

New York, January 4, 1936.

Leon Trotsky,
Oslo, Norway.

(Copy to I.S.)

Dear Comrade Trotsky:

The problem of the attitude of the Workers Party towards the developments in the Socialist party, which has faced us virtually since the fusion which created our organization, now confronts us in so urgent a manner as to dictate -- in the opinion of our group -- a radical change in the course we have pursued up to this time.

It is now no longer possible to evaluate the Socialist party on the old basis for the simple reason that serious changes and modifications in the relationship of forces have occurred and are continuing to take place at a rapid tempo. For our party to repeat the formulae and slogans of yesterday -- even ~~some~~ those which were correct yesterday -- would mean that it would manifest a sectarian ignoring of political changes and would court the risk of merely marking time and allowing events and mass movements to pass by without taking advantage of the great opportunities to exert influence upon them.

1. The Socialist party is now undergoing a sharp and (for the whole coming period at least) an irreparable split between the Centrist leadership and the leftward moving members, on the one side, and the notorious Right wing ("Old Guard"), on the other. In the numerically largest organization of the party (New York City and New York State) the split is already an accomplished fact. The Right wing elements, represented by Abraham Cahan and the Jewish Daily Forward, and James Oneal and the New Leader, have separated completely from the official national leadership, and specifically from the so-called "Militant Group". What is more, the Right wing has proved to have a minority of the membership in its most heavily fortified center, namely, New York. The National Executive Committee of the party, which meets in Philadelphia this week-end, will in all likelihood recognize the "Militant" organization in New York state (which has just held a successful state convention in Utica, N.Y., at which the titular leader of the party, Norman Thomas, spoke and gave his endorsement), as the official Socialist party organization. The split is spreading quickly on a national scale, and there is no doubt that whereas the Right wing will take with it some 4,000-5,000 members, the Centrists will retain control of the official party with a membership variously estimated at between 15,000-25,000.

The Young Peoples Socialist League, which is, generally speaking, to the Left of any of the official "Left wing" groups in the adult Party, will stand virtually to a man against the Right wing splitters.

2. The logic of events, which forced the present Centrist leadership to come to a complete organizational rupture with the Old Guard, cannot and will not cease to operate in the coming period; if anything, it will do so with redoubled force. The first differentiation must give way to a second, i.e., between the Right Centrists and the Left Centrists, between those who were driven to a reluctant break with the outspoken Right wing, those who feel that the present milieu requires a more radical, a more "attractive" reformism -- and those, above all among the youth, the rank and file workers and the radical intellectuals, who really want a thorough-going break with reformism and who will not be satisfied merely with a separation

from the avowed reformists of the Cahan-Oneal school. In various stages of development, the latter form the bulk of the membership (at least the active and vocal membership) of the Party and the Youth.

3. From the standpoint of what might be termed "political natural history" and the abstract "logical course of evolution", it might be said that these leftward moving elements will finally develop, "naturally", to the position of consistent revolutionary Marxism, i.e., to our position, "of their own accord", so to speak. Unfortunately, this "natural historical process" of evolution is gravely affected and even directly counteracted by a number of very "unnatural" but nevertheless real factors. Firstly: left to themselves, under their present Right-Centrist leadership which is not very far removed fundamentally from classic social-democratic reformism, and without an organized revolutionary Marxian pressure from within, the Socialist party, newly cleansed of the outright Right wingers, will inevitably slip back from Centrism to the old reformism. Secondly: the Stalinists, however, have no intention of leaving the S.P. members to themselves. Having at their disposal a more powerful apparatus than the S.P., to say nothing of virtually inexhaustible financial resources, plus the new turn to the Right (which appears to many Socialists as infinitely more "realistic" and "reasonable" than the irritating fantasies of the Third Period), the Stalinists have been conducting a tremendous campaign not only for the united front but also for organic unity -- a campaign which is increasing in popularity in ever wider circles. There is not merely a potential, but a very real danger that the bulk of the leftward movement in the Socialist party will be swallowed up, and consequently, vitiated and destroyed, by Stalinism.

