

A PETTY MENSHEVIST CLIQUE

Draft Report by Robertson on Visit to Baltimore on Saturday, 17 December 1966, by Political Bureau Delegation of Comrades Gaillard, Glenn, Nelson, Robertson and Turner (based on oral report to Political Bureau meeting, 26 December 1966).

Our techniques for the visit were straightforward. The delegation on arrival paired off its members with individual members of the Baltimore Organizing Committee for discussions (these were Turner-Kaufman, Gaillard-Williams, Glenn-Lach, Robertson-Sherwood and Nelson-Clark). Thereafter the delegation caucused together briefly, then met in plenary session with the Baltimore OC comrades. Robertson led off with the main report for the PB delegation, speaking at length and covering the following points:

(1) The Baltimore comrades have lost all sense of proportion in unrestrained hostility toward the national leadership.

(2) The Baltimore OC is functioning as a full-fledged faction, resolutely bent on destroying the majority of the Central Committee, but it has not constituted any sort of real minority to justify its course of struggle. It has brought in no documentation of political differences or position. Instead, these several comrades spend their energy (and ours) in seemingly endless personal and procedural complaint.

(3) In an effort to turn at least the form of discussion back into proper organizational channels and to deflect the Baltimore people from what appears to us plainly to be a split course, the representatives of the PB presented three points to which the Baltimore comrades must conform:

- "That the leadership of the Baltimore OC:
- conform to procedures for internal discussion--specifically recognizing the authority of the national leadership to regulate--and recognize that another violation will result in a trial;
- conduct future discussion in a comradely tone; specifically that continued references to "lies" of the national leadership will result in a trial to either prove charges or suffer the consequences;
- become qualified to handle PB minutes by working out an understanding on their proper circulation so that local receipt of full minutes may be reestablished."

The Baltimore OC unanimously passed the following motion in response:

"That: We agree to go through channels in the profound hope that the Political Bureau will execute their responsibilities. We will attempt to conduct our criticisms in a more comradely fashion in the hopes that the Political Bureau will do likewise. We reject any implication that we had a split perspective or that we have acted unprincipledly. Although we are not

satisfied with most of the replies, or lack of replies, to our criticisms, we have found the discussion valuable and somewhat clarifying."

(4) The PB had some idea of the causes of the Baltimore situation: an extremely thin-skinned Comrade Kaufman, exhibiting the well-known characteristics of a political life spent in geographic and other isolation, being acted upon by R. Sherwood who in our opinion has come to be a deliberate and willful wrecker of the Spartacist League. Robertson made concrete reference to a series of incidents personally attested to by him and/or other members of the delegation present, showing Sherwood to be without any particular political stability, having gone through many factional shifts, always with desire for personal recognition at the center, simultaneously snuggling up to those with criticisms or differences and at the same time, so long as he thought he could ingratiate himself, engaging in the most vulgar abasement before the leadership. This latter conduct included not only turning on previous allies--most notably Aarons-Friedlander--but even himself making false confession in an attempt to deflect personal criticism. Sherwood has shown himself to be pathologically blind to truth under the slightest pressure. When Sherwood's energy and surface affability were weighed against the weaknesses in this comrade which had come to light over a period of time, he turned decisively against the leadership which found him wanting. Operating unsuccessfully at the National Conference and very successfully in the Baltimore backwater, the dominant themes of his internal interventions nationally have been to take revenge for his hurt.

Baltimore Uber Alles

(5) Robertson then described some of the activities of the organization for the benefit of the Baltimore comrades who seemed to think that theirs were the only activities going on, in particular the Kinder case and our role in the student strike in the Bay Area, the perspectives for a new local in Seattle, the development of ESPARTACO (then in its second issue), the anti-SANE picket intervention by the NYC District, the variety of work in New Orleans, the new National Office and the recent SPARTACIST #8.

