

USA - SWP: Long March to Oblivion

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***The Party: The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988. A Political Memoir. Volume 2: Interregnum, Decline and Collapse, 1973-1988* by Barry Sheppard. London: Resistance Books, 2012, 336 pages + index. \$18 paperback.**

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THE GENERAL POLITICAL and organizational principles of the “revolutionary vanguard” (so-called “Leninist”) party, it seems to me, are easily stated: a party deeply rooted in the struggles and communities of working people, committed to the destruction of capitalism and to leading the working class to take power for itself, organized such that the members and units of the party, at all levels, are mutually and democratically responsible to and for each other.

This organizing principle is what’s called “democratic centralism.” As I once heard the veteran revolutionary Milt Zaslow put it, “the part is subordinate to the whole.” I would rephrase this to say that the parts and the whole are mutually responsible for each other. The principles may be easy enough to state, but putting them into practice in the real world has proven to be perhaps the most difficult project in the history of politics — one that broke the back of some of the crucial revolutionary movements of the 20th century.

An enormous historic obstacle, of course, was the weight of Stalinism, embodied in Communist parties that poisoned and destroyed from within a movement of literally tens of millions of workers internationally over multiple generations. But by the time covered in Barry Sheppard’s two-volume political memoir *The Party: The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988*, the capacity of the CP to hegemonize the left had been shattered in the aftermath of the Khrushchev revelation of Stalin’s crimes (1953) and the Hungarian Revolution (1956).

Nowhere did this hold more strongly than in the United States, where the SWP along with other currents would emerge from the political fringes into the arena of a dynamic new period marked by the Civil Rights, antiwar and youth upsurges.

Sheppard’s first volume on the SWP in the 1960s was reviewed by Paul Le Blanc in *Against the Current* 117 [\[1\]](#). That period, and the SWP’s earlier history from its origins in the Left Opposition or “Trotskyist” movement in the late 1920s, are important slices of U.S. radical history that lie beyond the scope of this review. (Alan Wald’s study of post-World War II “Cannonite Bohemians” appears in the July-August 2012 issue of *Against the Current* [\[2\]](#))

Sheppard’s volume has been anticipated by many readers, especially ex-SWPers, awaiting the author’s version of “what went wrong” with the promise of this small but energetic and well-organized left party – the account not of a longtime dissident or rank and filer, but of a leading veteran in the party’s apparatus and a participant in many of the actions that effectively self-

liquidated the organization. Comrades who experienced the best and the worst of the SWP will have diverse personal and political memories and interpretations of the crisis and degenerative process, and will undoubtedly speak for themselves.

The book is more than an account of collapse, however. In fact several stories are intertwined here. First are the events that marked a turbulent historical period, from the Boston school busing confrontation to the revolutionary events in Portugal, Iran, Nicaragua and Poland and the SWP's activities around them, recounted by Sheppard through extensive quotations from reporting in *The Militant* of the time.

I recommend in particular chapters 16 and 22 on Iran, where Sheppard along with other SWP and Fourth International activists were present on the ground as the insurrection against the Shah unfolded and then as the reactionary Khomeini regime emerged.

Such reportage cannot offer a definitive history, but does give a striking on-the-ground snapshot of what revolution and reaction look like, and then how international solidarity campaigns helped save the lives of some important revolutionary militants.

Second is the SWP's work inside the Fourth International, particularly as it involved the author and his longtime partner Caroline Lund. Sheppard covers some of the factional struggles in the 1970s Fourth International, in particular over guerilla warfare perspectives in Latin America, and their echoes inside the SWP (e.g. the expulsion of the "Internationalist Tendency"), the work related to ending that faction fight, and how the SWP's central leader Jack Barnes sabotaged the unification by turning to the construction of tiny satellite groups loyal to his own apparatus.