The Stalinists have just maneuvered a fusion of the Socialist and Communist student organizations, essentially on the Stalinist platform, and already under Stalinist organizational control. Tomorrow and the day after, there is good reason to believe that the Stalinists will register similar successes in even more decisive fields. Thirdly: We are authoritatively informed that, in payment for restoration into the good graces of the Stalinist bureaucracy, Lovestone is preparing to send a whole section of his group into the S.P. to agitate there for organic unity with the C.P. The overwhelming majority of the present S.P. leadership (unlike the shrewd and trained Old Guard) is composed of political ~~amateurs~~ amateurs; the Lovestoneites are composed of skilled political agitators and maneuverers for whom, man to man, the average unschooled and confused "Militant" leader would be no match. A combination of these forces, already at work, would effectively bar the road to the "natural process" of evolution of the anti-reformist membership of the S.P. to revolutionary Marxism -- unless a still more effective force is brought to counteract them.

...ation in the S.P. drastically affects our own Party's position. ... as an independent organization, the new developments are ... ly. While the Right wing was still in the party, and the ... ed and even capitulated to it, our comrades were able ... the S.P. with a fair measure of success, if not or- ... gandastic. With the Right wing out, and the Cen- ... "Militant" group and the official National ... attitude on the organizational split, our ... possible to approach the ranks with any pros- ... ing is expelled or has quit", the average ... argue, "we have a real opportunity to ... n party in this country, composed of ... bers. Your party (that is, the W.P.) has

a good program and fine revolutionists in it, but it has only a few hundred members. Why should I join it now and leave the S.P. when there are obviously such rich opportunities, now more than ever before, to develop it into a party such as you yourselves (that is, again, the W.P.) want to build up in this country? Instead of me leaving the S.P. now, why don't you comrades of the W.P., who have so much more knowledge and experience than we have, come into the S.P. and help us make it the kind of party we all want?" Our comrades hear this argument every day.

More than that, visible already now (tomorrow it will be as plain as day and twice as big) is the beginning of the sweep of the "unity" sentiment. The Stalinists, it goes without saying, nurture it sedulously. They have nothing to fear from fusion with the S.P. for, with their superior resources, their greater experience (to say nothing of their capacities for bribery and corruption of individuals and groups), they would easily predominate in a fused organization. As the sentiment for a general organic unity of "all the good radicals" grows in this country, the "intransigent" Workers Party, remaining on the side and criticizing the course of the unity (without doubt, correctly!), will be looked on as a fine bunch of fellows, perhaps, but nevertheless an obstinate group of incorrigible divisionists who stand in the way of a "good unity" merely because they insist, in their stubborn sectarian way, on a little church all by themselves.

5. Right now, significantly enough, the principal leaders of the first, second and third order in the S.P., as well as the bulk of the ranks, are opposed to the Stalinists, and even to a general united front with the C.P. But this is based largely on (a) reluctance to furnish the Right wing with additional "proof" that the S.P. leadership is "Communist" and (b) recollections of the Stalinist line and conduct in the Third-Period-Social-Fascism boom. To a somewhat lesser degree, the antagonism to the C.P. is based upon the social patriotic position of the Stalinists, above all in the question of "sanctions" against Italy, largely under the influence of our agitation. The formal reason given more or less officially by the S.P. for refusing a united front with the Stalinists (which would be the beginning of the end, to a much greater extent than was the case with the united front between the C.P. and the I.L.P. in England), is that the C.P. must first "prove its sincerity". Now, the important thing is not only that the "new" S.P. will care less and less about the charges of the split-off Right wing as the weeks go by, but that the C.P., with its present international line, will more than sufficiently prove its "sincerity" in a comparatively short space of time! And it will be easy to prove for the simple reason that the dividing line, in principle and tactics, between present-day Stalinism and Centrist social democracy (especially the Right-Centrists), has been effectively wiped out. What is decisive for us, however, is the problem of how to intervene actively and effectively in the Socialist party between now (when the membership is hostile to Stalinism and suspicious of it) and tomorrow (when the S.P. membership will be convinced of the "sincerity" of the Stalinists and will take those steps which would prepare the ground for their speedy devitalization and absorption by the C.P.).

