

Aspects of the SWP Experience 1960-1980

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The following is a talk presented by Gus Horowitz to a Conference on the Legacy of Leon Trotsky and U.S. Trotskyism, held at Fordham University in New York City July 25-27, 2008.

This talk was part of a panel discussing “Lessons of the SWP Experience: 1960 - 1980.” The three panelists each had twenty minutes.

This is the original text, lightly edited. During extemporaneous delivery of the actual speech some phrases may have been added, modified or omitted.

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I will take up three points:

1. The impact of the events of the 1960s radicalization on our ideas.
2. The impact of the Fourth International on the SWP.
3. The role of the 1960s leadership generation, and in particular Jack Barnes.

The impact of events on our ideas

In the early 1960s we all looked to the 1930s radicalization for inspiration, especially to the great labor and trade union struggles of that period.

But the 1960s radicalization unfolded differently than was expected, differently than what had been understood in traditional Marxist theory.

We were influenced by the Cuban revolution and by the other colonial revolutions which were still going strong at the time. But the colonial revolutions took place - not in the industrially developed world, not even in the less developed parts of the industrial world, but in some of the least developed areas.

We were influenced by the Black struggle in the American South for civil rights, which began in the late 1950s and which was followed in the 1960s by the rise of struggles and Black nationalism in both North and South. While the participants in the Black struggle were themselves for the most part working class, the issues of the struggle were generally not labor issues per se, but issues of democratic rights.

We owed a lot in our understanding of these events, and how they could be fit into Marxist theory to two leaders of the older generation: Joe Hansen and George Breitman.

But the enrichment of these ideas, and the application of the same kind of approach to new developments, was largely the work of the 1960s generation.

The driving force of the radicalization in the latter 1960s was the anti-Vietnam-war movement, whose key component was the students.

Students also raised important specifically student issues. Students, we should note, were now a significantly more populous element than in earlier periods, outnumbering farmers significantly.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s we saw the rise of the women's movement, the Chicano and other Latino struggles, the gay liberation movement and the development of a whole series of challenges to the old order on cultural issues.

How to fit these new challenges into the corpus of Marxist theory?

In the summer of 1970 we held the first of our Oberlin, Ohio national gatherings. It was the occasion for our first comprehensive analysis of all the main issues posed by the new radicalization. We collected the main speeches from that gathering into a book, *Towards an American Socialist Revolution: A Strategy for the 1970s*. I edited the book and wrote an introductory essay pulling the various themes together.

I would like to read a few passages from this introduction, because it conveys a bit of the flavor of our thinking during those times.

"There is questioning and rejection of the myriad social institutions and forms of ideological backwardness and prejudice serving to prop up the outmoded order. This is a feature, to one degree or another, of the women's liberation movement, the movements of oppressed nationalities, the student movement, the revolution in culture and many other aspects of the current radicalization...These struggles are part of, forms of, or potentially allied to the general class struggle of the working masses against the capitalist system.

"The ability to see this feature of the current radicalization, to see it within the framework of basic Marxist concepts, and to orient to it on that basis demonstrates the richness and viability of the Marxist method...

"Social reality is complex and uneven. In the United States as elsewhere, there is no such thing as a theoretically 'pure' form of capitalism, and thus no 'pure' form of class struggle. Under capitalism, side by side with the exploitation of the working class, there also exist new forms of long-known oppression, the reactionary institutional and ideological remnants of a pre-capitalist era: the oppression of women and nationalities, religious superstition, the persecution of homosexuals, reactionary social morality, restrictions on civil liberties and human rights are but a few examples.

"These have become instruments for upholding the present system and cannot be eliminated within its framework.

"As a result, the coming American revolution will have to accomplish an entire range of historically overdue democratic tasks, as well as socialist tasks, such as nationalization of industry under working-class control.

“With this in mind, we see that movements such as the women’s liberation movement, the struggles of oppressed nationalities for self-determination, the gay liberation movement, and the revolution in culture are a part of the general struggle against the outmoded capitalist system...

“These new movements are not unimportant or peripheral to the socialist revolution, but at the center of its advance.” [emphasis added]

In retrospect, the *Prospects* book was marred by an over-optimistic triumphalism towards the real prospects for revolution in the United States. But over-optimism is not the worst sin that can develop in a revolutionary organization.

