

14 Charles Lane  
New York, N.Y. 10014  
January 24, 1978

TO ORGANIZERS AND NATIONAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

Enclosed is a letter to Nathan Karp of the Socialist Labor Party, and a copy of an article by Karp from the Weekly People. The letter to Karp is the first of several to be sent to the SLP outlining our positions on key questions.

The letter to Karp should not be circulated outside the SWP.

Comradely,

*Syd Stapleton* (MR)  
Syd Stapleton  
for the Political  
Committee

(Typed on letterhead)

January 19, 1978

Nathan Karp  
Socialist Labor Party  
914 Industrial Avenue  
Palo Alto, California 94303

Dear Comrade Karp,

As we have noted before, we think there is a growing convergence in the views of the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Labor Party. In our opinion, this convergence is reflected in our increasingly common approach to the demands and movements of the oppressed. We find this to be true in areas as diverse as the fight for the ERA, independence for Puerto Rico, affirmative action, nuclear power, the fight to democratize the Steelworkers union, and others.

But, of course, what makes our convergence on these political questions most significant is our agreement on the need for a revolutionary Marxist party of the working class. We both see such a party as crucial to the overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of democratic organs of workers power, and the building of socialism.

As Marxists, we understand that socialism can only be established through the conscious, collective action of the workers themselves. But we also know that socialist consciousness is not a spontaneous outgrowth of the workers' struggle for better conditions of life under capitalism. Without the understanding of capitalism and the revolutionary program that a Marxist party provides, the workers' movement would be limited to defensive struggles until the decay of capitalism reduced civilization to barbarism or radioactive dust.

The SWP and the SLP also agree that the character of capitalist society determines much about the character of our parties. Specifically, the power and centralization of the capitalist class dictate that the revolutionary party be centralized and nationwide. It must appeal to, champion the struggles of, and include in its ranks and leadership,

all strata of the workers and the oppressed.

We also share a commitment to internationalism. Of course, internationalism is not an article of faith--it reflects the necessarily international character of the socialist program. It is an active affirmation of the common interests of workers around the world. In that light we were especially encouraged by the evolution of the SLP's views on Vietnam.

We share some other important ideas on the nature of the party and the needs of our class. Unlike both the Stalinists and Social Democrats, we do not believe the interests of the working class should be subordinated to the needs of any bureaucracy, whether in the AFL-CIO, the Soviet Union, or China.

We both believe that party members must democratically decide party policy and select party leadership. Unlike the Social Democrats, we reject the notion of an "all-inclusive" socialist party. We both stand for a party clearly based on a consistent revolutionary program.

We have both avoided the sectarian error of ignoring the opportunities presented by the capitalist electoral arena for socialist education.

The SWP and the SLP reject the notion that the workers have any interests in common with the bosses. We don't stand with "protectionist" capitalists against "free trade" capitalists. We reject capitalist "wage and price" controls as the answer to inflation. We don't think American workers should sacrifice to improve "their" capitalists' competitive position in the world market.

We both emphatically reject the notion that the Democratic or Republican parties offer a way out for American workers. We are opposed in principle to giving support to capitalist candidates for office, regardless of their stands on particular issues.

We agree in large measure on another issue with implications for our view of the party--the tasks of revolutionaries in the Soviet Union and similar countries. We both advocate the revolutionary overthrow of the bureaucracies and the reorganization of the Stalinized countries under democratic organs of workers' power.

We may disagree on whether the Soviet bureaucracy is a "caste" or a "class," and thus on whether the revolution will be "political" or "social." We may also disagree on the extent of bureaucratization in Cuba. But these disagreements exist within our parties as well as between them. They do not, in our opinion, exclude the possibility of reaching agreement on the kind of party American workers need to establish socialism.

We have a similar approach to questions that lay at the basis of splits in the First, Second, and Third Internationals. This fact is worth serious consideration.

Of course, agreement on some central questions relating to the character and role of a revolutionary party doesn't rule out disagreements on others.

Some SLP comrades may feel that one such disagreement exists because we in the SWP embrace Lenin's (and Trotsky's) concept of the vanguard party as the most advanced expression of the revolutionary consciousness of the workers and an indispensable instrument in the overthrow of capitalism by the working class.

But we think there may be more misunderstanding than disagreement on this point. We were convinced of this after studying the main points of your article on the role of the party that appeared in the December 31, 1977 Weekly People.

To begin with, we consider the areas of agreement outlined above to be fundamental planks in the authentic Leninist concept of a revolutionary party.

