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San Francisco, Ca.
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To the Political Committee

Dear Comrades,

I read with considerable interest Syd Stapleton's report on the SLP which, I note, was endorsed by the Political Committee. I think it is very good that, following our successful regroupment with the RMC, we are taking such a positive approach to another group obviously in rapid evolution in our direction.

It is of course quite correct to emphasize the coming together of the SLP and the SWP on concrete policies effecting our day to day work in the working class and related layers of the population. It is precisely this which lays the basis for discussions seeking to discover if there is a basis for fusion. It is also correct to suggest that many historical questions, resulting from the sharply different traditions of the two organizations, may never be fully resolved prior to a fusion. It was this proper approach which made it possible for Nancy Fields and myself to complete our "mini-fusion" as well as the fusion of the RMC .

However, it would be a great mistake in the course of such a process to confuse in any way our own evaluation of the history of the SLP and of Daniel DeLeon in particular. We do not require that the SLP agree with our evaluation of this history as a pre-condition to unification. But we should not in any sense change our evaluation to accomodate the views of the SLP any more than we in any sense changed our assessment of the class character of the workers states in the course of fusion with the RMC.

I do believe Comrade Stapleton's portrait of Daniel DeLeon is unnecessarily uncritical and thus gives an imbalanced picture of his role in American revolutionary politics to our own membership. Comrade Stapleton tends to mark the degeneration and sectarianism of the SLP with the death of DeLeon and Arnold Peterson's take over of the organization. In this he appears to follow the line of David Herreshoff's book The Origins of American Marxism.

Herreshoff's book has some valuable information in it (though Howard H. Quint's The Forging of American Socialism is more detailed and accurate) and serves a worthy purpose of stimulating interest in pre-Debs Marxism. However, I believe it is very much shaped by Herreshoff's own political past as a former supporter of Cochran. From such a political point of view Herreshoff was quite critical of the Cannon tradition in our party. This tradition is a direct outcome of the early Communist Party, the IWW and the left wing of the SP. Thus his book may be in part a search for some other "radical" roots independent of this tradition. This he appears to find in sprucing up DeLeon. Also DeLeon is attractive to such a political outlook because he was essentially a national phenomenon with little international links.

In any event I believe that this pro-DeLeon outlook of both Herreshoff and Stapleton (who on some critical matters is less critical of DeLeon than Herreshoff) is essentially incorrect. There is a difference between the SLP of DeLeon and that of Arnold Peterson but there is also a devastatingly negative continuity between the two. Under DeLeon the SLP mattered in the sense that it had an impact on radical and working class politics. That impact was, in my opinion, largely wrong and disastrous in its effect. Under Peterson the SLP simply did not matter--had no impact, negative or positive, on the left and the working class.

Of course DeLeon made some positive contributions to Marxist thought particularly in his sharp assessment of reformism and opportunism and his understanding of the trade union bureaucrats which he dubbed the "labor lackeys of capital." However, his negative role in American radical politics greatly set back the immature socialist movement of his day.

First it is necessary to make a correction on the Pre-DeLeon Marxist movement in America. Marxism had existed in America over 30 years prior to DeLeon's conversion in 1890 and those years were not without their positive contributions, contrary to Stapleton. The first Marxist group was formed in 1857, The Communist Club, by F.A. Sorge a close follower and lifelong friend of Marx and Engels. It later became the basis for the American section of the First International. The First Internationalists played an active role in defense of the North in the Civil War (Joseph Weydemeyer, a member and another close friend of Marx and Engels, was a general), held a significant demonstration in defense of the Paris Commune, and in the early 1870s led some very sizable unemployed demonstrations of foreign born workers.

In 1877, the organization, then called the Socialistic Labor Party, played an important supporting role in the National Railway Strike, especially in St. Louis. Over the next decade the organization made contributions in two ways. First many of its members played leading roles in the establishment of the first stable unions in America as part of the Knights of Labor and then of the AFL. I think it is no exaggeration to say that the biggest contribution to the early development of unions in America came from German-American workers either members of or under the influence of the old SLP. Its second contribution was its organization, following the advice of Engels, of a labor party campaign around Henry George for mayor of New York City. This was an important early experiment to fulfill a task which is still before us.

Mention should also be made of an important split off from the SLP, the anarcho-communists of Chicago. This group, who were rebelling in a totally politically confused way from the conservatism of the early SLP, developed a very strong base in Chicago's labor movement until they were witchhunted out of existence in 1886 through the famous Haymarket trials.

So my point simply is that many important contributions had been made by the SLP and related trends prior to DeLeon's arrival and in no sense can we claim that the DeLeonist SLP was superior to the pre-DeLeonist SLP.

