

POLITICAL COMMITTEE MEETING, No. 18, April 10, 1972

Present: Breitman, Britton, Camejo, Dobbs, A. Hansen, J. Hansen,
Horowitz, Jenness, Jones, Lovell, Novack, Rose, Stone

Visitors: Kerry, Scott, Seigle, Shaw, White

Chairman: Novack

AGENDA: 1. Latin America Report

1. LATIN AMERICA REPORT

Camejo reported.

Discussion

Meeting adjourned.

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

April 12, 1972

TO MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE

Dear Comrades,

The attached is a contribution by Comrade George Breitman to the discussion of the leadership question initiated by Comrade Farrell Dobbs at the Political Committee meeting of November 19, 1971. Comrade Dobbs' memorandum on this question was sent to National Committee members at that time.

Comradely,

Betsy Stone

Betsy Stone

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION OF THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION

Comrade Dobbs' memorandum of November 16, 1971, is a document that ought to engage the attention of the whole leadership at the coming plenum. What follows is written from the standpoint of one who agrees with the major purpose of his memorandum and, I think, most of his specific or implied proposals, but who views the problems he discusses from a slightly different angle.

The question is how to achieve the best balance of continuity and change in the leadership. In the early years of our movement it was not a pressing problem, and in part took care of itself; splits and defections automatically provided channels of change and renewal. In the second phase (counting either from the start of the cold war in the late 1940s or the Cochran split of 1953) recruitment shrank to a dribble, we were thrown completely onto the defensive, and we had to fight merely to survive; under such conditions the emphasis inevitably is placed on continuity: even its negative aspects then have their positive aspects. So the problem in its present form has been posed for us only since the start of the third phase, around ten years ago, when the objective situation began to change and we started recruiting significant numbers of serious young members. Simultaneously the older comrades began to reach the point where it was plain to them that they could not do what they had formerly been able to.

How has the transitional process worked during this last decade? Speaking as one who was not present in the national center during most of that time, I would say it has worked well. Not perfectly, but well. Not as fast as the comrades who initiated and guided the process wished, but not so slowly that the transition was seriously impeded. As a result we have reached a position of strength from which we can now advance much more rapidly and surely. I think it was this conviction that prompted Comrade Dobbs to say, "Little progress was made at the last party convention in carrying forward the necessary transitions in leadership."

How little the progress was is summarized in the memorandum: Of 28 regular NC members, 27 ran again and were re-elected; since the 28th was elected an advisory member, it can be assumed he too would have been re-elected as a regular if he had not declined. Of the 22 alternates, 17 were renominated and re-elected; one was elected to the regular list; four were dropped; and five were newly elected as alternates. Out of a combined total of 50 regulars and alternates, there are five new faces, a change of 10 percent. This is smaller than the real change that took place in the leadership between the 1969 and 1971 conventions. So far as the NC is concerned, we are lagging behind in the transition.

The situation is even worse if we examine the breakdown of the NC regulars by age as provided in the memorandum: only 9 of the 28 are younger, as compared to 19 in the middle and older age ranges. The age division among the alternates is healthier: 14 younger as against 8 middle or older. But at the recent rate of change in the regular list it would take many years, perhaps decades, before a similarly healthy ratio is achieved in the regular list.

What can we do to hasten the process? Comrade Dobbs' memorandum points to at least two steps: One is to make the leadership as a whole, and subsequently the party as a whole, more aware of the problem, more conscious about the need to grapple with it. A second seems to be a suggestion that more of the comrades (mainly the older ones, but also some of the middle ones) should consider not running for re-election.

I would like to offer a third: That we try between now and the next convention to alter somewhat the collective party understanding that influences the criteria used by nominating commissions in making their recommendations.

Section II of the memorandum correctly reminds us that continuity of the leadership must not signify or be equated with "automatic self-perpetuation of leadership." It is greatly to our credit that we have avoided self-perpetuation of leadership. But we have not avoided a too-slowly changing leadership. The way things are now there is too much continuity and not enough change.

Why is this? Nominating commissions are too conservative, in my opinion. They seem to begin by asking, "Is there any reason why Comrade A should not be renominated?" rather than "Is there any reason why this comrade should be renominated?" If Comrade A, a fine comrade for many years no doubt, has not done anything disgraceful, the tendency is to renominate. This tendency holds even if Comrade A hasn't done anything particularly noteworthy since the last convention either. Get elected to the committee once or twice, and thereafter, unless you do something scandalous or become completely inactive, you've got a better than even chance of continuing to be re-elected for a long time.

I don't blame the members of any particular nominating commission for this tendency: they merely continue what has virtually reached the status of an unwritten tradition. (The 1971 commission was, if anything, less "traditional" than usual; while I disagreed with some of their recommendations, I feel that they were less conservative than many of their predecessors: It has been some time since four members were dropped at one time.) This hasn't mattered too much in the past, but now it matters very much because it has become an impediment to progress.

