. They hope the next administration will extract the U.S. from its disastrous war in Iraq without surrendering its domination of the region. They want to see America's image restored by a president who will cover the iron fist of its military power in the velvet glove of a little more diplomacy.

Similarly at home, the rulers worry that the chasm between them and the increasingly desperate working class will spark a return to the protests, strikes and riots that have rocked this country in previous times of war and economic crisis. They hope that a presidency with a "kinder, gentler" image will avoid provoking upheavals – and continue the erosion of working-class incomes and living conditions that feeds their profits. And if workers and youth are convinced that rich and poor alike are part of a movement for "change," all the better.

Of course, the workers, poor and oppressed have a very different idea of what "change" means. The working class long ago turned against the bloody war in Iraq and wants the government to focus on raising living standards and expanding justice at home. It must be recognized that most American workers turned against the war when it became clear America was losing – not because it has led to the deaths of a million Iraqis. But many do feel for the plight of the Iraqi masses, and that sympathy would be most likely to turn into active solidarity in the context of a rising struggle against the capitalist attacks at home.

But as has happened so often in the past, every upshoot of struggle for these aims has been killed off by the Democratic Party and its allies – the union and community leaderships and the pro-capitalist left. The massive protests against the initial invasion of Iraq were hijacked by leaders who said the only solution was supporting the Democratic Party – only to see the Democrats eventually take over Congress and continue to fund the war.

Likewise, the huge and militant demonstrations by millions of immigrants against threats to criminalize and deport them were similarly directed into support for the Democrats under the slogan "today we march, tomorrow we vote." And every attempt by union workers to strike back against the bosses' attacks, from the 2005 transit strike in New York City to the auto workers' strikes last year, was prevented or shut down within days by union bureaucrats who promote electing Democrats as an alternative to struggle.

The working class's failure to break free of their pro-capitalist leaders and onto the road of struggle has allowed the Democratic candidates to get away with offering few concrete promises. Instead, they assume that little more than relief from the threat of another Republican White House will be enough to get a Democrat elected. But while they differ in rhetoric and do have some policy differences, all the major candidates – both the Republicans' McCain and the Democrats' Clinton and Obama – are in agreement on the major issues raised in the campaign:

- On Iraq, all favor keeping U.S. forces in the country until there is a stable government loyal to Washington, a "benchmark" that has little possibility of being achieved;
- On jobs and wages, all defend free trade "globalization";
- On immigration, far from favoring citizenship rights for the



Massive immigrant protests in 2006 were derailed into Democratic Party electoralism.

been so many lies, the stage will be set for an explosion of struggle from below. Through protests, rebellions and, most importantly, mass strikes that shut the economy down, the working class can beat back the capitalist attacks. In the course of those struggles, more and more workers will sense their class's great power and be open to views that only few embrace today: the answer to this imperialist world of exploitation, oppression and war is working-class revolutions that overthrow the capitalists and their profit-driven system and build a socialist world of freedom and abundance.

THE DEMOCRATS: PARTY OF DEMOBILIZATION

Elections are always difficult for capitalist politicians. They must appeal to the working class for its votes while reassuring the ruling class that its interests will be protected. The more the candidates can find a theme that can unite the working class behind capitalist interests, the better. In these elections, the vague promise of "change" has fit the bill perfectly, since the ruling class itself is for the most part desperate for a change in government.

The big capitalists and their agents openly express fear that

undocumented, all favor phony “paths to citizenship” to cover their real policy of keeping millions of undocumented immigrants as a pool of vulnerable superexploited labor – and all support building the draconian, racist wall on the Mexican border;

- On health care, none advocate the right of quality health care for all, and all defend the profiteering role of the private insurance companies.

At the beginning of her campaign, Hillary Clinton took for granted that Wall Street and the corporations would back her as the candidate who could deliver the sort of change they want. She still enjoys a lot of their support. But she quickly saw some influential members of the political establishment and capitalist class rally to Obama. With no fundamental policy differences between him and Clinton, they figure Obama’s magnetic image makes him much more capable of achieving their aims.

OBAMA AND THE RULING CLASS

Much is made of Obama’s support among Black voters as well as the tens of thousands of whites who have turned out to his rallies across the country. Black support shifted to Obama only after his victory in the almost all-white Iowa caucuses proved he could offer the possibility of electoral success. Then, after the Clintons’ race-baiting attacks, Black voters overwhelmingly rallied to Obama in defense.

But what boosted him early on in his campaign was his success in winning significant support from Wall Street and other rich donors and his appeal to the well-off middle class. While Clinton has still received slightly more donations from big business, 80 percent of Obama’s campaign contributions have come from business interests. Furthermore, he has won majority support in every part of the country among every privileged demographic of Democratic primary voters surveyed. So let us look at the positions that make him a trustworthy recipient of ruling-class funds.

The key to Obama’s success is that he offers the ruling class precisely the change they require. He spelled it out to the editorial board of Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* newspaper:

Given the amount of repair work that has to be done internationally in the wake of the Bush-Cheney administration, I don’t think there is anybody else who would signal a clear break from Bush and would receive a more open attitude from the world than me.

If I go to a poor country, I do so with the credibility of someone with a grandmother who lives in a small village without running water. If I go to a Muslim country, I do so as someone who has lived in a Muslim country for four years as a child and with relatives there ... credibility overseas directly translates into the ability to mobilize the world around real threats.” (*The Plain Dealer*, February 10.)

The most important place Obama hopes to use a new, more diplomatic approach is in Iraq. There, the only hope the U.S. has of significantly scaling down its occupation is by winning the cooperation of other imperialist powers to supplement its forces. In the meantime he has made it clear that he will continue to maintain a massive U.S. force in Iraq and neighboring states.

Further, having removed Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-based dictatorship in Iraq, the U.S. is now anxious to weaken Shi’ite Iran’s newfound strength in the region. Obama has joined the crowd hyping Iran’s supposed nuclear threat; he pointedly refused to rule out military action there while saying he supports



Destruction in Katrina flood waters. Obama denies the virulent racism in U.S. that left thousands of Black people for dead.

a diplomatic solution. And during Israel’s murderous starvation siege of Gaza, Obama blamed the Palestinian victims and pledged his support to Israel as the key to America’s policy in the region. In sum, he is no radical or “progressive” but a run-of-the-mill liberal imperialist.

“WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW”

In the U.S., vicious racist oppression has been crucial for capitalism. From the days of slavery in the South through the incorporation of Black workers in the heavy industries of the North in the 20th century, the mass struggles most threatening to the capitalists have been disproportionately led by Black workers. So who better to unite the country across class lines at a time of economic crisis and growing class divide than a Black president?

With the economy already mired in recession and threatening a more catastrophic fall, the next president will need to preside over significant attacks on working-class wages, benefits and social services. Toward this end, Obama has included in his recent campaign speeches the warning that he would be a president “who won’t just tell you what you want to hear, but what you need to know.” With the honesty characteristic of all bourgeois politicians, he is not now revealing “what we need to know.” He plans on saving the bad news until after he gets elected.

Influential figures in the ruling class are becoming convinced of Obama’s usefulness. One recent endorser was Paul Volcker, the Federal Reserve chairman under Presidents Carter and Reagan, who began in the 1970’s the massive attacks on working-class living standards that continue today. He explained:

After 30 years in government, serving under five Presidents of both parties ... I have been reluctant to engage in political campaigns. The time has come to overcome that reluctance ... The breadth and depth of challenges that face our nation at home and abroad ... demand a new leadership and a fresh approach. ...

It is only Barack Obama, in his person, in his ideas, in his ability to understand and to articulate both our needs and our hopes that provide the potential for strong and fresh leadership ... [to] restore needed confidence in our vision, our strength, and our purposes right around the world.

Of course, what Volcker so politely describes as “our purposes around the world” means the ruling class’s continued

Obama and Racist America

Few Black Americans have any illusions that Barack Obama's meteoric rise means the days of racism are over. But what does it say about the state of racism in this country? Sure, Obama doesn't talk much about racism, but his election can't be bad for Black people – can it?

History teaches that it is a lie and a deadly illusion to think that racism is not a basic fact of life in capitalist America. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, a wave of patriotic fervor swept the country, and even many Black people imagined that the country might have finally united across racial lines. But four years later, those illusions were replaced by horror as the world watched the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Thousands of working-class Black people were left for dead – by both Bush and the Democratic governor and mayor. Katrina dramatically revealed the conditions of de facto segregation and poverty that consign Blacks, Latinos and immigrants to misery and slow deaths in every city in this country.

In the one-sided class war the capitalists have been waging against the working class for decades, people of color have been hit hardest. The sub-prime mortgage crisis is only the latest example: the last hired and first fired, people of color are disproportionately hit by the current wave of home repossessions. One study calculated that it amounts to the single largest transfer of wealth from people of color to whites since slavery! As economic crisis deepens, this trend will only get worse.

And Obama? In response to the devastation of New Orleans after Katrina, perhaps the greatest act of racist mass murder ever to take place in this country, he declared: **“I do not subscribe to the notion that the painfully slow response of FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security was racially based. The ineptitude was color-blind.”** If Obama can deny the obvious racism of Katrina's aftermath, what possible defense could he offer Black people against the less obvious but equally murderous racist workings of capitalism?

COULD A BLACK PRESIDENT BE BAD FOR BLACKS?

It will no doubt be accepted as obvious by most people that the election of Barack Obama as this country's first Black president would mark an historic victory against racism. In one sense, it would. Choosing a Black man to lead a country that once

legally declared Black people less than human, property to be bought and sold, would be an extraordinary shift.

