Toward Stalinism or Trotskyism?
NEW LEFT’S DEATH AGONY

The heavily publicized SDS split at its National Convention in Chicago was the culmination of a year of factional squabbling and in-fighting between the “National Collective” (NC) and the “Worker-Student Alliance” (WSA). The WSA is led by the Progressive Labor Party (PL), this country’s semi-official—although by no means only—Maoist organization. The NC is based on SDS’s National Officers and their supporters who included, as it turned out, the Communist Party and the Black Panthers. The NC tendency is actually a bloc of several distinct groups (the old New Left exemplified by Mark Rudd, Avakian’s Bay Area Revolutionary Union, National Secretary Mike Klonsky) which crystallized in reflexive reaction to the aggressive assault on mainstream New Leftism mounted by the WSA.

In terms of size and influence, SDS was at its apex. Students newly radicalized by the Viet Nam war and repressions of the ghetto rebellions flocked to SDS in droves, attracted by its professed openness and its activism. In the main contemptuous of theory, SDSers scorned the “Old Left,” which they viewed as dogmatic, anti-democratic and faction-ridden, and sought to replace the old disputes with only a few classless phrases: “participatory democracy,” “community control,” “organize the poor,” “doing your own thing,” etc. In 1965, PL dissolved its earlier youth group, the May 2nd Movement (which had attempted, unsuccessfully, to compete with SDS) to enter SDS.

SDS Goes Stalinist

Faced with the pressing lack of program, perspective and theory, SDS began to harden up in a number of directions. The politics of PL, the main group visible in SDS with any kind of proletarian line, had tremendous appeal to the most serious SDSers groping for a class analysis. Partly in response, anti-PLism began to crystallize a strong sentiment to transform SDS into a democratic-centralist youth organization, a disciplined group representing evolving mainstream New Leftism. At the June 1968 SDS Convention held in East Lansing, PL came close to being thrown out of SDS as an “external cadre organization.” The recent Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) proposal embodied this attempt to transform SDS into domestic Red Guards, a hard-line youth party.

At this year’s June convention, the two currents met head-on. There was no doubt that a showdown was in the wings as the tension ran high, occasionally erupting into fist fights and lapsing into shouting matches with each side waving Mao’s “Little Red Book” at the other. The stage was set for a repetition in a higher key of last year’s PL-baiting, and it became apparent that this year the NC did not intend to stop short of expulsion. There was only one catch: the PL-WSA wing, by dint of their crude working-class line’s appeal and after months of determined organizing, came to the Convention with what was probably a majority of the delegates. The NC was forced to speed up its timing in order to force the intended split before the final voting for the incoming leadership. In a heavy-handed maneuver, they brought in the Black Panther Party for an obviously pre-planned denunciation of “racism” and “Trotskyism,” including threats of physical violence. Immediately following a harangue by the Panthers, leaflets were distributed—in a masterpiece of convergent timing—castigating PL for its “counter-revolutionary” and “racist” stands on Cuba, the NLF, the Black movement, etc. The splitting faction, representing a large minority of the organization, walked out of the Convention hall and SDS. They took with them SDS’s funds, mailing lists, offices and newspaper.

The Klonsky-Avakian-Dohrn bloc is united chiefly in its hostility to PL, its uncritical “Third World” enthusiasm, its refusal to tolerate criticism of what used to be called “progressive forces” and its anti-working-class line. They see colonial revolutions as a precondition to any radicalization of the U.S. working class, whose role they see as at best passive allies for the Vietnamese or else as a labor aristocracy bought off by imperialist crumbs. Thus, they reduce themselves to cheerleaders for the “Third World” guerrillas and function domestically as white Black Nationalists.

Spartacist Intervenes

The Spartacist League intervened at the Convention with several resolutions and position papers (reprinted in this issue of SPARTACIST). After the split of the NC bloc, our comrades remained in SDS (i.e., the WSA wing, to whom we stand closer than to the NC splitters who are both politically to their right and openly exclu-

(Continued Next Page)
AGONY

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Theoretical Bankruptcy

In a sense, PL has had its own Stalinism shoved down its throat. In December 1968, at the Ann Arbor National Council, PL blocked with the NC to racist-bait the Marcus group ("SDS Labor Committee") for their critical support to the UFT's in the NYC teachers' strike, and supported their expulsion in direct violation of SDS's non-exclusionist Constitution. Now PL is at the mercy of the same degenerate, anti-consciousness weapons in the hands of the NC—exclusion and slander—for their critical attitude toward Black Nationalism and the "Third World" Stalinist leaders, a line which is too far left for the NC and its right-wing Stalinists. In a classic ironic twist PL, after years of denouncing Trotskyists for criticizing Stalinist-led movements and their states, is itself accused of Trotskyism for its present version of the classically Trotskyist position that decimation of Trotskyists is vital rather than divisive in the fight against imperialism. Further, before its recent turn, PL spent years uncritically supporting Black Nationalism in all its guises, thus helping establish the precedent that the Panthers—who have now led the anti-PL purge—must be correct by definition.

