

NOV 8 1978

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN OUR RELATIONS WITH THE
DEBS CAUCUS OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY USA

Bill Breihan
Milwaukee branch

I. Description of the Debs Caucus

A. Size

The SPUSA has over six hundred formal members. Yet probably no more than half that number are in any real sense active. At the national convention of the SP in September about one-third of the non-delegated "delegates" voted with the Debs Caucus. As an organized tendency in the SP the Debs Caucus (DC) may have over 100 supporters. But in terms of active (real) members the DC may have fewer, 50. The distribution by city is something like the following: Milwaukee (20), Racine (10), Ann Arbor (10), New York City (10), scattered (5).

B. Political Direction

The DC is still quite heterogeneous. It includes people who call themselves "Leninists", "Trotskyists", "Debsians" and syndicalists. The "Trotskyist" trend is now, however, clearly dominant. A number of leaders of the DC are now self-avowed "Trotskyists"--Richard (Ann Arbor), Spiro and Miller (Milw.). Others are moving in that direction--McCallister and Weckerle (Milw.), Brissot (Racine). The DC is now conducting a national educational series on the basic works of Trotsky, Lenin and Cannon.

C. Political Development

Almost all of the DC people have been in the SP less than two years. Almost all of them are quite young. They claim that they received absolutely no political education in the SP and, this is quite obvious. Whatever individual DC members know of Marxism, they have learned on their own. The result: an incredible degree of theoretical and political confusion, naiveté as regards tendencies on the left, a high degree of unevenness in political education amongst their membership, and a general inability to understand the relationship of abstract theory to day-to-day political practice. Unlike the former RMC the DC is made up of "political virgins"--(inexperienced, yet very sincere people who have not gotten past the "A" in the ABC's of Marxism.

D. Activities

The Milwaukee branch was worked with the SP'ers now making up the DC in number of areas over the last few months: Mobilization for Survival, Anti-Apartheid, miners' strike, campaign, Baake, gay rights, Marroquin. Our best joint work has been through the campaign, Mobilization for Survival and anti-racist work. We are doing all we can to encourage the DC to maintain this orientation toward mass work so that our active collaboration can continue.

II. Milwaukee Branch's Collaboration with the SPUSA

A. Beginnings

We first came into contact with the SP in the spring of 1977 when several of them joined SCAR and worked with us on South Africa work. Real collaboration began somewhat less than a year ago. We began running into them regularly, working with them in numerous

coalitions and actively pursuing them in political discussion. On a personal level SP'ers and SWP'ers became quite friendly and began to socialize on a somewhat regular basis.

During this period the SP'ers loyally defended their party and party chair Frank Zeidler against our criticisms. They looked to Zeidler, Hart, and other oldtimers as the "grand old men" of the party. They displayed all sorts of illusions in the old guard social-democratic wing of the party. These illusions began to be broken down at the Wisconsin State SP convention last spring. Any remaining illusions in the character and methods of the social-democrats of the Zeidler school were discarded at the time of the SP national convention in early September. A split course was launched. The DC was formed at that convention by a group of radicals who thought they could actually win the SP as an organization to their views through democratic discussion. When this course was blocked by the bureaucratic machinations of the rightwing, the newly-formed DC drifted on to a new course: the recognition of the inevitability of a split. ^{as possible} The DC is now attempting to win over as many SP'ers to its ideas ^{not with a view to changing the SP} but in preparation for their own expulsion.

B. Campaign

Our decision to give critical support to ^{the} a campaign of Joel Miller, SP candidate for State Senate in Milwaukee provided us with our most important opening thus far in relation to the SP. Joel's campaign is not really an SP campaign. It is a Debs Caucus campaign. The right wing of the SP has boycotted it from day one. The DC'ers have been impressed with our support because it has been real and substantial. The SWP and the DC'ers have done joint canvassing, had joint campaign tables, and organized joint campaign events. We've been able to work quite closely throughout the campaign. It has been through this campaigning that our relations with the DC have undergone a qualitative change.

Our support for the Miller campaign has not been uncritical. We've taken every opportunity to raise with Joel and others the real inadequacies of their program. The result: a rewriting of their campaign literature incorporating many of our suggested changes. The influence of our criticisms is also very obvious in the public speeches Miller has given. He's sounding more and more like a SWP candidate.

The Miller campaign has been a very serious campaign. The DC'ers have put a lot of work into it. There has been none of the going-through-the-motions of campaigning as is the case with the CP.

The elections will be over on November 7. This avenue of collaboration will no longer be open to us. The branch is now working out various proposals to give to the DC to facilitate continued collaboration and joint work.

III. Spartacist League

One year ago the people who today make up the Debs Caucus were young, politically inexperienced radicals with left social-democratic political ideas. Today, most of the leading figures in the DC are avowed "Trotskyists", or, at least, quite sympathetic to Trotskyist ideas. This evolution in political views was not a spontaneous one.