At the same time, Obama's willingness to cover up the system's racist crimes means his presidency would be seriously threatening to the Black masses. Obama has already signaled his support for harsh measures. For example, in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, he went out of his way to declare that **“conservatives – and Bill Clinton – were right about welfare.”** Obama knows full well that Republican denunciations of welfare were part of the “Southern Strategy” of rallying racist support for cutting government aid to the poor. He also knows that Clinton borrowed that strategy, promising to “end welfare as we know it.” In office, Clinton kept his promise, cutting off 60 percent of welfare recipients; his attack hit the poorest sections of the working class and was particularly devastating to people of color.

The pretense of color-blindness in this racist society can only mean a capitulation to racism. Indeed, as his campaign has progressed, Obama has increasingly sounded like he is running to become this country's first blind president. In his victory speech after the South Carolina primary, he said about his time campaigning in the state: **“I didn't see a Black South Carolina or a white South Carolina. I just saw South Carolina.”** He has denied that racism is still a factor in public policy issues, and rejects “the assumption that the wealthy care nothing for the poor.” And he is supposed to stand for “change we can believe in”!

More and more, Obama's political approach sounds like his description of how he used to calm his white mother's fears that he was becoming a delinquent. In his first book, *Dreams of My Father*, he tells how she burst into his room one day demanding answers. He flashed her “a reassuring smile and patted her hand and told her not to worry.” This, he says, was “usually an effective tactic,” because people **“were satisfied as long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied; they were relieved – such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young Black man who didn't seem angry all the time.”**

It is tragic that some Black people feel they have to act meek to avoid the punishments of racism. It is even worse to feel the need to perform that way for one's own mother. But while the racism of individual whites can sometimes be avoided, that of the

whole society cannot. The Bible is wrong: the meek will not inherit the earth; the meek get crushed. Only standing up to racism in bold mass struggle can win progress for people of color. When they have stood up and fought, Blacks have also shown white workers and poor how to fight against the capitalist rulers. They will surely do so again.

OBAMA'S SERVICES TO THE ESTABLISHMENT

Every Black person can relate to the need to placate white people with power to get by in this society. But to translate that approach into a political program threatens to further unravel the gains won by the rebellions and struggles of the 1960's. These gains were not just material concessions and reforms from the ruling class, but gains in Black people's pride and sense of power too.

Obama is smarter and more capable than almost any mainstream white politician. But his rise to prominence has been based on his ability to serve the interests of powerful white capitalist politicians and corporate interests against those of the Black working class and poor. In his first run for Congress, Obama attempted to unseat Bobby Rush, the former Black Panther and now mildly reformist Democrat. Rush had tried to unseat Chicago's white Mayor Daley in 1999 and been soundly beaten. Obama sought to ingratiate himself with the Daley machine by running to unseat Rush the next year. His campaign, in a district with the highest percentage of Black people in the country, labeled itself as a move “from protest to progress.” These were clearly code words that meant abandoning concern for the Black working class and poor in favor of a focus on individual advancement, particularly for upwardly mobile Blacks. Obama was soundly defeated then, but his campaign won him the respect of the Democratic establishment.

After Obama was elected to the Senate in his next campaign, the Democratic leadership saw an opportunity to advance their own move “from protest to progress.” In 2004, eager to have a Democratic National Convention free of speeches by Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton or any association with the idea of mass struggle, they invited Obama to give the oration that catapulted him to national attention. Thus Obama has already served as a willing tool of white capitalist politicians against popular Black interests. That is what he threatens to do with the power of the presidency.

imperialist domination of the globe and stepped-up exploitation at home.

Obama has plenty of other ruthless ruling-class tutors as well. His foreign policy advisers include former Clinton National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, as well as Carter's foreign policy architect, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who noted that Obama would be "clearly more effective" than Clinton. Brzezinski has been vehemently denouncing the Bush administration for wrecking the U.S.'s power and prestige abroad – he notoriously champions the U.S.'s prerogative of manipulating the rivalries of other capitalist powers to keep the U.S. on top, and using local dictators to do the dirty work of keeping the masses down. Given these aims, it is no wonder that many ruling class figures see Obama's multinational and multi-hued image as a distinctly advantageous cloak.

PROSPECTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENCY

The tremendous unpopularity of the Bush White House means that the Democratic candidate has the best chance to win the presidency. We have already noted that the tight race between Clinton and Obama is forcing both to appeal more directly to working-class concerns about jobs, wages, and trade than either would prefer. They will try to lower expectations for change at the first opportunity. But the clash between their promises and the real policies of a Democratic presidency will inevitably provoke protest.

1. Reviving U.S. Imperialism Abroad

Abroad, the Democrats' pretensions of wanting to "bring the troops home" from Iraq will be quickly exposed. Both Clinton and Obama have made clear that they won't sacrifice "American interests" in the region. With no apparent way to stabilize the Washington-loyal government without a massive on-going commitment of U.S. troops, the bloody occupation will continue. Moreover in Afghanistan, where the once-defeated Taliban are now resurgent, Clinton and Obama have signaled their intention to send thousands more troops. Thus both candidates are calling for the expansion of the U.S. military and for an increase in the military budget.

Because the U.S. ruling class's ability to use its military might around the world has been so compromised by the disastrous occupation of Iraq, a Democratic president will be anxious to take advantage of a more liberal image to reassert that power elsewhere. Clinton and Obama both talk of freeing the U.S. military to credibly threaten other countries, under the guise of the "war on terror." At the top of their target lists is Iran, which they hype as threatening to develop a nuclear weapon. But the real reason U.S. imperialism wants to strike at Iran is that toppling Saddam Hussein had the unintended effect of greatly increasing Iran's power in the region. Clinton has gone furthest in backing Bush's threats against Iran. But Obama couples willingness to diplomatically pressure Iran with his own threats of military strikes.

The U.S.'s bi-partisan "war on terror" has really been a war drive to assert U.S. power over its unofficial empire of economic exploitation. Opponents of imperialism will want to protest such attacks, and revolutionaries will have to fight tooth and nail against Democratic Party and liberal efforts to squelch any response. Working-class action against imperialist aggression would be the most powerful way to deal blows to such

adventures. But as long as the working class in the U.S. continues to be prevented from defending its own immediate interests, there will be little prospect of such international solidarity.

2. Waging the Class War at Home

The Democrats' promises of "change" to reverse falling living standards will also prove to be lies. As corporate profits falter, the next president will have no choice but to call on the working class and poor to tighten their belts and sacrifice in the national interest. There will be cutbacks in social services and possibly even renewed attempts to privatize Social Security – along with policies that help the capitalists cut jobs and lower wages and benefits. And as always, with rising economic attacks the ruling class will drive rising racist attacks as well. Further, legislating phony "pathways to citizenship" for undocumented immigrants, coupled with slave-labor "guest worker" programs, will aim to drive them into an even more vulnerable position.

With the Republicans so widely hated, most of the ruling class recognizes that a Democratic president will be best placed to advance their class war. Democratic politicians, labor bureaucrats and pro-capitalist "community" leaders are always concerned that mass struggles would threaten the interests of the capitalist system on which they rely for their privileged positions. They will be more reluctant than ever to lead struggles for fear of undermining a president of their own party.

For the working class to advance a struggle for its interests will mean a fight against the resistance of their Democratic and liberal leaders every step of the way. Pressure from below can force such leaders to go along with struggles, but the danger of betrayal will always be present. Key to mobilizing pressure for struggle and resisting betrayal at the top is building a political leadership of the working class that isn't chained to what the capitalists can afford. That means a leadership committed to their overthrow: a revolutionary communist leadership.

POPULISM VERSUS WORKING-CLASS STRUGGLE

The growing class divide in this country, plus the inevitable exposure of the Democratic Party's false promises, will be an explosive combination. There will be a great potential for mass struggles against the capitalist attacks, through which the working



Despite talk of change, Obama stands for imperialist war abroad and class war against workers at home.



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class can become aware of its power and independent interests.

We have said that the Democratic candidates are already turning to populism. Populism seeks to convince workers to unite behind bourgeois politicians instead of undertaking class-based struggles against the capitalists. For the moment, Clinton and Obama (like John Edwards before them) are flirting with populist attacks on companies that export jobs overseas, insurers who rip consumers off and oil industry profits. Bourgeois editorialists who complain that this rhetoric is inconsistent with the business-friendly Bill Clinton administration overlook that its primary purpose for now is to win elections.

When class militancy heats up, a more sinister populism will aim to derail workers' struggles by combining rhetorical sympathy for the troubles of white workers with appeals to racism and nationalism. Mike Huckabee, the last competitive Republican presidential candidate aside from John McCain, shows the signs of things to come. In a TV commercial featuring images of factory workers and demoralized home owners, Huckabee seemed sympathetic:

We're losing manufacturing jobs, homeowners face a credit crisis, high fuel costs are spiraling, and families are hurting. ... I believe most Americans want their next president to remind them of the guy they work with, not the guy who laid them off.

Such appeals to workers are essential if the ruling class is to rally part of the working class to its side – against the rest of the working class. For that, racism is essential, and thus Huckabee also promises to deport 12 million undocumented immigrants as well as introduce a federal consumption tax on the grounds that currently “illegals, pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers” – all racist code words for people of color – don't pay taxes.

WORLD CAPITALIST CRISIS

Beyond all the politicians' talk of hope and change, the dominant feeling among the American working class today is fear. Many see their fate tied to American capitalism, and its prospects are clearly not good. The current mortgage and credit crisis is only

the latest turn in a downward spiral. Now the very homes and cars of workers and middle-class people, the very symbols of the “American Dream,” are being repossessed by banks that themselves are in danger of collapse.

This is not just another cyclical downturn in the “business cycle” – a relatively mild slump before things get better. Overall, capitalist profit rates internationally have not recovered since the post-World War II boom ended in the mid-1970's. Since then, only the intensified exploitation of workers at home and abroad has sustained the system. To recover full profitability, the system needs another Great Depression to wipe out the weaker capitalists and force the working class onto its knees.

