

The US SWP in the 1960s - Two reviews

Tuesday 10 April 2012, by [CHAPEL Duncan](#), [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2005).

Barry Sheppard's book is a sustained exercise in retrieving memories of experiences associated with left-wing radicalism prevalent in the 1960s. This is done especially for the benefit of younger activists who have become engaged in the struggle for global justice in opposition to the corporate-military quest for "empire."

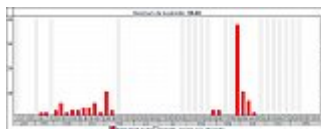
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How US revolutionaries navigated through the 1960s

Chris Brooks

This volume follows the struggles and successes of Sheppard and the US socialist organizations from the challenging years of the 1950s through to 1973, when the socialist left had been strengthened by a new generation of activists.



Sheppard's memoirs are partisan of, and sympathetic to, the two organizations Sheppard was an active member of: Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) and then of Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), which had been founded as the American section of the Fourth International in 1938. [1] The SWP and its members had survived isolation, government disruption and systematic victimization through the 1950s. In the 1960s, activists like Sheppard built a revolutionary alternative to the Communist Party and Social Democratic movements in the United States, both of which aimed to channel progressive activists towards the Democratic Party.

Sheppard's memoir explains how and why the Fourth Internationalists worked in defense of the black struggle, the Cuban revolution and the Vietnamese revolution. By helping the Young Socialist Alliance to energize a new generation, the revolutionaries made a historic contribution towards ending the war in Vietnam.

Above all, Sheppard's book is a history of the SWP's leadership transition. Through the 1960s, the central leaders of the SWP were mostly activists who had joined the movement in the 1930s and 1940s. This highly qualified leadership team was starting to age and saw the opportunity to bring in a new layer of leaders, including Sheppard.

The old revolutionary generation helped the new one to understand the centrality of international collaboration in the struggle to end the war in Vietnam. Seasoned leaders like Joseph Hansen, George Breitman and Farrell Dobbs helped younger leaders to navigate through the largest radicalization in US history and a deep global radicalization. Sheppard's book covers all of this material rapidly, directly and intensively. [2]

This book also gives an excellent flavor of the internal realities of the SWP: its strong organization coherence; the reluctance of aging SWP founder James P. Cannon to withdraw from his leadership role; the tendency of some branches to develop into fiefdoms; the strong apparatus (at one point, something like a fifth of SWP members worked for the party); and the power of its political committee. [3]

Sheppard's account attempts to be both a memoir and a history. He was a supporter of the Fourth International, which publishes International Viewpoint, and eventually one of its leaders. He held a number of central leadership roles until the 1980s, when those organizations withdrew from the Fourth International. However, this book is much more a history than a memoir: Sheppard's personal motivations, feeling and relationships are skipped over quickly but since this book covers an immense scope with such excellence, any criticisms we could make should not detract from the value of this book.

It should also be noted that this opening volume of Sheppard's book is deeply partisan of the SWP and the approach of its leadership committees. The net effect of this is to present the SWP as basically without internal, subjective problems by the time the book closes, in 1973. This accelerates the pace of the book, simplifies a complex history and reflects the opinions of its publishers, the DSP of Australia. However, this gives the book its weakness.

This simplification is unfortunate, especially because the SWP at this time was leading a minority tendency of opinion in the Fourth International. Both viewpoints in the debate were partially correct, but Sheppard's weak account of some disagreements makes the opinions of those that the SWP disagrees with impossible to understand. In particular, some comments concerning FI leaders such as Ernest Mandel, Tariq Ali and some leading comrades in France would have been better to have made in more detail, or not to have been made at all.

However, the general picture of a healthy SWP co-habiting with a sickening FI certainly conceals a number of developing tensions inside the SWP: In the discussions for the SWP's 1973 convention, a group of SWP members found themselves disagreeing with the monolithic SWP leadership on some issues (and, in fact, agreeing with the majority viewpoint in the Fourth International). These comrades had detected an adaptation by the SWP to more cautious political positions which offered the opportunity of larger mobilizations on a lower political basis (those comrades claimed that 'Victory to the Vietnamese Revolution' was replaced by 'Bring the troops home now', 'Free Abortion on Demand' became 'Repeal all abortion laws') and detected a less challenging approach towards the trade union leaderships. Those comrades were purged the following year by Sheppard and his then-colleagues in the SWP's leadership.