Recently I ran across two different places where Trotsky referred to Kamenev as a permanent member of the Bolshevik central committee. "Permanent" was puzzling -- was it a mistranslation for "regular"? No, it wasn't. Of course there was no such thing as "permanent membership" on the CC. Applying the rule that should guide all translators -- first make sure of what the author wrote, then ask what the author meant -- I came to the conclusion that what Trotsky meant was that Kamenev was one of the leaders who were always re-elected to the Bolshevik CC. I haven't had the time to do the research, but I think that in Lenin's time, both before and after 1917, a number of the leaders fell into that category, while another and perhaps larger number were what could be called occasional members, that is, were elected once or twice, then dropped for a time, later re-elected, etc. If this is correct, then continuity in the Bolshevik leadership was maintained not through 90 percent re-elections (as at our 1971 convention) but through the re-election of the central cadre of the leader-

ship, which might turn out to be 50 percent or less.

That is the kind of situation I would like to see in our party -- not an end to continuity of leadership, but a re-examination and re-definition of what continuity is and requires. A situation where it would not be unusual for people to go off the committee, or to be transferred from regular to alternate, not because they had done something bad but because other comrades of equal caliber had displayed the capacity to serve as committee members and should have equal opportunity to do so; and where therefore there would be no stigma attached to one's not being renominated time after time.

* * *

While I am at it, I would like to submit two other proposals which are not directly connected with the preceding problem but have some relation to it.

The party constitution provides that national conventions be held at least every two years. I don't propose that we change the constitution but that we consider holding conventions more frequently, say once a year.

I think this is warranted politically. The tempo of events has speeded up considerably in the last decade; the number of new problems we face and will be facing is increasing. Conventions strengthen the party, even though they put a heavier than usual burden on the national office. This kind of party strengthening will be exceptionally valuable and welcome in the next few years when it seems likely that our struggle for hegemony will come to a head.

As it is, we seem to be moving toward a national gathering every year, attended by the great majority of the membership: a convention in 1969, a national educational and activists conference in 1970, a convention in 1971, another educational-activist conference this year. That is, gathering the membership together in one place once a year does not seem to be a problem any more.

Things have changed considerably since we first wrote the every-two-years convention provision into the constitution. No delegates traveled by air at that time, now it is commonplace. Recently I heard a PC member remarking with some awe in his voice about delegates to a convention in India who had had to travel 3½ or 4 days by rail; he was too young to remember that that was quite common for West Coast delegates attending conventions in the early years of our movement.

There are two possible objections to this proposal that I can think of offhand: (1) that a yearly convention and yearly preconvention discussion period might interfere with our external activity, reducing its quantity, etc., and (2) that it might place an unnecessary burden on the comrades in the national office who have to organize the convention, prepare resolutions, etc.

With regard to the first possibility, I tend to minimize it because I think that preconvention discussions heighten the morale of the membership and therefore make them more rather than less responsive to their responsibilities in external work. At any rate, I would be willing to take the risk that I am wrong

here and let experience tell us the answer. (Meanwhile we might check with the YSA and find out what their experience has been with annual conventions and what they do to deal with this question.)

With regard to the second possibility, I would like to suggest that the burden on the national center could be reduced if we adopted some slightly different attitudes toward national conventions. First of all, it is not necessary that we have resolutions on everything under the sun at every convention. Second, it is not necessary that conventions be five days long, or longer. A perfectly adequate convention agenda could consist of two or three main points -- an international, a political and an organizational report, for example -- with more time allowed for each point than we have been able to allow with 8- or 9-point agendas. If we don't have something new to say on a question, let's not have a point on it; cover it in the political report. Nor do we need a resolution every time we have a point on a subject; sometimes a report is adequate. If we combine a convention with educational sessions, as we did in 1971, we can cover some things more informally in the educational sessions. And if somehow, as a result of this proposed compression, we omit something important, we can always take it up next time, which will be only one year away, not two.

I would suggest this kind of "loosening up" toward national conventions even if the proposal to change their frequency is rejected. And I would like to suggest that we begin to experiment with holding parts of the preconvention discussion in our public press, as we used to do in the early years of our movement; I think that doing this would make the party more attractive to our sympathizers and contacts, and enhance recruitment.

Last year I suggested to comrades in the national office that we consider holding another convention this year, but nothing came of it. Now it is too late, of course. I bring it up now in the hope that we can put it into effect in 1974.

* * *

My final proposal concerns the public spokesmen and women of the party. We have always correctly avoided the kind of thing that happened with the Socialist Party in the time of Norman Thomas, when a single individual came to represent the party more than the party did. But I think we probably bent the stick back too far. Most Americans tend to think of political tendencies in terms of their leaders; we can deplore this, but I don't think we can deny it. The SWP appears a little too anonymous to the public, I am afraid. Of course we have our candidates to speak for us, and the problem I refer to would be much worse if we did not participate in electoral contests regularly. But our candidates are always changing, and anyhow there still are periods when no important election is taking place. I think we can deal with this problem by taking steps that are quite devoid of artificiality or phoniness. We should designate three or four of our active leaders to be the public spokesmen and women of the party -- who call press conferences when the party has something to announce, who appear at public hearings, and who sign articles in our press not only with their names but also with their titles. The national secretary should be one of these. The national chairmanship should be utilized

for the same purpose (that is, changed from an honorary to an active operational post; if this is done, Comrade Cannon could be designated honorary chairman). We could have a vice-chairman/woman, or even two. The aim would be to "personalize" the party a little more for the benefit of contacts and readers of our press, to whom now it may seem somewhat impersonal and remote.

George Breitman
April 9, 1972