Capitalism's long-term stagnation is driven by contradictions inherent to the system. The great productive power of the world economy has outgrown the bounds of private profit and the limitations of the nation state. It took the long nightmare of depression, counterrevolution, fascism and World War to revive capitalism in the 1930's and '40's.

Today corporations and the nation states that enforce their interests are driven into even more cutthroat competition. As we have explained in these pages, for example, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was not simply the result of a crazy conspiracy by a right-wing White House. It enjoyed the bi-partisan support of Republicans and Democrats at the time because

despite its great risks, it was an attempt to address a pressing need of the ruling class – not only to reassert American military might after September 11 but to extend U.S. domination of oil reserves against the country's more oil-dependent imperialist rivals.

With the U.S. failing in its war aims in Iraq and its global power weakened, its imperialist rivals will increasingly seek to carve out spheres of economic domination through their own military might. For now, all the imperialists rely on the U.S. as the ultimate guarantee of capitalist stability. But their own profit needs will increasingly drive them to challenge U.S. interests.

Because of the dominant role of the U.S. in consuming products manufactured on the world market, a sharp economic downturn in the U.S. threatens to bring the entire world economy down with it. Other capitalist powers thus have an interest in trying to prop up the U.S. with loans and investments. But such moves only delay the crisis and make the eventual collapse all the more catastrophic. The same crisis of falling profits that laid to waste much of the “Third World” in the 1980's, and led to the collapse of the Stalinist statified-capitalist economies in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the '90's, will ultimately confront the Western powers as well.

THE REAL ROAD TO CHANGE

In this context, the programs of the U.S. presidential candidates look like rearrangements of the deck chairs on the Titanic. And on that score, the possible election of Barack Obama looks more like the pathetic Hollywood movie of a few years ago, *Deep Impact*. In that film a Black man won the presidency – just in time for a huge asteroid to hurtle toward earth threatening its destruction.

Capitalism's non-fictional destruction of the environment threatens the very survival of our species. But the system may not even allow time for that ultimate catastrophe. A depression far worse than that of the 1930's can be delayed but not avoided. If capitalism is not overthrown, it will again threaten to engulf the world in world war that this time could lead to nuclear holocaust.

A socialist society would seek to produce the needs of all rather than the private profit of an elite class of profiteers. Capitalism has itself laid the basis for transcending the misery to which it condemns humanity. It long ago built up the productive forces – industry, technology and a globalized economy – to the point where the potential exists to produce an abundance of all the things people need. Shortages of housing, food and every other form of want can be easily overcome, but that potential remains trapped by capitalism’s pursuit of profit.

Control of the economy will have to be seized from the capitalists. The state power, with the police and military that defend its rule, will have to be smashed in a revolution that puts the majority, the workers and oppressed, in control. And it will take revolutions across the world to prevent sabotage and attack by the capitalists and to unleash the productive potential of the world economy.

By producing an abundance of necessary goods for all, workers’ states would undermine the very basis for the existence of classes. Necessary work would be divided equally among all. And the introduction of labor-saving technology, instead of creating unemployment as it does under capitalism, would be used to shorten the work week and free workers’ lives for greater leisure. In such ways the basis would be laid for the development of a society free of all forms of exploitation and oppression.

Moreover, capitalism has created the class with the potential to overthrow it: the working class. Drawn from across the world and organized into a productive force on the job, the working class

can turn this organization against the capitalists in collective struggle. Strikes and other forms of mass struggle can defend past gains and even win temporary improvements; but they also show workers the real power of their class when it unites in action. General strikes by the entire working class raise the question of re-starting the economy under the working class’s control and direction.

Through the experience of such struggles, more and more workers can come to revolutionary socialist conclusions – if there is a working-class revolutionary party leadership built beforehand to help show the way. To this end, there is no easy road. Revolutionary-minded workers and youth cannot afford to wait until the great struggles of the future to begin to prepare themselves politically to play a leading role. The League for the Revolutionary Party is dedicated to building the beginnings of a revolutionary political party leadership of the working class by combining a study of political theory with active involvement in our class’s struggles. We urge every reader of *Proletarian Revolution* to contact us and join that struggle. ●

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No to Chávez, Yes to Socialism!

by Evelyn Kaye

With this article we continue our discussion of the working class political scene in Venezuela. We invite comments from readers. References to all quoted citations are available upon request.

The class conflict at the heart of Venezuelan society is breaking through the Bolivarian façade. The working class has rejected the overtly pro-imperialist neoliberal program of the rightist opposition. But for good reason, working people and the poor are growing more dissatisfied with President Hugo Chávez and his policies.

This sentiment led to mass abstention on a referendum pushed by Chávez this past December. The number of votes that Chávez traditionally counted on dropped so much that the No vote ended up winning narrowly. The opposition claimed victory over Chávez, but in reality they can't take credit since their campaign against the referendum resulted in no significant increase in No votes.

This significant shift in the voting pattern occurred just a year after Chávez had won re-election in a landslide victory in December 2006. Yet in December 2007, approximately 45 percent of his usual base abstained – in a referendum which he claimed was the way forward to socialism. The LRP favored a No vote, which we will explain in this article.

The referendum proposed a large number of amendments to the constitution, which had to be voted up or down in two different blocks. Block A consisted of 33 articles, mainly put together up by a commission appointed by Chávez which met in secret with no public debate during the process. Block B contained 36 additional articles approved by the National Assembly. Each block included amendments meant to appeal to the working class – like reduction of the work day and extension of social security benefits. However, Chávez already had plenty of time, power, and mass support to carry out such reforms without a special referendum. The proposed changes were in this referendum for a reason: they were the carrot that would lure the masses to vote for a very big stick.

CONCENTRATION OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER

Had the referendum passed, it would not just have increased Chávez's ability to retain office longer (notably, *only* the president would have had the right to be reelected continually). The right to freedom of information would have been more easily eliminated by a declaration of emergency, and such declarations could be of unlimited duration. During a state of emergency citizens could be detained without charge. Also, the president would have been empowered to reorganize the boundaries of cities, provinces and regions. Another proposal gave the president new powers to declare special military zones and regions and name military authorities for the regions, as well as the power to promote officers. All this would have strengthened the weapons of the capitalist state for future use against the working class.

Along this line of anti-worker attacks, another clause would



Under the eyes of Simón Bolívar, Chávez concedes defeat in December referendum. High inflation, food shortages, persistent poverty, unemployment, low wages and crime are all signs that his "Bolivarian socialism" is fake.

have changed the definition of public workers, raising concerns that this significant labor sector would lose legal protections. Other proposals would have increased the percentages of voters required to put a referendum on the ballot, whether for a recall, constitutional amendments or a constituent assembly.

There were also amendments that would have constitutionally bolstered the operation of communal councils, labor councils, and the like, all of which were to be funded and registered by the national government. The councils are intended to pre-empt mass struggle organs of workers, peasants and other sectors from arising, in addition to the already existing unions.

The "communal councils" already exist and are supposedly evidence of "people's power." The funds allotted to these councils come directly from the Presidential Commission for Communal Power. They amounted to about 1.6 billion dollars last year and about 3 billion dollars this year. These councils are mainly being used along the lines of participatory democracy schemes in Brazil, Bolivia and elsewhere: local residents are given pre-set budgets for limited local projects. At best they are a way to divert the masses from taking on real decision-making and power, but in reality they usually function as transmission belts for the politics of the ruling regime. It does not appear that Chávez has been very successful in getting the labor councils off the ground yet, because of fears that they would be used for anti-union purposes. Passage of the referendum could have aided that effort.

ROOTS OF BONAPARTISM

Chávez argued that he is uniquely endowed with the ability to make decisions for the good of the masses. Much of the left that defended the referendum bought that line. It is a hallmark of Bonapartism, a regime characterized by strongman rule with

power concentrated in an executive who *appears* to rule independently above the main contending classes of society. But in fact the Chávez regime, like all Bonapartists, represents capitalist interests and therefore its repression is aimed primarily at the working class, when push comes to shove. Ignoring this essential Marxist understanding, much of the left also swallowed Chávez's argument that increased concentration of the armed power of the bourgeois state would be used only against the right-wing opposition.

Most post-mortems on December missed an essential point: the bold attempt to enhance Chávez's power was a real necessity for this regime. Chávez is a populist: he promotes class collaboration by making big promises to the masses that he will represent their interests if they stick with him, and he seems to favor mass involvement in society. But populists like Chávez also argue for promoting good capitalists against bad ones, not for class struggle. Populist rulers inevitably become increasingly Bonapartist, since they cannot actually fulfill mass expectations. Eventually the mass mobilizations that they encouraged in order to gain power threaten to undermine their rule.

Chávez's dilemma is this: the masses are dissatisfied, but he does not have much more to offer them besides token improvements plus "red" rhetoric – dangling huge promises (i.e. "socialism") for the future. His bourgeois development scheme means cultivating a privileged wing of the weak domestic capitalist class. Building up Venezuelan capitalism also requires maneuvers with the majority of capitalists who are tied to the right-wing opposition and the imperialists. Chávez adheres to a policy of bourgeois nationalism and peaceful coexistence with Venezuela's imperialist oppressors, all his socialist rhetoric to the contrary. But even making minor gains for a capitalist Venezuela in that context requires a complicated balancing act. It is now economically impossible to continue appeasing the masses as well as the domestic bourgeoisie and imperialism. The failure of this project is behind the glaring economic woes today.

Even under near-optimal circumstances with high oil profits, Chávez has been unable to dramatically change the quality of life for the masses. This is impossible for any capitalist state, and all oppressed capitalist nations, like Venezuela, are bound to be dominated by imperialism in this epoch.