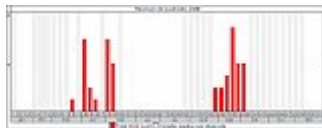
Some readers will hope that this book will show them the roots of the SWP's political crisis in the 1980s, which led to the SWP's re-orientation towards the Cuban bureaucracy, the wrong-headed expulsion and exclusion of members who maintained solidarity with the FI, and its final withdrawal

from the FI. This crisis ripens in the second volume of Sheppard's book, but the origins are signaled.

The Socialist Workers Party in the Sixties and Beyond

Paul Le Blanc

Today's realities continue to reflect class, racial, and gender oppression, cultural and environmental degradation, antidemocratic and imperialist violence. Such things continue to spawn shock, disillusionment, anger, protest, resistance. There has been a resurgence of radicalization among layers of the population in the United States, especially among many who have come to political awareness since American capitalism's much-heralded triumph over "Communism." Barry Sheppard's book is a sustained exercise in retrieving memories of experiences associated with left-wing radicalism prevalent in the 1960s. This is done especially for the benefit of younger activists who have become engaged in the struggle for global justice in opposition to the corporate-military quest for "empire."



Actually, Sheppard's memoir begins in the mid-1950s and concludes in 1973, the first of two volumes corresponding to his own involvement, which ended in 1988, in the U.S. Socialist Workers Party (SWP), associated with the revolutionary perspectives of Leon Trotsky. These perspectives included Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which saw worker-led democratic revolution spilling over into socialist revolution; an unyielding revolutionary internationalism; and a rejection of the bureaucratic dictatorship represented by the Stalin regime in the USSR.

What the SWP Did

Sheppard's contribution is unique in its focus on the remarkable rise of the SWP in the 1960s and early 1970s. Born out of fierce factional conflicts in the Stalinized Communist Party of the 1920s and in the reformist Socialist Party of the 1930s, and after hopeful glory days of the 1930s and '40s, the SWP had become a shell of itself by the 1950s, thanks to an unprecedented capitalist prosperity and a stifling climate of Cold War anti-Communism in the wake of World War II. From 1960 to 1973, however, the SWP and its youth group the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) grew from about 400 to about 3,000 cadres. They became a significant force in a number of initiatives:

- **Fair Play for Cuba Committees**, organized to oppose aggressive policies by the U.S. government against Cuba after Fidel Castro and Che Guevara led the Cuban Revolution to triumph in 1959;
- **Student Peace Union**, which protested against the testing of atomic and hydrogen bombs and the threat to humanity posed by the possibility of nuclear war in the early 1960s;
- **Civil rights and black liberation movements**, in activities ranging from eyewitness reporting on early challenges to Jim Crow in the South for the SWP's newsweekly, *The Militant*, to honoring black trade unionist E.D. Nixon (who played a pivotal role in the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott), to

helping organize nationwide picketing of Woolworth's stores in support of the 1960 Greensboro lunch-counter sit-ins, to rallying in defense of Robert F. Williams (militant president of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP, who advocated armed self-defense by Blacks against the Ku Klux Klan); the SWP also played a special role in helping Malcolm X convey his revolutionary nationalist perspectives more widely than would otherwise have been possible;

- **Early stirrings of feminism's "second wave"** - from animated early discussion of Frederick Engels's views on gender equality in pre-class societies and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, to involvement with the National Organization for Women and the abortion rights struggle, not to mention the increasingly prominent involvement of women in the SWP and YSA at all levels;

- **Socialist electoral challenges to capitalist politics-as-usual**, sometimes joining with others on the Left to run left-wing candidates, sometimes running aggressive and colorful campaigns in the name of the SWP, and always using the campaigns, often quite effectively, to promote current social struggles and to win people to socialist ideas;

- **The movement to end the war in Vietnam.**

In this last initiative, one can find a number of key elements of the SWP's success. The period of the Vietnam war was the first time in U.S. history when a majority of the population shifted from accepting the government's war to opposing it. Mass demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands and reflecting the thinking of millions were organized year after year, by such broad coalitions as the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam and the National Peace Action Coalition, posing a sharp challenge and a growing barrier to the power of prowar politicians and policymakers. Some in the antiwar movement (including the present author) had an illusion that the antiwar effort could be shifted into a multi-issue course in order to transform it into a mass radical movement. We believed this would be able to usher in a more fundamental social and political change than "merely" U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam; for some this was seen as taking place through the Democratic Party, for others it was seen as taking place well to the left of and against both the Democratic and Republican parties.

