

# *Down with Slander and Hooliganism!* **Defend Workers Democracy!**

Workers democracy—the commitment to full and free discussion within the labor movement and the resolution of differences through rational argument and political debate—is for Marxists a question of principle. Revolutionary consciousness cannot be taught by rote, nor can it be imposed on a reluctant or passive working class. The attempt to do so is a profound departure from the Marxist program. Revolutionaries can win political hegemony in the working class only through the patient and pedagogical political exposure of all variants, however sophisticated, of bourgeois consciousness in the workers movement.

The requirements of the existing reformist leadership of the working class is just the opposite. Their influence depends on the class remaining passive and confused. They therefore cultivate faith in capitalist legality, “proper channels” and the parliamentary road to socialism. They deal with criticisms from their left by expelling or otherwise silencing their opponents. Those who resort to such apolitical and irrational methods acknowledge implicitly their inability to win on the terrain of politics.

The twin tactics of slander and violence and/or reliance on the bourgeois state were pioneered by the social-democratic bureaucrats of the Second International in their attempts to suppress left-wing minorities. In 1917, Lenin, Trotsky and the other Bolshevik leaders were branded as hirelings of the Kaiser by their Menshevik opponents. Noske’s and Scheidemann’s murderous “critique” of Luxemburg and Liebknecht represented the ultimate counterrevolutionary logic of political bankruptcy.

## **The Legacy of Stalinism**

The Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International extended and “enriched” these practices (for which, among other things, Trotsky aptly dubbed Stalinism the “syphilis of the workers movement”). Freedom of expression was abolished within the Stalinized Communist Parties. Slander, lies and hooliganism replaced argument in dealing with political opponents, whether internally or publicly. This reached its pinnacle in the infamous Moscow purge trials of the 1930’s in which the majority of Lenin’s Central Committee was exterminated.

The members of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International fought long and hard against Stalinist slander and violence. Among nominal Trotskyists in the English-speaking world, such practices have, until recently, been associated almost exclusively with the followers of Gerry Healy. Yet attempts to circumvent discussion and debate with administrative measures are increasingly common within the “Trotskyist” left in North America. This is ultimately a product of the rightward drift of left organizations and the theoretic and

programmatic regression which inevitably accompanies such political motion.

Both wings of the United Secretariat in North America (Jack Barnes’ Socialist Workers Party and Ernest Mandel’s adherents in the Alliance for Socialist Action) bar leftist critics from their public meetings, as do the American followers of the late Nahuel Moreno. Other organizations, like the International Socialists, resort to a less blatant form of anti-communism and restrict political opponents to a single speaker during the discussion period at their events.

## **Spartacist League: Trotskyist Rhetoric, Stalinist Tactics**

In recent months the Bolshevik Tendency (BT) has been the target of a series of vicious attacks—both in the form of physical violence and slander—by the ex-Trotskyist Spartacist League (SL). The most serious incident occurred on 19 September 1986 at the University of California’s Berkeley campus. Comrades of the BT who attended an SL forum were roughly pushed out the door after the formal conclusion of the meeting and two were shoved to the ground. When they protested this unprovoked hooliganism, several of the SL “ushers” went completely berserk and began a violent assault on the BT. (Two female comrades of the Left Trotskyist Tendency, who were attending their first Spartacist forum, received a few whacks when they attempted to stop the assault.)

Singled out for attack were two former SL trade-union supporters whose adherence to the BT the SL tops find particularly galling. Howard Keylor, a high-profile class-struggle militant in the San Francisco longshoremen’s union, was thrown out into the lobby where SL goon Pete F. began to savagely bang his head on a bench. Bill S., well-known in Spartacist circles as the trade unionist who made a six-figure contribution to the SL from money awarded to him as a result of a serious industrial accident, was knocked to the floor and brutally kicked by Peter W. At this point the BT supporters began to retaliate.

The altercation ended when the SLers broke off their attack and went back to their room. Shortly thereafter a bunch of Berkeley campus cops turned up, presumably summoned by one of a roomful of horrified Christians meeting across the hall.

## **Even Slander Should Make Some Sense!**

In a demonstration of what Stalin meant when he observed that paper will take anything written on it, the 26 September 1986 issue of the SL’s *Workers Vanguard* (WV) glibly reversed the charges and portrayed the SL goons as innocent victims. For good measure, WV added the absurd smear that the fact that the campus cops

turned up a few minutes after the whole thing was over, somehow “indicates a prearranged ambush” by the BT. This requires a considerable leap of faith, even for the dwindling number of devotees of SL founder/leader James Robertson, as the timing of the conclusion of the forum was determined by the SL itself. As Trotsky once remarked, even slander should make some sense!

In a follow-up item *WV* devoted a full page article in its 5 December 1986 issue to the fact that we chose not to attend the next SL event in Berkeley. We had, in fact, planned to attend and asked a variety of left organizations to send observers with us in the hope that the presence of independent witnesses would forestall more SL gangsterism. Representatives of the Revolutionary Workers League, Workers Socialist League and Chile Solidarity Network as well as several unaffiliated leftists agreed to accompany us. So on 21 November, equipped only with newspapers, pencils and notebooks, we went to the SL meeting for a political debate.