6. Can we intervene by the method of forming a fraction inside the S.P. to fight for our line? To our mind, this method is too late in view of all that has happened, is happening and will happen. The criminality of the Oehlerites stands out glaringly in this connection; no less glaring is the sterility and vacillation of both Muste and Weber. If, nine or even six months ago, we had seriously and energetically begun the work of penetrating the S.P., of crystallizing the disaggregated left movement into an organized Left wing standing on our platform and working with us, we would now be miles ahead of our present position; we would be

able to reap the fruits of our work; we would, more likely than not, be under no necessity to consider a sharp turn in our policy. But we were compelled, not so much by the discredited and hopelessly sectarian Oehlerites who were no particular problem, but by the Weber and Muste groups who shielded them from our blows, who tripped us up every time we struck at the splitters, and who (unpardonable!) concentrated their fire instead upon us -- we were compelled to waste all this time patiently and wearily explaining A B C questions, elucidating the difference between a Bolshevik tactic and "liquidation". It took us six months of bitter fighting in the party to force an acceptance of the idea (the Oehlerites haven't accepted it to this day, of course!) that it was not liquidationism to advocate the formation of a Left wing in the S.P.

Such waste of time does not pass with impunity, however. A new situation is at hand. A new tactic is demanded. To think of coping with the new developments in the S.P., highly favorable to the growth of our movement, by the method of sending a couple of dozen of our rank and file, more or less unknown and inexperienced comrades, into the S.P., is like trying to catch whales with a fishing net. Not a fraction -- the season for that vegetable is passed. The whole party must now enter the S.P. Furthermore, this entry must be effected without delay, while the situation in the S.P. is still fluid in the process of splitting. Of that, after thorough and responsible deliberation, we are entirely convinced.

7. The possibilities for our progress in the Socialist party in this country, under the given conditions, are distinctly favorable. In the first place, our problem is not, as the Muste-Weber group puts it, the negative and defensive one of protecting the "independence of the party", which is not yet a real party but merely an enlarged propaganda group. Our problem is not to hunt around for ways to prevent the "liquidation of the independent party". Our problem is: how to clothe the bones of our ideas with the flesh of masses; how, in the shortest possible space of time, to add to the approximately 1,200-1,500 W.P. and S.Y.L. members another one - two - three thousand revolutionary workers! What link shall we pull on, at the given moment, which will draw more of the whole chain into our hands?

There cannot be two answers right now, we think. Firstly: the movement in the S.P. is distinctly to the Left and if we can inoculate it against Centrism in general and against Stalinism in particular, it will develop -- if not all of the members, then at any rate thousands of them -- all the way to consistent Marxism. Secondly: we have skilled and trained forces at our disposal capable of organizing a serious fight inside the S.P. for our tendency; our work of seven years of hardening Bolshevik cadres, on top of the previous experience of the leadership, has not been lost work; without exaggeration, we can say that the forces of the American ~~section~~ section of the Fourth International can easily take care of themselves in the S.P. Thirdly: compared with the European parties, the American S.P. (with the "Old Guard" out) has a small and weak bureaucracy, composed of unskilled politicians (the most able ones are in the split-off Right wing) who have none of the abilities and experience of the German, French, Czech or British reformists. Fourthly, our Party -- not so much as an organization -- but as a banner, as a ~~system~~ system of ideas, as a tradition, as an aggregation of known and experienced revolutionists, enjoys a considerable prestige and respect among the S.P. and Y.P.S.L. membership. (Widespread among them is this argument: "Why don't you comrades come into the S.P.? We need experienced people like you. With your ability you could become the leaders of the movement!" Important here is not the formula or the exaggerations, but the attitude.)