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The early SLP was at the same time a weak and politically sick movement. Its essential problem was an ingrown outlook common to emigre groups. Some of the best Marxists in America like Sorge and Weydemeyer found they could not live in it. It was deeply divided between two warring wings. The first were called "LaSalleans" who urged political propaganda and running in elections and were uninterested in union work. The second were called "Marxists" and favored union work (usually of a rather bread and butter variety) and were uninterested in election work. Of course this problem of the relation of the trade union and political side of a socialist party's work is a persistent one which we still wrestle with. In fact most of the problems we face today were posed a century ago and this is what makes a study of American labor and radical history so interesting and vital. It is also why one can make no compromises on this history as far as our own understanding is concerned.

DeLeon sought to resolve this conflict soon after joining the organization in 1890. His solution was simplicity itself--however the real world proved to be a bit more complicated. Political action was to be primary but trade union organization would also take place. The latter would need to be revolutionary and industrial unionism under the general control of the party.

Shortly after his arrival on the scene DeLeon consolidated his iron grip on the SLP organization. Between 1897 and 1900 a bulk of the membership of the SLP broke away unable to exist under his tyrannical regime. Most of these forces had at least some base within the AFL as well as effective electoral operations. They tended in a reformist direction.

In 1900 the various forces which had split off from the SLP (the only forces within the SLP with any serious base in the working class) united with a group around Eugene V. Debs, the great class struggle leader of the Pullman Strike, to form the new Socialist Party. The resulting party was very heterogeneous but it had a serious base in the working class and contained the most important revolutionary class struggle fighters of the day, like Debs and Haywood, as well as important intellectuals.

Cannon has well analyzed the great weaknesses of this party which in the end proved its undoing. And yet the SP represented the highest point socialism was to reach in America even to this day. And further, the future revolutionary movement would emerge from out of the SP and not the SLP. The SP had a relation to actual great class battles, masses of workers were passing through. The SLP was essentially isolated from the class struggles of its day.

The decisive test for DeLeon was the formation of the IWW. Here was, so to speak, the revolutionary industrial union movement, at least in embryo, that DeLeon (as well as all others on the left) had envisioned. DeLeon at first hailed the IWW and participated in it. But then he turned in a sharp factional direction seeking to take it over and to transform it into an adjunct of the SLP. When he proved unable to do this, DeLeon split from the IWW and formed a rival "Detroit" IWW (the official body had its headquarters in Chicago.)

The Detroit body soon became synonymous with the membership of the SLP. Its few attempts to actually organize workers proved disastrous and revealed the essentially conservative character of DeLeon's left-ist phrasemongering. For instance it was the Detroit IWW which first organized the Patterson Silk Workers. It concluded the first strike in a completely pacifist manner refusing to take any action to keep scabs out and not even picketing the plants. Two months after an agreement was signed the bosses repudiated the agreement. The workers then called in the official IWW. DeLeon sought to blame Haywood for his own failure in Patterson. The workers did not accept this position and soon the most important class struggle since Lawrence was underway under the leadership of Haywood and others.

This factionalism on the part of DeLeon not only seriously weakened the IWW and thus objectively aided the right wing AFL leadership and their right wing supporters in the SP, but just as important gave politics a bad name within the IWW encouraging syndicalist tendencies. The official IWW continued to carry on and lead important struggles of workers in the lumber camps of the west, among migrant agricultural workers, as well as the already mentioned Lawrence and Patterson strikes.

While the wrecking operation on the IWW was the decisive test of the SLP, the Russian Revolution marked its epitaph. There is more involved here than the fact that the SLP under Peterson took a hostile attitude towards the Russian Revolution and refused to participate in the Third International or really learn a thing from this greatest of all revolutionary experiences. The right wing of the SP took the same attitude. The important point is that hardly a single individual came out of the SLP into the CP while the CP was formed out of the majority of the SP. Also many, many activists from the IWW played important roles within the future CP.

The only serious exception I know of (in addition to Louis Fraina who left the SLP before the Russian Revolution) was a small group of individuals around Dr. Julius Hammer and his son Armand. I do not believe these people ever joined the CP but they substantially aided the fledgling workers republic in developing trade relations to the U.S. Armand Hammer ended up over the years rather well situated as president of Occidental Petroleum Company.

The whole point of this experience is simply this--the tradition in America which turned to the Russian Revolution and began the transition to becoming real Marxists and internationalists (our tradition) emerged out of the class struggle fighters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and not out of the sectarian formal doctrinaire tradition represented by DeLeon.

There is another point in Comrade Stapleton's contribution which needs some clarification. This point, I am afraid, is a bit of a sticky wicket as it has a rather direct bearing upon the present and thus cannot be totally excluded from what will be required as a political basis for a successful fusion.

This is the question of the nature of the party and the nature of the revolution itself. Here I do not believe our differences with the SLP can be written off as simply or largely "terminological" as Stapleton suggests.

