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were always conscious of the fact that to have to give up the party, that would be a sacrifice. Because through activity of the party, we got fulfillment of life and satisfaction and the confidence that we were working not merely for our own little selves, but for the entire human race.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Speeches for Socialism*, pp 279-80.

## CANNONISM VERSUS BARNESISM

### THE DEGENERATION OF THE SWP

By Doug Lorimer<sup>17</sup>

Since the late 1970s the US SWP has degenerated into a bizarre political sect, which justifies its abstention from involvement in the mass working-class movement with the shibboleth that it is building a “communist party of industrial workers”, ie, of blue-collar workers.

The roots of the SWP’s degeneration lie in the party’s departure from a central tenet of James P. Cannon’s political methodology, namely, that party-building tactics must be decided not on the basis of speculative hopes about the future course of the class struggle, but on the basis of actually existing circumstances. As Cannon observed in his 1942 lectures on *The History of American Trotskyism* “the most important of all questions for a political group or party, once it has elaborated its program, is to give the correct answer to the question: *What to do next?* The answer to this question is not and cannot be determined simply by the desire or the whim of the party or the party leadership. It is determined by the objective circumstances and the possibilities inherent in the circumstances.” (p 118)

### PROPAGANDISTIC STAGE OF PARTY-BUILDING

The central task facing any small revolutionary organisation is to recruit, educate

<sup>17</sup> Doug Lorimer is a member of the National Executive of the Democratic Socialist Party.

and train cadres. As a consequence the aim of its activities must be propagandistic. On the most elementary level such activities include the educational work of oral political discussions with interested coworkers, the production and circulation of printed propaganda, public forums, internal educational classes, running candidates for public office and so on. They also include participation along with others in strikes, strike support activities, public rallies and street marches, etc, where the Marxist forces gain opportunities to demonstrate in practice the relevance and correctness of their strategy and their capacities as leaders of the mass movement. The key objective, however, is still that of accumulating cadres.

To transcend the propaganda stage of party-building, to reach the position of being able to bring the objective situation under the conscious control of revolutionary forces, requires winning over massive forces—numbers so great as to make a qualitative difference. Once this qualitative point is reached, activities having an aim qualitatively different from those of the propaganda stage become both possible and necessary. The struggle for state power, previously excluded, is placed on the agenda of the day. In April 1917, for example, when the Bolshevik party had some 80,000 members throughout Russia, Lenin emphasised that the party's central task was still that of conducting propaganda work, of "patiently explaining" to the masses the Bolsheviks' policies and of "preparing and welding" the cadres of a mass revolutionary workers' party. In the months preceding the October Revolution, Lenin stressed repeatedly that the Bolsheviks' tasks were limited to the propaganda work of "explaining" their policies and of "criticising and exposing" the errors of their political opponents in order to win over to their side a class-conscious and organised majority among the workers. Only when the Bolsheviks had achieved this did Lenin signal that qualitatively new tasks had become possible and necessary. On September 25-27, 1917 Lenin called on the Bolshevik party to launch a struggle for state power, stating his premise and conclusion in one sentence: "Having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals [ie, of Petrograd and Moscow], the Bolsheviks *can* and must take power into their hands."<sup>18</sup>

But a revolutionary party that lacks a mass base, which has not won over to its side the majority of the working class, still faces as its main task the recruitment and education of cadres through:

<sup>18</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 26, p 19.

- Consistent *propaganda* advancing basic revolutionary socialist ideas around the burning political issues of the day in opposition to all other political currents.
- Appropriate and timely *agitation* directed to the mass organisations of the oppressed for mass actions to win reforms under the capitalist system.
- Persistent attention to the *organisation* of the party itself, particularly the development of professional revolutionary propagandists, agitators and organisers educated in Marxist theory, strategy, tactics, and methods of organisation.

