

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Americas > USA > On the Left (USA) > Biographies, History (Left, USA) > History: SWP and before (USA) > **On the SWP (USA): Invaluable History and Important Lessons**

On the SWP (USA): Invaluable History and Important Lessons

Tuesday 2 October 2012, by [MIAH Malik](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2012).

***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.**

Contents

- [The Break With History](#)
- [Barnes' Evolution to Cult \(...\)](#)
- [Three Important Lessons](#)
- [The Barnes Cult](#)
- [Ruling by Fear](#)
- [An Important Lesson](#)

I'VE KNOWN BARRY Sheppard as a comrade and friend for more than 40 years. I joined the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) in 1969 as a high school student in Detroit. I joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1970 and met Barry at the SWP's national conference that year. I later moved to New York in 1971 to join the staff of the YSA's National Office, and soon became head of the YSA's work among Black youth.

Barry and I first worked closely during the desegregation of Boston public schools in 1974-75 when I moved to Boston to head our participation in the campaign against the racist opposition. It was then I became a member of the SWP's National Committee (NC) and Political Committee (PC).

But our closest collaboration began in 1981 when I moved back to New York after serving three years as the party's central leader in Chicago, where I was the district organizer and later a leader of our fraction in the United Steel Workers union (USWA).

My return to the PC came as I began several years of work as one of the SWP's representatives to the Fourth International (FI) in Paris where Barry and I served on the FI's main leadership bodies. We made many trips together to attend meetings and discussions in the United Secretariat of the FI and in European sections of the FI.

I also served as a staff writer and editor of *The Militant*, the SWP's weekly newspaper. Much of what Barry writes in his second volume on the rise and decline of the SWP I know, both as a member and a leader of the SWP in the 1970s and 1980s. I was suspended/expelled from the SWP in 1989, over differences on trade union policy.

In 2005 the first volume of Barry's political memoir appeared: *The Party, The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988, The Sixties, A Political Memoir*. It covers the exciting years of "The Sixties" and youth and Black radicalization, when major political developments such as the civil rights revolution

and the Vietnam antiwar movements led to big advances for the working class and poor — and to an ongoing reaction from the ruling class.

The second volume was recently published: *Interregnum, Decline and Collapse, 1973-1988*, covers the period of political degeneration and isolation of the SWP (“the party”) that played a disproportionate role in many of the big events of “The Sixties.”

The Break With History

It is important to read the two volumes together. The sweep of post-World War II history in which the SWP and YSA functioned is central to understand how a small group of dedicated revolutionary socialists could play an important role in history.

In my view the SWP’s decisions initiated by National Secretary Jack Barnes, to gradually break with the party’s history and traditions, made it easier for Barnes to convince the party majority to purge its ranks of long-time leaders and accelerate the SWP’s degeneration. This process culminated with a rejection of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution and the transitional method of the founding document of the Fourth International, *The Transitional Program*, both rooted in the experience of the Russian Revolution and the Communist International in Lenin’s time.

The reasons given for the break with the historical positions of the SWP were ostensibly generalizations made from real struggles and revolutions we all supported, including those in Nicaragua, Grenada and Iran in 1979. Domestically, there were important fightback struggles in the unions in the 1970s that led us to believe we were on the eve of a political radicalisation of the working class and its unions, which we characterized as the industrial unions moving to “center stage.” This led us to project a “turn to industry” in 1978, to get a majority of our members into the industrial unions.

Without these developments, coming on the heels of the mass movements in the 1960s, it would have been difficult for “one man” centralization to consolidate as it did. At the same time, there is no doubt in my mind that the seeds of Barnes plans were hatched secretly before these developments.

Because our analysis of events between 1978-81 didn’t work out as we had hoped, as Barry explains, the wrong analysis of the political period (international and domestic) and the failure to correct it — in particular the fact that the U.S. working class wasn’t moving to center stage — underlined the fundamental error in breaking with the past practice of the SWP and Trotskyism.

This is not to say that it was incorrect to reconsider Trotsky’s views in light of the Nicaraguan, Grenadian and Iranian revolutions. We had always rooted our analysis in previous decades based on new events. Marxism is not a static ideology. We had found that the Marxism known as Trotskyism represented the best tool to understand new mass struggles and determine our stance and policies.

