

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

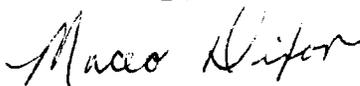
October 8, 1979

TO ORGANIZERS AND NATIONAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

Enclosed are copies of communications between comrades in industry and the National Office concerning trade-union activity and the role of worker-Bolsheviks. Also included is correspondence between David Herreshoff and Frank Lovell. Herreshoff is a former member of the party. These materials would be useful for trade-union fraction heads and coordinators.

Comradely,



Maceo Dixon
National Office

Phoenix, Arizona
September 14, 1979

Frank Lovell
c/o SWP
14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

Dear comrade Lovell:

In this letter I want to ask for your opinion on three questions.

The first is what attitude our fractions should, in general, take towards "shop floor" issues in the plants. Before I go further, let me say that I am not of the opinion that our fractions should orient towards these "shop floor" issues and neglect what has been called "broad social questions." I agree generally with the replies to comrade Riehle in the pre-convention discussion by comrades Ryan, Kendrick and Taylor. But none of these articles dealt concretely with what attitude we should take towards "shop floor" questions.

We definitely should talk to as many workers as we can about "broad social issues" and socialism, sell the press, bring contacts to forums, etc. In the process, workers see us as people with intelligent ideas and consequently come up to us and ask us what to do about every problem, big and small. By "shop floor" issues, I mean questions such as: a foreman forcing a worker to work with unsafe equipment, speed-up, forced overtime, favoritism in awarding bids, etc. We know that the grievance procedure is bad, and so do many workers, so what do we advocate? A walkout? Sit-down? Slowdown? Sabotage? Surely we cannot just say, "Well, there's nothing you can do about working on that unsafe equipment until the unions are transformed and form a labor party. Join the SWP and help us fight for this perspective." Such a reply would be sectarian. Yet to advocate some sort of action could be adventuristic and result in a defeat. This is the dilemma.

We are confronted with these "shop floor" issues every day. I do not think we can ignore them or brush them off with ultimistic, sectarian replies. The workers would regard us as all talk and no action.

The solution, I think, lies in somehow linking the "shop floor" issues with the "broad social issues" and advancing tactics that are transitional--which start with the present no-strike grievance system but advance towards mass, independent action by the workers.

(over)

We can link speed-up and forced overtime to unemployment. We can link griping about the large amount of taxes withheld to the war budget and U.S. foreign policy. Stupid decisions made by the company can lead to discussions about workers control, Cuba and Nicaragua.

Our tactics can neither be sectarian nor adventuristic. One possible step is that grievances could be filed, but signed by several workers, or the whole department, instead of only one worker. This leads away from the attitude fostered by the grievance system that the problems of one worker are of no concern to the others.

Another tactic would be if a worker was treated unjustly, a petition could be circulated in the plant backing this worker's grievance and then presented to the company to let the company know that all of the workers are behind the victimized one.

I would very much appreciate your opinion on this problem, since I am faced with it every day and remain baffled as to the solution. I do not wish to seem to the workers like we are no different than the union officials who say do nothing except file a grievance. At the same time, we do not want to advocate walkouts or job actions when there is little chance, under the circumstances, of them being successful.

A second question I want to ask you concerns the question of union posts. I can see why we should, in general, avoid taking posts, including stewards, at the present time. We do not want to be identified with the grievance system. But how do we avoid the criticism, "Oh, you're just all bullshit. You talk a lot, but when you're asked to do something, you back out."? Secondly, if we turn down these posts, who do we think should take them? Should we advise our contacts and sympathizers to take posts like stewards? Don't the reasons why we don't take these posts apply to them as well? If so, then who do we think should be union president, stewards, and the rest? The right-wing workers? Somebody has to hold the posts.

The third thing is that I am presently researching the history of union organization among copper miners, especially in Arizona. If you know of any source material that would be of use to me, I would appreciate the help. Also, if you or any of the older comrades could furnish me with some information on the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers and the Stalinists I would be grateful.