We also think much misunderstanding of Lenin's ideas has roots in the totally false caricature of Leninism advanced by the Stalinized Communist parties and, for their own reasons, the capitalists and their ideological mouthpieces.

Both of our parties are familiar with the fact that both Stalinists and capitalists try to equate Marxism with the form of government in the Soviet Union and China. The capitalists do this to discredit Marxism in the eyes of the masses, while the Stalinists do it to try to draw the mantle of scientific socialism around their crimes. But our parties reject both these distortions, and defend Marxism against those who would misappropriate its name and deny its substance.

Lenin's views are also falsified and distorted by the Stalinists. And, of course, the Stalinists have had eager Social Democratic and capitalist accomplices in their effort to portray Lenin as the founder of the Soviet bureaucracy.

But while we obviously have our own opinions on Lenin's Bolshevik Party, reaching agreement on this is much less urgent than reaching agreement on the kind of Marxist party needed in the U.S. today. If SLP comrades find the SWP's conception of the party substantially the same as their own, we could discuss the lessons of Bolshevik history and the Russian revolution in a common

party.

Perhaps a helpful way of outlining our ideas on the party and its role as a leadership of the working class would be to explain a little about our conception of leadership.

There are some important parallels in our ideas on party leadership and leadership of the working class. I'll start with our views on party leadership and go on from there.

In our opinion, all parties have leaderships and leaders. That is, people who take responsibility for thinking out and proposing solutions to the political, administrative, and organizational challenges facing the party. Of course, within this definition, leadership has always been a part of the Marxist movement. For example, Marx was a leader of the First International, speaking and writing to try to win a majority to his point of view, on broad political and theoretical questions, as well as on the immediate tasks of the day.

Sometimes party leadership is bureaucratic, as in the case of the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties. Sometimes its existence is denied, as was the case with SDS's "participatory democracy." But SDS's attempts to avoid the leadership question only ended up obscuring the leadership from the members, and removing it from conscious democratic control. In the name of combating elitism, SDS fostered leadership by cliques. They forgot that when you have a meeting without a chairperson, people with loud voices can determine the outcome.

We believe that consciousness about the role and limitations of leadership is an indispensable element in constructing a revolutionary organization, assuring its potential for growth, and protecting the rights of its members. As a result of this view, we have spent a great deal of time working out our approach to the training and development of party leaders, and discussing methods of leadership functioning and selection.

This discussion has led, over the history of our party, to some central conclusions:

Party leaders must be democratically selected, and they must carry out policies discussed and determined by the membership. This is not just an idea that we include in our constitution for appearance ' sake. We are convinced that only a party based on an educated, critical membership, with a leadership that reflects and has the confidence of the members, can meet the

challenges facing revolutionaries.

Party leaders can't just be thinkers, pondering the great questions of the day. They must think out problems facing the party on all levels, make proposals for action, and guide the day-to-day work of the party. But the existence of a leadership is no substitute for the fundamental responsibility of the membership for determining the policies and the work of the party.

Party democracy is what assures membership control. Our conventions are preceded by at least three months of discussion, during which any member can submit any article for publication in pre-convention Discussion Bulletins, which are circulated to the entire membership. Resolutions are drawn up on key political questions, and counter-resolutions or amendments can be submitted to the Bulletins. Discussions are then held in every branch of the party, and delegates are elected on the basis of the branch members' views on the key resolutions. At the convention, delegates, after more discussion, vote on resolutions on questions they wish to consider.

It is only after this discussion and vote that a party leadership is elected to carry out the policies adopted by the convention. As part of this process, members not only have the right to elect new leaders, but they can also form ideological tendencies to argue for a particular position. Members can even form factions to fight to throw out the old leadership and replace it with one based on a different political perspective.

Revolutionary Marxists in the United States face a ruthless and cunning opponent--the most powerful capitalist class in history. This fact dictates another--that the revolutionary party must be ideologically cohesive, and capable of concentrating its forces in action. Its leadership must have the authority to make decisions in the heat of struggle. But revolutionary leadership authority must be based on the ability to persuade and politically inspire, not on bureaucratic power. It must be based on a conscious membership that elects representative individuals from its ranks to serve as a party general staff.

Development of the theoretical and political skills of party members is important from another point of view. A revolutionary party must be capable of rapid, even explosive growth. For a party to be able to grow, it must be constantly educating its members in the historical experience of the workers' movement, developing new leaders, and giving them opportunities to test their leadership skills and initiatives in practice.