(6) The PB minutes show that comparable credit for work in Baltimore has been given for the activities of the comrades there. Nonetheless, Baltimore shows an exaggerated idea of the relative newsworthiness of more static and abstract propaganda techniques. (For example, we never thought to mention outside New York City the Greenwich Village table manned by our comrades on weekends.) Had an issue of SPARTACIST come out during the Baltimore election campaign, we would certainly have given the campaign coverage in order to deepen its impact. But after the fact, as a write-in campaign without even a vote to report, it was judged to be of little news value outside our own organization. A related exaggeration of Baltimore in its own eyes is the belief that Baltimore merits more attention than our international work. Related to this is Baltimore's feeling that the National Office is essentially a service unit for peer locals, not a national leadership discharging central func-

tions, one of which is to work to assist our local and regional organizations to handle as much of their own service work as possible in order to free the N.O. for work on those tasks which can only be done at the center.

Deliberate Provocations

(7) Much of the recent conduct of Kaufman and Sherwood was seen as deliberate provocations to incite organizational action against them and make "martyrs" of themselves. Robertson stated that the PB is not interested in the state of their martyrdom but has other responsibilities--in particular, to protect the organization against their antics, not only doing whatever is necessary to keep them within that mode of practice which when employed responsibly benefits the organization and which when employed irresponsibly is not unduly damaging or wasteful, but in addition to protect the organization against responding to Baltimore's provocations in a way that would damage the right of factional democracy. (Indeed, Sherwood and Kaufman's greatest harm to this organization could come from our being drawn into taking unfounded action against them. We will readily expel them if they want, but to be expelled they will have to do more than just be annoying.) The particular provocations that we have in mind which do go beyond the acceptable bounds are: (i) the attempt to convene behind the backs of the national Spartacist League or NYC District organizations a factional meeting of the Baltimore people with the NYC local; (ii) sending out the 10-page mimeo'd factional circular on their own for no other reason than that it was believed that these actions would inflame the internal situation.

(8) Our position regarding written discussion is that Central Committee regulation means at this point essentially insuring centralized distribution in order to make sure that the material circulated does not jeopardize us and to assure that it is distributed uniformly and properly throughout the organization, and also, conceivably, limitation of volume by restricting the size of articles should it become necessary. (In pre-Conference periods, of course, a main task of the national organization is in handling what should hopefully be a very large volume of internal discussion material.) We reserve the right under other circumstances to be more stringent, but in each case the reason must be justified. With oral discussion there is a different attitude because there is a different purpose to oral discussion. Its impact is transitory and it leaves no record, so that outside immediate pre-Conference periods oral discussion serves little good purpose. For a minority to want oral confrontation under these circumstances strongly smacks of a desire to simply get in a few parting shots.

Conclusions: A Petty Menshevist Clique

The trip to Baltimore was extremely valuable because the Baltimore comrades were revealed to be a clique in the fullest and most precise sense of the word in Marxist politics. Previously, from the time of their unprincipled factional intervention at the founding Conference, they had been described as a clique. For example, Lou D. had once characterized them this way in writing. However, the PB delegation felt a "shock of recognition" that the Baltimore

people are really and truly a clique by watching the inner mechanisms and relations which most fundamentally define the group. The Baltimore OC consists of two leaders, A.R. Kaufman and R. Sherwood, whose characters and relations between themselves have previously been described, and three or four followers and supporters. In all innocence several of Kaufman and Sherwood's supporters, in response to the severe criticisms raised by the PB, sought to defend their local leaders by insisting that while these things might be true, Sherwood and Kaufman worked hard in Baltimore, were "good guys" as far as they knew, and besides there was nobody else to do the job. Sherwood and Kaufman added to this picture of an unpolitical cluster based upon personal and local loyalties by proudly announcing that an applicant for membership--i.e. a non-member--from Baltimore (now in the Midwest) had just phoned in to announce his solidarity against the Spartacist League with his friends in Baltimore "no matter what happened". Thus was displayed before us a group bound together without any semblance of common political position against the Spartacist League.