Thank you.

Comradely,

s/Rob Roper

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

September 24, 1979

Rob Roper
Phoenix, Arizona

Dear Rob:

This is in response to the three questions you submitted in your letter of Sept. 14. It seems to me that the answers to these questions begin to emerge in your explanation of them, and I'm inclined to believe that in a short time you will discover the answers. Maybe our discussion of the problems will be helpful.

The first question: "what attitude our fractions should, in general, take towards 'shop floor' issues . . ." In your reference to past discussions (material that appeared in our pre-convention discussion bulletins) you correctly say that "none of these articles dealt concretely with what attitude we should take toward 'shop floor' questions."

The reason for this is that the writers were discussing the question "in general," exactly what you are asking for again. There can be no satisfactory general answer.

What we do about "shop issues" always occurs over some specific issue, within a given set of circumstances, and is seldom repeated. What we do on one occasion may be different from what we did under similar (but different) circumstances previously. Such generalizations are not helpful, are they?

It is better to talk about specific instances, using examples from our experience. How we relate to "shop issues" (confronting an overbearing foreman, settling grievances under the terms of the union contract, deciding whether to leave the plant on an unbearably hot summer day, etc.) is determined by our political goals and by the willingness of our fellow workers to fight.

The examples you give are good ones. How do you file a grievance? You say a grievance can be signed by several workers, not only one. I suppose this depends on the nature of the grievance. It may be that many workers would have similar individual grievances, and they could all file separate complaints at the same time. This would accomplish the same thing and have the same effect on the boss. The purpose, as you say, is to get away from the false notion that a grievance of one worker is of no concern to the others.

If we try to generalize this, we conclude that our task in relation to shop floor issues is to find ways, through the handling of these issues, to raise the level of class consciousness, develop a greater sense of solidarity, and help to organize actions that will educate the workers in the use of their own power.

(over)

The circumstances of the workplace has a good deal to do with this. In a small shop only a few workers are involved in any action, and very often the boss you confront is the owner of the shop or a direct representative of the owner. Within the work force there may be relatives of the owner or the foreman. Under these circumstances the way we deal with "shop floor" issues is different from what we can do in a Ford assembly plant or a U.S. Steel mill.

Mass production facilities employ thousands of workers in many different departments. The employee-management relationship is regulated to some extent by the grievance procedure. In most places this "grievance procedure" is fixed; there is an established pattern and specific "steps" that all grievances must follow. This established pattern may not be the only way grievances can be filed, nor is it the best. Some new ideas, such as you suggest, could probably be introduced. These would need to be discussed with as many workers as possible, certainly all those who have grievances and want some action for a change.

We believe in change. We want to do what we can to help bring about changes, big and small. But nothing is possible without the participation of large numbers of workers. So our job is to talk about these "shop issues"--just as we talk about all other issues--and try to work out ways to handle them in concert with as many of our fellow workers as possible.

There really are no slick ways of handling shop problems, settling grievances in favor of the workers. Like all other problems, they can be solved only in consultation and collaboration with the workers involved. You must have the tacit support (at least) of a majority of workers in order to bring about any changes, however small.

This does not mean that we cannot propose and help carry through better ways within the union of handling disputes with the boss. But we must submit our proposals to our fellow workers and get their approval, agreement, and active participation. In the course of talking about better ways of handling shop issues, it may be that you will discover many other workers who have good proposals. It is always useful to accept the proposals of other militants and try to find ways to work with them and help them to improve (and sometimes correct) their ideas. In this way, we usually learn too.

You mentioned the common grievance about unsafe equipment. And of course you are right when you say it is unacceptable to tell workers that nothing can be done until unions build a labor party, meantime join the Socialist Workers Party and help us fight for a labor party. This is a caricature of political work in the union movement.