This means party leadership must be an open, not a closed, institution. It must not become a self-perpetuating clique, but to the contrary, must be replenished and

expanded by new people who are tested in struggle. It must be inclusive, not exclusive. Every party member must be given an opportunity and encouraged to take on as much responsibility as he or she is willing to assume. Special efforts must be made to ensure that party leadership reflects the national and sexual composition of the party and the working class.

From all these considerations it follows that party leadership cannot be the responsibility of a few specialists or "stars" who supposedly have all the answers. To meet our needs, party leadership must be a team effort, drawing together individuals with a range of strengths and weaknesses. This is the only way to maximize the number of people who can be drawn into leadership responsibilities, while ensuring the most effective use of their talents.

Another aspect of our view of party leadership reflects our commitment to building a party of professional revolutionaries--people whose lifetime commitment and first loyalty is to revolutionary socialism and the party. Party leaders especially, regardless of how they make their living, must be dedicated to building and defending the party above any other personal considerations.

Although the terminology may be different, our goals in the area of party leadership are probably not so far apart. I've spent so much time on the subject, however, because I think it's important to show that conscious attention to party leadership can strengthen, rather than sacrifice, party democracy. One can even think of party leadership as the vanguard of the party without giving an inch to elitism or bureaucracy.

The same is true in thinking of the revolutionary party as the vanguard or aspiring leadership of the working class.

The role of the revolutionary party as the leadership of the workers' struggle for socialism has been a concern of our movement since its founding. The first line of the founding document of the Fourth International, "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International" by Leon Trotsky, reads, "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." We think this sentence is as true now as it was when written in 1938. What do we mean by it?

First, we believe that the objective conditions for socialist revolution have existed in ripened form on a world scale since the First World War. Capitalism has no remaining progressive role in the development of human civilization. To the contrary, it staggers from crisis

to crisis, from war to depression, posing a greater and greater threat to the well-being of the workers of the world and even threatening life on the planet.

The economic, social and political crises in the advanced capitalist countries of Europe and North America have opened great opportunities for revolutionary advances. Nevertheless, the workers have been set back by defeat after defeat. These range from the collapse of the German revolution of 1918-1919, to the victory of the Nazis in 1933, to the defeat of the Spanish workers in the Civil War, to the consolidation of the American labor bureaucracy, to the Stalinist and Social Democratic betrayal of European workers after World War II, to the dispersal of the French mass movement of 1968 and failure of the more recent Portuguese upsurge to bring the working class to power.

In our view these defeats have not been due to the strength and vitality of capitalism or its repressive apparatus. To the contrary, the big capitalist nations have been battered by war, the colonial revolution and the decreasing profitability of their own system. It has been the absence of mass revolutionary parties at the crucial time that has allowed the opportunities for the abolition of capitalist rule to pass by, and let the capitalist regimes restabilize themselves for a time.

We see the question of the party, of revolutionary leadership, as the central problem on the way to the workers' conquest of power. Not only is the party the central and necessary element in conveying revolutionary theory to the workers, but it is the repository of the historical experience of the world working class. It not only transmits revolutionary theory to the workers, but it transmits the historical lessons of the experience of the workers' movement. It not only points to socialism as the solution to the workers' problems, but helps show them how to get there.

This means, in our opinion, that the party goes wrong if it just tries to lead the workers by pointing out the dead-end nature of capitalism and the advantages of socialism. It must also take responsibility, on the basis of its understanding of theory and history, for providing guidance in the day-to-day combat of the class struggle. To do this it must be immersed in the workers' movement and its struggles, learning and thus developing its theory, and gaining experience in the realities of the class struggle. Only in this way can a revolutionary party win the confidence of the workers and win the best of them to its ranks.

We agree with the quotation from Rosa Luxemburg that you included in your December 31 article, that the revolu-

tionary party is "the most resolute part of the proletariat..." We also agree that it cannot and must not attempt to substitute itself for the working class.

It should be stressed that both Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky, who were opposed to Lenin's concept of the party at various points prior to the October Revolution, changed their views on Bolshevism as a result of the experiences of 1917. In fact, Rosa Luxemburg, even before Lenin, launched a fight against the German Social Democracy's concept of the party and party leadership. In contrast to the stultifying Social Democratic bureaucracy, she championed the self-action of the toiling masses. But did this negate the need for a vanguard party?