The comrades of the Milwaukee branch of the SWP "patiently explained" our politics to the left SP'ers over many months. We got our literature into their hands and we encouraged them to study. This has led to a situation today of the DC discussing whether or not to adopt the transitional program as the programmatic basis of their tendency. They are supposed to vote on this shortly. At least on the theoretical (historical) level they've come into basic agreement with us. Here, however, the problem arises. At least a dozen little sects claim the transitional program as their own and refer to themselves as trotskysts. The DC'ers are now getting a little confused as to who the "real" trotskysts are. This confusion has been compounded ten-fold in the last two weeks by the intervention of the Spartacist League into our discussions.

The SL is on a seriously organized and well thought out campaign to wreck our collaboration and discussions with the DC. The SL first established contact with the DC at the SP national convention in September. Workers Vanguard carried a major article on that convention in its October 6 issue. The DC'ers were impressed with SL's criticisms. SL, which has no presence in Milwaukee, has come up to Milwaukee to talk with the DC'ers a couple of times and in mid-October sent a couple of their Central Committee members to meet with the leadership of the DC. That meeting convinced the SL to hold their first forum in Milwaukee on October 28.

The night before their forum, seven SL'ers (mostly Chicago steelworkers) came to our Militant forum on the BRAC strike because they knew that Tom Spiro (national secretary of the SPUSA and a DC leader) would be there. It was a large forum. SL did everything they could to disrupt it. They denounced us for every "crime" imaginable-- particularly for "scabbing on the BRAC strike". As soon as they began their disruption all the independents at the forum walked out. They put on a whole show entirely for the benefit of Tom Spiro. He was obviously confused by the whole thing, but also taken in somewhat by the Sparts.

The next night was the SL forum. SL flew Joseph Seymour (their main theoretician) in from N.Y. to give the forum. There were 20 SL'ers, 15 DC'ers and 4 SWP'ers (as observers). The DC'ers were from Ann Arbor (2), Racine (2), and Milwaukee (11), all in Milwaukee for some sort of national DC meeting. The SL held the audience "captive" for almost four hours. Much of that time was devoted to repeating every slander the SL has raised against us since 1963. It was a well-staged "Hate SWP" rally. The DC'ers were obviously quite dumbfounded.

At the forum the SL admitted that they were trying to provoke us into a public debate with them. They were so kind as to provide us with a full 10 minutes to respond to the charges. The atmosphere at the meeting was that of the Moscow trials. Our candidate for lt.-governor, Bill Breihan, got up and explained that he was not authorized by the SWP to participate in a public debate at this time with the SL. He noted that if any members of the DC had any questions about the real views and activities of the SWP, they should read the Militant newspaper. The SL then denounced us for the next hour or so as "scabs", "cowards", "yellow", "traitors", "betrayers", "Stalinophiles", "Stalinophobes", ad nauseam. The politically inexperienced DC'ers were shocked. Most of them had never heard any of this before. A number of DC'ers got up and practically begged

us to respond to the charges. (This is especially true of some of the DC'ers most sympathetic to the SWP.) We again refused to debate the SL under the conditions.

The SL accomplished one thing by this forum: they've raised a thousand and one questions in the minds of the DC'ers concerning the "revolutionary integrity" of the SWP. The SL wants to break up any move in the direction of a SWP-DC fusion. They want to poison the minds of the DC'ers against the SWP as a first step toward winning some of them to the SL. It will undoubtedly take some time to undo the damage done by the SL, but we're quite confident that we will be successful at this. Some of the DC'ers have obviously not been taken in at all by the SL. But some have.

The biggest problem with the DC in relation to the SL is the fact that they know absolutely nothing about the actual practice of this group. They've never seen them in action. All the DC'ers have heard is the theoretical positions of the SL which seem quite "orthodox" to them.

We obviously do not want to define our politics in relation to the slanders of the SL. But to clear the air so that a real and serious discussion between the DC and SWP can take place, we are going to have to answer some the SL slanders. The DC'ers insist. The branch has already begun this process.

Since the article on the SP convention appeared in Workers Vanguard, a number of other left groups (mostly "trotskyist" sects) have been calling the DC from other cities and asking for political discussions with them. The DC'ers say they intend to check out all of these groups before arriving at any kind of decision. But for right now the two real choices before them (in their minds) are the SWP and SL. A couple of Ann Arbor DC'ers (the Richard brothers) and now Tom Spiro and a couple of his friends are under the spell of the SL. (This may be only a temporary phenomenon). A number of Milwaukee DC'ers (Miller, McCallister) are quite close to the SWP.

What we obviously need to do in our discussions with the DC is to direct the focus of the discussion away from the level of abstract theory and toward the level of actual political practice. We have to show how the SL's methodology in applying the transitional program to the real world of the American class struggle is utterly sectarian and ultraleft. We have to direct the discussion toward the real political questions facing the left today--affirmative action, womens' liberation, the struggle for union democracy and a class-struggle leftwing, etc. We will win this debate with the Sparts. (The Prospects book will be of great use in this if we can convince enough of the DC'ers to really study it).