Comrade with

Helping to solve shop problems is important political work, as important as any of our campaigns. We should avoid thinking and acting as if there were two separate categories: political campaigns and/or shop issues, political work vs "practical" work. But solving shop problems is slightly different, and most comrades are new to these problems. We don't pretend to have all the answers and we don't

promise to provide the solutions. We must undertake to work out the answers jointly with all other workers who are trying to find out what to do. Once we start working in this way we will make more progress.

The second question, "the question of union posts," is related to our method of working on shop issues. Usually those who have the best answers to the "shop issues" problems are the most likely to be elected to union posts. The workers say, "Rob has good ideas about how to handle grievances, we should make him our grievor and he will fix everything for us."

this (A)

This is wrong.

The most clever shop steward cannot do much for the workers. Many inexperienced militants think they can do great things if they can only manage to get themselves elected to a union job. They soon learn that when the workers look to and expect some "clever leader" to take care of their problems with the boss, those problems are never very well taken care of. This is what we must explain in our discussions about "shop issues."

To be a respected leader of workers on the shop floor does not require that you have a union title. When some workers urge us to "take responsibility," we explain that we are anxious to work with everyone else who is willing to seek solutions to our common problems. Who serves as the "official" union representative is not decisive. At some stage in the development of the union struggle we will want to accept union posts, but for the time being it ought not to be difficult to explain to our fellow workers that we really are not office seekers and that we are too busy with other projects to devote the full time that taking a union post requires. We are willing to collaborate with others, and help out in every way we can at this stage.

(B) this

and this (C)

I think that for those workers who are seriously interested in this question of leadership, it would be productive to organize classes on the Teamster books by Farrell Dobbs. They should get a better understanding of union work and perhaps they would join our party as a result.

On the third question: "history of union organization among copper miners, especially Arizona." Enclosed is mention of a new book, Hard-Rock Epic, from the Sept. 8 issue of The Nation. I don't know if this will be of much use to you since it covers the period 1860-1910. I have no acquaintance with the modern history of the miners' union in Arizona, and have passed your request along to Paul Montauk.

Comradely,

s/Frank Lovell

c/c Caroline Fowlkes
T.U. Steering Comm.

9-25-79

Rob Roper
Phoenix

Dear Rob,

Re; the part of your letter to Frank Lovell asking for information on the history of the Mine Mill & Smelters union;

While the shelves are fairly full of various histories of different unions, I do not know of one single work that deals with Mine Mill per se--it is usually discussed within other histories and most of this deals with the post WWII witch-hunt period.

Mine Mill actually traces its lineage back to the Western Federation of Miners and also can boast of being expelled twice from the "mainstream": from the AFL in 1938 and from the CIO in 1950, the first time for being a supporter of John L and industrial unionism, the second for being a "communist dominated" union.

Bert Cochran's Labor & Communism (Princeton Univ Press) is an excellent source of facts and history of the Stalinists in the union movement. His political errors are somewhat compensated by his thorough and reliable research. He has a small section on Mine Mill in it.

At its height (1946) Mine Mill had a claimed membership of 100,000--or that was the number of members they were paying the national CIO per capita for. This is not too reliable a figure for it was (and still is) common practice for different unions to inflate this figure. John L for example always claimed at least 20-50% more members than he really had at different times.

While their main and primary base was in the nonferrous areas of the Southwest, they did become very active in the Alabama area in organizing. At one time they were the bargaining agent for the miners at Bessemer, Alabama and were embarked on a campaign of organizing throughout the South.

In the Southwest (and the South) it appears that their main constituency were oppressed minorities: Mexican Americans and Blacks. That, combined with the nature of the industry (traditionally the most violent capitalists who relied frequently on vigilantes and terror) combined with a militant tradition was reflected in their being a very feisty and combative union.

Unlike the UE (Stalinist led--and frequently referred to as an "NLRB baby" because of their growth through class-collaboration politics and gifts from FDR as a consequence) Mine Mill grew through struggle.

They were pocketed in by the Steel workers and the UMW and never were able to develop a national perspective. This was further aggravated by their rather slavish adherence to Stalinist policies and sell outs.