Luxemburg's views are apparent in her 1918 pamphlet on the Russian revolution (Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, Pathfinder Press, pp. 367-395). While she had strong disagreements with aspects of Bolshevik policy after the October Revolution, the mature Rosa Luxemburg made it clear in this pamphlet that she agreed with the role the Bolshevik Party played in the workers' struggle for power in Russia.

It's worth quoting her remarks on the subject at some length:

"Thus it is clear that in every revolution only that party is capable of seizing the leadership and power which has the courage to issue the appropriate watchwords for driving the revolution ahead, and the courage to draw all the necessary conclusions from the situation..."

"The party of Lenin was the only one which grasped the mandate and duty of a truly revolutionary party and which, by the slogan--'All power in the hands of the proletariat and peasantry'--insured the continued development of the revolution.

"Thereby the Bolsheviks solved the famous problem of 'winning a majority of the people,' which problem has ever weighed on the German social democracy like a nightmare. As bred-in-the-bone disciples of parliamentary cretinism, these German social democrats have sought to apply to revolutions the homemade wisdom of the parliamentary nursery: in order to carry anything, you must first have a majority. The same, they say, applies to revolution: first let's become a 'majority.' The true dialectic of revolutions, however, stands this wisdom of parliamentary moles on its head: not through a majority to revolutionary tactics, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority--that is the way the road runs.

"Only a party which knows how to lead, that is, to advance things, wins support in stormy times. The determination with which, at the decisive moment, Lenin and his comrades offered the only solution which could advance things ('all power in the hands of the proletariat and peasantry'), transformed them almost overnight from a persecuted, slandered, outlawed minority whose leader had to hide like Marat in cellars, into the absolute master of the situation...

"Whatever a party could offer of courage, revolutionary farsightedness and consistency in a historic hour, Lenin, Trotsky and the other comrades have given in good measure. All the revolutionary honor and capacity which western social democracy lacked was represented by the Bolsheviks. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution; it was also the salvation of the honor of international socialism."

(Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, pp. 374-375)

And of course, there is conclusive evidence that she took these words to heart. In the midst of the German revolution, she led the formation of the German Communist Party.

There is plenty of time to discuss her criticisms of the Bolsheviks' post-October policy--on the Constituent Assembly, land reform, self-determination of nations and so forth. But these do not bear on Lenin's (and Luxemburg's) developed views on the mass working-class party as a necessary instrument of socialist revolution.

We agree with your article when it points out that a revolutionary party cannot be substitutionist, manipulative or self-appointed. Clearly, there have been parties that functioned that way, including Stalinists and Social Democrats. These two varieties of reformism have placed powerful obstacles in the way of the mobilization of workers' power, steering workers' organizations in the direction of accommodation with their own ruling class.

How would a mass revolutionary party differ from the leadership offered the workers' movement by the Stalinists and Social Democrats?

First and foremost, a mass revolutionary party will be distinguished by its program--for the overturn of capitalism. A revolutionary party must also understand that the dislodging of powerful capitalist ruling classes can be achieved by nothing less than massive, self-acting, class conscious mobilization of the working-class and its allies.

Unlike the Stalinists, labor bureaucrats, and other reformists who see the workers' movement as a pawn to use

in their negotiations with the capitalists, revolutionaries work toward the independent mobilization of the working class, in its own interests, on the political and economic field. We urge workers to adopt demands that lead in the direction of workers' control of production, and that promote unity of the working class in defense of the most oppressed.

In periods of crisis, revolutionaries will be the most consistent advocates and partisans of organs of struggle independent of the capitalist class. These organs of struggle, whatever they are called (Soviets, workers committees, Socialist Industrial Unions, etc.), would be the instrument for united action by the workers. They would have a form determined by the evolution of the struggle. They might first spring up, in some places, within the shell of existing industrial unions. On the other hand, they might first appear alongside of and independent from the unions. Among these committees might be neighborhood organizations of struggle--which could easily arise in areas of mass unemployment, especially Black communities and barrios.

We don't know the exact form these embryonic councils, soviets or SIUs will take. But we think it is obvious, on the basis of historical experience, that they will not necessarily be led by revolutionaries from the start. While we know from historical experience that such committees are the embryo of a powerful instrument that can overthrow capitalism and form a workers' government, the workers don't start out with that idea in mind. If that was the case, the job of revolutionaries would be simple.

Experience teaches that workers' committees that represent anything quickly become an arena for programmatic struggle among the various tendencies in the workers movement. Reformists and ultralefts don't abandon the field simply because workers committees have been formed.