Later in the 1970s the SWP also wrote better appreciations of the dynamics of working class struggles. But I still believe that the essays in this book best captured the spirit of the time as well as a deep appreciation of the new aspects of class struggle that had come to the fore in the 1960s radicalization.

The new generation of revolutionary fighters will have to re-conquer these Marxist analyses on its own. I hope that they will look at the documents of the past with an objective eye, no matter what they may think of the SWP of today.

The impact of the Fourth International on the SWP

There are several international groups, all claiming to represent the true heritage of the Fourth International founded by Trotsky. The SWP was associated with the group generally known by its leadership body, the United Secretariat. So, when I talk about the Fourth International, this is what I mean.

We experienced a faction fight in the Fourth International that lasted for nearly 10 years, from 1969-1977.

On one side was the IMT, the International Majority Tendency, led by Ernest Mandel, Livio Maitan and the leaders of the French LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire). On the other side was the LTF, the Leninist Trotskyist Faction, led by leaders of the U.S. SWP. For a while the LTF also included Hugo Moreno.

I will discuss the impact of this faction fight on the SWP.

Like all factional struggles in all political organizations this one was marked by all sorts of organizational fighting. I believe that there were injustices and justified complaints on both sides.

But it is not very productive to go into the details. It is not very useful for new people seeking to gain insight and lessons.

Many of the organizational issues were documented. For those who are interested, I would advise you to read the documents in preference to the horror stories.

Remarkably, there was not a split in the international as a whole, although we came close on a few occasions.

As for the underlying political issues, there were some interesting discussions and debates. These centered initially over strategy and tactics in Latin America. But soon the debates extended to encompass issues over Europe, the youth radicalization, the women’s movement, and other

topics.

A review of these issues could be of some use, even though, I think in retrospect that some of the arguments were exaggerated due to the tension of the faction fight.

But from the vantage point of today, I think most of the underlying political issues are only of historical interest.

In looking back on it all, from the vantage point of time and distance, I find that the impact of the faction fight on the SWP is the most interesting aspect.

On balance, I think that the impact was positive.

This may seem like a surprising thing to say. I do not mean, of course, that faction fights are a desirable thing, or that they are the preferred mode for political discussion. So let me explain.

Like all Trotskyists, we in the SWP had always prided ourselves on our internationalism. We thought about international events a lot, we wrote about them a lot, and we took action where we could. It is not this aspect of internationalism that I want to deal with here.

What I want to discuss is our *personal involvement* in the International.

For the earlier part of the 1960s we didn't have - at least most of us didn't have - a good firsthand feel for our own international movement.

There were important international discussions in the early 1960s, and there was a major organizational step - the reunification of the FI. But these involved Joe Hansen and later Ray Sparrow/Art Sharon. These two comrades were based in Europe, participated in the discussions, and came back to give reports at national committee meetings. For most of us of the 1960s generation, and I believe, for most of the other party members and even leaders, it seemed far, far away.

The fight that began in 1969 caused us, and especially the younger generation, to become very engaged on a variety of levels: on the PC, on the general SWP leadership level and on the general membership level.

We attended discussions and meetings overseas on a regular basis. This included regular participation in meetings of the IEC (International Executive Committee) and the United Secretariat as well as many informal discussions. These interchanges were mostly on the Political Committee level, where some eight people were regularly involved, a substantial part of that body. Larger meetings such as the IEC, which met every year or two, or the World Congress, which met every 5-6 years, had a broader participation from SWP leadership.

We conducted regular visits and tours. These included attending conventions and central committee meetings of other groups as well as many general visits. For the most part these visits were simply a form of diplomacy, an attempt to win friends and influence people.

We shared experiences with our comrades in other countries. We explained the U.S. political situation and our activities to them. They explained their situation to us. Of course we also held discussion on the international political issues in debate.

Members of the SWP were encouraged to make visits to other countries, and vice versa, comrades in other countries were urged to come here and get acquainted with us. We found that -

whether it was Barcelona or Athens, Bogota or Sao Paulo, Bombay or Tokyo - we were meeting young people, just like us, interested in many of the same things, sharing somewhat similar outlooks on the world.

We turned our big summer gatherings at Oberlin College into quasi-international events, not in a factional way, but simply by inviting comrades from countries all over the world. Often we had well over 100 international guests present.

Of course we also spent considerable time writing documents and arguing over ideas. This was an area where the whole membership got involved. The high point was the 1973 SWP convention, attended by 1,400 people. The members of the SWP wrote 240 articles for the preconvention discussion - 1.5 million words. Most of these were not leadership documents.

