

POLITICAL COMMITTEE MEETING No. 34, August 3, 1979

Present: Barnes, Britton, Clark, Dixon, Hawkins, Horowitz, Jaquith, D. Jenness, Kramer, Lyons, Morell, Ring, Sedwick, Seigle, Stone, Waters

Guests: Lund, Mailhot, Prince, Rodríguez, Sheppard, Zimmermann

Chair: Clark

AGENDA: 1. Healyite Slander Campaign and Weissman Protest
2. Organization of Convention
3. Postconvention Expanded Political Committee Meeting
4. Houston Referendum

1. HEALYITE SLANDER CAMPAIGN AND WEISSMAN PROTEST

Jenness reported.

Discussion

Motion: To propose that Seigle give report on new developments in the Healyite slander campaign and protest from Comrade Weissman regarding an article submitted to the party Discussion Bulletin to preconvention National Committee plenum; and propose to NC that Weissman protest be referred to incoming Political Committee.

Carried.

2. ORGANIZATION OF CONVENTION

Jenness reported on revisions in the previous PC proposals to the National Committee in the organization and schedule for the convention. They are:

1. order of the agenda be shifted to put Political Resolution Reports ahead of report on International Women's Liberation Resolution.
2. to give Jack Lieberman, reporter for the Counter Political Resolution, 30 minutes plus 8 minutes summary.
3. to give Roger Horowitz, reporter from the YSA National Committee minority, 30 minutes plus 8 minutes summary.
4. to extend 30 minutes each to NC minority reporters Tim Wohlforth and Bruce Levine, rather than 38 minutes, and that Wohlforth be given an 8-minute summary. Comrade Levine doesn't request a summary.

Discussion

(over)

Motion: To approve.

Carried.

3. POSTCONVENTION EXPANDED POLITICAL COMMITTEE MEETING

Barnes reported on proposed agenda for expanded Political Committee meeting August 13 and 14: Nicaragua; a report from José Pérez on his recent trip to Cuba; Iran; and world movement.

Discussion

Motion: To approve.

Carried.

4. HOUSTON REFERENDUM

Jeness reported. (See attached letter.)

Discussion

Motion: To delegate a PC subcommittee of Ring, Rodríguez, and Seigle to discuss and decide on proposal from Houston branch Executive Committee to oppose change in city charter in August 11 referendum.

Carried.

(Following meeting, PC subcommittee met with Houston leadership and voted unanimously to concur with course recommended in letter.)

Meeting adjourned.

806 Elgin #1
Houston, TX 77006

July 27, 1979

Political Committee
New York

Dear Comrades,

There will be a referendum here on August 11 with one proposal on the ballot: to change the city charter to enlarge the city council from eight members elected at-large to a council of five elected at-large and nine elected by geographical districts (single-member districts).

The branch wants to propose that the party oppose this change by calling for a "no" vote, calling for a council composed of all single-member districts, and explaining that a labor party is needed to give adequate political representation to the city's Black and Chicano communities, as well as all working people.

Background

This referendum is a reaction by city officials to a long fight by Blacks and Chicanos in Houston for equal political representation. As the Black and Chicano population has steadily grown from the early years of this century, the local ruling class has changed the form of city government several times in order to freeze Blacks and Chicanos out of political representation. During this century there has been only one Black and one Chicano elected to city council or an executive city office.

In 1955, after most legal restrictions against Blacks voting were eliminated, the current at-large system for electing city council was established. This was combined with a state law that allowed three cities--Houston, Dallas and San Antonio--to annex any contiguous unincorporated areas, yet allowing these annexed areas to keep independent school districts.

In recent years, the Houston city government has aggressively annexed white suburb after white suburb to keep the percentage of Black and Chicanos below the fifty percent mark, while intensifying school segregation. The Houston Independent School District is roughly 70% Black and Chicano, while the city officially is 37½% Black and Chicano. Many Black and Chicano neighborhoods receive totally inadequate city services. One Black neighborhood, for example, called Acres Homes, has 700 families without indoor running water; the city refuses to provide it. Other aspects of the racism in city government, like police brutality, are well-known.