In contrast, the SWP called for a movement with a single focus-immediate, unconditional U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam (translated into the popular slogan "bring the troops home now"). That was too radical for most Democratic Party liberals, who preferred more equivocal slogans. SWPers nonetheless labored tirelessly to build a nonexclusionary united front to organize peaceful, legal mass demonstrations around the "out now" position. While the single-issue focus was linked to other various issues (Black liberation, women's liberation, labor struggles, opposition to poverty, civil liberties, etc.), in speeches, flyers, and specific contingents in the mass demonstrations, the demonstrations were open to all who agreed on the antiwar perspective, regardless of where they stood on other issues, and regardless of what political party they did or did not support. This was the strategy that, in fact, made the antiwar movement an increasingly effective force that helped limit the options of the warmakers, by mobilizing colossal demonstrations year after year. As the group that was most consistent in advancing this orientation, and as a quite effective and highly-disciplined party, the SWP became central and unrivaled leaders of the antiwar movement and helped bring an end to that bloody conflict.

Some Personal Recollections

This brought a significant layer of new left and antiwar activists (including the present author) into the SWP by 1973, which is basically when this first volume of Sheppard's memoir ends.

The SWP and YSA were organizationally and politically far more serious than anything I had participated in previously. I received an incomparable and multifaceted education within them. One

facet of this was simply practical, resulting from a variety of internal assignments (branch secretary, forum series director, literature sales director, bookstore director, financial director, branch organizer, as well as executive committee member) that taught me the nuts and bolts of maintaining a very active political organization in which a diverse number of individuals had to work together to accomplish a great deal.

As an electoral candidate and as a participant in a number of election campaign committees, I gained valuable experience in explaining socialist ideas to many different kinds of people. And I participated in party fractions that were active in "mass work": opposing the U.S. war in Vietnam; protesting the U.S.-sponsored coup in Chile and working to defend Latin American political prisoners; building support for struggles of the farm workers, teachers, mine workers, and other unions; undertaking civil liberties efforts and opposing the death penalty; participating in student protests against tuition hikes; struggling for abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment for women; campaigning against South African apartheid and against racism here at home; and protesting against the dangers of nuclear power.

While it was not possible for me personally, at any given moment, to be involved in everything that needed to be done to bring about a better world, by being part of an organization in which all phases of activity were democratically and collectively evaluated and decided upon, I could be involved in far more activity-all of which was interrelated and part of a unified revolutionary, socialist, practical orientation-than would otherwise have been possible.

A sense of revolutionary continuity that came, in part, from having several generations of activists in a single organization. There were time-tested perspectives and norms, a rich pool of knowledge and political experience. Some of the older comrades seemed simply to be glad that they could still be part of a revolutionary movement that was being regenerated by an influx of young activists, whom they embraced with a perhaps too uncritical affection. Others seemed concerned that older revolutionary virtues of their own youth would be lost unless they (sometimes rigidly and imperiously) provided firm guidance, undergirded with long lectures and occasionally punctuated with fierce reprimands. But many of the veteran cadres maintained a balance, relating to the newer forces on a basis of genuine equality-patiently sharing their own knowledge, seeking to learn from new experience, encouraging the full development of the young comrades while frankly putting forward their own thinking on perspectives and directions for the SWP. On the whole, all these older comrades had considerable prestige among the younger layers.

Many different qualities could be found among the younger members. There was a tremendous eagerness and vibrancy-sometimes a maddening "eager-beaver" enthusiasm and a youthful "we're the greatest" arrogance about the SWP and YSA, which alienated unsympathetic outsiders. Some took to copying the mannerisms of the prestigious elders-talking sagely about "the way we do things" even if they had been members for only twelve months, speaking about experiences of bygone years (before they had been born) as if they had been participants, hewing sometimes rigidly (unlike many of the older comrades) to imperfectly assimilated orthodoxies. These jostled with the more rebellious spirits who saw no need to cease being outspoken mavericks simply because their rebelliousness had brought them into a revolutionary organization. This by itself guaranteed the flare-up of passionate, animated arguments-sometimes fed by one or another neurosis, and sometimes cohering around genuine political differences. There were also many who were more pragmatically inclined (sometimes interested in discussing ideas, sometimes not) who concentrated their energies more exclusively on working effectively in the mass movements and maintaining party institutions. Theories, party history, and critical ideas were judged in more practical terms of how they seemed to advance the party's work in the here and now. The energies of all these young activists contributed to the movement's dynamism in the 1970s.