A key task of revolutionaries would be to work within these committees, to help them offer leadership to the working class and its potential allies, to combat the machinations of the reformists and ultralefts, and finally, as these committees acquired support of broad sections of the population, to encourage them to take hold of the job of organizing and operating industry and society in the interests of working people.

At this particular point, the role of a revolutionary party will be just as crucial as it is in showing the way forward in earlier stages of the struggle. Revolutionary workers, as the most conscious and resolute section of their class, will attempt to provide guidance (leadership) on the questions of politics and practice facing the workers committees. This does not mean that the revolutionary party is elitist and manipulative--any more than the leadership of a party, which performs much the same function, is necessarily bureaucratic.

The revolutionary party, in our opinion, will be the most organized and disciplined expression of revolutionary sentiment in the working class. It will thus be indispensable in the construction of the general staff of the revolution.

The 1918-1919 German revolution is particularly instructive from this point of view. By most accounts, soviet-type formations were very widespread in Germany during this period --perhaps even more than in Russia in 1917. The workers' councils were dominated by reformist parties and leaders. But there was obviously no lack of revolutionary sentiment among the workers--what the sentiment lacked was an organized and conscious expression, competing for the allegiance of the workers and the leadership of the councils. This is the problem Rosa Luxemburg spent her last days trying to resolve by building the German Communist Party.

We regard the idea of a revolutionary party competing for the allegiance of the workers as the essence of Leninism. We don't think that it means that party makes the revolution in the name of the workers. We think it would be impossible for the workers to take power from a powerful capitalist class in any way other than the independent, educated, class-conscious mobilization of the resources of the entire class.

Lenin shed some light on this point in October 1917, in the midst of a developing revolution:

"To be successful the uprising must be based not on a conspiracy, not on a party, but on the advanced class. This is the first point. The uprising must be based on a revolutionary upsurge of the people. This is the second point. The uprising must be based on the crucial point in the history of the maturing revolution, when the activity of the vanguard of the people is at its height, when the vacillations in the ranks of the enemies, and in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted, undecided friends of the revolution are at their highest point. This is the third point. It is in pointing out these three conditions as a way of approaching the question of an uprising, that Marxism differs from Blanquism."

(Collected Works, Volume XXI, page 224 - Moscow, 1932. Emphasis in original.)

We don't regard our view of the revolutionary party's role in the establishment of socialism as in any way in conflict with the main points of your December 31 article, as I mentioned before. Nevertheless, one section of the article indicates that you feel Lenin would have rejected the ideas you express. We think such an evaluation of Lenin's ideas would be wrong. The central ideas you express

seem quite compatible with what we say in our resolutions and other programmatic documents.

Of course, there is the question of whether or not the actions of the Bolshevik party after 1917 laid the ground for Stalinism. We do not think so. But there is no SWP requirement that members agree with all the actions of the Bolsheviks between 1917 and 1923. Much debate on this question can be left to historians of the workers movement. Our whole tradition and history has been rooted in a defense and explication of the basic strategic correctness of what the Bolsheviks tried to build.

But we do have a view of what the role of the revolutionary party should be in a workers' government, and what that government should look like. We sometimes use different terminology from you. For example, in discussing the dictatorship of the proletariat, we often use the terms "workers state" or "workers government." By those terms we mean "an industrial government composed of councils of workers democratically elected from the industries and social services." (Nathan Karp, Weekly People, December 31, 1977.) We also agree that "there is no need or justification for any separate governmental structure; no need for a political state aside from the SIU." (Same source.)

As we've mentioned before, we do disagree completely with the idea expressed in some SLP material, that the revolutionary party must dissolve on the day of the revolution. After all, divisions within the working class, and even classes, won't disappear overnight. The working class is a complex social phenomenon, with many different strata, composed of different racial and national groupings. The impact and heritage of capitalist society on this class, including racism, sexism and all sorts of other reactionary baggage, won't vanish overnight. Capitalism will bequeath the workers' government shortages, problems of distribution, and a desperate layer of farmers, small shopkeepers and other petty bourgeois elements. The world situation will not be simple.

All these factors (and others) guarantee that there will be debate in the workers councils or SIUs or whatever they are called. Disparate social layers and points of view will be reflected in parties. Should parties be outlawed? We don't think so--we think the way to ensure a revolutionary course for the workers' government is through debate, through winning workers to revolutionary ideas, not bureaucratic suppression. We think it would be a fatal mistake to deny anyone, especially the most revolutionary workers, the right to form or maintain a party as an organized expression of their point of view.