Third is the painful, even surreal story of how the SWP shriveled into one of the strangest political formations this side of the Bob Avakian cult. In brief, Sheppard attributes the debacle to the way Jack Barnes responded to the failed expectations of a massive working-class radicalization, the development of an increasingly one-man show in the party leadership, and the fatal failure of other SWP leaders to resist the degeneration while there was a chance.

On this count Sheppard is sharply self-critical — "(t)he responsibility is primarily mine, since I was the first to understand it, and next to Jack [Barnes] I had the greatest authority" (323) — but that will not be the main focus of this review.

Rather, I am approaching Sheppard's account from the standpoint of an outsider — never having been an SWP supporter — with a particular interest in what the experience suggests about the potential and pitfalls of "party-building." The difficult part is to separate the objective problems that will inevitably arise in such an effort, and the important general lessons that can be drawn from the experience, from the subjective peculiarities that an increasingly weird and narrow group at the party's center imposed on a membership left unorganized by continual changes in line, forced transfers and assorted destructive practices.

From "Turn" to Disaster

I want to give particular attention to Sheppard's assessment of "the turn to industry" — because it is, after all, involvement in the struggles of the working class that must be central to the purpose of any socialist organization — and some instructive comparisons with the experience of my own organization of the period, the International Socialists (IS).

"The turn to industry," launched in 1978, "could have been a big step forward for the party, instead

of the disaster it became (as it) developed over the next year or two into a forced march, riding roughshod over a continued campus orientation for the YSA [the party's youth group] and the maintaining of our teachers, health care workers, and social service fractions."

To accomplish that, Sheppard argues, "the error of projecting a political radicalization of the working class just about to happen would have to have been corrected in a timely fashion, as the evidence to the contrary began to mount...A forced march to build our industrial fractions, based on the erroneous projection that dictated we had to immediately turn the party upside down or be left behind, would have been relaxed. Patience in building our presence in industry would have replaced the forced march." (274)

Some agonizing political and human consequences of "the forced march" — moving people from one place to another like interchangeable cogs (or corporate middle managers), deliberately destroying comrades' workplace and community roots, forcing members who desperately needed decent-paying jobs to take horribly low-paid ones — are retold in grisly detail.

Several underlying points strike me as worth exploring. The first is timing. Relative to other currents of the 1970s revolutionary left including the IS and several "Marxist-Leninist" or Maoist formations of considerable size, the SWP made its "turn" rather late — perhaps accounting in part for its "forced march" quality.

Many groups had "turned" to industry — or to organizing lower-paid workers or communities of the oppressed, each current according to its ideological and strategic orientation — sometime in the early 1970s.

Indeed, by 1978 when the SWP was projecting "the political radicalization of the working class just about to happen," we in the IS already knew better, not because we were brilliant theorists but because reality had knocked us upside the head. A wave of heat wildcats in Detroit auto plants (1973-'74) were smashed by the corporations and the UAW leadership, the much publicized "blue collar blues" at Lordstown and other factories had receded, and then the "stagflation recession" of 1974-'75 dealt a blow to rank and file industrial militancy from which it never really recovered.

The IS perspective, anticipating the simultaneous rapid development of rank-and-file organization and the potential for building a revolutionary "workers' combat organization," had accordingly run aground. Some very effective rank-and-file union work did result in recruiting a small number of excellent worker militants, most of whom however didn't stick for very long. (In our case, the possibility of constructively thinking through these complex problems of an unfulfilled perspective was short-circuited by a factional wrecking operation launched by the British SWP — no relation to the U.S. party — but that is another whole story.)

Second, despite its imperfect timing the SWP went into industry with some formidable assets. It had the precious continuity of some cadres with years or even decades of union experience; it had the capacity to get a few hundred members into important industrial jobs, compared (say) to the much smaller number of IS members; and above all, it had a well-developed organizational infrastructure capable of serving and maintaining union fractions.