A perfect example of his policy toward imperialism is the current struggle between Chávez and Exxon-Mobil over the terms of a proposed joint venture in the oil-rich Orinoco Belt region. It is a question of the degree of superexploitation. For all his rhetorical threats, Chávez has made it clear that he will break no other existing business deals with Exxon-Mobil and will only utilize legal, i.e. imperialist sanctioned, means to defend Venezuelan interests. The last thing that he wants is to mobilize the willing ranks of the working class into an actual fight against imperialist holdings in Venezuela.

It is the duty of revolutionary workers to defend all oppressed nations against imperialist attack. But no sector of the national bourgeoisie of oppressed nations is capable of defending the masses against imperialism, since they are themselves incapable of breaking with imperialist domination. Revolutionary workers must also tell our fellow workers the truth about this: the working class itself must unite with all the downtrodden for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system. The basic need is to replace the capitalist state, the state of bourgeois rule, with a workers' state, where the working class will rule. By building their international vanguard party, the most class-conscious workers will lead the fight for socialist revolution not only in one nation but internationally. The idea of building socialism in one country is a fraud. A federation of workers' states is the necessary step for abolishing class society and scarcity. This is Trotsky's strategy of permanent revolution, and it is the only way to end imperialism and really answer the hopes of humanity.

Chávez is clearly weaker after the referendum, but he still is tremendously popular – in contrast to any contending leader or party in Venezuela at this time. He has amassed tremendous power, including the power to rule by decree. Using this authority, he caused much grief among his mass base when he granted amnesty on January 3 to opposition leaders tied to the imperialist-backed military coup against his government in 2002. Another presidential decree on January 18 turned the operation of the Caracas police force over to the national government. This transfer is the opening stage of a proposed National Police Law, which will place all municipal and state police forces under the national government.

STATE MANEUVERS AGAINST WORKERS

In "Chávez vs. Working Class" (PR 80) we highlighted Chávez's attacks on union autonomy in announcing the launch of the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela). The PSUV welcomed "socialist" business and military leaders into its fold, but demanded that unions and left organizations give up their independence in order to join. Getting the referendum passed would have been a great asset for force-feeding a program and rules for the party, since Chávez could then have falsely claimed that he was carrying out a popular mandate. He wants to make the PSUV into a big authoritarian party that could operate as a disciplining agent, repressing dissension from workers and the left.

It is obvious that his model in large part is the Communist Party of Cuba. It is no accident that the PSUV project had a Disciplinary Committee from the start and has even started expelling members, even though it is still a party in formation without any official program or statutes! Contrast the scene that Chávez faces today with Fidel Castro's Cuba. Castro was able over time to fuse his July 26th Movement with the hardened cadre of the existing Stalinist party,



On February 15 workers of the "La Gaviota" sardine cannery held a protest against the Ministry of Labor, for evading their union rights and ignoring abusive work conditions.

which had had much experience in backing the Batista dictatorship, especially within the union movement. Castro organized a new Communist Party, which was tied to the then powerful and nominally socialist Soviet Union and was an effective tool against the working class. Only after employing CP cadres to stifle the workers could Castro then take bold anti-imperialist measures like nationalization of industry.

While Chávez still retains great authority, his prestige has obviously suffered, which makes it even more apparent that he can't summarily create a "great leap forward," a mass party strictly following his dictates based merely on proclamations from on high. The material circumstances in Venezuela are not the same as in Cuba forty-plus years ago. And he can't turn the small and independent Venezuelan Communist Party (which refused to enter the PSUV) into an authoritative party with masses of disciplined cadre that can control the working class.

Many leftists falsely claim that nationalization of major industry in itself signifies the existence of a workers' state or some form of "socialist" regime. In Venezuela, Chávez has preserved a capitalist mixed economy, an alliance between state and private enterprise even within the formally state-owned oil industry. And Chávez openly opposes workers' control or management of the industry.

REPRESSION OF WORKERS CONTINUES

Repression against protesting and striking workers, discussed in our previous issue, has continued. Chávez especially fears the potential role of oil workers in Venezuelan politics – there are thousands of core workers who at great sacrifice and courage fought off the bosses' attempted lockout for 14 months from December 2002 to February 2004. Afraid of workers' power, Labor Minister Ramón Rivero even actively opposes the oil workers' right to elect their own union leaders. A government appointed phony negotiating team from a newly merged union organization, FUTPV (United Oil Workers Federation of Venezuela), pushed through a bad contract in November. Workers who had tried to protest this process in Anzoátegui state in September were attacked by police, with many arrested and injured; this led to an immediate work stoppage by other oil workers in the area.

The significance of the FUTPV's negotiation of this contract goes beyond the raw economic deal: over half of the 60,000 oil workers in Venezuela had already voted to be represented by C-CURA (the United Revolutionary and Autonomous Class-Struggle Current) in the Fedepetrol federation, but the government refused to recognize this or to hold new elections. (See box on this page.)

Reinstate Orlando Chirino!

A Statement of International Solidarity from the LRP-COFI

This statement was sent to the UIT-CI at solidaridadconchirino@yahoo.com. They are requesting international solidarity statements.

The League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) wishes to join our fellow workers in Venezuela and elsewhere who are protesting the dismissal of union leader Orlando Chirino on December 28, 2007 by the PDVSA of Venezuela, the state-owned oil company. Chirino has worked at the PDVSA of Venezuela, since 2003. He is a prominent left-wing union leader and critic of President Hugo Chávez's recent scheme to revise the Constitution. We agree with Chirino's own declaration that his dismissal was an act of "discrimination and political persecution."

The ruling Chávez regime, which totally controls the PDVSA, has made specific efforts to curtail the union movement. The regime especially wants to suppress militant and independent developments among workers in the pivotal oil industry. During recent contract negotiations, the regime refused to bargain with the four existing federations that already represent workers in the oil industry. It also refused to allow new elections whereby oil workers themselves could have selected a united bargaining slate. Instead, the regime colluded with its hand-picked Minister of Labor and hand-picked union hacks that are totally under its control. It set up a new federation, the so-called United Oil Workers

Federation of Venezuela (FUTPV). Chirino and other union leaders and union militants demanded that the FUTPV hold elections immediately but the demand for elections was denied. Oil workers had even been attacked by state police forces when they mobilized to protest this process.

To date the FUTPV is still under pressure to hold elections. It is no accident that the FUTPV and the regime would want to get Chirino removed from the PDVSA workforce at this point. There has been a small but growing number of class confrontations between the regime and the workers in other industries as well.

Chávez was defeated in his attempt in early December to impose amendments to the constitution via a "referendum" whose main effect would have been to strengthen the ability of the capitalist state to repress working-class struggle. Chirino advocated an abstention in the referendum. He also solidarized with those workers who would vote No against the referendum on a working class basis, the position which the LRP favors.

Chávez not only declared any type of opposition to his referendum as "counter-revolutionary" but even declared a campaign for abstention to be illegal. Nevertheless, for the first time since he took office, Chávez was defeated in a voting process. Large numbers of working class and poor people refused to back his proposals. Despite still great illusions in

Chávez's populist promises, many workers refused to back the idea of increased repression by the state and increased power in the hands of Chávez.

As the recent food and milk shortages have made painfully obvious, despite great oil wealth, Venezuela is being run in the interests of Venezuelan capitalism and the imperialists still dominate the economy. The firing of Chirino also takes place within a general context where the Chavez regime has recently granted amnesty to many of the coupsters and has moved in the direction of making other concessions to the rightwing opposition as well.

As revolutionary socialists we have always argued that Chavez's pro-capitalist populism was fundamentally anti-working class. We believe that the situation in Venezuela will only be decisively reversed with workers' socialist revolution. That requires the building of an international revolutionary vanguard party.

As articles on our website have made clear (www.lrp-cofi.org), we have fundamental political differences with the perspective and policies that Chirino and his co-thinkers have carried out over the years in Venezuela and elsewhere. These differences are no obstacle to a united defense campaign, which in fact is the duty, not only of those of us who believe in workers' revolution, but of all who wish to defend the working class and its basic rights.

The UNT (National Workers' Union) was set up to be an alternative to the CTV union federation that had backed the coup and carried out the shutdown of the oil industry in 2002-2003. But the UNT itself is now permanently split – with each of the leadership groupings that co-founded it all using the same name-tag. The FSBT-UNT (Bolivarian Socialist Workers' Force) is made up of close associates of Chávez's government who now act in absolute cahoots with the regime to sabotage and divide labor struggles on a regular basis. They do not have a mass following of workers like C-CURA, which goes into conflict with the bosses and is obviously far more popular among militant workers.

C-CURA itself has two wings. The minority led by Orlando Chirino opposed entry into the PSUV and the recent referendum. It includes José Bodas, an important oil union leader, and has called for a "new party of workers," which it is already calling the PAIS (Left Socialist Party) with a paper *Voz de los Trabajadores*. (See www.izquierdasocialista.org.ar.) The majority led by Stalin Pérez Borges entered the PSUV and favored the referendum. It publishes *Marea Clasista y Socialista* and includes Ramón Arias, leader of Fentrasep, the public sector union that has some 1.5 million members. The Chirino and Pérez Borges wings used to jointly run the fledgling PRS (Revolutionary Socialist Party) formation. Both wings capitulated heavily to Chávez, enthusiastically campaigning for his re-election in 2006. But the PRS never had any real political life and disappeared after its majority went into the PSUV.

Having made no fundamental break with their past tradition, Chirino and his associates have been forced into a phase of opposition to Chávez. Despite its capitulations, C-CURA finds itself representing the left wing of the existing union currents. For now it seems to be maintaining some unity in action, in order to defend itself against anti-union attacks from the regime.