Much energy was certainly needed for the seemingly endless succession of weekly branch meetings, educationals, fraction and committee meetings, sales of the party's newspaper *The Militant*, forums, activities of the mass movements, and so on that formed a way of life for many of us. This made the SWP an especially demanding environment for normal working people, students serious about their formal education, and those with families. This very distinctive subculture helped to make us effective in the many activities, movements, and struggles that we engaged in. It also created a separate universe that often made it difficult for us to understand and relate to those outside of it. This could have a negative impact on members' sense of perspective. Sometimes this made it possible for collectively-embraced notions to distort our understanding of complex realities, undermining our effectiveness in communicating to people. It also blunted our ability, sometimes, to anticipate possibilities and limitations in the dynamic political and social contexts of the larger society.

Failings and Decline

In the early 1970s, a transition was initiated, resulting in the older central leadership layer, shaped by the 1930s and '40s labor struggles, being replaced by a much younger layer of 1960s activists, led by Carleton College graduate Jack Barnes and his second-in-command Barry Sheppard from Boston University and MIT.

Although the writings of Lenin, Trotsky, and U.S. Trotskyist founder James P. Cannon were avidly read, discussed, and internalized by the young activists, the context in which the revolutionary "teachers" from earlier decades had lived and the context in which the avid students of the 1960s lived were qualitatively different. The relationship of the new radicals to the rest of the working class, not to mention the culture and consciousness of both the actual proletariat and its would-be "vanguard" in the 1970s were far different from what was true in the early 1900s or the 1930s. A failure to comprehend the meaning of this ruptured continuity would contribute to the rise of a fatal disorientation that accelerated within the SWP as the 1970s flowed into the 1980s, culminating in fragmentation and implosion. For some disillusioned SWPers, responsibility for these outcomes was laid at the door of Lenin and/or Trotsky and/or Cannon. Some bitterly came to dismiss everything having to do with the SWP.

This failure, however, more or less afflicted all Marxist-oriented organizations in the U.S. from the late 1970s through the late 1980s. Ironically, this occurred as influences from the 1960s radicalization permeated much of the U.S. population, and as negative impacts from the early manifestations of "globalization" created remarkable new openings for left-wing developments within the working class. At the same time, many actual and potential activists who are technically part of the working class have been more drawn to "identities" related to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc., and to specific issues (war and militarism, human rights, ecological concerns, globalization, etc.).

The SWP that Barry Sheppard describes might have weathered the crisis of the late 1970s and '80s—it would seem to have contained qualities facilitating fruitful adaptation. It stands to reason, therefore, that there were certain other qualities in the SWP, muted or missing in volume 1 of Sheppard's memoir, that generated a far less positive outcome. This included a hothouse and disruptively carried-out "industrialization" policy in the late 1970s, which sent almost all cadres into factories regardless of personal, political, or economic realities—an especially serious problem given the relative decline of U.S. industry in the 1980s. It included a romantic fantasy that Fidel Castro's Cuban Communist Party was about to forge a new revolutionary international—"necessitating" a rapid, top-down abandonment of Trotskyist theory. It included a grotesque tightening of "party

discipline" that drove hundreds of actual, incipient, and potential dissidents out of the SWP (including a majority of its remaining veterans from the 1930s and '40s)-a campaign which Sheppard helped to implement in its early stages, and of which he was a victim in its later stages.

The SWP seems so incredibly good in this book-how could it have turned out so badly? There is hardly a glimmer of such negative possibilities in what Sheppard writes. But there is more than one reason why this limitation can be forgiven. First of all, Sheppard himself explicitly acknowledges these silences, and he promises to take up such matters in the upcoming volume that deals with the SWP's decline. Second, this relatively uncritical account provides a sense of the mindset, at the time, of Sheppard and many other SWP comrades. And it also allows for a straightforward telling of a story that needs to be told.

Even in this first volume, Sheppard begins to introduce a critical note. While the SWP and YSA played a role in early civil rights efforts of the late 1950s and '60s, he suggests that it would have been wise for them to become involved in the 1964 Freedom Summer efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He is critical of the SWP's earlier homophobic tendencies (shared with most of the Left up to the 1970s) and self-critically suggests that its pathbreaking reversal of this failed to go far enough. While Sheppard never questions the centrality of the working class as the force that must bring the socialist future into being, he suggests that an overly optimistic notion predominated in the SWP leadership regarding how soon class-conscious workers might be expected to play such a role on the U.S. political scene. And while he clearly indicates his own preference for the leadership style and perspectives of Farrell Dobbs over the older and more seasoned Jim Cannon, he does draw attention-in his discussion of an initial tightening of organizational norms in 1965-66-to Cannon's prophetic warning to the Dobbs leadership (even more relevant for the Barnes leadership): "Don't strangle the party."