The objective of such activities is to expand the party and its influence. To accomplish this, its cadres must bring Marxist ideas into the spontaneous mass struggles of the oppressed, doing this as *participants* and not as *outsiders*. Since the central task at this stage of party-building is to recruit new members to its ranks, the focus of its work must be directed toward those social sectors that are most open to radical ideas and thus provide the best opportunities for recruitment.

#### REJECTING DOGMATIC SCHEMAS

This approach, which had guided the SWP since its foundation in 1938, was summed up as follows in the perspectives resolution adopted by its 24th National Convention in August 1971:

"In the final analysis, the decisive question is the construction of a mass Trotskyist party. We proceed from the recognition that the SWP is not yet that mass party. We are a small but growing nucleus of cadres formed around the revolutionary-socialist program necessary to build such a party. Thus recruiting, training and assimilating such cadres are the indispensable preconditions for building a mass workers' party... Today our immediate goal is the recruitment of more and more of the young militants radicalized in the current political struggles, and the transformation of these recruits through education and experience into Trotskyist cadres."

The resolution went on to contrast the SWP's party-building approach to that of its opponents within the radical movement:

"All our opponents to one degree or another act as if they already were mass parties whose central problem is the deployment of their forces. Thus the Communist Party has launched a daily newspaper, with a circulation below that of *The Militant* [the SWP's weekly paper], as if their size and ability to directly influence all areas



of the class struggle required a daily paper. Progressive Labor [the main Maoist formation] has for several years 'colonized' its members into various unions, under the illusion that they are going both to transform themselves into a mass proletarian organization by this and directly influence the course of the unions' development. The Workers League sect, which carries lack of appreciation of reality to the extreme, has formed committees of a few of its members previously 'colonized' in the unions to 'form a Labor Party now'...

"All revolutionary parties at different times selectively colonize members into promising political situations in industry. But the purpose of such colonization cannot be a shortcut in overcoming objective developments and artificially 'proletarianizing' the organisation by transforming colonized individuals into workers. The key to becoming a mass working-class party, in composition as well as in program, does not lie in such individual transformations. It lies in the recruitment of politicalized workers to a party that has proven itself in the political and social struggles that are occurring, that has geographically spread and grown to a size that it is seen as a revolutionary alternative to the parties of the rulers and the programs of the workers' misleaders.

"All of our opponents are wrong about the way a socialist party obtains working-class cadres. Workers become politicalized by the struggles they engage in, and radicalized by the important social and political issues facing the country and at the center of the radicalization. As this occurs they begin to look for an alternative political organization to support. Our own recruitment of politicalized workers in the 1930s and 1940s confirms this.

"How many radicalized and politicized workers will be recruited in the future to a revolutionary program and organization or to a reformist or ultraleft dead end depends one key factor: the prior development of cadres capable of participating as revolutionary socialists in the struggles as they arise."<sup>19</sup>

In a report on the draft of this resolution, adopted by the SWP National Committee in March 1971, Jack Barnes, then the SWP's national organisation secretary, made the following criticisms of the approach advocated by the SWP's left opponents:

<sup>19</sup> "Perspectives and Lessons of the New Radicalization", *International Socialist Review*, Vol 32, No 10 (New York, November 1971).

"Our opponents...all counterposed to our perspective what they must think is a new discovery. Their strategy for party building is what the CP calls an 'industrial concentration', what the IS calls 'workers work', what Wohlforth modestly calls his 'proletarian orientation', what Progressive Labor calls the 'colonization of selected key plants', etc. There are different names for it. But what they all come down to are subjective and arbitrary shortcuts by a handful aimed at bridging the objective gap between the pace and characteristics of the radicalization of the decisive sections of the working class and the growing radicalization of other oppressed sections of the population...