Sheppard's final chapter, reviewing his companion Caroline Lund's shop floor and union activism at NUMMI in the years following their departure from the SWP — during which they would become members of Solidarity — publishing a newsletter and doing all kinds of work that was "strictly forbidden to SWP members in industry," concludes:

"With a little imagination one can picture what could have been accomplished by over a thousand

SWPers in both industrial and white-collar unions, organized into self-confident fractions, collaborating in the plants and nationally with a correct orientation...we could have been an important pole for the fightback as the massive crisis of finance capital plunged the United States and much of the world into the Great Recession in 2007.” (336)

Whether that last bit overstates the potential of what the SWP or indeed the entire combined U.S. revolutionary left might have achieved, we'll never know. But if we leave aside some solid strike support work which was carried out by SWPers as well as members of other tendencies in the labor movement, one has to ask why the SWP with its greater resources ultimately contributed so little to building workers' resistance — arguably, less than Caroline Lund after leaving the party accomplished almost by herself.

That's the third and crucial question. How was it, for example, that the SWP missed “the formation of Teamsters for a Democratic Union?” Or that “(o)n a national level, discussion in the fractions became more and more rehashes of our political policies developed by our political bodies — useless repetitions of what everyone already knew”? (275, 277)

Sheppard opens a window on the answer when he says: “I believe Jack blocked the development of fraction leaders because they would have had independent bases of support, and threatened the cult.” (277)

There, I believe, lies the critical point. If one boastful claim could be made for the labor work of the IS, even though we were a modest organization — with a great deal to be modest about — it would be this: Our comrades did not subordinate the interests of small-scale but important rank-and-file activity to the perceived interests of “party building,” nor did the IS leadership ask them to do so, nor would they have done so if “ordered.”

The theory behind IS labor work had plenty of gaps, but its central premise was that the development of a large rank-and-file upsurge and the potential for building socialist workers' organization would take place together, and that socialists needed to take a responsible role in building both without bending the former to the supposed interests of the latter.

We paid little attention if some sectarian simpletons called us out for not “raising socialist politics” or not promoting a resolution against the war, for a labor party or whatever else when that kind of propagandism would have derailed a real movement, even a small local one. One could always argue whether the particular tactics in a given situation were too bold or too cautious, but what's clear is that in Jack Barnes' SWP it was the needs of the party, and then the party apparatus, and soon the demands of Barnes that became paramount.

What Barry Sheppard notes about the “threat” posed by elected fraction leaders is also true on a much wider field. Over time, IS members in the unions found themselves in relations with supporters of other tendencies, often ideologically very far from us — and it was in everyone's interest where possible for those relations to be as collaborative as possible rather than confrontational.

There can be little doubt that SWPers in industry, given the healthy development of fractions and encouragement for comrades to sink real roots in their work places, unions and communities — instead of repeatedly tearing up those roots — would have had similar experiences with other leftists in industry. That too, of course, would have been an even more deadly “threat” to a cultist party leadership that kept feeding its cadres more and more weird versions of “the working class radicalization” that wasn't happening.

In short, what happened in the SWP's turn to industry was not “the subordination of the part to the

whole,” but the ultimate subordination of the whole party to a self-deluded central apparatus.

Some Further Observations

It's impossible, without making this review too long and tangential, to explore the SWP's ideological long march — all imposed from the top — from a rather formulaic version of “orthodox Trotskyism” to Barnes' official repudiation of Trotskyism, accompanied by the systematic purge of veteran members for defending the politics of the party they'd joined. For those of us in the IS (or “Third Camp”) tradition, the theory of “degenerated and deformed workers' states” in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was a crippling contradiction at the heart of the Trotskyist movement, but that dispute belongs to history now.

There were, however, some specific peculiarities of political line along the SWP's journey. Sheppard covers some of these, including the party's support for the Soviet Union's disastrous invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. There are some he doesn't mention, however, that I think are worth recalling.