The issue of single-member districts has been an important issue here for more than a decade. A coalition of Black organizations, with the support of major Chicano groups filed suit against the city claiming that the at-large election system coupled with the city's annexation policy violated the Voting Rights Act by diluting Black and Chicano voting strength.

On June 11, the U.S. Justice Department ruled that the city's 1977 and 1978 annexations violated the Voting Rights Act and issued an injunction against the November general elections until the city council is restructured so that Blacks and Chicanos could win 37½% of the seats, or unless the residents of newly-annexed areas could not vote. The latter would violate Texas law, so the city council was obliged to propose a charter change election or the regular elections would be indefinitely postponed.

On July 19, final approval was reached for the August 11 referendum. If the proposed charter change fails, then other options for a charter change will be voted on in November and the city elections will be postponed until January. If it passes, and meets Justice Department approval, the election will be in November.

Under the proposal on the ballot, the city council will draw up the district boundaries before November. With only nine single-member districts, it would be very easy for the council to gerrymander Blacks and Chicanos out of equal representation. Every Black and Chicano organization in Houston favors a larger number of single-member districts to help ensure equal representation. Some favor 16 single-member districts out of 20; others favor simply 20 single-member districts.

Positions of other forces

The ballot measure is supported by substantial local ruling class figures, although at this point they are not mounting any kind of drive around it. There are no "citizens committees" or anything of that nature pushing for passage. The regular Democratic Party, Chamber of Commerce, executives from big corporations like Brown and Root have supported it.

Right-wing and racist groups and leaders are generally not making a fuss about this. A few--representing groups that claim to speak for annexed areas, who want deannexation for generally racist reasons-- have opposed the charter change because they want a larger council with single-member districts in order to have their own representatives on city council.

Other ruling class forces oppose the charter change. The liberal Democratic Party (organized in the Harris County Democrats) has taken a position for a "no" vote on the charter change. This position is shared by the NAACP, LULAC, Gay Political Caucus, Women's Political Caucus, and every substantial civil rights organization. Most back a plan for sixteen single-member and four at-large council members as proposed by the Harris County Democrats. They claim to have collected 15,000 signatures to put this on the ballot in November.

This week the Harris County AFL-CIO also took a position against the 9-5 plan and for single-member districts without pushing for one of the other specific alternatives.

The Mayor, who is now pushing the current charter change proposal, has publicly stated his willingness to support the 16-4 plan if his plan is voted down.

The party's position

The Houston SWP has long had a position in favor of a city council based on all single-member districts. Our candidates for municipal office have always included this as an important issue in our campaigns.

During the current discussion, Debby Leonard, the party's current mayoral candidate, testified at a city council meeting where the charter change was discussed. Rather than advocating one or another particular plan, she called for a city council of all single-member districts, large enough to ensure equal representation for Blacks and Chicanos, with the districts drawn up by a board of Black and Chicano organizations. We differentiated ourselves from those who opposed the change for racist reasons, and we explained that working people need their own political party to really be politically represented in city council.

The branch executive committee feels that we should oppose the ballot measure, because it is another attempt to stall on giving Blacks and Chicanos equal political rights. We do not think we should at this point endorse one or another alternative to this plan. We think the thrust of our statements should continue to be, in a general way, for all single member districts.

One option would be to ignore, or call for an abstention on the current ballot measure. We believe that would be an error. The question of single member districts is a big political question in Houston. The 9-5 plan, in our view, is clearly an attempt to maintain unequal political representation for Blacks and Chicanos. Our party should clearly and publicly oppose it.

Even though the referendum will happen quite shortly, the branch feels we can still intervene in the discussion by issuing a statement and press release, participating in meetings around this question, and having an article in the Militant. Within this framework we will be able to get a hearing for our other ideas, particularly our ideas on what kind of political party and program is needed to represent the interests of Blacks and Chicanos.

Comradely,

Rick
Rick Berman

Susie
Susie Winster --for the Houston Branch EC.