"There are many rationalizations used and justifications raised by our opponents. One is what I call the 'miss the boat' theory. That is, if we don't take this step now of sending large numbers into the factories, we'll miss the boat. But the problem of the revolutionary proletarian boat is a more complex one than that. What we must build is a large enough cadre, politically homogeneous, with collective experience in leading real social and political struggles, who have gained a reputation in the fighting mass movements, and thus be able to attract politicalized and radicalized workers to their party. That's the boat not to miss. There's no danger of missing the boat, any more than there's the danger of us not responding if there is a concrete opening where we can do political work in industry, where we can recruit some cadres, where we can make some political gains. No problem at all. We have been doing so; we intend to continue.

"The second justification is what we call the 'class composition' justification. That is, the idea that the central problem of a small group of cadres trying to increase their size and build the nucleus of a mass party is its class composition. The problem is 'solved' by telling everyone to get a job in industry. In other words, this is an attempt to solve the problem of building a proletarian party through taking a small group of cadres and substituting a transformation of the social composition of these cadres through colonization in industry, for the construction... of a large enough cadre to be able to attract and recruit radicalized workers as the radicalization deepens, to be able to turn to real openings as they develop."<sup>20</sup>

By orienting toward the realities of the class struggle and toward those social sectors that were radicalising during the 1970s the SWP increased its membership from less than 400 in 1970 to around 1800 in 1977.

<sup>20</sup> Barnes, "Report to the SWP National Committee", *ibid*, p 55.

*THE TURN TO 'INDUSTRY'*

Then, in February 1978, the SWP National Committee adopted a report presented by Jack Barnes (who had replaced Farrell Dobbs as SWP national secretary in 1972) which proposed that the party "subordinate everything else to immediately organizing to get a large majority of the membership of the Socialist Workers Party into industry and the industrial trade unions".

This turn toward the rapid colonisation of the SWP's membership into blue-collar jobs in industries producing and transporting commodities such as mining, manufacturing, construction and rail freight was not motivated on the basis that there existed greater opportunities to recruit to the party in these industries than in other sectors of the work force or among college students. Instead it was motivated by a version of the "miss-the-boat" argument the SWP leadership had rejected in 1971.

"Our judgment", Barnes said on behalf of the SWP Political Committee, "that this political move is necessary and timely flows from the big changes in the situation facing the capitalist class on a world scale, the need of the American ruling class to drive forward their offensive, to more and more make the industrial workers and their unions the target. Our judgment flows from the changes in the attitudes of the working class in response to this offensive.

"We are still in a preparatory period—not a period when we are leading mass class-struggle actions. We must make no mistake about that. But is it a preparatory period in which the *center of American politics has shifted to the industrial working class*. That's the central political judgment we put before the plenum."

Nowhere in the report did Barnes seek to justify this particular claim, or even what he meant by it. However, its implication was that the "industrial" workers were not only radicalising but were the social milieu where the best opportunities to recruit to a revolutionary party would soon exist. If the SWP did not rapidly get a large majority of its members into "industry" it would miss big opportunities to expand its cadre force. This was the impression Barnes sought to convey with his next comments:

"If we do not bring about a significant and rapid change in the composition of the party, we would place ourselves, *now unnecessarily*, outside of the arena in which the decisive changes and developments are happening in the class struggle. We

would not have our hand on the pulse of the working class, the real rhythm of its developments and changes. By not making this move quickly, now, we would unnecessarily cut ourselves off from the center of American politics...

"If we fail to do this, the party will regress, it will slide back on its accomplishments, and it will miss opportunities."

Elsewhere in the report, Barnes reinforced the impression that big opportunities for recruitment now existed in the blue-collar unions, which the party would miss out on unless it carried out a rapid and wholesale colonisation of these unions. He did this by arguing that such a move would have been a mistake if it had been undertaken before the onset of the long depressive wave in the world capitalist economy in the early 1970s, which was definitely signaled by the 1974-75 world capitalist recession:

