

April 28, 1975

TO MEMBERS OF THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE

Dear Comrades,

The attached correspondence is for the information of the Political Committee only.

National Office

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Brooklyn, New York
April 19, 1975

Dear Joe,

Thank you for your recent letter. I am right now in the midst of typing up the final draft of my article on Cannon. It should be finished in a few days and I will be happy to submit it to Intercontinental Press with the understanding that you will, of course, feel free to make your own independent comments.

I found the information on Pablo very interesting. Once a man is broken from any roots in the historical development of the movement and free from the day to day task of constructing a party, then he is open to great intellectual instability. This was certainly the case with Shachtman and with Burnham. Beginning only with their own moods and impressions, they become subject to the class pressures around them. This is what I mean by subjective idealism.

The case of Gerry Healy has, I feel, some similarities. I agree that there is a mental problem, a real idiocyncrasy involved. This, of course, has been with him a long time. Never once in my long collaboration with Healy did I ever feel I could express to him a real difference and discuss it out. I never observed anyone else do so either with the possible exception of Mike Banda on rare occasions. He would not tolerate an honest discussion of differences in the movement. This shaped his leading committees as well as the IC from the beginning.

However, I believe the situation has deteriorated in the recent period. It may just be that the movement developed beyond him; it was no longer just Gerry Healy and followers. Thus he turned on us in the United States precisely at the point of our greatest health and strength and within England he turned upon his healthiest, independent and proletarian section of the party.

I have noticed other things, small but significant in the light of recent developments. I knew him reasonably well for someone not in England and stayed at his house sharing a room with him on many occasions. In the recent period he spends very little time at home living a very artificial life in a semi-apartment, semi-office across from the party headquarters. He has gathered around him a coterie of girls who carry out the administrative work of the party and who are not allowed to have any personal life. Slaughter is always treated like dirt and he has no real political collaboration with people of any stature capable of occasionally coming up with an idea different than his. This was not the way either Lenin or Trotsky functioned or lived.

His performance in August was without question mad. The man relished every drop of gossip which could be dug up and ranted and raved in a wild way. It was more than a political problem and God knows it was that. Then Thornett reports some question

of his being drunk at a meeting. This I found interesting because when I first met him he used to occasionally drink and then he gave it up on his doctor's suggestions and did not touch a drop for many years. I still remember him drinking Vichy water in Paris with the French comrades who were not known to skimp on wine. So I believe there may be a very real personal degeneration in the man.

But I believe there is a very real political and philosophical question which must not be lost. If we simply dismiss the man as a head case, then we get nowhere for the only cure, if there is much of one, is a psychiatrist. But if we recognize that the mental problem is only one level of the problem posed by Healy then we can proceed to two important and related points. One is obviously how in Hell did a madman end up with such a sway over an important group of cadres internationally some of which at least had real potential? And secondly, how do we describe the expression of Healy on the political sphere and the method of thought he uses?

This is what causes me to be concerned with the question of subjective idealism. Psychological disturbances like paranoia are not the same as but have much in common with subjective idealism in thought. They represent attempts to rearrange the world in the mind of the beholder, which are quite logical internally, but most illogical when compared to the actual movement of the material world -- and that comparison cannot be avoided as the person is part of the movement of matter. A party which is dominated by an individual so completely expresses, as my document pointed out that individual's peculiarities. Gerry Healy might have become mentally deranged but in a healthy party he would be but one, though important, figure in a collective leadership which could counter his peculiarities or at least be some sort of brake upon them.

Gerry Healy no doubt had traces of these peculiarities in the days when he collaborated with Jim Cannon but then there was some form of restraint upon him, someone else who could influence his course, someone with a history and roots in the actual struggle of the working class over decades.

Stalin was no doubt a deranged man in his last years, but Stalinism is more than the product of one man's mental disturbance. Quite the contrary is the case. It is the irrationality of the bureaucratic caste which has no real historic role and which is in increased crisis which expressed itself in Stalin the arbiter, himself a deranged man. The same can be said for fascism and Hitler.