The government feels threatened by the militant oil workers who have tremendous objective power, despite the fact that they represent only about one percent of the workforce. They also reflect the general popularity of class-conscious demands like full nationalization of a range of industries without compensation, workers' control and management, an end to second-class contract labor, and a sliding scale of wages and hours. A notable battle right now has been taken on by the steel workers against the Argentine-controlled Sidor Corporation. These workers have been demanding nationalization for years and are in embroiled in a contract struggle as we go to press.

ATTACKS ON GOVERNMENT WORKERS

For further proof of the attitude of Chávez toward class struggle one needs to look no further than to the plight of his own employees, the government workers, who represent about 13 percent of the workforce. Many make no more than the minimum wage. Along with oil and steel workers, public workers have a strong tradition of unionization. The elected representatives of Fentrasep went to the Ministry of Labor last August to renegotiate the collective contract for their members, after the workers had been stalled for two and a half years without a contract. The minister refused to meet with the delegates and locked them inside a room with no food or drink for days. They were eventually attacked by a thug organization associated with the government and dislodged. The ministry to date has refused to negotiate a contract, challenging the legitimacy of the

delegates by claiming there is a dispute over union election results between C-CURA and the FSBT. The latter favors a lower wage settlement.

These are two of many examples where the government uses its ministry and labor lackeys to subvert the initiative of the ranks and their right to put forward their own leadership. In a September 2007 interview, Chirino spoke about this trend not only among the oil and public workers;

In Firestone, the labor inspector ordered the company to discuss the collective agreement with a union that only represented 10%. In Mavesa Foods, they registered a union in record time, a union with 34 signatures in a body with 750 workers. In Coca-Cola, after signing a collective agreement, the labor inspector partially certified the contract, leaving 15 clauses pending. ...We state that in all these cases the work inspector acted in a perverse manner in order to favor minority groups identified with the FSBT in order to mount parallel unions. And so as to leave no doubt, the inspector herself has told the class-struggle union leaders that she has the order to string along all the unions that identify with C-CURA.

The government has also directly attacked or indirectly sabotaged small struggles of militant workers in the same vein. For one striking example, the workers at the Sincreba solid waste management company in Mérida suffered a shutdown of their plant last September, carried out by the boss with the help of local thugs and the police. They then occupied the plant and established themselves as a cooperative, attempting to run the operation for two months, while campaigning for the support of various mayors in the area as well as the local Puente Viejo Communal Council. Their initial occupation was shut down after a number of violent attacks. But they continued struggling for the goal of a permanent reopening as a state enterprise under workers' control.

However, the Council, which had been empowered by the area mayoralities to run the plant, not only turned a blind eye to the violent attacks against these workers but refused to meet with them and finally denounced them. This anti-worker situation is what the government-sponsored councils can foster. (For Spanish language readers we recommend checking out the website



Workers occupied the Sincreba plant last fall and set up a factory council, above. Their goal: a "socialist plant" under workers' control.



Caracas, December 2006. March in support of Sanitarios Maracay workers who occupied their plant, demanding nationalization under workers control. Their continuing militancy is an inspiring example for the whole labor movement.

<http://my.opera.com/CLAN/blog/>, which has extensive coverage.) The heroic struggle of these workers continues, as do many similar small battles, notably that of the workers of the Sanitarios Maracay bathroom fixtures plant, who had their occupation shut down last September. They have recently managed to reopen a part of the plant.

THE MASS ABSTENTION

It is estimated that 200,000 workers actually voted *against* the referendum. There are many reasons why millions more who also didn't want the referendum to pass chose abstention. No doubt worries about retaliation by the regime (loss of jobs, benefits, etc.) played a big role in making workers afraid to vote No. But the act of abstention represented not just fear. It also reflected mixed consciousness among workers about how far to go in expressing or organizing their opposition.

Over the years Chávez and his mouthpieces have effectively preached the idea that a vote for Chávez is always a vote against imperialism, and vice versa. This time as usual pro-imperialist forces dominated the opposition to Chávez. Workers not only feared that they would be punished or slandered as right-wingers; many had to wonder if a No vote really would strengthen the right opposition.

The fact that the regime even declared it illegal to campaign for abstention meant that abstention became an act of protest, but a limited and still passive and confused one. It reflected a significant shift in workers' consciousness but not an active clear way forward.

To a large degree workers who opposed the referendum didn't see a class alternative. Workers are tending to become bolder in their experiences of conflict with the regime and with private bosses on a local or industrial level. But most have still not drawn sharp conclusions about the basic capitalist nature of the state and Chávez himself. On one level this is because the struggles have still been kept isolated from each other; workers have not yet experienced their independent power as a class. Many still believe that Chávez and the so-called left wing of the regime can be fashioned into a tool for winning class victories and even socialism – if only the “bureaucrats,” “rightists” and “corrupt” within the government could be weeded out. Despite the remaining illusions, there is a mounting tendency for workers to want to assert themselves and generalize their struggles as a class.

The outbreak of greater class struggles is inevitable. The biggest problem in our view is that there is no vanguard party in Venezuela which can point the way forward. In December, a revolutionary vanguard would have advocated a No vote tied to an independent workers' opposition to Chávez on an explicitly anti-imperialist basis. For one thing, it could have called for demonstrations in support of the immediate enactment of a shorter work day, expanded social security coverage, and other specific benefits promised in the referendum. For another, it could have rallied support for the contract struggles in oil, steel, the public sector, etc. It could have opposed all the repressive measures in the referendum and the politics of the reactionary opposition at the same time.

Trotsky made a key point about the need to oppose the strengthening of a bourgeois state even against the threat of fascism:

The struggle against fascism, the defense of the positions the working class has won within the framework of degenerating democracy, can become a powerful reality since it gives the working class the opportunity to prepare itself ... to mobilize the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie on the side of the revolution, to create a workers' militia, etc. Anyone who does not take advantage of this situation, who calls on the “state,” i.e., the class enemy, to “act,” in effect sells the proletariat's head to the Bonapartist reaction.

Therefore, we must vote against all measures that strengthen the capitalist-Bonapartist state, even those measures which may for the moment cause temporary unpleasantness for the fascists. (“Bourgeois Democracy and the Fight Against Fascism,” *Writings 1935-6*.)

Trotsky's insistence against supporting the military build-up of any capitalist state, even against an immediate fascist threat, has relevance to Venezuela today. It argues that revolutionaries should counterpose the need for independent workers' militias as opposed to reliance on any capitalist regime, however progressive its claims to be. Chávez has never ceased to insist that his proposals must be unequivocally supported in order to stop an imperialist inspired overthrow. While we do not believe that such a threat is real at this point, it remains true that in order to fight the threats of an imperialist intervention or coup, now or in the future, the workers must rely on their own independent power, not on Chávez. To this point, in the case of an actual imperialist threat, even then we would not support the kind of emergency decree or other Bonapartist measures that Chávez was pushing in the December referendum. The working class must never give up its independence, because only the working class can defeat imperialism.

In the current situation, the threat of an imperialist coup or takeover by the domestic right opposition has obviously receded, and Chávez has been using the relative peace on that front as an opportunity to make more deals with the right and crack down on mass struggles and aspirations at the same time. In fact, the current scene dictates the need for workers' defense guards against the National Guard, police and thug outfits who have been attacking workers' occupations, strikes and protests – as well as against any threat of a pro-imperialist coup from the right opposition. Workers' political opposition to Chávez, and to this referendum in particular, must always include a commitment to mass mobilization to defend the regime against any imperialist attack. This was part of the message of class opposition to the referendum that revolutionaries needed to share with their fellow workers.

AGAINST THE STREAM WHEN NECESSARY

The point is not whether a working-class No vote campaign would have immediately won wide adherence. Sometimes even a small propaganda group with a bold message can tap into what workers are feeling and have influence beyond their numbers. But it is necessary to provide political leadership for the most advanced, potentially vanguard, workers, and create a working class pole of attraction – even if workers' opposition to the referendum remained a minority movement at this particular time.

Tactically we could have favored abstention or voiding the ballot for workers in dangerous situations who could not vote No, but that had to be a very secondary matter. The main political message had to be clear: it was in our class's interests that this referendum fail, and abstention was not a means to ensure that outcome. We totally reject any idea that voting No on behalf of the working class was a vote for the right or for imperialism. That methodology of amalgamation is what Chávez counts on every time, and such arguments will always be used to allow more power to fall into his hands – unless the initial elements of an authentic revolutionary vanguard are willing to stop living in the fear of Chávez's shadow. It is absolutely necessary to distinguish between those times when a bloc with the regime is necessary to defeat an immediate imperialist threat or attack, and the times when blocking with the Chávez regime abets his ability to attack the working class himself and sets up the masses for more attacks from the right. The latter was the case in December.

Calling for abstention was an opportunist and irresponsible position for those concerned with defending the working class and raising its consciousness about what needs to be done. The fact that abstention indirectly resulted in a narrow defeat for Chávez could not have been assumed. The strategy of abstaining while secretly hoping for a defeat was opportunist, reflecting a fear of being amalgamated with the right opposition rather than having the courage to advocate what was necessary and risking such slanders temporarily, if necessary.

CHIRINO'S ABSTENTIONISM

Chirino and his associates, both in the unions and in his political tendency internationally (the UIT-CI), opposed the referendum. But they held back from calling for a No vote. Instead, they came out for a form of abstention. Here is an excerpt of the statement "Void Your Ballot" by Chirino and associates on behalf of the "Organizing Committee of the Movement for the Construction of a Workers Party," dated November 2, 2007.

We call upon the workers to VOID YOUR BALLOTS this coming December 2, don't mark either of the two options (YES or NO), just hit the VOTE key. This is an approach that has been raised by many workers who are afraid to be identified as abstentionists – now that the CNE [the electoral authority] has anti-democratically forbidden citizens to campaign for abstention – or who fear being fired from their jobs in government enterprises or being counterrevolutionary or reactionary for voting NO.