We don't think parties, any more than leaderships, automatically create bureaucratism. In fact, we think the revolutionary party will be a crucial element in defending and extending workers' democracy. It will, for example, advance and defend proposals for the right

to immediate recall of all officials of the workers' government, and for a limit on government salaries to the level of a skilled worker. It will be a staunch defender of basic democratic rights, because of its thorough understanding of the dangers to the working class inherent in their abrogation.

We don't see how it would advance the fight against bureaucratism to put formal restrictions on the right of revolutionary workers to have an organized party to maximize their influence in the workers' government.

Of course, as Marxists, we think that the workers' government itself will be a transitional phenomenon. At a certain point, the productive capacity of society becomes sufficient to eliminate scarcity. When that happens, dictatorship of the proletariat, or workers government, or the workers state "dies out," or "withers away." Obviously, the need for a combat party of revolutionary workers would "die out" too, perhaps even faster than the government.

In any case, divisions over the precise nature of the revolutionary party's role after the revolution seem, to us, a little premature. This seems especially true when we already hold in common an abiding abhorrence for the Stalinist caricature of workers' rule, and a commitment to workers' democracy and the sovereignty of the organs of workers' power.

To try to sum up, we think that labor bureaucrats, Stalinists and other reformist "leaders" are bureaucratic, not because they are leaders, but because their interests and politics make them opposed to the idea of a self-mobilized, politically independent, educated and critical working class. Revolutionary leaders, in our opinion, are people who play an opposite role in their party and in the class. They promote independent class action, democracy in the workers' movement, education and critical thinking as indispensable elements of the struggle for power.

In our experience in the labor movement, in the antiwar movement, and in the organizations and struggles of women, Blacks, Chicanos, and students, we have found that the broadest democracy, the most unlimited discussion, and the broadest mobilizations possible are the best conditions for the spread of a class-struggle perspective and for the growth of revolutionary forces. Some concrete experience with these ideas is reflected in Farrell Dobbs' books on the Minneapolis teamsters.

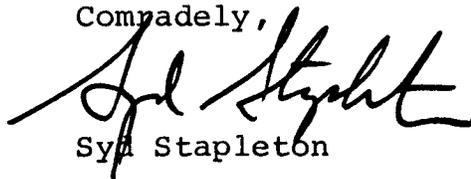
After reading your article on the party in the Weekly People, I think it is quite possible that if we put aside terminological differences and historical suspicions, we might well reach general agreement on the role of a revolutionary party.

Of course, the problem is that while we are both aware of the need for a mass revolutionary party, we don't yet have one. And neither the SLP nor the SWP (experience teaches us) will become one simply by recruiting one-by-one over the years.

Not everyone coming to revolutionary conclusions in the United States will just get the idea and then start paying dues to one of our parties. By various routes other than ours, many people and groups will arrive at an understanding of the need for revolutionary change. We will have to search out, talk with, and join with these people. Fusions of revolutionary forces will be an inescapable and necessary part of building a revolutionary party in the United States. If we insist that membership in a revolutionary party must be limited only to those who agree on every point of historical assessment and predictions about the future, we will never build the party American workers need. This, of course, is not to deny the need for agreement on basic program--a question we will deal with initially in our next letter.

We are both aware of the imperative need for a revolutionary Marxist party. We have a responsibility, because of that need, to find out more about the possibility of a combination of our forces. We think that can best be done by vigorously pursuing common activities in the mass movements, and by thorough discussion of our ideas and experiences.

Comradely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Syd Stapleton". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized script. The first name "Syd" is written in a larger, more prominent hand than the last name "Stapleton".

Syd Stapleton

Dangers of 'Vanguardism'

# What Is The Role Of A Socialist Party?

*The following article was adapted from an address given by SLP National Secretary Nathan Karp on November 19 at the Eastern Interstate Thanksgiving Banquet in New York City.*

In commemorating the 125th anniversary of the birth of Daniel De Leon we not only honor the man and his contribution to the revolutionary movement, we also demonstrate our own involvement in that movement. Moreover, the occasion affords the opportunity to review some current aspects of the revolutionary movement.