These were documents written by the regular SWP members. On top of that, each branch of the SWP conducted extensive discussions.

As Barry Sheppard said in his book: *"It was by far the most thoroughgoing discussion that the SWP had ever had, more comprehensive, in fact, than any group associated with the Fourth International and, I believe, more comprehensive than any discussion held in any group on the left anywhere in the world."*

To our credit, we managed to translate the entire International Discussion and to circulate it throughout the world. This helped raise awareness and involvement of the entire world movement, since English was the most widely used language.

As a result of our efforts in this regard, the SWP membership was one of the most - perhaps the most well-informed and engaged of the larger groups in the Fourth International.

Despite the fact that the circumstance leading to this engagement was a faction fight, nevertheless the involvement and engagement was a major positive value in itself.

Furthermore, there was *influence in both directions*. Even when we argued sharply with comrades from other countries, even when we disparaged some of the other groups modes of operation and organization - *and they ours* - we were forced into a position of having to seriously consider what they had to say, and to observe how they conducted themselves. The same for comrades from other countries who came here.

This whole interchange had a positive impact all around. It enriched our understanding of the world, our understanding of Marxism, and our understanding of party building.

The SWP in the 1980s turned away from the Fourth International, and lost the tempering effect of these interchanges. This, in my opinion, was a big factor in the decline and degeneration of the SWP.

The role of Jack Barnes and the 1960s leadership generation

There has been in recent years, a certain disparagement of the generation that joined the SWP and came into prominence in the 1960s and early 1970s.

This perception is undoubtedly due to the decline and degeneration of the SWP in the 1980s and after, and the fact that the 1960s leadership generation was unable to reverse that decline and in fact, to our discredit, did not even mount an effective challenge to that degeneration.

Nevertheless, the failure of the 1980s and beyond should not detract from the fact that it was the 1960s generation that did lead the party through the 1960s radicalization, that did measure up to most of the challenges that it faced, and that does deserve credit for the achievements that were made during that period.

Of the 1960s generation, the outstanding personality was Jack Barnes.

In recent years it has become common to hear people express the opinion, on internet discussion lists, for example, to that effect that Jack Barnes was "hand-picked," as if he and others were not the natural and worthy leaders of that generation, but were artificially catapulted over others into leadership positions.

I do not know where this notion came from. It was certainly never expressed, as far as I know, by anyone in the older SWP leadership during the 1960s and 1970s - not even by Frank Lovell, who, I believe, used the term "hand-picked" in a document he wrote some years later.

As I recall it Frank never said a word to this effect at any National Committee or other leadership meeting at the time. Nor did George Breitman, nor Nat Weinstein, nor Tom Kerry, nor anyone else in the older leadership generation who were so ruthlessly cast aside later on by Jack Barnes.

Frankly, the notion that Jack Barnes was "hand-picked" seems *preposterous* to me, especially since I knew him well for 20 years and worked with him in an entire range of activities, including years before the time that he became a national leader.

I have always thought that Jack Barnes was, without question, the outstanding, most talented natural leader who emerged from the 1960s generation. He led our work in a variety of areas, and he was the main person of our generation who the others looked up to for advice.

Naturally the older generation encouraged him. Of course they gave him tasks and challenges that tested his capabilities - tasks and challenges that he passed for the most part. I fail to see how that can be called "hand-picking" him. What else were the older leaders to do?

It was the great authority that Jack Barnes earned in the 1960s and 1970s that enabled him to play so big a part in turning things sour in the 1980s and after.

But then, that was a *different* Jack Barnes

He was not without serious flaws, some of which started to become clear in the mid-and-late 1970s, and became quite pronounced later on. I don't think it is possible to fully understand what went wrong without appreciating this factor, even if we do not agree on how much weight to give it along with the more objective factors in the decline of the SWP.

Those who look at the SWP of today see an organization that is but a *grotesque caricature* of what it once was. And they see a leader of that party - a person who is the object of international scorn and scandal - who is also a grotesque caricature of what he once was.

Just as the party has changed, so too Jack Barnes has changed.

Yes, there were signs and precursors of what was to come. There was foreshadowing and some of us had premonitions.

But in the 1960s and 1970s both the party and the leading people were for the most part different, and much better. How that changed, and why that changed, is a topic that should be examined in some detail. But it is a topic for another time