For revolutionary socialists it is important to express that we do not support the reform proposal, and for that reason we solidarize ourselves and we support all of those compañeros who are thinking about abstaining in a conscious form so as not to give their support to a retrograde constitutional reform, and more so with those who are disposed to take the risk of voting NO, without worrying about the manipulation and the pressures of all type that have come down on them.

Thus Chirino & Co. in passing solidarize with those workers who were bold enough to vote No. But this did not lead them to

boldly call for a No vote themselves as a class policy, and they are supposed to be the leaders.

The call to void your ballots is close to the position adopted by the Juventud de Izquierda Revolucionaria (JIR: Revolutionary Left Youth), a small section of the Fracción Trotskista Cuarta Internacional (FT-CI: Trotskyist Fraction–Fourth International). We focused on the work of this small far left group in Venezuela in our previous article because of their consistent opposition to political support for Chávez in past elections. As well, they have put out some honest propaganda directly exposing the nature of Venezuelan society as capitalist and denouncing the Chavista myth that there is a "revolutionary process" underway.

These positive qualities contrast with the record of left union leaders like Chirino. Chirino is in a very militant phase now. But he and the whole UIT-CI tendency have consistently told workers to vote for Chávez. There is no evidence that he has changed his tune on that. In fact, despite his current oppositional stance toward the regime, he still talks about "deepening the revolutionary process" in Venezuela. He still fails to explain definitively that Chávez heads a populist bourgeois regime which uses the pretense of a "revolutionary process" to fool workers into supporting a capitalist state. Chirino uses the same false rhetoric while demanding a big role for workers in the process.

THE JIR'S ABSTENTIONISM

Our previous article, in which we criticized the JIR for tailing Chirino, should be read as background to understanding the current turn. Unfortunately the JIR has not yet chosen to respond to our correspondence to them or to our published criticism. Worse, they have followed Chirino in taking the position of abstention in the recent referendum.

Here is the gist of their argument:

We are facing a proposed Constitutional Reform that seeks to increase the range of government power, in order to regiment the class struggle and the movements of the different factions of the classes, on the road of its "socialism with businessmen." This is supported by the bourgeois sector of owners that backs the government and receives a boost from government, while the majority sectors of the dominant class oppose the reform.

...In the present referendum, there are apparently only two choices, that of YES to the Reform that Chávez and the National Assembly are proposing, and that of NO, defended by the broad majority of the right-wing opposition sectors and minority sectors that have withdrawn from the chavista movement. ... Neither of these variants is a choice for workers, since, reformed or not, the Constitution continues defending private ownership of the means of production, that is, the regime of capitalist exploitation. Therefore, we are calling for an invalid vote ("votar nulo"). (JIR statement, Dec. 1, 2007.)

Of course, neither the movement backing Chávez nor the movement backing the right-wing opposition represented a political choice for workers. But that was not the question posed by the referendum, unlike in a regular election where Chávez runs against an opposition bourgeois candidate, when abstention would be the only choice. Here, voting No would just result in maintaining the current constitution.

Here the JIR argues against participating in a specific referendum simply because both sides stand for bourgeois constitutions. The JIR recognizes the mounting threat of Bonapartism in words but then refuses to identify it as the essential question to act on when a vote is posed. Whereas Trotsky said "we must vote against all measures that strengthen the capitalist-Bonapartist state," the JIR claims that workers must abstain on strengthening

the Bonapartist state because the result will still be a bourgeois state. This formalist argument covers up an opportunist conclusion: don't stand directly against Chávez, not even on this.

In fact, defeating the referendum weakened Chávez's power and therefore potentially strengthened the workers' movement to fight back. The vote did not automatically strengthen the threat of a rightist coup; it didn't even add significant numbers of recruits to the traditional opposition. Had working-class fighters mounted their own opposition and organized their fellow workers to actively vote No, the danger of strengthening the right wing would have been even less.

Last Spring the Chávez regime revoked the license of the RCTV network, creating a groundswell of opposition by the traditional right as well as a new middle-class student movement. The bulk of the left, including Chirino and the whole C-CURA tendency, championed Chávez's move and urged that he go further. On this matter, the JIR correctly went against the pseudo-left stream, stating their opposition to the censorship of a reactionary TV station, even though opposition to the shutdown was dominated by the right. Again they went to Trotsky, looking at the essence of the question from the point of the class struggle, not siding with the seeming "left wing" of the capitalist class against the "right." They quoted in their press from his article "Freedom of the Press and the Working Class" in *Writings (1937-38)*:

As Leon Trotsky states in his brilliant work, "Theory as well as historic experience, testify that any restriction to democracy in bourgeois society, is eventually directed against the proletariat, just as taxes eventually fall on the shoulders of the proletariat. Bourgeois democracy is usable by the proletariat only insofar as it opens the way for the development of the class struggle. Consequently, any workers' 'leader' who arms the bourgeois state with special means to control public opinion in general, and the press in particular, is a traitor. In the last analysis, the accentuation of class struggle will force bourgeois of all shades to conclude a pact: to accept special legislation, and every kind of restrictive measures, and measures of 'democratic' censorship against the working class.'"...

We encourage workers and honest militants, students, and intellectuals to read this important work of Trotsky's.

Going back to 2004, before the JIR formally existed as a section of the FT-CI, its co-thinkers in the Trotskyist Fraction internationally took the correct position of voting No against the imperialist-backed recall referendum which threatened to remove Chávez from office. This proves to their credit that they are not for abstention in all bourgeois referendums as a matter of course and that they can distinguish between a referendum and a regular election. It was correct in that situation to bloc with pro-Chávez voters. Even though Chávez advocated it, the recall was an extraordinary and illegitimate exercise forced upon the Venezuelan people by U.S. imperialism. The result of a successful recall campaign would not have been a normal electoral change in bourgeois representation but rather the opening for

some sort of coup under a "democratic" pretense, and with covert U.S. support.

As the Mexican section of the FT-CI, the LTS (Workers League for Socialism) pointed out at the time, a vote against the recall referendum was a vote against imperialism and not a political endorsement of Chávez. In their article of August 13, 2004, the LTS stated:

The Chávez leadership can only bring defeat and frustration to the Venezuelan masses. Unfortunately, most of the left capitulates to him, bestowing political support more or less shamefacedly, which only serves to impede the proletarian vanguard from regrouping around independent working-class politics. ... Vote NO critically, a NO to the opposition and to imperialism, which in no way means a YES to Chávez.

It was equally correct to abstain in the December 2006 presidential election, as the JIR did, and give no political support to any bourgeois candidate.

If the FT-CI tendency in 2004 was able to recognize that a No on the recall referendum was not a Yes for Chávez, we raise the question of why they couldn't recognize that a No on the December 2007 constitutional referendum was not a Yes for the current constitution. It does them great discredit that they came up with such a paper-thin argument for abstention this time.

LEFT OPPORTUNISM AND THE STUDENT OPPOSITION

The only far left tendency we know of in Venezuela to call for a No vote was the Morenoite Unidad Socialista de los Trabajadores (UST: Socialist Workers Unity), a small group affiliated to the Liga Internacional de los Trabajadores (LIT: International Workers League). They called for a No vote but under the horribly false justification that it was mainly necessary to intervene in the middle-class student movement that opposed the referendum! While it would be wrong to argue that the student opposition is thoroughly right-wing and bought and paid for by the CIA, it is definitely a movement which calls for democratic rights based on free enterprise and has nothing to do with the aims of the workers' movement and the fight against imperialism.

The bulk of the left, whether it calls itself Marxist or Bolivarian or both, is still cheerleading Chávez – with whatever hand-wringing criticisms they made about how the referendum was carried out. Not only do most of these groups not consider the struggle of the working class to be central; they virtually ignore it. That is why the JIR, which does politically oppose Chávez in general and does address itself centrally to the working class, is worthy of far more attention.

The defeat of the referendum is undoubtedly creating openings and encouraging the working class to put forward its demands. It did not result in an immediate rise of the right, while it has shown workers that there are many who share their mounting questions about the regime. Chávez conveniently claimed that the vote against his referendum showed that the working class was not ready for socialism. The opposite is far closer to the truth. ●

February 18, 2008

***No to Imperialist Intervention!
No to Capitalist Attacks on the Workers and the Poor!
No to State Intervention in the Unions!
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Auto

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proposed this for its flagship industry.

Reversing the traditional aim of UAW “pattern bargaining,” the GM sellout became the template for the settlements at Chrysler and Ford. With some variation in terms to further please the bosses at the other companies or attempt to fool the workers, the disaster was repeated: frozen wages, diverted COLAs, two-tier wage systems, the replacement of retiree health care by VEBAs. The supposed sweetener at all three companies was the union getting “solid pledges” about new investments in domestic production to maintain current job levels.

These job security pledges are worthless scraps of paper. Similar promises in past contracts did nothing to stop GM from destroying over 600,000 jobs since 1978, and the latest promises are already being shredded before the ink is dry. GM is closing three plants and planning to base the fate of others on agreements over unspecified cost-cutting measures, while Chrysler announced the layoffs of 10,000 workers within a week of its agreement.

The reaction of the vampires on Wall Street was by itself an indication of just how bad the deals were. The news of the initial contract at GM produced a sharp increase in the price of GM shares, along with those of Ford and Chrysler in anticipation of similar sellouts. Finance capital loves attacks on workers as a solution to ailing companies, and these days only true bloodlettings qualify as the right medicine. That’s what the auto Big Three got. GM’s post-contract buyout offers, which would gain them nearly \$50 per hour for each worker replaced, means that the bottom tier the union signed on to could become the industry standard wage.