Reid Robinson, their President, if not a member of the CP, did a good job of cheating them out of dues. He was always in the forefront of some CP front group doing his thing. Mine Mill officially endorsed the 48 Wallace campaign, (something the CP was not able to do even with their control over the UE) and this seems to have contributed to their defeats in Alabama and in New Mexico where there was a beginning movement on the part of Mexican American miners against the capitalist parties and policies.

His assistant, Maurice Travis, (first vice president, then president after Robinson left) lost his eye in a jurisdictional beef in Alabama.

Many of the leaders of Mine Mill (similar to Travis) it seemed did enjoy high stature as fighters and this was reflected in the inability of a strong opposition to arise in the union basing itself on the witch-hunt.

They were really up against it when Taft Hartley and the witch hunt rolled in. Suffering a limited base to begin with they were up against the government and they were officially proscribed for not signing the loyalty affidavits (The UE leaders did sign) and then were forced to fight for their existence against massive raids that were launched by other unions. A large section they had was taken away and given to the shipyard workers, but otherwise they pretty well held their own.

Facing this onslaught they somehow managed to survive as an independent union.

In the Right to Challenge (Herling, Harper Row) he describes how after Abel won the presidency of the USWA, he opened up negotiations with them and in 1967 they were brought into the USWA with a recorded membership of 25,000 here and 15,000 in Canada. Abel, (who at that time was opposed to red-baiting) seems to have given them a fair deal and they were able to hold on to their own leadership within the USWA.

It is unclear whether the CP was able to continue as an effective part of that leadership. Some remnants of it were illustrated when Juan Chacon ("Salt of the Earth" star) (and now president of his local in New Mexico) organized a "Rank and File" caucus pitted against Ed Sadlowski in District 31..but never got very far with it. Chacon was pretty discredited by this maneuver.

I would assume that one can find many papers written about them--particularly in the University of New Mexico--by graduate students. Hopefully, some day we will be able to research them and learn more.

comradely,

Paul Montauk
National EducDept.



18 September 1979

Michigan

Frank Lovell
The Militant

SEP 22 1979

Dear Frank:

You have accepted the responsibility of conveying the lore of our generation to the young militants of the SWP. I believe that you strive with success, usually, to perform that function reliably. The paragraph in your obituary for Arthur Burch devoted to the Cochran split, however, is not one of your successes. What you write there won't help anybody to understand and learn from the faction fight of 1953. What you undertake there is to reveal what the Cochranites really thought, "decided," and "convinced themselves" of. This is a dangerous proceeding both in politics and in the writing of political history. No one has yet invented a sincerometer, Lenin once warned people inclined to substitute a psychological probe of their adversaries for an analysis of the ideas and acts of their adversaries. When that inclination becomes a method, the result is an end to political debate. Any critic of prevailing party policy can then be dismissed with the taunt: "What you are saying is not your real program; in essence you're just a quitter." To teach young revolutionists this method is to miseducate them.

You write of the Cochranites that "They decided that the working class in this country would never fulfill its historic mission to transform society and create a new world. They convinced themselves that the great mass of workers will never be interested in anything more than 'bread and butter' issues, like the union officials say." Now the Cochranites never said anything like that and they didn't believe anything like that either. So why do you say it now? I'll listen to whatever explanation occurs to you. I won't try to tell you what you really believe and why. I don't have a license for that.

Meanwhile here are a couple of my conclusions about 1953.

The split of 1953 was between revolutionists and was therefore unprincipled. It was not, as you wildly assert, a split between revolutionists on the one side and Comperseite unionists on the other. No, the Cochranites were not converts to business unionism who had given up on the working class as the agent of revolutionary change. And the worst that was charged against the Cochranites at the time was that they were going to or wanted to capitulate to the union bureaucracy. In the absence of evidence to show that such a capitulation had actually occurred the castigation took the form of a prediction. A standard dogma of all left sects is that outside my own party there are no revolutionists. (To the Spartacists for instance the left is divided between the revolutionists (themselves) and everybody else ("the fake left"). By recourse to that dogma you might make a "case" for the Cochranites having given up on the revolution. I believe, though, that that would conflict with the SWP's recent, and welcome, emphasis on revolutionaries of action. In what ways in the 50s were the activities of the Cochranites in the unions, in civil liberties, in socialist propogands less militant

than those of members of the SWP?