While the Kronsly-Dohrn-Avakian wing comes out openly for smashing the working class for its racism, the WSA-PL opposes Black separatism and calls for working-class unity across color lines. This is again a crude version of an impulse toward Trotskyism: that is, the program of proletarian revolution rather than Maoist peasant-based "Bloc of Four Classes" national movements. But in its "Stalinist" fashion, PL has rejected its former line of uncritical apologetics for Black Nationalism only to jump over the Leninist outlook into the camp of color-blind, unity-mongering, denying the need to fight against the special oppression of Black workers.

WHO'S WHAT NOW?

"The Progressive Labor Party has attacked every revolutionary nationalist struggle of the Black and Latin peoples in the U.S. as being racist and reactionary... "Progressive Labor Party has attacked Ho Chi Minh, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, the revolutionary government of Cuba—all leaders of the peoples' struggles for freedom against U.S. Imperialism. Progressive Labor Party, because of its positions and practices, is objectively racist, anti-communist, and reactionary. It has no place in SDS, an organization of revolutionary youth."

(from official statement of National Collective wing of SDS following June 1969 Convention, establishing new criteria for SDS membership)

"The Spartacists, in general, want a revolution in Cuba, China (People's Republic), Algeria and the USSR. This position of the others has been taken by the Spartacists and other Trotskyists. Coincidentally, this is the same position taken by the U.S. State Department... In effect, the Trotskyists do the work of the enemy."

(from PL's William McCaod's letter to the Chicago Epton Defense Committee excluding Spartacists from Epton defense work, 3 March 1969)

would reveal a great deal about its heroes. And without any methodology, PL can only readjust its mistakes by flip-flopping impressionistically every time the wind changes, often to a symmetrical error from the opposite direction.

The Leninist-Trotskyist conception of the role of the vanguard in broader struggles includes recognition of the special oppression of racial, ethnic, national, social minorities and seeks to fight for the special needs of all the oppressed while recognizing the primary of class issues and the necessity for proletarian hegemony. Lenin and the need for mass organization—transitional organizations.

Black people, women, youth—suggestion of their special needs across national, ethnic and sex lines in order to focus all these on a fight against the real oppressors of their exploitation.
AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1969

Defend Black Panthers!
The authorities are everywhere trying to destroy the only existing nation-wide Black movement of struggle.

Free the New York 21
jailed in a vicious, transparent frame-up and held on $100,000 bail each for "Conspiracy" charges.

Money for legal defense is urgently needed.
Send to:
Black Panther Party
Box 1224
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11202

which are in essence an unconscious bad paraphrase of Trotskyist analysis, usually several years too late and after denouncing as "counter-revolutionary" these very positions. Unable to stand up against any study of history or theory, which would reveal the betrayals of Stalin and Mao as well as PL's own checkered past, PL must continue to denounce Trotskyism and to practice the same Stalinist slander, exclusionism and violence which the Klonsky wing is now employing against them.

This decisive split in SDS comes after years of rejecting the lessons of history and the "old disputes" of the earlier movement a sectarian and irrelevanct. The split reflects a clear left-right polarization between those who continue an anti-worker elitism and those who subjectively seek, in an abortive and distorted way, working-class politics. Both sides have now accepted, if unevenly and incompletely, the counter-revolutionary dead-end of Stalinism—a massive tradition of anti-Leninism built upon the physical destruction of the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky and which has behind it a series of betrayals of the international working class from China in 1927-8 through Spain in 1936-7 to Indonesia in 1965. It is indeed ironic that the New Left, after years of rejecting the "Old Left," should end up embracing precisely that aspect of the "Old Left" responsible for the sterility and failure of the efforts of perhaps millions of dedicated militants who at one time shared SDS's subjective commitment to revolution. Chicago marked the death of a flawed, contradictory and hopeful phenomenon, the New Left.