"To make the move we're now deciding prior to this fundamental change would have been a blunder. It would have been a gimmick. It would have disoriented the party. It would have been built on guesses, not tied to the real developments in the working class and the political life of the country. Prior to 1974 much of the political activity took a course around and not through either the industrial unions or the workers in industry. But following Nixon's 1971 wage-price freeze that changed. As we got closer to the 1974-75 depression it changed more and more. Prior to this though, the best arena for recruitment to our working-class program was not in these unions."<sup>21</sup>

Thus the implication was that these unions would now provide the "best arena for recruitment" to the party. However, lacking any evidence to support such a claim, Barnes sought to justify the colonisation drive with the claim that the capitalist rulers would have to more and more centre their offensive against blue-collar workers since this was the section of the working class that directly produced surplus value, the source of capitalist profits. As the capitalists did this, the blue-collar unions would become the centre of resistance to the capitalist austerity drive against the working class as a whole, and thus, by implication, the centre of a new labour radicalisation. While denying that this prognosis was based

<sup>21</sup> Barnes, "Leading the Party into Industry", *Party Organizer* Vol 2, No 2 (New York, April 1978).



on the 1977-78 110-day-long coal miners' strike, Barnes repeatedly utilised the coal miners' struggle to bolster his arguments in favor of a rapid and wholesale colonisation of SWP members into blue-collar jobs.

In his reply to the discussion on the report Barnes sought to assuage any concerns that the "industrial" colonisation drive would mean abandoning the work that the SWP was already doing among white-collar workers:

"Saying we are going into industry doesn't mean we are demeaning our AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] or teachers work. To the contrary, by building a more powerful proletarian party, better equipped, we will be strengthening this work, making it better, and increasing the rate of recruitment in it. We will build bigger and better fractions. If out of all this, five years from now, three years from now, two years from now, we don't have a bigger and more powerful teachers fraction, or an AFSCME fraction, due to recruitment and increasing influence, then we've messed up."<sup>22</sup>

#### 'PROLETARIANISING' THE PARTY

In his February 1978 NC report, Barnes stated: "What we propose is a *political* move, not a hygienic or therapeutic move for the party. We are not doing this to cleanse the party of petty-bourgeois elements or any such nonsense." By April 1979, however, the SWP leadership had decided that the "industrial" colonisation drive was indeed necessary for "hygienic" reasons. The draft perspectives resolution adopted by the April 1979 SWP National Committee plenum for submission to the party's 30th National Convention stated:

"The SWP's turn to the new political openings in the industrial working class marks the end of the relative isolation from our class imposed upon us by the political retreat of labor that began in the late 1940s. We are becoming a party whose members live, work, and struggle each day as part of the working class. We are becoming a party of workers whose neighbors, friends, and political collaborators are workers..."

"The proletarianization of the party is essential to the recruitment and development of a party whose membership and leadership are multinational in composition... The proletarianisation of the party opens the door for growing numbers of socialist

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

workers to bring a working-class strategy and political leadership to the struggles of the oppressed nationalities and women."<sup>23</sup>

The implication of these passages was that prior to beginning the drive to colonise its members into blue-collar jobs, the majority of the SWP's members had not been wage workers (which was patently false) or that the proletariat, the working class, consists only of blue-collar workers. That latter view began to be fostered from December 1978 on.

In a report to the December 1978 meeting of the SWP National Committee, Political Committee member Mary-Alice Waters claimed that since the late 1940s the SWP had been forced to live a "semi-sectarian existence" isolated from "our class" and its battles. At the same time she affirmed that throughout those decades the SWP had its "fingers on the political pulse of our class in every possible way, and we took advantage of every opening to build the party". But, she argued, "the conditions created by the postwar boom meant that confrontations between the real class giants—the industrial working class of the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialist rulers—were limited. Especially in the United States they were few and far between. After the postwar upsurge, the 1946-47 battles, we had to wait three decades for conditions to bring the giants into head-on collision again as they did during the coal miners' strike last winter." According to Waters, the 110-day coal miners' strike was "a taste" of the "class combat that is coming". In this context, "We need no longer be physically isolated from our class."<sup>24</sup> Waters' thus implied that the term "our class" referred not to the US working class as a whole but only to a minority sector of it—the "industrial" or blue-collar workers.