The SWP of the present was shaped by the victors of 1953. This results in a disinclination towards a fundamental review of the experience and an inclination to perpetuate, unexamined, the factional charges of the victors. Furthermore the few Cochranites who have rejoined the SWP or become sympathizers have shown no desire to bring such matters up. This is too bad because the Majority faction of 1953 was not all it was cracked up to be in the standard version. That Majority, starting with the bloc of Cannon and Weiss, was a hodge-podge which included proto-Healyites, proto-Maoists, the Johnsonite remnant, pro- and anti-Black nationalists. These shadings of opinion united (briefly) on the proposition that faith in the leadership, faith in the party, and faith in the class, are one and the same thing. They agreed (more briefly) on the cockeyed notion that the country was entering a class confrontation between fascism on the march and the proletariat. This is not a legacy which should be shielded from critical review. Events quickly demonstrated the error of the prognosis, and, while the Cochranites shrank towards the vanishing point, the bloc of the victors proceeded to fall apart. Weiss, Swabeck, Schultz, Marcy, Stein, Bolden, Fraser, Kaye went their separate ways. The SWP barely made it into the 60s. I believe that the character of the Majority combination of 1953 diminished rather than augmented the probability of the party's survival. That estimate naturally flows from the premise that the split of 1953 was unprincipled and perhaps avoidable. I believe Mandel thinks that too.

I write this hopefully, believing that making sense out of experience is important. That is why history remains important. No party which misrepresents the beliefs and actions of its defeated factions can hope to become the conscience of its class. I believe, Frank, that you want the SWP to be that conscience.

Fraternally,



David Herreshoff

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

October 2, 1979

David Herreshoff
Highland Park, Mich.

Dear Dave:

This is in response to your letter of September 18 about Arthur Burch and the 1953 Cochranite split in the Socialist Workers Party.

My article was an attempt to record and explain the contributions that Arthur made to the growth and stability of our party. The passing reference to the Cochranite split was incidental to the purpose of the article. Nonetheless the reference is misleading and should have been better stated. It would have been more accurate to say that the Cochranites were convinced (not that they decided) that the working class is incapable of fulfilling its historic mission.

You are correct about the "sincerometer." No one has yet invented such an instrument, and I am as little interested in psychological probes as you are. I understand the purpose and danger of this method in politics, and I also know that its specious character is easily exposed. I never was tempted to try mind reading, nor have I ever questioned the sincerity of Cochran or any of his followers.

It is not necessary for us to debate the causes of the 1953 split because that very important political development is recorded in its entirety, from beginning to end, in the Cannon volume, "Speeches To The Party." (Pathfinder Press, 1973) As participants we can write about it as it appeared to us at the time (twenty-six years ago), and the way we see it now in retrospect.

I am indebted to you for your letter because it forced me to return to Jim's reports to the party and his letters to leading comrades of the time. His central theme was that Cochran had lost confidence in the coming working class struggle for power. Cochran represented the mood of a very important sector of the party at that time. "The components of Cochranism (Cannon to Dobbs, p. 250) are capitulatory pessimism and unprincipledness," said Cannon. The unprincipled part was the Cochran/Clarke combination on the "progressive features" of Stalinism which Cochran did not believe in at all and said so. But for the purposes of our present discussion it is the "capitulatory pessimism" of Cochranism that is in question.

You tell me now that the Cochranites never said that they had decided that the working class was unable to fulfill its historic mission, "and they didn't believe anything like that either." In 1953 they also vehemently denied that they were pessimistic about the future, and complained that they were being slandered. Cochran said, as I recall, that a party or faction can only be judged by its program, by what it says it stands for, not by what others read into the program.