Marcus is without a doubt a nut case and I found him pretty strange not only in the brief period of our collaboration in 1966 but earlier in the SWP. But he lived in the SWP for years. Also his recent actions express the madness of sections of the middle class who actually hate the working class and the building of

serious parties. His theory that America is on the verge of a liberal incipient fascism is not only absurd in a scientific Marxist sense but expresses a real lack of faith and hostility to the masses of American workers who have only barely begun to stir, who have a rich history, and who will not be a pushover for fascists.

My point is that it may be that it is more important to see Healy's madness as an expression of a political disorientation and a method of thought than his orientation as simply an expression of personal psychological problems. He has, as my article on Cannon will show, attempted to break himself from the real history of the Trotskyist movement, to hide even his own history (a history including much he can be proud of as well as serious shortcomings which themselves are a product of a difficult period on [sic] our history) from his members. He has separated out "philosophy" from the actual material processes, class forces, and political programs of which it is naturally a part. This Lenin, Trotsky and Marx, himself, never did.

In this manner his movement became dominated by a subjective idealist method, an autocratic personal internal regime, and an ultraleftist political line aimed to justify the existence of the movement and its leader, not to advance the consciousness and development of the mass of the working class. In this ultra-left way (and Pablo was no stranger either to ultraleftism) his movement became subject to the pressures of the middle class.

This became expressed in his own party in a reliance on the upper middle class actors against workers like Thornett. When a Roy Battersby, one of the highest priced directors in the BBC and independent films, becomes a bodyguard against assembly line workers from Cowley, and when Vanessa Redgrave is chosen as an IC delegate over such workers, there is something amiss.

I certainly agree that the Marxist "method" is not some magical formula that solves all political problems. There were times in the Workers League when we tended to view it that way with our education centered on classes on Volume 38. We made our most progress in education when we dealt with works like Revolution Betrayed and State and Revolution, where the method lived in an actual analysis of political events and class forces. There is nothing in any event to be learned from books abstracted from party building.

I believe Gerry Healy consciously encouraged an essentially Hegelian (though he himself never really studied Hegel) approach among the intellectuals in his party only to denounce them for being idealists. In this fashion he kept potentially independent minds in their place. But he was not able to develop his party beyond a certain level that way. Clearly the SLL-WRP have been floundering since 1970 at least as far as any theoretical work is concerned and nobody was ever able to explain what in Hell the "transformation" for the SLL into the WRP was supposed to accomplish.

I am looking forward to a serious discussion as soon as it can be arranged. I agree it must be very objective and comradely. You will receive my document on Cannon shortly.

Comradely,

s/ Tim Wohlforth

P.S.: The Workers League has decided to stop my sub to the Bulletin which I have not received for the last month. Do you have an extra set somewhere there? If not perhaps Nancy and I could come by and look your set over.

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April 28, 1975

Dear Tim,

I mailed you a copy of the April 15 and April 18 issues of the Bulletin in case you had not seen them. I hope you got them all right. No matter how angry Mazellis and the others may feel over the impact made by the publication of your article, it is hard to understand why they do not grasp the stupidity of not honoring your subscription. Don't they want you to read their replies? Do they think such a petty action can block you from getting copies?

Any time you want to drop in to look over our files, please do so. The invitation, of course, includes Nancy Fields. We would like to meet her.

To reach our office, you climb to the fourth floor at 410 West Street. At the entrance tell whoever is there that you want to see me or Mike Baumann in Intercontinental Press and that we are expecting you. The only catch on this is that from Thursday May 1 up to Monday May 5 no one will be in because of a plenum. So it might be better to telephone the National Office (242-5530) first. Ask for Reba. She can help facilitate things.

Jack and Barry want to meet you and Nancy as soon as is convenient for you after the plenum. At the moment they are bogged down with resolutions, reports, and organizational details.

I agree with you that Healy's positions have to be debated on the political level. The personal aspect enters in only because his quirks played a considerable role in putting him on the road to cultism.