In my view, the union policy adopted by Barnes under the prognosis of a political radicalisation of the working class was more significant than rejecting Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. The discussion on theory should be done in a calm manner. Barnes’ new orientation in the unions soon resulted, in practice, in the rejection of the entire past trade union policies of the SWP. The new trade union policy became abstentionism from struggles in the labor movement and retreat into abstract socialist propaganda — hallmarks of an isolated sect.

Ironically, the failure of Barnes’ analysis to justify a break with our past accelerated his drive to push his goal of one-man rule and drive out all opposition currents and leaders, including those like

Barry and myself who had agreed with his politics in 1978-81. When facts on the ground showed the party's analysis was wrong, we expected a change in course. That's how the SWP had operated throughout our history.

Barnes' Evolution to Cult Figure

Jack Barnes' decision (secretly implemented) to become a cult or one-man leader began before the turn to industry or his new political positions on Trotsky, the Fourth International, Cuba and many other issues, as Barry explains.

How could this be done without those in the leadership not seeing it? The SWP central leadership had always operated as a team with back-and-forth discussions that were then taken to the general membership for final decision.

For myself, I expected corrections to eventually be made. This is how it had occurred during the Boston desegregation fight that I helped lead for the party. For example, I initially disagreed with the PC's conclusion in 1976 that the NSCAR (National Student Coalition Against Racism) should be wound down. There were no threats or fear in those discussions in contrast to what occurred a few years later.

In a political organization with members dedicated to the cause of socialism and revolution, it required major political events and analysis to justify the break with the past. Jack Barnes used sophistry concerning the revolutions in 1979, combined with organizational top-down purges, to consolidate his control. He then demanded personal loyalty from everyone still in the party or they would face disciplinary retaliation.

Because Barry, I and others agreed with the changes in political analysis, we saw the organizational changes as secondary to the political evolution. Only later — too late in Barry's and my case — did we understand the direct connection between the organizational degeneration and the changes in the party's program and principles.

The story and lessons of SWP history are not just for those of us who joined, built the party and eventually left by suspension, expulsion or resignation. There are broader lessons for all those who believe in the radical and revolutionary vision first explained by Marx and Engels in the 19th century and later put into revolutionary action by Lenin, Trotsky and the other Bolshevik leaders of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

While many former comrades reject the need for a Leninist type party today, the ideas and theories of Marx, Lenin and the Communist International of 1919-1922 are still necessary to study and follow.

Barry makes clear that he still stands by his revolutionary Marxist views and believes that those ideas and the need to build a revolutionary vanguard party are as valid today as when he first joined the SWP in 1959.

"I believe the worldwide crisis of the capitalist system that began in 2007 represents a massive attack on the working class," he explains in the introduction to the second volume. "The drive by the government and the corporations to make the working people bear the burden of this crisis will impel new forms of struggle and organizations to emerge. The rebuilding of a revolutionary socialist party is an urgent necessity to help lead this process as it unfolds. A new radicalization will develop, and we must build a conscious Marxist party out of it to lead it to victory."

"I hope this political memoir will help in this process, both by preserving positive lessons and pointing to some things to avoid in the experience of the SWP. People from other traditions, new and old ones, will also contribute to this necessary rebirth."

Three Important Lessons

There are three integrated stories in the two volumes. First are the events themselves. Barry describes powerful mass struggles — some that he observed, others as a participant — at home and abroad. The SWP was involved in many of these struggles as supporters and in some cases as leaders.

As a political party formed in 1938, during the major social upheaval and massive resistance to capital in the 1930s, the SWP had leaders forged in struggle.

The SWP was also a founder of the Fourth International. The founders understood that no socialist party could function simply as a national organization. Internationalism, collaborating with co-thinkers around the world, was key to building the SWP.

Second is the story of the political debates within the SWP, YSA and Fourth International. Even while the SWP was engaged in the real political events of the day, it also had a lively internal debate about the meaning of the wars, revolutions and mass movements regarding its program.

Was the program of Marxism as understood and advanced by previous generations still valid? Should it be changed? This debate occurred with tendency and factional fights in the 1930s, '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s.

Third is an explanation of how the SWP declined, degenerated and why. This aspect may seem less important to the reader who can easily identify with the big events (Iran, Nicaragua, Grenada, Poland and other democratic revolutions) discussed in the book, but who has not been a member of a socialist organization.