8. We can enter the Socialist party without surrendering or modifying any principles or any weapons. We are in a position to state more or less definitely that the present S.P. leadership could not and would not put any obstacles in the way of the whole W.P. membership and leadership joining the S.P., without discrimination. We would be able to join with an appropriate statement of our principled position and the declaration that we intend to and shall have the opportunity to advocate and defend our position within the normal channels of the S.P. and Y.P.S.L. (Youth) organization. There is not the slightest real doubt of our ability to continue the publication both of the New Militant and the New International, as well as Young Spartacus, as organs of our tendency inside the S.P. and Y.P.S.L. Much as the Centrist leadership would like to see us suspend these publications if we were to join the S.P., they would nevertheless be unable to prohibit them. Firstly: there are any number of periodicals already being published in the S.P. by local party organizations, not under the control of the national organization. Secondly: there are several periodicals already being published in the S.P. by factional tendencies and groups, which are not under the control of the national organization (Socialist Call, Socialist Appeal, Revolutionary Socialist Review). Thirdly: the Y.B.S.L. in national membership referendum has just voted by a majority to permit any individual or group of individuals in the Y.P.S.L. to publish any periodical or issue any documents or leaflets so long as it is stated therein that the views expressed are not those of the Y.P.S.L. or the S.P. officially -- a very significant decision.

Furthermore, in a number of localities, and even in whole states, by our entry we would become the S.P., both in membership and in leadership (Minnesota), whereas in other localities, and not unimportant ones, we would represent a considerable and important force in the S.P. from the very beginning (New York, California, Southern Illinois mine fields). In addition, we have good reason to believe that we would immediately be joined, inside the S.P., by those who already declare their agreement with us in principle, but who refuse to leave the S.P. and join the W.P. For example: the National ~~Executive~~ Secretary of the Y.P.S.L., calls himself a "Trotskyist"; the secretary of the Socialist party in the state of Missouri, likewise; etc.

9. From an international point of view, which is what we are concerned with fundamentally, we believe that, surface appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the movement for the Fourth International would be advanced rather than retarded. No doubt the existence of the Workers Party of the U.S., standing for the 4th International, is a factor in the movement for the latter. But what is decisive in our opinion, is forces rather than names, strength rather than fictions. Our party to be sure is not a fiction, but in truth it is not yet a real force. Our problem is to become one. The 4th International does not require above all the signature which reads "Workers Party of the U.S." -- it requires a movement in the United States which represents not hundreds but thousands.. Thus far, we are merely a large seed of the Fourth International in this country. We must implant ourselves in such fertile soil as will yield the strongest and largest trees. We need hardly state to you that we are not animated in this proposal by an opportunistic chasing after "masses". We are not proposing to join the S.P. as socialists, without our banner and with somebody else's; we propose to join the S.P. as Bolshevik-Leninists, to fight for revolutionary Marxism among the socialist workers and youth, to expand the ranks of the Fourth International. Instead of breaking with our international movement, or in any way weakening our bonds with it (as the Spaniards have done), we shall propose to strengthen these bonds. At the national convention of our party, and on the eve of entering the S.P., we shall propose that our party shall formally affiliate to the International Secretariat as a section, so that the work of our faction in the S.P. shall be under the guidance and control of our

international organization.

10. Our group (that is, the Cannon-Shachtman faction) has discussed the whole problem thoroughly and from every angle that we could think of. We have decided to take this step audaciously, not lightly but in the most serious and responsible manner. Our whole leading group is unanimously in favor of the proposal. The leaders of the Minneapolis organization, which has been most prominently engaged in independent activity in the trade unions and the class struggle generally, are unanimously in favor of the step. At a meeting in New York last week of the most active and representative members of our faction, following a report by Cannon on the new situation in the S.P. and our attitude toward it, with a thoroughgoing discussion from the floor, the vote to endorse our ~~proposal~~ proposal stood 61 in favor, 1 opposed and 2 withholding their vote for later recording. We have no doubt that our supporters throughout the country, which means the decisive majority of the party, will follow suit. We are so deeply convinced of the correctness of this step, that we are determined to carry it through at the end of the national convention of the party which is scheduled to take place in New York at the end of February.