(1) Kaufman gave a changed explanation and justification to Baltimore's conduct as a clique, fully defending the conduct if not the word "cliquist". He insisted that there is no necessary relationship between the most serious crimes of a leadership organizationally and its political positions in the class struggle. He reiterated (his analogy and view) that just as we have correctly attacked Healy for brutal organizational practices of bureaucratism and debasement of revolutionary morality without there being significant political weakness in the SLL, so too do Kaufman and Sherwood make similar attacks without there being serious political differences, either now or anticipated, between Baltimore and the Central Committee. Kaufman stated that they had been wrong in their document presented at the Conference when they stated that from their organizational criticisms, political differences would surely follow. This position of Comrade Kaufman, as an empirical attempt to come up with a defense for unprincipled factional struggle, denies the unitary Marxist understanding of the complex interactions between organization, political position and struggle. His "theory" flows from his previous weakness as well, since he has never grasped that Marxism is a unitary viewpoint.

The S.L. vs. Healy--Merely Organizational?

Speaking concretely to Kaufman's analogy, it had not been true that there were no political differences of significance between Healy and us. In the first instance, organization and political morality are themselves political questions; further, sharp theoretical differences on Cuba were such that operating in a slightly altered context they could lead to political differences as pronounced as that which separates revolutionary from counter-revolutionary. Moreover, on the national question and racism, we had become aware that the practice of the SLL smacked of a chauvanism reflecting the imperialist Great Power position of the British. Finally, we had noted (even in our public press) that the position of the SLL on the necessity of Trotskyism in Vietnam was equivocal. Since the discussion in Baltimore took place, the attempted Healy

analogy has turned into an enormous refutation of poor Kaufman's position. Within Britain the SLL has escalated from the beating of Tate to the use of the bourgeois state's legal apparatus against him and in the first issue of Healy's new International Correspondence to a general justification of the use of the courts, not polemic, against "slanderers", and from this to a general proposition in favor of the use of the courts by "revolutionists" against trade union bureaucrats, etc., who might victimize them. This is not different in substance from the call of the American SWP for Federal troops to defend the Negroes in the South, which the SLL declares it deplors. Thus from an indefensible organizational act it has been but a few steps for the SLL to repudiate by implication and by deed the Marxian theory of the State.

(2) The SLL, starting from its theoretical vacuum over the Sino-Soviet states outside Russia, has proved unable to distinguish between a giant purge by the commanding section of the Maoist bureaucracy and the Pabloite idea of political revolution by the bureaucracy itself. The SLL's line, propagated by Banda in the Newsletter and touted by Wohlforth in this country, is not different in kind from the enthusiasms over the Castro leadership a few years back by the SWP. (The ACFI, as we had long known, has been completely predisposed to embrace some larger force should its immediate masters permit it.) The explanation for the turn is to be found within the SLL, which is now paying the price in itself embracing Pabloist opportunism through lack of theoretical clarity compounded by a brutal bureaucratic regime which makes attempts at internal correction physically dangerous. So much for Kaufman's pathetic attempt at defense by analogy.

(3) Comrade Kaufman, to paraphrase Trotsky, may seek to ignore politics, but politics does not ignore him--that is to say, cliques have politics. True, a clique is not born on the basis of a political line, and this clique resolutely opposed all our efforts to turn the discussion from recriminations about who said what, when, over administrative details, to political issues. The politics of the Kaufman-Sherwood clique are an almost perfect naive projection of the composition and circumstances and the related psychopolitical reflection of the Baltimore people. Thus when we discussed with Baltimore our criticisms and corrections to their draft election platform (which changes they had insisted were mere exercises in bureaucratic arbitrariness) we found in each case a significant political point of difference.

The Negro Question

(a) Regarding the issue of Baltimore's alleged insensitivity on the Negro question, there are differences, at least in application. We propose to document in detail the issue as revealed in the main printed items from the Baltimore campaign because the Baltimore comrades have sought to hide the differences behind a smoke screen of complaints that they are being falsely accused. The Baltimore comrades got their election campaign underway through two printed items that they requested be run off from our West Coast shop at the same time. One was the platform, nominally priced at 5 cents, a 12-page

brochure; the other was a throw-away (2-sided legal) leaflet with pictures of the two candidates and containing a brief statement, "Why We Are Running". The National Office received copies with a cover note dated 13 September. The leaflet contained no reference at all to the Negro question. The absence of any appeal to Negro workers in an election campaign in Baltimore--a semi-Southern city in which perhaps a majority of the proletariat is black--struck the N.O. as a very significant oversight. Comrade Kaufman, when asked over the phone about this, stated that it was deliberate and that the main platform did contain a sufficient section on racial discrimination.