The same consideration applied in the case of Posadas, who attracted a following of surprising size despite his idiosyncracies. (Maybe his idiosyncracies helped him.) Posadas had an international outlook -- more so than Healy I believe. Posadas had groups in many countries; and his followers were dedicated activists who published newspapers in various languages. Some of those who finally dropped out had fascinating stories to tell about the peculiarities of this genius and his organizational methods.

Johnson, Marcy, Marcus, despite the striking differences among them, fall into the same pattern from the political point of view.

When the Johnsonites synchronized their watches nationally and took off at the same minute from coast to coast, Jim Cannon said a few things, one of them being that there is nothing easier for a leader to do than create a clique or a cult. But a real revo-

lutionary leader sooner or later becomes aware of the trap and consciously blocks it. He cited Trotsky as a model in this respect.

That such formations can sometimes gain adherents on a considerable scale is to be explained, as you indicate, in terms of the social stresses arising from the decay of capitalism and the lack of clear perspectives, especially among the middle class, in the absence of a mass revolutionary party. I suppose parallels are to be found in the rise of religions in past periods of economic breakdown and social upheaval. It is an interesting subject.

On the points you raise, I would describe Healyism as a form of sectarianism. In relation to the internal problems in the Fourth International, it first became noticeable to me about 1957 or 1958 when he discounted the stand taken by the International Secretariat in relation to the Hungarian and Polish events and then set himself on a course of dead-end factionalism, although that was not at all clear to us at the time because we had not yet grasped his capacity for duplicity. He made out that he agreed on probing the possibilities for a principled reunification and of trying to put the claims of Pablo in this respect to the test. Actually, as he later admitted to us, he did his best to sabotage this course. Also we had not yet discovered that the reports he relayed to us about the Pabloites in Britain blocking with right wingers against SLLers were far from being clear cut and were connected with unilateral sectarian actions of sometimes provocative nature taken by the SLL (as I discovered in checking out some of the items during the year I was in Europe before the 1963 reunification).

He also followed a sectarian course in regard to the Labour party after winning a number of very promising cadre elements from the Communist party following the Krushev revelations. We discussed this with him at the time, since it appeared to us that a sectarian course would lead to muffing the most promising perspective in Europe in those years. Healy, of course, did not move an inch from his sectarian orientation, and the results, unfortunately, turned out as forecast.

As to Healy's method of thought, I get what you mean by "subjective idealism." But I think the term tends to be misleading in the present context. Healy's thought process really does not deserve to be weighed on the level of philosophy. It comes closer to a delusional structure -- which is not to deny that some philosophies have delusional aspects or amount to elaborate fantasies.

As used by Healy, the term "subjective idealism" is applied mostly as an epithet, the game seeming to be that if you can make the epithet stick, that finishes the argument. But what is actually learned by that? Is the understanding of subjective idealism advanced?

In any case, it appears to me that it would be better from our point of view to indicate how inappropriate such argumentation is among Trotskyists in discussing political line and orientation. If it is necessary to thresh things out on the methodological level, then we should try to show how dialectics is involved -- and without branding those who try to defend dialectics as anti-dialecticians. In the case of Burnhams or Eastmans -- the conscious opponents of dialectics -- that of course would not hold. If the question of subjective idealism did arise in a discussion on that level, it would have to be taken up, naturally, but then it ought to be done in a way to make it comprehensible so that everyone could learn something from it.

I agree with your point about Healy encouraging an essentially Hegelian approach among the intellectuals in the WRP. In fact when I read the dissertation in the April 15 Bulletin, I came to the conclusion after not too many pages that I was reading a throwback to what might have been heard in the Hegelian circles antedating Feuerbach. I have been thinking about it since in considering an answer to that document and to the one about GPU and CIA agents in the April 18 issue, which I will try to write immediately following the plenum.

Meanwhile I am looking forward to reading your analysis of Banda's series on Cannon.

Comradely yours,
s/ Joe Hansen

P.S. I am enclosing a leaflet advertising a meeting in Washington at which Slaughter was advertised as the featured speaker. The comrade asked the person handing out the leaflets if they were going to permit Wohlforth to speak there, too. Was unable to get a satisfactory answer despite some persistence in pressing the question. I don't know if anyone we know was able to get to the meeting.