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Cannon argued that politicians and political parties must be judged not only by what they say, but by what they do. And he explained further that what they do is determined by the pressure of social forces upon them. The class struggle is decisive. Those in the working class movement who proclaim the same goals do not all respond in the same way in the continuously shifting battle with the ruling class.

The main thing is to try and understand the social forces at work. In the case of the Cochranites, Cannon understood more and was better able to explain Cochran's politics than he or any of his associates could.

No one then (certainly not Cannon) said that the Cochranites were conscious capitulators. If they had been able to foresee the consequences of their struggle to revamp the party, they probably would not have undertaken it. Cannon saw further and warned them and the party that their course, if followed, would lead to the liquidation of the SWP. That is why he warned at the outset against the danger of a split.

I do not believe now that in 1953 the Cochranite faction ever met and consciously "decided that the working class in this country would never fulfill its historic mission..." Certainly they never said that, and I doubt if any of them consciously believed it in 1953.

My formulation in the Arthur Burch article is a type of shorthand that we sometimes slip into. It tries to catch in a sentence the result of a rather complicated process that unfolded over several years. In this instance, it is confusing to say of the Cochranites that "they decided." Readers understand decision-making to be a conscious process and will conclude that the decision was made in 1953. At that time the leading Cochranites were convinced in their bones that the working class could not transform society. I say this with confidence because their subsequent development as a group demonstrated that they acted upon this premise. And somewhere along the line some of them (certainly Cochran) came to the conscious conclusion that their 1953 feelings were completely accurate.

Today Cochran sneers at Marxism. In his latest book, "Labor and Communism," he writes the following: (p. 20)

"In Marxist doctrine the working class was the repository of revolutionary virtues. According to the sacred writings, this class was the chosen leader to propel the nation along a path of progress, the battering ram for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, the host disciplined in the production process, able and ready to battle the enemy in preparation for the great day."

I believe the author of those lines has decided that the modern working class will not lead a social revolution. However he explains history, it is clear that he has discarded the Marxist theory.

You raised the important question of whether the 1953 split was unavoidable and necessary. I believe it was unavoidable because ours is a voluntary organization and there was no way the majority could prevent the Cochranites from leaving. I also believe that it was necessary in order to maintain and continue to try and build the Leninist-type party that the SWP strives to become. Cannon elaborated upon this theme in his speech at the November 1953 plenum of the SWP after the Cochranites had left. (See "Speeches," p. 172) There is no reason for me to repeat now what was better said almost exactly twenty-six years ago to the day.

It is true, as you say, that the SWP has suffered other defections since the Cochranites left. There were different reasons in each of the instances mentioned, but I think the long period of relative prosperity and political repression was largely responsible. The more important fact is that the SWP survived and is growing.

I think we should take pride in the fact that some comrades who were misled by Cochran have returned to the party, or are close sympathizers and supporters of the party. That is testimony to the validity of our party-building methods.

As you know, we have nothing whatsoever in common with the sectarian dogma that all radicals outside the SWP belong in some kind of "fake left." Our entire history is a search for allies, for united front actions against social and political reaction, and for fusions and mergers of all forces moving in the direction of class struggle politics.

I think for purposes of correcting the faulty formulation about Cochranism in the piece I wrote about Arthur Burch, it would be useful if you sent in a short paragraph to The Militant calling attention to it. I would respond briefly, probably submitting the 2nd para. of this letter. Whether the editors would publish such an exchange to keep the record straight depends partly on the backlog of letters. But I think the chances of publication are good.

Best personal regards,

s/Frank Lovell

September 28, 1979

Frank Lovell
National Office
New York

Dear Frank,

On September 8 Pete Kelly was in the Twin Cities as the featured speaker at a "rank and file contract rally" organized by two members of the Unity Caucus which exists in local 879 here. A few of our comrades attended this meeting. At our September 9 fraction meeting there was a brief report and discussion on the "rally." We decided to write to you about the meeting and to raise a few questions.