We hope to take the W.P. into the S.P. as a body, not merely our group, but the Muste-Weber group as well. We intend to do everything in our power to persuade them of the correctness of this step. But we do not wish to conceal from the comrades abroad the fact that we do not intend to allow more months of precious time to be wasted in an endless repetition of the old arguments which fritter away both energies and opportunities.

After having compromised themselves badly with the Oehler group, with whom they were in effect in a bloc against us, the Muste-Weber combination is now in a process of disintegration. In Allentown, their leader (Reich) had to be censured by his own comrades for conciliation to Stalinism -- the fact being that both Reich and Hallett (another Musteite leader), especially the former, are shot through and through with pro-Stalinist poison; but, even more than was the case with Oehler, these elements receive fervent protection from Muste-Weber. The small branch of Davenport, which solidly supported the Weber group up to yesterday, has gone over in a body to the Oehler faction. In Columbus, another Weber fortress, a small branch, a resolution is unanimously adopted condemning Cannon and Shachtman with all the arguments -- word for word, thought for thought -- of the Oehler group. In Salt Lake City, another Weberite branch, a resolution is adopted condemning once more the "organizational methods" of C.-S. for proposing a two months' postponement of the national convention (a proposal adopted unanimously by the P.C. and N.C., including Muste, Weber, Glotzer and Satir!) and declaring that we may soon have to come out in favor of a Fifth International!

A faction trained on semi-Oehlerite arguments and organized with semi-Oehlerite methods, must inevitably produce Oehlerites, full-fledged or half-baked. The position of the Muste-Weber on the S.P., as stated in the resolution they have just presented to the Political Committee, is merely a re-worded mass of Oehlerite sectarianism; we must defend the independence of the party; it was all right to enter the S.P. in France because the Bolshevik-Leninists were a group, but here we are a party, and therefore its independence is a principle; we must fight against the "tendencies to liquidate the W.P." into the S.P.; the new situation in the S.P. does not impair our opportunities for recruiting but enhances them; we have not met with any difficulties in our work and will not in the future; and so forth and so on ~~and~~ ad nauseum. Despite all our efforts, despite our policy of collaboration with and conciliation towards Muste and Weber --

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particularly with the former -- in the whole past period, we do not intend to remain silent while Oehlerite garbage is ~~smuggled~~ smuggled into our party in a slightly diluted form after we have gone through a period of bitter fighting for the purpose of smashing Oehlerism. Not remain silent -- rather, we intend to take up the cudgels against it.

If Maste and Weber are willing to discuss with us the matter of entry into the S.P. as a practical, tactical question, and in a loyal, comradely manner, we shall meet them more than half-way, and we are confident that our point of view will prevail in a communist discussion. If, however, despite all our efforts to prevent it, they insist on greeting our proposal for such a discussion with abstract formulae, with hysteria about "liquidation" and "liquidationists", with sectarian shibboleths and -- worse yet -- slanders and old wives' rumors, we shall be obliged to combat them with the same vigor we manifested in the fight against their predecessors of the Oehler camp.

We intend, now more than ever in view of the ~~present situation~~, to maintain a far more systematic correspondence with our comrades in the international movement than we have kept up in the past. We intend, furthermore, to keep you and the I.S. informed of all new developments and to supply you with all the documents that we issue, especially on the subject dealt with in this communication. Because of the great value we attach to the opinions of our comrades abroad, we are especially anxious to hear from you immediately, so that we may be guided in our further considerations on the problem by whatever comments you may be able to make on the thoughts set out in the present letter. The urgency of the matter we raise here is so obvious that we do not hesitate to request the earliest reply from you notwithstanding the fact that we know you to be occupied with numerous other tasks and problems.

With cordial Bolshevik greetings,

(Sgd.).....

Max Shachtman

(Sgd.).....

James P. Cannon