

TWO PROPOSALS

by George Breitman

1. That we discontinue designating ourselves as "Trotskyists."

On April 10, 1951, Comrade Cannon, on behalf of the Secretariat, gave a report to the PC on reasons why we should stop designating ourselves as "Trotskyists" and why we should refer to ourselves as socialists, revolutionary socialists, the Socialist Workers Party, etc. A motion to this effect was then passed by the PC as a recommendation to the next plenum. There was also agreement with a Secretariat proposal that the pictures of Lenin and Trotsky be removed from the editorial masthead of the paper. (Pertinent excerpts from the minutes are attached.) I can't find the minutes of the subsequent plenum, but the only ones who ever demurred, if my memory is right, were the Marcyites (who reinstated the two pictures in their paper's masthead for a short while after they left us)

I thought the proposal was a good one then; and, despite conditions that are not identical, I think it's good now. On the whole, the label "Trotskyist" is a handicap, not an asset. To new people it gives the impression that we are some kind of cult, creating unnecessary obstacles to reaching them with our program, especially rebellious youth who are suspicious of cults.

This was not a term we chose or sought. Trotsky never used it, except within quotation marks to indicate it was not his designation for our movement. Moreover, we ourselves generally did not use it during his lifetime. Only after the 1940 split did we begin that practice, when the Shactmanites used it for a while.

Unfortunately, there was a relapse from the wise decision of 1951, starting in 1952 with the fight against the Cochranites and their slogan, "Junk the Old Trotskyism," and continuing to the present time with few exceptions. I maintain this is quite unnecessary today in the U.S.; 99 times out of 100 that the term is used in our articles and speeches it is unnecessary. I wish our editors, writers and speakers would take the trouble to see how often it can be replaced, without any loss of specificity, by Socialist Workers Party, revolutionary socialists, the Fourth International and its sympathizers throughout the world, etc. And I hope the NC or the convention will stimulate them to take the trouble.

2. That we change the transitional slogan "For a Workers and Farmers Government" to "For a Workers Government."

The present slogan and the one proposed both are designed as bridges to the idea of a government of the revolutionary workers and their allies among other sections of the population -- farmers, minority groups, women, youth, parts of the petty-bourgeoisie, etc. The trouble with the present slogan is that it mentions only one of these potential allies (farmers), and that these are not the most important of the allies, either numerically or socially. Since we can't include all the allies in the slogan, it would be better in my opinion to include none, and to list them all in the explanations we have to make of the slogan; we have to make explanations with both slogans.

There was a time when the farmers were a much bigger section of the population, and when their relative political weight was heavier. Such was the case in 1938 when the present slogan was adopted. But technological change has altered the situation considerably. In 1938 those Americans occupied in agriculture, including all classes and their families, represented between 21 and 22% of the population; today the figure is around 8%, and the trend continues to be down. It is wrong today to single out the farmers above all the other potential allies of the revolutionary workers when, to take one example, the Negro people are both more numerous (10 to 11%) and more dynamic.

In 1938 there were differences and a discussion about the slogan (see articles by Burnham and Weber and conversation with Crux in the August, 1938 bulletin). I hope my proposal will not be connected in any way with that discussion (or be misconstrued as an "under-estimation" of the revolutionary potential of the farmers). The proposed change is motivated primarily by the different rank among our potential allies that the farmers have been shifted to by changes in American capitalist society during the last 27 years.

But I would like to call attention to a point made in 1938 by both Crux and Weber in their defense of the present slogan. Crux said, "The farmers play a very important role in the United States. In England, this is not a very important question because the workers are the overwhelming majority." Weber, following this cue, said the Workers and Farmers Government slogan does not apply universally; "It would not at all apply, for example in England. But it does apply in the United States." Because in England the farmers had, in 1938, become "a negligible factor, numerically and economically," forming, "families and all, only some seven percent

of the population. Thus in England it would be quite unnecessary to argue the point, in a transition program, of whether to call for a workers government or a workers and farmers government."

Detroit, Michigan
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The above two proposals were submitted last January too late to reach the N.C. plenum. They were then mailed to the N.C. members in April, but never evoked any response. They are now submitted for action by the coming convention, under any point on the agenda deemed most suitable, or for referral by convention action to the new N.C. for disposition.

I would add only this: "For a Workers Government" looks a little sparse. Perhaps the formula should read: "For a Workers Government -- for a government based on, representing and acting for black and white factory, farm and office workers and their allies." On certain occasions, it could be referred to in shorthand as "A Black and White Workers Government" or "A Factory, Farm and Office Workers Government"; or "a government of factory, farm and office workers and their allies."

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Attachment: (From P.C. Minutes, April 10, 1951)

(Cannon) reported discussion in Secretariat on how we should designate ourselves as the movement approaches more and more the general public, particularly as we are developing a pattern of broader participation in election campaigns. We have tended to call ourselves Trotskyists as a distinguishing label in what may be called the internal fight of the Socialist and Communist movement in order to distinguish ourselves from the Stalinists, the Social Democrats, etc.

For some time our struggle in this country has been shifting away in its main axis from both of these struggles. It is no longer concentrated primarily on fighting Stalinism; and even the fight against the Social Democrats of various breeds is a subordinate part of our work....

Our comrades in the field, however, have had the tendency to insist on calling themselves Trotskyists everywhere.... I have the feeling that this designation impresses the average unpolitical

American -- the very person we are most interested in -- as a sectarian movement, as followers of some individual, and a Russian at that. It is not a suitable characterization for a broad American movement. Our enemies will refer to us as Trotskyists, and we will, of course, not deny it; but we should say: "We are Trotskyists because Trotsky was a true socialist."

What we are presenting against American capitalism and the labor bureaucracy is the principle of the class struggle of modern socialism. I think we ought to consider this seriously from the point of view of propaganda technique, and more and more refer to ourselves as Socialist, revolutionary Socialist, Socialist Workers, or something like that....

Let our enemies within the movement, that is in the narrow framework of the more political movement, call us Trotskyist. We will not protest. But then we will say we are Trotskyist because he represented genuine socialism and we, like him, are the real Socialists. This has importance because more and more in elections we have the only candidates against the bourgeois candidates....

We have to think of ourselves more and more as representing the Socialist opposition to the American bourgeoisie. I don't think we should do it under the handicap of what appears to the workers as a sectarian or cultist name. That is what the term "Trotskyist" signifies to them. A very illuminating comment was made by Herrick in a letter from Seattle. A party member reported the remark of a worker about the "picture of the two Russians" on the editorial page. He said, "Your party must be some kind of Russian outfit." These things have to be noted. This should be one of the points on Plenum agenda for decision.

General Discussion.

Motion by Cannon: That we propose to the Plenum that we designate ourselves in broad public political agitation as "Socialist" or "Socialist Workers" or "Revolutionary Socialist," alternatively, as the occasion may demand.

Carried.

Proposal of Secretariat: That the two pictures be removed from the masthead as of next issue, and that hereafter we run occasional quotations from American leaders of the past, as well as from our classic leaders, with pictures.

General agreement.