Kelly spoke for approximately 1 1/4 hours. The talk outlined his personal history, the formation of the United National Caucus, past contract negotiations and strikes since 1964, leading up to the 1979 contract and its importance. He also spoke considerably about the introduction of robots and other technology and the effect on the workplace in the auto industry. Finally, he spoke about the American working class; raised the issues of union democracy and solidarity and the necessity of breaking with the Democrats and Republicans. Our comrades expanded on the last two ideas in the discussion. During the discussion he passed out copies of "You Can Do It Better Democratically" to anyone who wanted it.

I had been introduced to Kelly before the meeting started and asked him if he had seen the Militant article on the pamphlet. Later that evening I was able to catch up with him again and give him a copy of the 3/23/79 Militant. While we talked he told me he knew you and that you had been one of his mentors. He also wondered why the SWP abstains from participation in the working class. When he told me he hadn't read the Militant for "about 4 years" I suggested that he take a good look at it one of these days. He did know about the Detroit auto crisis forum that Pulley was going to speak at.

Now, for the questions. What is the Independent Skilled Trades Council? What sort of formation is it? What is its relationship to the union leadership? How much influence does it have? What happened to the United National Caucus? Where does Kelly stand politically -- is he lined up with any group or is he an independent? Have you heard anything about a new national caucus forming? Kelly seemed to imply that was a possibility over the next few months. He kept alluding to the necessity of rank and file groups getting and staying in touch with each other to co-ordinate activities nationally to be more effective. He told me he's not a sectarian, he'll work with anyone. However, he seems to me to be an oppositionist at heart.

I've enclosed for you copies of material available at the meeting and also a copy of a speech he gave last fall at the invitation of the Guardian.

Comradely,

s/Libby Moser, Twin Cities

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14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

October 3, 1979

Libby Moser
St. Paul, Minn.

Dear Libby:

I'll try to answer the questions in your letter of September 28.

1) What is the Independent Skilled Trades Council?

The Independent Skilled Trades Council is an outgrowth of the attempt by the skilled trades division of the UAW to overturn the 1976 UAW contract which was negotiated with Ford Motor Company.

In that contract year (1976) there was greater organized opposition to the package that came out of the negotiations than before or since. There was greater participation in the voting than this year at GM on the current contract (see Shelly's piece in this week's Militant), and the skilled trades division at Ford turned down the 1976 contract. They had been led to believe by Woodcock (and by Reuther earlier) that if either the skilled or unskilled divisions turned down a proposed contract, it would have to be re-negotiated. They discovered that this was not the case.

I think the Independent Skilled Trades Council grew up in the struggle to clarify this issue of the power and semi-autonomy of the UAW skilled trades division within the UAW structure.

The most influential representative of the Independent Skilled Trades Council is Al Gardner who is Chairman of the UAW Ford local 600 tool and die unit. Others who have held this post were subsequently elected president of Local 600, largest local in the UAW.

2) What sort of formation is it?

It is a caucus formation. It seeks to speak for skilled workers, and claims to represent the interests of all UAW members.

It has an office in Southfield, Mich., tries to maintain a dues-paying membership, has elected officers, holds business meetings from time to time, has a constitution of sorts or a statement of purpose (I think), publishes an occasional issue of its 4-page paper, the Skilled Tradesman, issues handbills, calls mass meetings and demonstrations when issues arise, conducts general propoganda (the pamphlet "You Can Do It Better Democratically" is an example) and tries in this way to influence UAW policy.

3) What is its (ISTC) relationship to the union leadership?

The leaders of ISTC are local UAW officials (past or present) and they are all active in UAW politics on the local level. They

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assume an oppositionist stance in relation to the UAW International bureaucracy. They meet occasionally--as individuals or as a delegation--with Fraser and/or other top UAW officers to complain about incompetent International Reps. who come to settle local grievances, or discuss other matters of a similar nature. Usually they are at odds with UAW Regional directors, on policy matter; but the relationship remains more or less cordial.