A Book Worth Reading

In this book we get a sense of how a relative handful of people-aging Trotskyist veterans and younger activists-utilized certain basic organizational norms and political principles to build a dynamic organization that made a real difference in the United States from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. At the same time, while providing insights on the personalities and internal workings of U.S. Trotskyism in this period, Sheppard conscientiously seeks to connect the activities of the SWP to the larger historical contexts: the Cold War, the Hungarian revolution, the Algerian war for independence, developments in the Middle East, the "thaw" in the USSR, the mass slaughter of leftists in Indonesia, the Vietnam conflict, the so-called Cultural Revolution in China, the May-June 1968 student-worker rebellion in France, the ill-fated Prague Spring that reached for "socialism with a human face," and more.

Another valuable dimension of the volume is Sheppard's discussion of the Fourth International, the global organizational network of revolutionary groups embracing a majority of the world's organized Trotskyists, to which the SWP adhered as a "sympathizing section." He gives interesting glimpses of some of his own rich experiences with comrades in Europe, India, and Sri Lanka. He also begins a discussion (to be concluded in volume 2) of a sharp factional dispute in the Fourth International from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s over whether the world revolutionary breakthrough would be advanced by a continental strategy of rural guerrilla warfare in Latin America. Sheppard and other SWP leaders argued in the negative, insisting on the continued relevance of the classical Leninist-Trotskyist method of party building and applying the Transitional Program, seeking to raise demands to reach and mobilize mass movements.

This orthodoxy posited that all political organizing must facilitate two things: (1) the education and mobilization of masses of people, especially the working-class majority, to struggle for democratic

and “immediate” social and economic advances, and (2) the building and strengthening of a revolutionary party capable of helping to lead masses of workers and their allies not only in struggles for democratic and immediate demands, but also for transitional demands leading towards socialism. Such an orientation also put the SWP at loggerheads with many other currents on the U.S. Left in the heady days of which Sheppard writes.

There are some errors that have crept into this text which should be corrected in future printings. Reference is made to the almost suicidally ultraleft Weatherman faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) arising a year before it actually came into being. Another incorrect reference is made to the Pentagon Papers as the source demonstrating that Presidents Johnson and Nixon, in contrast to their public statements of indifference, were quite concerned and upset by mass antiwar protests. This fact is revealed in numerous comments by their former aides and, for Nixon, also in the Watergate Transcripts-but not in the Pentagon Papers which (as Sheppard notes elsewhere in this volume) “documented the involvement of the United States from 1945 to mid-1968” in Vietnam, and “told the truth, in contrast to the lies the government spoonfed the public about the reasons for the war.”

There are, of course, also interpretations of events that are open to question. Having been in the New Left milieu about which the author writes from the outside, I think there are oversimplifications mixed with the insights-which may also be the case regarding the influence of the Communist Party, with which the SWP had been crossing swords for over three decades. Yet even if one might question certain judgments, they give a fairly accurate gauge of the kinds of judgments many SWPers made at the time. The text is also generously sprinkled with gems of bluntly-expressed wisdom, such as “Whenever capitalist politicians talk about ‘the national interest,’ take heed. They invariably mean the interests of the ruling rich.”

Some of the SWP’s history and personalities are conveyed, as well, with a generous sampling of photographs, and the volume is enhanced with three helpful indexes: one of names, one of organizations, and one of events, ideas and topics. While not pretending to be the final word on the history of American Trotskyism, Sheppard’s book tells a story worth telling. It is a valuable source for activists (and for scholars), and one looks forward to the continuation of the story in the next volume. Its publication will help to advance thinking and discussions that will inevitably be stirred by this first volume regarding the extent to which positive aspects of the SWP’s legacy might be utilized (and negative aspects avoided) in ways that will help activists transform the 21st century.

[This review has been taken from [Labor Standard](#). A somewhat different version of this review will appear in [Against the Current](#).]

Footnotes

[1] Despite reactionary legislation in 1941 which forced the SWP to disaffiliate from the FI, the party was a strong supporter of the world movement until the 1980s. In the 1980s the leadership of the SWP adapted increasingly to the Cuban Communist Party. It withdrew from the FI formally in 1990.

[2] For a more extensive outline of the SWP’s policies during this period readers can refer to a series of books, sadly no longer available from the SWP’s Pathfinder Press: Towards an American Socialist Revolution [1971]; A revolutionary strategy for the 1970s [1972]; Feminism and

Socialism [1972]; and Black Liberation & Socialism [1974].

[3] SWP leaders Frank Lovell discussed some of these issues in the open half of an introduction he wrote to a series of books on the later crisis in the SWP. (<http://tinyurl.com/cwq8u>)