In his report to the April 1979 SWP NC plenum on the draft perspective resolution for the SWP's 30th national convention, Jack Barnes made an attempt to clarify what was meant by his February 1978 claim that the "industrial working class is at the center stage of American politics":

"Of course, it's important to understand what we mean when we say that the working class is moving to center stage in American politics. As we've explained,

<sup>23</sup> "Draft Political Resolution", *SWP Discussion Bulletin*, Vol 36, No 8 (New York, July 1979).

<sup>24</sup> Waters, "Building Party Fractions in Industry", *Party Organizer*, Vol 3, No 1 (New York, March 1979).

in one sense it is the American ruling class that is at center stage. Because of the misleadership of American labor, the bosses still hold the offensive today...

"When we say that American workers are moving to center stage, we mean two closely intertwined things. First, the industrial workers are the central target of the rulers' offensive. As we explain in the political resolution, that's who the employers are after. To drive up their profits they have to take on the big industrial unions which are the most powerful institutions of the oppressed and exploited.

"Second, we mean that the working class is moving to the center in the *resistance* to the offensive in the fight back."

More important than Barnes's sleight of hand in changing the formula from "the industrial working class is *at* the centre stage" to "is *moving to* centre stage", was his interchangeable use of the terms "working class," "American workers" and "industrial workers". Earlier in the report, Barnes had introduced the new "hygienic" justification for the colonisation drive:

"The turn is a vital necessity. A party that doesn't center its political work in the most powerfully organized and strategically located components of its class, when the possibility to do that exists, can only degenerate..."

"Our overall goal in deepening the turn, of course, is for the turn to wither away. It's a short-term tactic to accomplish a decisively important political goal: bringing the composition of our party into harmony with our proletarian program."<sup>25</sup>

The colonisation of the SWP's members into blue-collar jobs was thus dictated by the supposed need to safeguard the party from "degeneration" due to an alleged discrepancy between its "proletarian program" and the class composition of its membership. But since most SWP members, like most other US wage workers, were employed in non-blue-collar jobs, in order to justify such an argument it was increasingly necessary for the Barnes leadership to equate the blue-collar sections of the working class with the working class itself and all other sections of the working class with the petty-bourgeois middle-classes. The corollary of this thoroughly non-Marxist line of argument, of course, was that the rapid and wholesale colonisation of SWP members into blue-collar jobs would not be a "short-term" tactical move, which within a few years would enable it to recruit

<sup>25</sup> Barnes, "A New Stage of Revolutionary Working-Class Politics", *SWP Discussion Bulletin*, Vol 36, No 6 (New York, June 1979).

radicalising workers in other occupations and thus lead to a strengthening of its implantation in other sectors of the work force. Instead, the colonisation of its members into blue-collar jobs would become a permanent feature of the SWP's life.

#### 'PETTY-BOURGEOIS PRESSURES' AND 'REVOLUTIONARY CONTINUITY'

As the unions began to retreat in the face of the intensification of the capitalist austerity drive and hopes of a mass labor fight-back, led by the blue-collar unions, began to fade, the "hygienic" justification for the colonisation of blue-collar jobs increasingly came to the fore in the reports of SWP leaders. For example, in a report to a November 1980 SWP NC plenum, Barnes explicitly stated that this was the main reason for the "turn" to colonise blue-collar jobs. He claimed that during the 1950s and 1960s the SWP "was not immersed in our class" and that since its big gains in recruitment in the late 1960s and early '70s had been among college students this had "led to a significant petty-bourgeois composition of the party", adding this "naturally created tension between our proletarian political program and inevitable pressures to look for petty-bourgeois nostrums that seek to leap over the organization and consciousness of the working class." These pressures had been effectively resisted only thanks to the "leadership continuity of the SWP".<sup>26</sup> This latter theme—that Barnes himself embodied the continuity of proletarian revolutionary leadership from the founding of the communist movement by Marx and Engels in the 1840s—would become a core article of faith within the SWP by the mid-1980s.