4) How much influence does the ISTC have?

Not much. Its numerical strength fluctuates, as is commonly the case with all such caucus formations. It is not able to mobilize very large numbers of UAW members in mass demonstrations. It measures its strength by the number of members it manages to help get elected to UAW posts. Its continued existence depends upon a narrow network of UAW local officials in the skilled trades division who have a need for it to maintain contact among themselves and to present their ideas more forcefully in UAW councils.

They can operate this way without fear from the International officialdom for a combination of reasons: there is an ever-present threat that the Skilled Trades Division may split from the UAW (this threat is not great right now, but in the past there have been company sponsored attempts to set up independent skilled trade unions); Fraser and his cronies regard the ISTC as a "loyal opposition" (i.e. not seeking to bust up the UAW and having no sympathy with craft unionism), and serving as a kind of safety valve; the ISTC is no threat to the UAW bureaucracy.

5) What happened to the United National Caucus?

It never amounted to much.

I was a charter member and supporter (not an enthusiastic organizer of it) along with Kelley, Roger McFadden and others at the GM Tech Center, Art Fox at Ford Local 600, and a few other scattered UAW dissidents. The UNC existed for ten or fifteen years about like the ISTC does today, and was subsumed by the ISTC in the fight against the 1976 contract.

The difference is not great between UNC and ISTC. The name has changed, but not much else.

6) Where does Kelley stand politically--is he lined up with any group or is he an independent?

He lines up with any group that supports his current project, whatever it may be.

At one time in Detroit he sought the support of the IS.

I suppose you would say he is an independent radical of sorts. He was active for a time in the anti-war movement.

His main interest is union politics.

I have always tried to stay on friendly terms with Pete. And with others in these groups, even when they have fallings-out among themselves.

7) Have you heard anything about a new national caucus forming?

No.

But one is always forming, even when it is only a hope in the hearts of a few.

8) In conclusion.

Pete Kelley told you the truth. He is no sectarian.

He will work with anyone who helps him.

His talk was typical.

I think your impression is accurate.

Comradely,

s/Frank

September 29, 1979

Peter Seidman
Militant Business Office
New York

Dear Peter,

I wanted to dash off a few lines to you about our experiences here over the last few weeks while selling the Militant at our plant gate. These thoughts are coming straight off the top of my head, so I may get tangled up--please bear with me.

We have had a regular Friday afternoon shift change sale there since mid-March of this year. Up until Sept. 14 the sale was always done by other members of the former Minneapolis and St. Paul branches (we are now back in one Twin Cities branch). Over the spring sales drive we sold approximately 100 Militants at the gates, and one sub.

Since the 14th the comrades who work in auto have led the plant-gate teams on Friday afternoon. The response has been very interesting. Some of our co-workers who knew we were socialists and had already bought the Militant from us inside the plant were excited to see us at the gate. They gave us all kinds of signs of encouragement. Some of our other co-workers became curious and have since talked to us inside about what we were doing at the gate. This has ranged from: "What was the pamphlet you were passing out?" to "What's in that paper you sell?" We have been able to sell more inside as a result of the added visibility the Militant has gotten when being sold by a co-worker, in my opinion. It has also helped us talk to more people about subs and raised the general political discussions we're having to a higher level in some cases and started discussions with a whole new layer of people. (Some people have indicated displeasure also.)

It seems there are others who have been noticing our activity also. At the orientation sessions for new hires the fact that there are members of other political parties in the plant has been added along with the "official" word about the Unity Caucus--stay away from them. We just found out about this and will be watching the situation. My suspicion is that it will give us a little business.

I hope these erratic remarks are of some use to you. I would encourage comrades to sell at their own gates if they feel it won't create any problems for them. It is a wonderful feeling to see your co-workers make a connection between you and the Militant, especially when they seek you out to find out more about the paper and your politics.

Comradely,

s/Libby Moser