The world in De Leon's day was not exactly as it is today. There were no jet planes, computers, atomic power plants, thermonuclear weapons, or man-made satellites in space. Nor was there the widespread concern with the pollution of our air, land and water. But there was wide-spread poverty, recurring unemployment crises, spreading urban chaos, racial prejudice and discrimination, brazen violations of democratic rights, international conflicts that threatened to erupt or periodically did erupt into open warfare and a host of other economic and social problems.

Most of these problems still plague us. They have, in fact, grown worse. The prevailing social turmoil and conflict all attest to that. Bluntly stated, the vaunted capitalist system in America is perpetually on the verge of complete collapse these days.

Unfortunately, its collapse would not necessarily result in the automatic establishment of a better social system. In the absence of the human forces required to accomplish that end, the collapse of capitalism could lead to stark reaction and the establishment of brutal fascism. The consequences would be greater deprivation and suffering for the vast working class majority.

That possibility is real. Nevertheless, it does not justify pessimism and dismay, for it is not the only possibility. There are social forces in motion that could lead to other results—including the establishment of a free and affluent society.

There are some encouraging signs. There are stirrings among the workers. Increasing numbers of them are questioning the values and standards of our present society. More and more of them are openly criticizing the system—questioning its inequalities and demonstrating a growing contempt for its politics and its politicians.

Among the millions of workers belonging to the unions there also is rising dissatisfaction, much of it directed at the bureaucrats who run the unions. In increasing numbers, rank and file workers are demanding a more effective voice in the operation and affairs of their unions.

In short, there is a climate of social unrest, an atmosphere of questioning and challenge, and a spreading demand for change in many areas of our society. These developments could serve the forces of progress and lead to the establishment of a new, viable social system.

For that to happen, however, an important development must take place. There must be a growth of classconsciousness among the workers. There must be a realization of the need for a reconstruction of society on democratic and equitable social and economic principles—a socialist reconstruction of society.

A revolutionary transformation of the social and economic basis of society is not a simple task. Nor is it one to be accomplished by some select, self-appointed group or party on behalf of the vast majority. On the contrary, the revolution to socialism

can be assured only if it is the collective effort of the working class of the nation. That class must be involved consciously and actively. The revolutionary effort must be under its direct influence and control. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg, the revolution "must arise out of the growing political training of the mass of the people."

Daniel De Leon was emphatic in his warning that "the proletarian army of emancipation cannot consist of a dumb, driven herd." Rather it must be organized on the basis of a comprehensive understanding of its class interests and a clear comprehension of the socialist goal.

## Vanguardism Rejected

These are not idle rhetorical points and few, if any, of the organizations on the left would contest them. Yet by their daily actions and in their day-to-day propaganda work many left organizations in large measure violate or ignore them. They conduct themselves in ways that demonstrate that they consider the proletariat a mass that can be led to revolutionary action only if it is manipulated by a party—a party that provides the "right leadership."

Moreover, these organizations envision the party as the dominant body—the vanguard of the class—with a permanent role to play in the new society. They consider that role to be not merely political and educational but also governmental and administrative. In short, they see the party as an institution of proletarian rule in the new society.

The Socialist Labor Party does not accept this Leninist concept of the party. It considers it a fundamental departure from the sound Marxist premise that the emancipation of the working class from wage slavery must be its own conscious act. The SLP

holds that the dominant factor in the socialist revolution must be the classconscious proletariat, not a small, close-knit, vanguard party that leads the revolutionary effort and then remains in existence to conduct the affairs of the new society.

This is not to say that the party has no role to play. It has a very important role. It must actively assist the development of classconsciousness among workers through its agitational and educational work, offer a program of organization that will consolidate the power of the workers, do all within its means to urge the revolutionary organization into existence, and keep the socialist goal in sight at all times. The party, then, must be what Rosa Luxemburg described as "the most resolute part of the proletariat that at every step points out to the whole broad mass of workers its historical tasks."

In short, the party's important role is to assist and give impetus to the social forces that are welding the proletariat into the revolutionary force. But in doing so it must not substitute itself for the proletariat as the revolutionary force, nor as the future instrument of workers' rule. If that happens, the party becomes a threat—the threat of a dictatorship over the proletariat. There is eloquent testimony to that in the world today.

It must be remembered that there is a vast difference between the "regulated docility of an oppressed class" by a party claiming to speak and act in its behalf and the self-discipline and classconscious activity of a "class struggling for its emancipation." Socialist democracy, Luxemburg correctly declared, must be the accomplishment of the organized, classconscious workers not a decree "from behind a few official desks." Vanguardism inevitably contains the danger of a proletarian dictatorship "transformed into a system of class rule based on unthinking obedience to the commands of leaders."