One occurred in 1978, and might easily have been forgotten in the swirl of international events building up toward the Nicaraguan and Iranian revolutions, the party's turn to industry and the new problems arising in the SWP's relations with the Fourth International — but I found it instructive at the time and still do. That year, the Vietnamese Communist Party launched a purge of ethnic Chinese, including party cadres as well as merchants in southern cities (leading to a wave of “boat people” fleeing the country and certainly exacerbating tensions with China, which would invade Vietnam the following year).

The racist and bureaucratic character of this purge surely vindicated the argument that the SWP leadership itself had made in 1975, that the Vietnamese CP was a Stalinist party. But the SWP now enthusiastically hailed these actions as “completing the overturn of capitalist property relations” in southern Vietnam. It would appear that this rather grotesque line received little notice in the SWP's ranks.

A second episode occurred in 1989, the year after Barry and Caroline had left the party and therefore outside the scope of this volume strictly speaking — but in my view, a real turning point in the party's abandonment of socialist political integrity.

A leading Cuban general, Arnaldo Ochoa, a hero of Cuba's military intervention in Angola and other campaigns, along with high-level Ministry of Interior officials Patricio and Tony de la Guardia, were tried, convicted and rapidly executed on charges of smuggling drugs and other contraband.

The circumstances remain murky, but if the charges were true, it was never explained how in Cuba's tightly controlled system such acts — supposedly intended initially to supplement military operational budgets — could have occurred without knowledge of the top leadership. (Barry's statement that “Nor has there ever been in Cuba the settling of differences in the party by imprisonment and executions, as under Stalin and Mao” [293] is demonstrably wrong, although of course there was no reign of terror remotely comparable to those of the Soviet Union and China — again, this is a disagreement for a separate discussion.)

The whole process carried the stench of purge and coverup, yet in one issue after another *The Militant* carried trial transcripts without raising the slightest hint of questions or doubts. It was a low point in the SWP leadership's groveling effort to win the favor of the Cuban regime — not that the Cubans paid much attention as far as one could tell — but did no party members at all raise objections to such a travesty? I guess after what the party had done to so many of its own veteran

comrades, the members who remained were pretty much indifferent.

This brings me to a few final observations. Barry Sheppard doesn't shy from his own responsibilities or painful memories, as when he and two others assigned by Barnes to purge George Breitman and George Weissman afterward "went to a bar and drank a number of martinis, ostensibly to celebrate but in reality to numb ourselves to the disgraceful thing we had done." (299)

At the same time, the central importance of Barry's political and life partnership with Caroline Lund comes through clearly. (For a memorial of Caroline's life published in *Against the Current* [3].)

Since books from non-resource-rich left publishers aren't always the best produced, it should be mentioned that this text is clearly written and the typeface highly readable. There are only a few stray quotation marks and a handful of spots where a spellcheck program produced the occasional howler — as when a demonstration was "disbursed" instead of dispersed (41).

We're left in the end with the still-unsolved problem of building a well-rooted revolutionary party that will advance the struggle for working-class power and, frankly, not screw things up. The road is long and hard, but it doesn't have to lead to Barnestown.

Barry Sheppard and Gus Horowitz have created a website where reviews of Sheppard's two-volume history will be posted: <http://swphistory.com>. His account of a small but vigorous party that took theory and politics seriously but ultimately succumbed to a self-intoxicated leadership's false promises may, as the author hopefully concludes, "help preserve what was positive in that experience and warn against what was negative." (330)

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P.S.

* From *Against the Current* n° 160, September/October 2012:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3687>

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 22282), [USA: Revolutionary Redemption, lessons for activists – On the history of the Socialist Workers Party](#).

[2] Available on ESSF (article 22527), [A Winter's Tale Told in Memoirs \(on the history of the US SWP\)](#).

[3] Available on ESSF (article 4159), [Caroline Lund-Sheppard, Sept. 24, 1944-Oct. 14, 2006: A Life Fully Lived](#).