The contract debacle was no surprise to anyone familiar with the Gettelfinger leadership. In the lead-up to the current contract round, the union tops already accepted huge cuts in the health care programs at Ford and GM, and had helped bosses carry out a bloodletting attack on jobs, wages and benefits at Delphi, GM’s parts-supplier spin-off. They signaled that they would be more than receptive to GM’s demands for this contract. The bureaucrats had been meeting with the company for months before the bargaining formally began. Gettelfinger even let fly the fact that the union had proposed a VEBA set-up to management two years ago! All this just emboldened the bosses: in the bargaining itself, GM and then Chrysler appeared unwilling, at least publicly, to throw Gettelfinger any job security sops he could possibly use to sell the deals to the membership and soften the anger over the massive cuts.

So at GM and Chrysler, the briefest of strikes – two days at GM and not even the length of a shift at Chrysler – were called by the union leadership before agreements were announced. Dubbed “Hollywood strikes” in the capitalist press, they were in large measure maneuvers to make the union leadership appear willing to fight back and hold the line – if they weren’t fully stage-managed affairs by management and union tops. Gettelfinger made clear that any strike would be half-hearted and short and would accomplish as little as possible. (According to a *Washington Post* account, a UAW official revealed that Gettelfinger had actually suggested over the summer that GM build up its inventory as strike preparation!) At Ford, the union tops managed to avoid a strike altogether in fashioning their betrayal.

ANGER AND RESISTANCE IN THE UNION RANKS

Nonetheless, the strikes themselves showed the the potential for workers to unite in action against the bosses. Tens of thousands of GM and Chrysler workers had no problem walking out.

Teamster drivers honored picket lines by refusing to deliver completed cars while threatening the same for parts and supplies. It was possible to cripple the car companies, particularly GM with its more limited inventory of cars and trucks. Most important, serious strike action by auto workers had the potential to be a rallying point for the entire working class.

Opposition to the sellouts was widespread and almost decisive. At GM, the one-third rejection rate by both production and skilled workers was higher than typical contract votes in the union. At Chrysler, the opposition was more intense, as were the efforts of the Gettelfinger leadership to win approval. Unlike at GM, some of the Chrysler local leadership – most importantly the head of the bargaining committee, Bill Parker – expressed opposition to the contract.

Parker, a long-time supporter of the reformist socialist Solidarity organization, was reluctant in his opposition and respectful of bureaucratic superiors who truly deserved contempt. His “Minority Report of the Bargaining Committee” said:

In taking this position, I want to make it very clear that this is, in no way, a reflection on the leadership of Vice President General Holifield. I am very appreciative of the changes and integrity he has brought to the Chrysler Department since his election.

For his part, Holifield supported the contract, exulting that the agreement will “allow opportunities for the company to grow.” Parker’s report did write pointedly on the evils of the multi-tiered wage scales: “Two tiers of workers create divisions within the union, pressure to reduce the top tier in the direction of the second tier, and efforts to drive the second tier even lower.” Which made it all the worse when he ended up voting for a modified version of the two-tier settlement!

Parker may well be the sincere, hard-working type he is portrayed as by other oppositionists in the union. But it is a sincerity that has been hardened over a long time in the direction of seeing collective bargaining, and a bureaucracy-management relationship that oversees it, as the solution for workers’ struggles. He stressed in his minority report that the proposed contract was “a devastating break from the pattern,” as if that “pattern” was a golden path that had not led to the dire results of the contracts.

Parker’s instant status as a high-profile labor maverick should not fool militant workers that he represents a real alternative to the pro-company Gettelfingers. But the opposition that he and other local leaders put up, in particular to Chrysler’s failure to commit to future products, expressed widespread anger among the ranks and briefly provided a focus in building momentum against the deal. Key locals voted down the contract by significant margins, and only a frantic campaign of intimidation by the leadership at late-voting locals salvaged the agreement, with only 55 percent of production workers and 51 percent of skilled trades voting for the contract. Deeply concerned with this opposition, and fearing it could be worse at Ford where workers had only narrowly approved (perhaps by a rigged vote) previous cuts in health care, Gettelfinger & Co. crafted a contract with Ford management that played up the promises of production and jobs.

The success of that tactic underscored that, in the end, concerns with keeping their jobs was the most prominent consideration for the ranks. A well-founded fear of losing jobs when few other options are available framed the defensiveness of the workers and their grudging acceptance of concessions, while the dubious promises of job security proved to be effective sweeteners. But the ratifications will not obscure the deep dissatisfaction in the ranks at the contracts and towards the union leadership. Indeed, the acceptance of the contract can be largely attributed to

the lack of confidence in Gettelfinger & Co.'s unwillingness and inability to lead any sort of real struggle.

CAPITALIST CRISIS, REFORMIST BETRAYAL

The conduct of the union tops, treacherous as it was, was to be expected of a leadership that is tied to the preservation not only of the capitalist system but also of the individual companies it does business with. And a business it is. The labor bureaucrats derive their privileges and prestige from performing as bargaining agents between workers and bosses. To do this, they must protect company profits while trying to throw the ranks enough sops for them to stay in power and maintain their bargaining position, collect dues and conduct financial operations. With the sustained and growing decay in the American economy and in industry in particular, this has meant agreeing and helping to carry out the bosses' demand that the workers pay for the crisis of the system. The leadership's betrayals in auto are but the latest demonstration that the trade union bureaucracy must be replaced by a revolutionary leadership, committed to the interests of the working class and therefore to the necessity of socialist revolution.

Auto workers are already seething over the previous health cuts and the deterioration of their communities, as plant after plant shuts down. They are tired of management and the capitalist media rattling on about how the companies are doing so badly because the workers supposedly have it so good. There are strong currents of feelings, nurtured by some out-bureaucrats, militant reformists and leftists, that the plight of the domestic auto producers is a hoax; that the companies are really rolling in profits. It is understandable and even healthy that many of the more militant workers so mistrust capitalist propaganda. And to some extent their feeling is accurate. The auto companies have undoubtedly exaggerated their woes while conveniently neglecting the high living of management and big shareholders, and have blamed workers for their own stupendous levels of incompetence in design, production and marketing.

But let's be clear: Big Three automakers do have a real crisis. Mountains of money have been lost in recent years – Ford lost \$12.6 billion last year, while GM lost \$39 billion in the past quarter. The Big Three lose money on their domestic operations, and they are losing market share (now around only 50 percent in the U.S. itself). But beyond the immediate bottom line is the competitive disadvantage with foreign-owned companies in this country who have avoided unionization and therefore pay far less in benefits to a far smaller number of retirees. It's the way the system works: capitalism rewards those companies who cut their labor costs, however ruthlessly, and punishes those who don't. This has never been more true than in recent years, when a decaying capitalism demands a dramatic intensification of exploitation.

The Big Three have staved off a reckoning for years by relying on sales of over-priced gas-guzzling SUVs, speed-up on the factory floor, and cutting the workforce to the bone. (GM has reduced its workforce from a quarter of a million to just 73,000 since 1994.) But their SUVs are facing stiffer competition; and the sales of the larger models, the biggest cash cows, are declining in a world of high gas prices. Now the companies not only must further cut the workforce but must go harder on the employees who survive.

While the automobile industry has its own unique conditions, in basic ways it is representative of the fundamental problems confronting the capitalist system as a whole. The boom of the post-World War II years has long since been replaced by capitalist stagnation. Only a greatly intensified exploitation of the working class in the U.S. and internationally, from the vast outsourcing of industry to oppressed third-world countries, to the shredding of wages and benefits and job rights in the richer imperialist coun-

tries, has prevented the system from suffering a full-scale depression. But that – and a massive deepening of the capitalist assaults – is in the cards. The domestic auto industry has in a sense been a more fortunate sector of manufacturing. But no longer.

SPARK SPUTTERS

There may be comfort for some in the thought that enough anger and militancy will call the auto companies' bluff and tap into their supposed vast troves of buried treasure. Such an outlook characterizes the approach of a number of union oppositionists and even some socialists. The group around the *Spark* paper carries this notion to an absurd level, suggesting that the crisis in the Big Three is a mere charade. "Ford has been pretending financial trouble," they wrote on October 8. More elaborately, at a public meeting on September 23, a *Spark* presentation made the claim that labor costs are only \$8.40 out of each \$100 of an average vehicle's price:

Thus they have \$91.60 for everything else – not only materials but CEO bonuses, payoffs, corruption, mismanagement, profits, country clubs, you name it.

Spark is pulling a fast one here. Even assuming their numbers are right, they are overlooking the cost of plant and machinery, which is substantial in the auto industry. They also slip in "materials" among all the bosses' perks, which is another big chunk of an automobile's cost. As self-styled Marxists, *Spark* ought to know better since Marx showed that the cost of any commodity includes not only wages and profits but also "constant capital," the used up portion of plant and equipment.

This accounting fraud allows *Spark* to imply that the overwhelming proportion of sales is realized as profits, broken up in a variety of ways to benefit management and stockholders – as if there is all kinds of room for massive improvements in wages, benefits, "you name it." If only life was this simple. Why bother with the trouble of making a revolution and building a society on a fundamentally new basis if the wealth is already here and only needs to be redistributed?

Revolutionary Marxists, in contrast, explain that as overall profits fall and competition intensifies, there is no solution to the needs of the working class under capitalism. Mass struggles can at best defend and win limited and temporary improvements in the working class's unsatisfactory-at-best living standards. Such struggles certainly cannot hold the line for long in the face of mounting capitalist attacks. The great importance of union and other struggles is that they can teach increasing numbers of workers that the only real solution is the overthrow of the system by workers' revolution. *Spark*'s stress on corruption and greed is not Marxism but populism, the notion that capitalism in clean hands can be run in favor of the people.

The October 8 *Spark* also tried to use the foreign transplants' success as part of its argument:

The fact is that the biggest, most profitable market for vehicle sales is in the United States. Why have the Japanese companies come here? Why are German companies building plants here? Because here is where the money is.