The rhetoric about the danger of degeneration stemming from petty-bourgeois political pressures transmitted via the alleged "petty-bourgeois composition" of the bulk of the SWP's membership recruited in the 1970s soon became a means to isolate any critics of the Barnes leadership. Since this leadership embodied "revolutionary continuity" anyone who disagreed with it must be acting as a transmission mechanism of non-proletarian political pressures on the party.

The rhetoric about "proletarianising" the party through colonising blue-collar jobs also served another purpose: it became a means to justify overturning the democratic organisational norms and practices it had inherited from the period of Cannon's leadership. In a report presented to the SWP National Committee in

<sup>26</sup> Barnes, "Branches, Fractions and Party Leadership", *Party Organizer* Vol 5, No 1 (New York, February 1981).

March 1982, Barnes set down the rationale for this course by claiming that: "Until the conditions existed for us to be able to begin transforming the social composition of the party and ending the enforced isolation from the working class imposed upon us by the course of objective events, we could not possibly have known all of the aspects of party life, party institutions, and party functioning that we would have to transform and adjust in the process."<sup>27</sup> By the time of its 32nd national convention in August 1984, the SWP was a very different organization from the one that Cannon had led in the 1930s and '40s. Despite its rhetoric about "revolutionary continuity" the Barnes leadership itself acknowledged that the "implementation of the turn to the industrial unions has resulted in some of the biggest changes in the Socialist Workers Party in its history."<sup>28</sup> Despite having nearly all of its members in blue-collar jobs, its political influence within the union movement was negligible. Nor was this compensated for by expanding influence in any other sector of the working-class movement. Its main public activities were sales of books and pamphlets—an activity that would come to dominate its life in the 1990s and be rationalised as the fundamental task of "communists" confronting a world rapidly "marching to fascism and World War III".

In a letter written in 1955, Cannon observed that "Every tendency, direct or indirect, of a small revolutionary party to construct a world of its own, outside and apart from the real movement of the workers in the class struggle, is sectarian. Such tendencies can take many forms, and we should not delude ourselves that the well-known illustrations exhaust the possibilities."<sup>29</sup> Tragically, the party that Cannon founded has, under the leadership of Jack Barnes, provided another example of the sectarianism that can befall a small revolutionary organisation.

<sup>27</sup> Barnes, "The Organizational Norms of a Proletarian Party", *SWP Internal Information Bulletin*, No 1 in 1982 (New York, September 1982).

<sup>28</sup> "Political Committee Draft Political Resolution", *SWP Information Bulletin*, No 4 in 1984 (New York, July 1984), p 25.

<sup>29</sup> Cannon, "Engels and Lenin on the Party", p 78 of this edition.

## JAMES P. CANNON—A CHRONOLOGY

1890	Feb 11	Cannon born in Rosedale, Kansas
1908		Joins Socialist Party
1911		Quits SP to join International Workers of the World
1917	Nov 26	Russian Revolution
1919		Founding of Communist Party
1921		Cannon first chairperson of Workers Party
1928	Jun	Sixth Congress of Comintern in Moscow
	Oct	Cannon, Shachtman and Abern expelled from CP
	Nov 15	First issue of <i>The Militant</i>
1929	May	First national convention of Communist League of America
1933	Jan	Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany
	Mar	Roosevelt president. Promises "New Deal"
		CLA turns away from CP to work in mass movement
1934	Apr	Toledo Auto-Lite strike led by Muste group
	May	Minneapolis strike
	Jul-Aug	Second Minneapolis strike victorious
	Dec	CLA and Muste group fuse to form Workers Party of US
1936	Jun	Entry into SP
1937	Late	Departure from SP