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The present party structure of the SWP is not simply determined by our immediate tasks, on which we have considerable agreement with the current SLP, like opposition to Bakke, for ERA, for Sadlowski, for democratic rights, etc. We also view our party as the embryo of the party of the future which will lead the American Revolution. Our present party structure is determined thus both by present tasks and preparation for future tasks. Finally, our concept of future tasks is developed out of our assessment of past revolutionary events -- particularly the Russian Revolution. In this fashion historical questions have a rather direct bearing on our present organization and day to day functioning. Unless some clarity is achieved on this question of revolution and party structure I do not see how the SLP comrades could comfortably exist in a common party with us. This problem did not arise with the RMC which shared a common tradition as far as the Russian Revolutionary events were concerned.

Comrade Stapleton states: "Some SLP comrades are confused about our attitude toward the state. But in fact, our views are very similar. We both stand for the abolition of the capitalist state apparatus--courts, Congress, the army and police, and the rest, and its replacement with organs of workers power based on industry. Whether you call that a workers government, or a workers state, or a Socialist Industrial Union government, doesn't seem like an earth-shattering difference."

What Stapleton does not explain is that DeLeon, for all his left rhetoric, believed deeply in the peaceful essentially parliamentary road to socialism at least in the United States. DeLeon wrote: "Political action raises the labor movement above the category of a 'conspiracy'; it places the movement in line with the spirit of the age...in which the masses must themselves be intelligent actors. ...The political movement bows to the method of civilized discussion: it gives a chance to the peaceful solution of the great question at issue."

DeLeon felt that it was possible that the ruling class might resist a majority electoral victory of the workers. But in this case he assumed mass general strike action would so frighten the capitalists that they would accept their own expropriation without violent resistance. Needless to say such a concept of the peaceful road to socialism effected his concept of party organization and even day to day tactics. He was generally known in his day for an overly legalistic approach and even announced that his Detroit IWW would not conduct strikes in any situation where there was a danger violence might ensue.

DeLeon, like many sectarians, was actually a very conservative fellow.

Basically the SLP projection of the revolutionary process appears to be as follows: (1) The SLP will gain through its socialist propaganda the voting support of the majority; (2) at the same time it will organize the mass of the workers into industrial unions affiliated with the SLP, dedicated to revolutionary socialism, and refusing to carry on any immediate activities of any sort;

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(3) The SLP Congress would then vote to abolish the army, courts, and itself handing power over to an electoral system based on the work place; (4) the SLP, having fulfilled its tasks, would then dissolve itself.

Quite frankly I do not see the identity Stapleton seems to see between this schema and Lenin's State and Revolution.

It also should be noted that the SLP concept of industrial union government is different in essential respects from our concept of soviets or workers councils. Our concept is developed out of the actual history of the working class--the Paris Commune, Russia 1905 and 1917, Germany and Hungary, 1919, Hungary and Poland 1956. We see such councils as developing spontaneously out of great revolutionary crises prior to socialist revolution, not willed from on top following a peaceful parliamentary transition. Such councils and the resulting government structure encompass more than workers at the work place. They have historically included the peasants, sections of the army, unemployed workers, and other intermediary layers of the population necessary to a successful revolution. The SLP concept is both devoid of real content from real struggles, envisioned in a formal rather than mass actionist way, and narrow in its constituency. Actually it is an idea DeLeon borrowed from French syndicalism and grafted on to his sectarian politics.

Of course having a very different concept of the nature of the revolution itself, the SLP has historically had a different concept of party organization. This is the roots of the continued hostility to the concept of a combat, Leninist party. Also, as Stapleton explains, they have no concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the necessary workers state stage in the evolution towards socialism, the role of parties in this process--and many other abc concepts. The problem we face with the SLP is that we are dealing with a tendency which has essentially evolved outside the main Marxist world current for over 75 years. There is hardly a question of essential revolutionary theory upon which we have a common starting point. But without some level of common theoretical base a successful fusion is a pipedream. This is not some totally new group to emerge freshly out of the working class.

I do not hold that we must reach complete agreement with the present SLP over the nature of the Russian Revolution and the related concept of the Leninist party. However, we must not in any way weaken our concepts by seeing them as only terminologically distinct from DeLeon's and Peterson's. And I do happen to believe at least some progress toward agreement on this most fundamental of all questions will have to be reached if a fusion can not only take place but be successful between small organizations like ours and theirs.

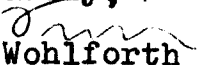
I hope the Political Committee comrades will consider these ideas in preparation for the Plenum when I am sure at least some version of Comrade Stapleton's report will be given. Also it might be

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helpful to circulate this letter to the National Committee so comrades on the committee as a whole can think a bit in advance on this matter before the plenum.

I want to thank Comrade Stapleton for seriously dealing with these critical questions of American socialist history even if I do not agree entirely with his emphasis. The resulting discussion can only be extremely educational for the whole party.

Comradely,


Tim Wohlforth