These companies did see money in the American market, but as only one part of an international strategy. And they actually began building plants in the U.S. as a way of getting around import quotas. Once here, they discovered they could make handsome profits – in large part because they have not had to pay the kind of health and retirement benefits that the Big Three have been desperately trying to shed. *Spark*'s argument only draws attention to their own failure to understand the very real problems of the capitalist system.

UAW REFORMISTS OFFER NO ALTERNATIVE

While *Spark* wishes away the capitalists' profit crunch in order to encourage illusions that old-style union militancy can still offer a way forward, others inside and around the UAW proposed another approach. Former mid-level UAW bureaucrats Jerry Tucker, Paul Schrade and Warren Davis were once leading figures in the now defunct "New Directions" caucus that posed as a militant alternative to the UAW tops. In response to Gettelfinger's proposed VEBA they had a letter published in the *New York Times* which expressed their "grave concerns" about the idea and in diplomatic tones suggested an alternative: a different kind of alliance between the union and the bosses! They wrote:

We do respectfully submit that the appropriate counter-proposal to the corporate bailout by way of a VEBA is a UAW demand that ... the corporations become a moving force on the public policy front for the enactment of the current universal, comprehensive, single-payer healthcare legislation. ...

Such a national healthcare system would serve the auto companies self-interest and level the competitive playing field (Sept. 16, 2007.)

This appeal to collaboration with the bosses was quoted without criticism by the Solidarity-associated *Labor Notes* magazine and was even echoed by Greg Shotwell, leader of the militant Soldiers of Solidarity movement within the UAW. Shotwell is hardly one for "respectful" debates with the UAW leadership – his *Live Bait & Ammo* newsletter is known for its caustic attacks on the union bureaucracy. But in an issue otherwise hammering the bosses and bureaucrats, he quoted GM rhetoric advocating national health care and added his own take:

If taxpayers are going to get stuck with the bill, the investment should have a commensurate return, i.e. health care for everyone not just the privileged few. Furthermore, the return should ensure a level playing field for all employers. National health care is the only viable social-economic solution to the crisis in American industry and our communities. (*Live Bait & Ammo*, No. 73, July 8, 2007.)

A taxpayer funded national healthcare system would indeed take the burden of paying for workers' healthcare costs off the auto bosses and help them to compete with companies that don't have to pay for such benefits. But the auto bosses know this and still don't support the move because they are part of a capitalist class whose fundamental interests are served by cutting the benefits workers receive everywhere. The idea that there can be a "level playing field" for companies to compete is ridiculous. In market competition, somebody has to lose – and it's always the workers, one way or another.

This kind of militancy is in fact counterposed to a more fundamental class opposition to the attacks: it leads to a serious misestimation of the auto bosses' resolve and what it will take to beat them; it doesn't take into account that any gains are apt to be very temporary; and it points away from the necessity of linking the auto fight to other workers' struggles and taking on the system as a whole.

Even after these contracts, the sad fact is that most workers in this country and certainly the world have it far worse than those at the Big Three. For decades the militancy of the union and the profits amassed by the American car companies allowed U.S. auto contracts to be trend-setters for other union and even non-union workers. But the auto plants never ceased to be miserable places to work. And with the end of the post-war boom, the union leadership's counterposing of bargaining to mass struggle could only roughly maintain wages and benefits at the

price of deteriorating work rules and the mass depletion of the workforce, hitting Black workers disproportionately as the last hired and first fired. Now even those basic standards are being shredded, with the reformist-led UAW in panicky retreat. Trade-union reformism, even militant versions of it, has no answer to the capitalist attacks – except in one way or another to accept and enforce them.

REVOLUTIONARY SOLUTION

The auto sellouts underscore the absolute impossibility of securing the needs of workers through the collective bargaining process. Consider health care. The increasing inability of the working class to afford health care costs – or, for many, even an insurance plan – is a scandalous indictment of the capitalist system. Like other reformists, the UAW leaders have clamored for national health insurance. (And the union tops are playing up the GM contract's creation of a labor-management study of the matter.) But the VEBA plan is a monstrous step in the opposite direction – its coverage will be inadequate and its private funding based on stock market investments is doomed to collapse. And it is being touted in the capitalist press as the alternative to other union health plans that appear too generous toward retiree health needs.

Likewise job security. The massive loss of jobs, which will only continue under the new contracts, in what has been a premier industry of modern society, demonstrates the inability and unwillingness of private enterprise to provide sufficient good-paying jobs, or any jobs, for the available workforce.

The demands of capitalist economics for ever-increasing mass misery, the increased association of anti-worker attacks with privatization schemes, and the great limitations of collective bargaining all point to the need for solutions for the entire working class like socialized health care and nationalization of industries. There will likely be a mass upsurge of workers and oppressed people in response to the continuing attacks, and its hopes and demands in the initial stages will be largely focused on measures demanded of the capitalist state. Revolutionists will be active participants in mass militant struggles for health care and jobs, just as we will fight for all the gains the working class has won and can win under this system.

But we argue in these struggles that serious, lasting protection of those and other rights cannot be won under the crisis-ridden capitalist system and the state which defends it. What is needed is a working-class socialist revolution and the creation of the workers' own state to secure those rights. Only under a workers' state will nationalized industry and services be under the control and serve the interests of the working class and the oppressed. A revolutionary leadership, committed to the overthrow of the system itself, must be forged among the most politically advanced, revolutionary-minded workers, to start assuming leadership of the vast struggles that the criminal capitalist system is pointing towards.

Auto workers have a proud history as a militant, organized and often-victorious section of the American working class. And despite these harsh setbacks, the UAW is still a powerfully situated union which is capable of inspiring other workers, union and non-union alike, who can more closely identify with their conditions, and muster the beginnings of a real defense. Their struggles must become one with those of the increasingly restive and powerful immigrant workers and the struggles of Blacks against racism. The most politically conscious workers must see the destruction of their class's dreams under the bosses' system as a wake-up call for the creation of their own revolutionary party that can fight for a revolutionary state and society dedicated to human welfare, not profit. ●

Auto Workers Betrayed – Again

Auto workers took a beating in the contract rounds between the “Big Three” American auto companies and the United Auto Workers (UAW). The UAW leadership rammed disastrous contracts down the throats of General Motors, Chrysler and Ford workers. President Ron Gettelfinger and other union officials, after the thinnest facade of leading a fight, settled on terms that mean massive givebacks in wages, job conditions, health care and – despite assurances to the contrary – the loss of jobs themselves.

The betrayal by the UAW bureaucrats is a big setback for all workers. If organized union workers in the auto industry can be forced to swallow such concessions, all of us have to be worried about what will happen to workers with less immediate power to fight back, particularly unorganized workers and young workers just getting a start. That is why it is especially important that revolutionary-minded workers analyze what has happened in auto and reach conclusions about what is necessary to prevent further disasters.

The UAW has a special history and role in the U.S. working class. The automobile industry remains the greatest concentration of production workers in the country. Auto workers were at the center of the great industrial battles of the 1930’s and 1940’s, fights in which socialists were prominent. The union that emerged from those struggles became a trendsetter for wage and benefit gains in the post-World War II era. And as a result of the ghetto rebellions of the 1960’s, auto became a key source of decent-paying stable jobs for Black people in cities like Detroit. The UAW in turn became a focus of Black workers’ struggles, both against the racist anti-worker bosses and against the treacherous UAW bureaucracy.

While pro-capitalist leaderships over the past 30 years have surrendered the leading role it once played, the UAW is still central to the labor movement. This latest major defeat of a core industrial union will be a green light for other capitalist bosses to further press their long-term offensive against the working class.

The contracts were not passed without opposition, particularly at Chrysler. They were certainly not approved with any satisfaction by the rank and file, either for their terms or for the conduct of the union leadership. And while such a defeat inevitably creates a measure of demoralization in the working class at large, class-conscious workers should see it as a lesson in the class struggle: it is an indication of capitalism’s plans for a ramped-up assault on the working class, of the treacherous role of the union bureaucracy in collaborating with the bosses’ attacks, and of the utter inability of the reformist union oppositions to offer a serious defense of workers.

A massive, militant fight back against the bosses’ attacks is needed. But workers can afford to have no illusions – under conditions of increasing economic crisis, the attacks will just keep coming. In the course of their struggles to defend their jobs and standard of living, workers will have to see that the only solution is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist profit system.

OUTLINE OF A SELLOUT

The UAW leadership selected GM as the first company to attempt to settle with, in large part because it figured the chances for rank and file approval were highest there. The terms of the



Soldiers of Solidarity demonstration at Detroit auto show.

GM contract add up to a wholesale slashing of hard-won rights and working and living standards of GM workers and their families. They include:

- A wage freeze for the length of the contract (with some piddling “bonuses” thrown in that do not add to basic wages and benefits). As well, large portions of the cost-of-living payments, which had helped protect auto wages from the ravages of inflation, will be diverted to help pay for health care.
- The creation of two-tier wage scales in “non-core” areas, a huge section of the workforce. This slams incoming workers with halved wages and divides the workforce. On top of this, new hires will be subject to a 401(k) plan rather than receive a pension.
- The trashing of one of the premier employer-paid health care plans for retirees in the country in favor of a Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (VEBA). Under the VEBA, the union will take over the management of the health care fund, but company funding will be greatly reduced (to about a third less than current spending). Moreover, the fund will be subject to the mercies of a stock market that is grossly over-valued and primed for a meltdown.

In fact, the VEBA trust is expected to be the largest stockholder in GM. So the UAW leadership will feel even more pressure to help company profits at workers’ expense in order to prop up the fund. The UAW leadership well knows of the collapse of such a plan at Caterpillar after just a few years, but nevertheless

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