The Barnes Cult

In some ways this discussion of the rise, fall and decline of the SWP leadership and program, and the creation of a cult of personality is the most important one for a new generation of Marxist and revolutionary activists and leaders.

Some may argue that the formation of a cult (whether you agree that it is one or not) was irrelevant after the rejection of Trotsky's views and the Fourth International. Barry correctly argues that the cult (started in secret) began before the new political positions were formulated by Barnes.

I believe that a cult could arise even if none of those new political positions were taken. It would have been harder, however, to convince a majority of the leaders and members to accept such a radical revision without facing a bigger internal fight.

Barry describes the creation of a one-man band and cult, which did not happen instantly. It was a process, as Barry explains:

"Political cults revolve around individuals, in my use of the term. These are not all alike. The cult of Stalin and Mao grew out of the needs of a social layer, the ruling bureaucracy. . . . Cults in small

socialist groups are not based on such material interests. Although certain privileges can develop in the later stages, such groups play no role in the economy, or control vast resources.

“To be specific about the cult around Jack Barnes in the SWP, It should be first noted, that it didn’t occur all at once, but over a period of years. Jack was a talented leader of the SWP youth in the period of the radicalization of ‘The Sixties.’ He emerged from that period as the recognized central figure among the other younger leaders, including myself, as well as among the older leaders of the party. It was Jack’s positive role in the previous period that earned his authority. Gradually, this authority was abused, until it turned into its opposite. From a positive force building the SWP, it became a negative and destructive force that wrecked the party.”

I remember this very well. My first dealings with Jack were all positive. He encouraged me. When I questioned a position, he did not attack me but welcomed my input, explaining that discussion of various views was the party tradition.

Later after the turn, and our decision to break with Trotsky’s views and move away from other party traditions, I noticed a change. Comrades who disagreed were criticized behind their back.

The turn policy as outlined in the 1978 report was agreed to by the entire central leadership, including those who later questioned the shift on Cuba, Nicaragua, and many other issues. I was at those NC meetings too. I gave reports on the policy at later meetings and to the United Secretariat meetings in Paris and other countries.

When Barnes decided to emphasize “talking socialism,” he never said openly that it meant moving away from our history, or that his own 1978 report was wrong. He just jettisoned it in practice.

I had learned from George Breitman and other founders of the party that differences would always arise in the leadership, mistakes would happen, but corrections would be made as facts proved one side or the other right or wrong.

I assumed the same would happen with the trade union question. In fact I gave the report at the 1979 NC meeting about the turn, and refuted the charge of an FI leader at the meeting who challenged the way we were implementing the policy and our call on all FI sections to carry out the turn as we were doing. He specifically challenged our frequent movement of comrades from one factory to another before roots could be established.

At the Oberlin convention in 1981, Jack reversed a decision made by leaders of our national trade union work, including me, that our union fractions were ready to elect their own leaderships.

Fractions electing their leaderships was something I had pushed. I thought then that Jack’s reversal of this decision of our trade union leaders was a temporary setback. I voted against the PC decision and requested the right to explain why in the forthcoming PC minutes. Before the minutes came out, Jack met with me to convince me to change my vote. He said the elected leaders of the party had to decide leadership posts. I reluctantly agreed to drop my objection.

This was a typical method of Barnes. He would take you out to a local restaurant and convince you his position was correct for the party as a whole. He always stressed any differences were over emphasis, not policy. And if events proved otherwise, corrections would be made.

I should have known Jack would not forget my stance when I later opposed an arbitrary decision of the PC to overturn the decision of the Machinist fraction I headed in the airlines. After moving to San Francisco and getting a job at United Airlines and leading our IAM fraction there for some years, I found out that trying to carry out the longtime SWP union policy led me to being

suspended/expelled in 1989.

Ruling by Fear

Barry first suspected the formation of a cult while assigned to Europe in the mid-1970s. He explains that the fear of being expelled after spending your political life in the SWP is why many longtime members, like Barry himself, did not stand up to the new policies and one-man rule.

Did Barnes always plan to run the SWP himself without democratic checks? Who knows? But once the old guard of the 1930s and '40s generations retired or were in their final years in the 1970s, it's likely that Barnes decided that he wanted to ensure his total control of the party. He couldn't do so by simply declaring all the old political positions and programs of the SWP were wrong. He began by chipping away at the SWP's heritage and program.