The PB meeting of 19 September, which took place a few days after the call, authorized the Western Bureau to include a paragraph in the throw-away leaflet on the Negro question. This was done, and well, but over the continued bitter objections of the Baltimore OC. Furthermore, the PB, now somewhat concerned, gave the election platform itself a close scrutiny. In the draft we found that the section on Black Power did not state our transitional position but rather stated, "in this light the demand for Black Power is not militant enough" and "working class power of the exploited over the exploiting is what is needed". This is a departure from our position on Black Power, which is to support the slogan and seek to give it a class content. (The brilliant and precise statement by Geoff White of our position is found in Spartacist-West No. 8, Sept. 30, 1966, entitled "Black Power--Class Power", subtitled "Once Again on Black Power".) This section of the platform was changed by the PB. In Baltimore in our discussion with Comrade Kaufman on this he stated bitterly, "Those that advocate Black Power call me 'Whitey' ". Here we see the source of his position--his personal thin skin.

One Accusation Explored in Detail

Kaufman and Sherwood have attempted to defend their factional differences, insisting that they are being misrepresented. Their claims are (from Baltimore's letter to the PB 17 Nov. in their mimeo'd factional circular): "first of all the leaflet referred to was not our mass leaflet but was merely a supplement to the platform which in itself had a tough position on the Negro question. Our mass leaflet [a third leaflet, with the red headline "Vote Socialist"], of which over 5,000 were distributed (mainly to white factory workers) presented and defended the Negro struggle. This leaflet was written before we had knowledge of the PB criticisms". The Baltimore people repeat substantially this in their mimeo'd "Baltimore Statement..." of 20 January 1967. Now it is nonsense to call the obviously designed main campaign throw-away (with a big striking headline "Vote Socialist" and pictures of the candidates) a supplement to, i.e. following in the wake of, a 12-page document priced at 5 cents. Furthermore, this story leaves inexplicable the conscious resistance to explicit reference to and defense of the Negro struggle in what on the face of it was their main initial campaign flyer.

As far as we can tell, the second line of defense is just plain not true--i.e. the allegation that the leaflet in 5,000 copies was written before they knew of PB criticisms and that the section on the Negro question ("Negro equality aids all workers") was introduced

spontaneously. Here is why we don't believe it: Our carbon of copy to the printer sent here for approval was received on 14 October. Already before 19 September, i.e. about one month earlier, the criticisms from New York were first made known to Baltimore by phone call and immediately afterward by more phone calls and letters. The Baltimore people did not even receive the first campaign materials until the end of September (their copies straight from the West Coast were received here 26 and 27 September.) So we do not believe that the final campaign leaflet, which unfortunately deleted the very good statement on the Negro Question written by the Western Bureau in favor of a much more pedestrian one, was conceived and completed prior to the dispute taking place. We also note that the draft of the third leaflet which we received was very heavily cut and pasted and gives the appearance of having been worked on over a lengthy period of time, especially since it is a leaflet which ends on the subject of how to write in one's vote. We do really believe that Comrades Sherwood and Kaufman are deceiving us when they tell us that this mass leaflet was completed before the campaign had hardly begun and when they had not even received their main printed platform.

If the comrades are by this point tired and bored with the recitation of known facts, deeds and references on this one topic of Baltimore's position on the Negro question as reflected in their campaign literature, they will appreciate why it is only on this one question of considerable political importance that we have taken the trouble to meticulously seek to set the record straight. We do this not only in order to make some points about the falsehoods of the Baltimore people but mainly to get at their political views which Comrade Nelson mildly and with full accuracy described in the PB meeting of 26 September on the basis of his discussions in Baltimore as "the Negro struggle was omitted from the mass leaflet on the basis it was intended to reach white workers--an impermissible opportunist omission." Kaufman and Sherwood reacted to this as "savage slander"; presumably their eyes so glazed over in rage that they were unable to focus on the next sentence in Comrade Nelson's balanced report--"they are doing a good job on the election campaign; Bob K. is very experienced at this sort of thing."