IV. What To Do Next

A. Enclosed Letter

It is necessary to explain what the enclosed letter to the DC is all about. First, the DC would like to hear the SWP's political views as presented by a leader of the party. Larry Seigle is a comrade whose name has come up a number of times as a good person to address the DC. The DC'ers want to hear from a leader of the party who can speak in the name of the Political Committee of the SWP. They want to talk to someone with "authority". Larry would be a good comrade to handle this for another reason. The DC'ers have many questions

concerning the RMC fusion--whether it was "principled", whether it will prove workable, etc. Larry is the comrade who's probably best qualified to deal with this and related questions.

On November 11 the SP National Committee will meet in Chicago. That meeting will undoubtedly vote to remove Tom Spiro from his post as SP national secretary. This point is a "fighting question" for the DC. They believe that Nov. 11 may result in a split. They think the expulsion of the DC is a real possibility.

In response to our offers of a speaker from the leadership of the SWP, the answer has been "yes", but after Nov. 11. So as to time, things are still somewhat up in the air. We're expecting a formal response from them in a few days. The meeting can then be set up on a date mutually agreeable to the DC and the SWP N.O.

Second, the classes we've offered to give to the DC are not on the books that we think are the best ones (necessarily) to start out with. The books listed in the letter are some of those the DC are presently studying. By making this proposal we are trying to find a way to link up with what the DC is presently doing as far as education is concerned.

Third, the proposed educational conference with the SP is being scrapped for reasons self-explanatory in the letter.

One final point for the consideration of the N.O.: it is the thinking of the comrades involved in SP work ^{in Milwaukee} that the ^{enclosed} letter might be put to good use by our comrades in Ann Arbor and N.Y.C. It could be shown to the DC in those cities as a means of opening up a formal relationship between us and the DC. We could show the DC'ers in Ann Arbor and NYC what type of collaboration and discussion is taking place between our two organizations in Milwaukee and Racine and, then propose to them the establishment of similar relations in their cities.

This report is little more than a brief outline of some of the problems we've run into and some of the progress we've made in our relations with the DC. Things are developing at a very rapid pace, so parts of this report may be passé in a few weeks.

Close collaboration between the Milwaukee branch and the N.O. will be necessary from now on. The question of the DC is no longer a "local question" that the Milwaukee branch can deal with on its own. Ways of collaborating with the DC in Ann Arbor and NYC will need to be worked out by the branches in those areas in cooperation with the N.O.

Further reports will be forthcoming to the N.O. as new developments take place.

Comradely,

William C. Breihan
Bill Breihan

*** This report was written on the basis of discussions with Susan LaMont, Tony Prince (organizer), and Alexandra Topping (assigned by branch as DC liason).

October 29, 1978

Dear Comrades,

We have discussed the following proposals with several members of the Debs Caucus recently as a means of furthering a political and programmatic discussion between the Socialist Workers Party and the Debs Caucus. Please let us know as soon as possible your response to these proposals so that we can make the necessary preparations.

First, we propose that a national leader of the SWP give a presentation of what the SWP is and what it stands for, and answer any questions that Debs Caucus members may have about the SWP.

Second, we are willing to make presentations to the Debs Caucus classes on books that are particularly relevant to the Trotskyist movement---books like The Third International After Lenin, The Revolution Betrayed, The Transitional Program, The Struggle for a Proletarian Party, or any other books that you would like.

We would also be willing to make presentations on our current positions on issues like the women's liberation movement, our strategy for the labor movement, the Black liberation movement, what strategy for the fight for socialism, etc.

If you would prefer a different format for discussions than any or all of the above, please let us know; we're open to different formats.

We had considered proposing a jointly sponsored public educational weekend on socialist strategy for the '70's and '80's, but now we think that this would probably be at least premature, since the Debs Caucus is still in the process of working out its program.

We hope to hear from you soon.

Comradely,

Tony Prince

Tony Prince
Milwaukee SWP

These community leaders, plus many Socialists and other activists are urging you to vote for Joel A. Miller for State Senate on November 7. Joel's positions are clear and his proposals are creative. For over two years Joel has put his body on the line to defend minorities from police attacks, to save the natatoriums, and to build and defend neighborhood groups.



Nicholas Topping



Memo Topitzes

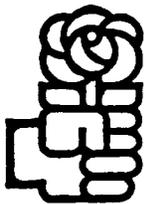
As a State Senator, Joel will introduce legislation that will:

**Shorten the work-week from 40 hours to 30 hours for the same pay. This will help to spread the work.

**Eliminate forced overtime.

**Eliminate the State Sales tax. (Joel's opponent, Jim Moody wants to increase this tax by 1¢ which would hurt low income and elderly people the most.)

**Eliminate the property tax and the State Income tax for working people while making the rich and corporations pay for the State that they run in their own interest.



JOEL A. MILLER,

LETS MAKE THE DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS AND THEIR BIG BUSINESS SUPPORTERS SHAKE IN THEIR BOOTS. ELECT JOEL A. MILLER TO THE STATE SENATE, NOVEMBER 7. You will find his name in the independent column on your ballot.

AUTH. AND PAID FOR BY THE SOCIALIST FOR STATE SENATE COMMITTEE
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