A militant party of socialism must also be capable of responding to the "pace" and events of the class struggle and of becoming involved in that struggle in fact as well as in words. It must avoid reducing Marxism-De Leonism to a set of abstract principles and formulas. Toward that end it needs to acknowledge its obligation to support, to the extent that capacities

and resources permit, the legitimate efforts of workers to improve their lives, relieve their miseries and ease their burdens. As Marx observed in a letter to F. Bolte (Nov. 23, 1871):

"Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organization to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power, i.e., the political power of the ruling classes, it must at any rate be trained for this by a continual agitation against and by a hostile attitude toward the policy of the ruling classes. Otherwise it will remain a plaything in their hands..."

But in meeting this obligation the party must not become a purveyor of reformist promises. It must not dilute the scientific content of Marxism-De Leonism. Rather, it is imperative that it promote a clear, classconscious understanding of the nature of capitalism.

Granted, that is not an easy task. Nor is it a new one. We are not the first to be confronted with it. As Rosa Luxemburg observed: "The basic question of the socialist movement has always been how to bring its immediate practical activity into agreement with its ultimate goal."

Whether we get the workers' attention during these critical days of capitalist disintegration will depend on a number of factors. Among the most important of these factors are (1) the zeal and alertness with which we approach the task, follow developments and events and seek out opportunities; (2) the Marxist-De Leonist insight and socialist analysis we bring to bear in connection with such opportunities; and (3) the tact and intelligence with which we conduct our work. Needless to say, at all times we must reject reformist opportunism in every aspect. We must never compromise or subordinate our socialist principles and goal for any temporary advantage. As Luxemburg correctly warned:

"Opportunism is a political game which can be lost in two ways: not only basic principles but also practical success may be forfeited...If we begin to chase after what is 'possible' according to the principles of opportunism, unconcerned with our own principles, and by means of statesmanlike barter, then we will soon find ourselves in the same situation as the hunter who has not only failed to slay the deer, but has also lost his gun in the process."

## De Leonist Program

Safeguards against such errors must be built into the basic program of a socialist party. And they are built into the De Leonist program of the Socialist Labor Party. For that program is based upon the recognition and acceptance of the fact that the revolutionary change to socialism must be the classconscious act of the workers themselves.

Accordingly, the SLP calls upon workers to organize politically for the purpose of advocating this revolutionary change. Such a political organization would not only promote classconsciousness, but also project a program of organization that workers could implement toward this end. It would seek to build a party capable of capturing the political state with a view to dismantling the state when the workers assume power.

Simultaneously, the De Leonist program calls for the organization of revolutionary socialist unions. These are essential to mobilize the economic power of the proletariat, not only to resist the ever increasing encroachments of capitalism more effectively, but ultimately to provide the essential power to enforce the revolutionary demand.

In the revolutionary equation the economic organization is the decisive one. Capable of assuming control and continuing to administer and operate the essential industries and social services, it can exercise the power and provide the decisive leverage to "swing" the revolution. Moreover, it has the structure that provides the necessary foundation for socialist society.

This is the De Leonist socialist industrial union program. It is unique and essential to the revolutionary movement in the United States. It provides the basic organizational structure for consolidating the massive power of our class. It clearly defines the socialist goal. It provides the means for defending working class interests and pursuing working class objectives as long as capitalism exists. It provides the societal framework on which to build the new social structure as soon as capitalism is abolished.

Moreover, the SIU program makes clear that it is the workers who must construct the new societal framework and own, control and administer the new social structure. It thereby provides the basic concept for

workers' control of the entire economy and all other essential elements of society. And it is a concept that enables the workers to exercise that control directly rather than through any surrogate party that would contain the germs for new forms of economic and political enslavement. It provides for an industrial government composed of councils of workers democratically elected from the industries and social services.

Once the workers' mass organizations are in control of the entire economy and social structure—and without them proletarian control is an illusion—there is no need or justification for any separate governmental structure; no need for a political state apart from the SIU. Certainly there will be problems of all kinds. But whether such problems are minor or serious, anticipated or unexpected, all of them will be within the capacity of the SIU government to deal with.

The essence of the SLP's De Leonist concept of SIU government is that it puts the workers in complete control and provides for the most democratic form of social administration. It is a concept capable of assuring the success not only of the revolutionary act but of the revolution itself. It is, therefore, a solid, indispensable revolutionary program.