Jobs--Not Permanent Welfare

(b) Several other political differences came to light during the careful reading of the draft Baltimore platform by PB members on 19 September. The draft had a section entitled "Guaranteed Jobs or Income" which the PB changed to "Guaranteed Full Employment". Discussion revealed that the whole considered position of the SL against the general idea of guaranteed jobs or income, i.e. subsidy of a lumpen proletariat instead of the struggle for a shorter work week with all of its implications of overcoming unemployment, doing away with ghettos and pockets of working-class stagnation and creating an objective basis for unity between black and white workers--all this seemed lost on the Baltimore leadership. There is a reason for this. Just as the Baltimore comrades--all white except for the one Negro whom they have excluded and want to get rid of--show such thin-skinned egotism toward Black Nationalist racist gibes, they react in about the same way toward criticism from the N.O. The social com-

position of our people in Baltimore stands in a one-to-one relationship with their blindness toward "Jobs or Income Now".

The Baltimore people, contrary to their oft-repeated declarations, are not a proletarian group. One, after a life spent as a salesman, now sells advertising over the phone on behalf of policemen's benefits. Another, fired from this job, has a bourgeois background and a random history of brief employment, and does occasional work such as passing out phone books assisted by another comrade, an older man with a working-class background but for a long time unemployed through injury. Another member is a woman permanently on welfare; another a student from a poor background. (Ironically, the Negro comrade whom they have dismissed is, however, an employed worker.) Thus the social composition in Baltimore can best be described as declassed, a situation not without its advantages. The small group of comrades there have an enormous amount of free time to run anything from election campaigns to factional intrigues. However, such a composition (as for example noted in Bukharin's book, Historical Materialism) immediately gives rise to a series of political weaknesses unless opposed by a systematic Marxist consciousness.

Federalism and Anti-Internationalism

(c) The comrades in Baltimore have a thorough federalist attitude toward the Spartacist League. In their insularity they see Baltimore as one among a number of peer units to be serviced by a central warehouse, the National Office. The Leninist principle of centralism is for these comrades just bureaucratism (Robertson!). For comrades with this attitude there will always be some ogre in a national or international center to "oppress" them.

(d) The Baltimore comrades revealed both orally and in writing an anti-internationalism that is swinish. In the "Baltimore Statement..." of 20 January 1967 they put their remarks in writing: "Servicing the locals does not preclude but does take definite priority with corresponding with Timbuktu". ("Timbuktu", they have made it quite plain in their remarks, means the sum and total of our international relations and responsibilities, which they believe should weigh less than the incredibly important revolutionary epicenter-- Baltimore!)

Taking all these fragments of a political position together, they constitute, though episodically and badly-thought out, the pathology of classical Menshevism beneath the concealing tissue of personal clique relations. In one of their documents, Kaufman and Sherwood refer to us an "an Iskra organization", borrowing a phrase from Lynn Marcus (himself one of the American Trotskyist movement's more notable victims of egotistical subjectivism run wild). The comrades in Baltimore had better know that Iskra was born in savage struggle against the sort of petty-bourgeois ego-stroking circle spirit that had hitherto dominated the Russian Social Democracy. The Spartacist League has not been born to undo the lessons of building the revolutionary party in which Iskra marks a milestone.

A Call to Order

(4) Thus the trip to Baltimore and the ensuing discussion have permitted us for the first time to fully analyze and lay bare the nature of this peculiar face in our midst: The Baltimore OC is a petty Menshevist clique. This explains the unrestrained and willfully provocative conduct of A.R. Kaufman and R. Sherwood. What their fate in the future as individuals in this organization will be we do not know. But their rotten politics and closely linked anti-organizational methods are going to be ruthlessly exposed and defeated. How the individuals in Baltimore will take their defeat by Bolshevik policies and practices depends on what qualities within them come to the surface: petty cliquism leading them to embrace ever more rotten politics or a dedication to our organization based upon a perspective that is revolutionary, proletarian and internationalist.