Once he got agreement on each step by the majority of leaders, he moved to throw out those who challenged him. This salami tactic was used over and over until almost the entire leadership cadre and most of the ranks accumulated in the 1960s and 1970s were gone.

I believe Barry explains clearly that the move toward a cult began before the major political changes of long-held SWP positions. It is wrong to say the changes of political and theoretical positions came first. That's not how it happened. But the only way the cult could ultimately be consolidated in the membership in a political organization like the SWP was to reject the party's historic program and activity.

For those seeking to revitalize the left and socialist movement and program there is a lot to learn about why mechanisms need to be in place to prevent the type of takeover that occurred in the SWP. Our downfall was to assume that all leaders played by the same rules and would abide by the practices that the party adopted in its documents.

I agree with Barry that the founding principles and program of the SWP and Fourth International, including their updating through the years as the class struggle developed, remain true today precisely because the working class has yet to have its day on a world scale.

Read the books!

Malik Miah

An Important Lesson

I was glad to read Malik's review of our party's history (of course, based on Barry's excellent volumes). I only have a very brief comment here on two points:

First, the critique of the party's leadership by party leaders—after the fact—can lead to one to think that it is possible to correct one's mistakes once a process of self-reflection takes place among "leaders". However, we, all of us, in this party at least conceptually expected that we were a party of leaders whose "vanguard" role would be realized with the rise of the working masses in struggle;

indeed, such a party of leaders would only be the kernel of a larger mass leadership. It would be wrong for Malik or Barry (or others on leadership bodies of our former party) to believe that it was just a matter of a more self-reflective and better courageous national leadership that would have “saved” the party. It may be true that bureaucratic cults like Stalin’s and Mao’s were based on a material economic and political reality, but the rise of the cult in the SWP (no longer our “Party”) remains to have a material reality—of course, that material reality is precisely the downturn in the mass movements that never precipitated the sought-for upsurge of the organized working class. Barnes—and for that matter, Barry and Malik—came to “power” in the 60’s then 70’s based on historical challenges in revolutionary leadership continuity (such as the FI splits, Trotsky’s murder, not to mention Trotsky’s and people like Cannon’s own limitations, etc.) that made the inevitable transition between the Party leadership of the 30’s-40’s to the one of the 60’s-70’s. In a word, we all were too new and the upsurge so urgently needed to fuel “our” development just never came. We must remember that Barry’s and Malik’s (as well as Lynn’s—Henderson—and Nat’s—Weinstein—and others) critiques are the analyses of leaders who admittedly made the mistakes that “led” to our party’s demise. In reality, the challenges of the material conditions were likely to produce mistakes and it just so happened that those challenge, in fact, got the better of all of us, not just Barry and Malik. The truth is concrete and that, unfortunately, is the truth. It didn’t have to be the truth. The Party’s development could have gone differently. That is also true, which is I believe Malik’s (and Barry’s) most valuable point. The truth of a vibrant revolutionary leadership steeled not only the mass struggles, but in real workers democracy and the traditions of combined inter-democratic debate and action can be a reality if we can really learn the lessons of our own experiences.

That last point is my second one. Malik states “Our downfall was to assume that all leaders played by the same rules and would abide by the practices that the party adopted in its documents.” His statement might be inaccurately interpreted to mean that somehow we should all be vigilant in case any our individual motives are not “pure”. Such an interpretation would, of course, lead us precisely to the same End that we have seen in our Party. I prefer to interpret Malik’s last point to mean that, rather, we should be sure to have each others’ “backs” in a revolutionary party; that a veritable party of leaders learns not to leave our solidarity to chance or our comradeship for granted. A revolutionary party must be a generation of scientists and students of the revolutionary political will of the masses; not some “special forces” whom everyone should support because “we” have the answers, the strength, and commitment. In a few words, comrades in a revolutionary party are more than friends—though we are that—more than trustworthy—though that must be inevitable. As comrades, we help each other learn and tell the Truth so that Truth can be the concrete victory of the working masses from the scourge of our common oppression.

Submitted by Manuel T. Barrera, PhD (not verified) on September 28, 2012 - 1:46pm.

P.S.

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