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Memorandum to the Political Committee of the Socialist Workers Party
From: David Thorstad
Re: Resignation From Membership
Date: December 17, 1973

I have decided to resign from membership in the Socialist Workers Party. My decision, although arrived at with great reluctance and put off with the stubbornness of those who cling to hope when that is all that is left, is made with the confidence that it is the correct one. There is, quite simply, no reasonable alternative to it.

I address this letter to the Political Committee not out of any inflated estimation of the importance of my decision as an individual member of the party. Rather, I do so because I feel that since my resignation is only one of a series of resignations (or potential resignations) for similar reasons, it may be of some value to the PC to know a bit about the considerations that have brought me to this point.

Let me preface these considerations with the following observation. While some may judge my decision to be a reflection -- or even proof -- of personal weakness, I regard it as a sign of personal strength and integrity. Few, I think, could seriously question the commitment of myself and other gay comrades to revolutionary Marxism; the record speaks for itself. And until recently -- certainly until the rise of the gay liberation movement -- it would have been frankly unthinkable for me to leave the organization to which I had devoted my life. Yet I have come to regard commitment to homosexual liberation and membership in the Socialist Workers Party as incompatible.

The evolution of the party's approach to gay liberation since Spring 1971 has been such as to objectively drive gays from the party. Such a statement may at first appear shocking or hyperbolic. But a closer look at the history of the past three years will show that the party's attitude toward homosexual oppression and liberation (and indeed sex questions in general) has reached a point where gay comrades who are unwilling or unable to divorce their struggle against their sexual oppression from their politics are being forced to make a choice between gay liberation and revolutionary socialism. This is, to be sure, a false choice; for a Marxist, the commitment to gay liberation is inseparable from a commitment to revolutionary socialism, and vice versa. Yet the party's determination, after a fleeting flirtation with gay liberation in early 1971, to demote it from a political to an essentially personal issue, is forcing this choice upon its gay members.

Not all will choose, as I have, to leave the party. Some may even decide to remain members for basically the same reasons that I have decided not to. But all will decide. And to attempt to explain their decision to stay or to leave as simply a necessary, or even valuable, step along the road to "cadre selection" would be to fail utterly to understand either the profound nature of the conflict on a personal level or its significance from a historical point of view.

Gay liberation confronts the revolutionary movement with a historical test. It raises issues so fraught with fear and prejudice, so smothered in ignorance and superstition, and so lacking in accepted status as a cause to be championed by the left that it

would be foolish to imagine that a reversal of that status could be brought about easily. But a reversal must be achieved. And I have come to the conclusion that it can be achieved best outside the SWP rather than inside it.

So far, the SWP has failed the historical test. Its elimination of the antigay policy at the end of 1970 gave reason to hope that finally a Marxist, materialist appreciation of homosexual oppression and liberation was about to prevail on the revolutionary left. I can speak about the intensity of this hope with some knowledge because I myself had all but lost it; I spent the better part of the year 1970 debating with myself whether or not, as a homosexual socialist, I should leave the party that so unconscionably oppressed its own gay members. I was able to maintain the dichotomy between my homosexuality and my commitment to socialism long enough to see the conflict resolved by the elimination of the policy.

The months following the removal of the policy saw the beginnings of an attempt to develop a serious, Marxist grasp of the significance of the burgeoning gay movement and of how the struggle against homosexual oppression fit into the aims of the revolutionary party. Many homosexual comrades were stirred to new life, hope, and creativity by this willingness of the party to embrace gay liberation. They began to challenge the unchallengeable stereotypes about themselves, confident that the party stood behind them. They became perhaps a bit heady to see straight comrades joining them in this fight. They began, for the first time, to see evaporate the need for them to keep their homosexuality and their politics in separate compartments.

Their headiness did not last long. In just a few months, it became clear that serious obstacles were being placed in the path of such a trend. They were being placed there by a party leadership that was divided over the trend, that adopted a course of papering over differences on this issue rather than confronting backwardness and bigotry head on, and that, as time went on, became less and less candid with the ranks about the retreat that was begun in late Spring 1971. Retreat was portrayed as advance, vanishing coverage of gay liberation in the press as evidence of a decline in the gay movement, withdrawal of support as evidence of support, nonintervention as intervention, and a refusal to develop a Marxist analysis of gay oppression and liberation as the very paragon of Marxist wisdom. The 1972 literary discussion on gay liberation was itself merely a stage in a retreat that culminated in the party convention decision in August of this year. There is no need to elaborate on this process; it was simply, and accurately, described by Lee Smith in "Looking Backward: The SWP and Gay Liberation, 1970-1973" (SWP Discussion Bulletin, Vol. 31, No. 29, July 1973).

Supporters of the National Committee Memorandum on the Gay Liberation Movement sought to portray it as a pro-intervention document. Surely it would require a great deal of cynicism to defend that argument today, in view of the post-convention standstill the party has reached on gay liberation. It is a cynicism of which I find myself incapable.

The convention decision has made it impossible to recruit gay militants to the party. It has made it impossible for gays to reconcile their commitment to gay liberation with party membership. Rather, they must stay in the party in spite of such com-

mitment. Some may wish to do so believing that the memorandum -- as wretched, unscientific, and un-Marxist a document as one can imagine -- will prove to be a disaster (which it will) and that the inevitable wheels of democratic centralism will bring about a rectification of the error. I hope they are proven right. I cannot say that I am as optimistic as they are, however. For, since the encouraging willingness of the party leadership in 1970 to respond to pressures from below and to reverse the policy banning gays from membership, the pendulum appears to have swung back to a point where the comrades of the PC are intent on calling the shots. Yet none of you have any credentials as experts on gay liberation -- despite the pretentious character of the memorandum that the PC and NC brought to the party for adoption. In matters of homosexual oppression and liberation, you still have far more to learn from gay comrades and from the gay movement than they have to learn from you.

You still cling to your conception of the socialist revolution being an essentially heterosexual revolution -- made of, by, and for heterosexual workers. You fear that too close an identification of the revolutionary party with gay liberation will alienate it from the (heterosexual) masses and interfere with its ability to lead the socialist revolution. And you have tied the hands of gay comrades (and straight sympathizers) who wish to help you change your mind. You have made membership in the SWP for many members of our oppressed minority intolerable.

I am fed up with the SWP's procrastination in developing a Marxist line on gay liberation. I sincerely hope that some day it will be able to do so. It can begin by throwing its memorandum on gay liberation into the nearest trashbin. For my part, however, I believe that I can make a more useful contribution, however modest, outside of it.

Fraternally,
s/David Thorstad