When we finally found the hall (the location had been changed at the last minute for “security” reasons), we didn’t much like the look of it. It was a church basement in a semi-deserted middle-class neighborhood with the only access down a narrow flight of concrete stairs. A knot of SL goons stood at the top of the stairs brandishing heavy police flashlights while more lurked at the bottom inside the door. We don’t know what they had in mind, but it looked like it might have been more than political debate. Given the SL’s increasingly erratic and violent behavior and their obsessive and fanatical hatred of the BT, we decided that it wasn’t worth risking serious injury to find out. So we went home.

The attack at the 19 September forum had been preceded by a series of increasingly rabid and apolitical “polemics” in the pages of the Spartacist press over the past year or so. Last April, for example, *Workers Vanguard* printed a grotesquely falsified attack on Howard Keylor for supposedly supporting drug testing on the waterfront. Anyone who reads what Keylor actually wrote can quickly determine for themselves that the SL attack was a lie. (In the interests of elementary political sanitation, we have assembled a packet of materials, available for two dollars to interested readers, documenting the pattern of unprincipled and frenzied attacks on ourselves and other leftists by these political bandits.)

### ‘Security and the international Spartacist tendency’

One of the articles of faith for the residents of “Jimstown” (as the SL is referred to by many of its ex-members) is the belief in a gigantic web of intrigue connecting most of the organized left to various police agencies in a sinister conspiracy aimed at—what else?—the Spartacist League. Like the Healyite smear campaign against Joseph Hansen as a GPU/FBI agent, the SL’s paranoid ravings are so patently absurd and self-serving that they have only discredited the organization among most of those who know or care about the North American “far left.”

According to the 5 December 1986 *WV*, “the fake-

Trotskyist, third-camp social-democratic swamp in which the BT has so deeply ensconced itself” ranges from “the Slaughter wing of the British WRP to Harry Turner to Sy Landy’s LRP.” (In earlier versions it has included the Communist Party and the Marxist-Leninist Party, among others.) All these organizations are supposedly united by “the perfect unity they have on opposing the communists of the SL.”

The absurd notion that all the rest of the left is united in a grand alliance with the police against the SL is *necessary* to the maintenance of the Robertson cult. It doesn’t matter that such slanders don’t make sense. The purpose is to cut off the SL ranks from any contact, even political argument, with people outside of their own closed milieu and bind them more closely to their degenerate leaders.

### IWP & SL: Not-So-Strange Bedfellows

The Spartacist League is pretty well known on the left for shrill breast-beating, slander and a willingness to stoop to just about anything against its opponents. Most leftists who read the conflicting accounts of the 19 September attack concluded that the SL was guilty as charged. To our knowledge, only one organization rallied to the defense of the Robertsonites’ “right” to brutalize its critics—the International Workers Party (IWP). At first glance, this may seem a bit odd as the IWP is led by one Nicholas Perez, whose name rarely appears in *Workers Vanguard* without mention of his 1982 hammer attack on several SLers who were excluded from an IWP “public” meeting in Los Angeles.

The IWP’s newspaper, *Working Class Opposition* (*WCO*), reported that at the end of the SL meeting, the “BT was invited to leave by the Spartacists, who then proceeded to push and shove the BTers out of the room....” Perez & Co. see nothing wrong with this, nor with the ensuing attack—after all, it is roughly how they treat opponents who dare show up at IWP events. *WCO* explains that: “Whoever sends a large number of people into a small forum with hostile political intentions—whether it is the SL, the BT, or anyone else—is looking for a fight, not a political debate and discussion.” In other words, any left group that turns up at an IWP “public” meeting can expect pretty rough treatment.

But there is more to the IWP’s defense of SL gangsterism than a shared contempt for workers democracy. The Morenoites’ “solidarity” with the SL is also fueled by antipathy toward the Left Trotskyist Tendency (LTT) which *WCO* refers to disingenuously as “a previously unheard of grouplet.” In fact the comrades of the LTT were all well known to the IWP—they included three former members of its central committee and a third of its candidates for public office in the 1986 elections! Perez has not suddenly gone soft on James Robertson’s nasty, contracting political cult. He has simply concluded that after the recent LTT/BT fusion, the Bolshevik Tendency is more politically dangerous to the IWP than the SL.

The IWP gave a graphic demonstration of its concept of workers democracy in San Francisco on 2 November when it announced arbitrarily that the SL and the black

nationalists of Uhuru House were to be excluded from a public debate (ostensibly sponsored by the Peace and Freedom Party) held at the IWP office. All organizations which Perez & Co. considered to be to their left were either excluded or restricted, while social democrats, Stalinists and miscellaneous reformists were welcomed with open arms. We protested these politically motivated exclusions and demanded that the meeting be conducted in accordance with the norms of workers democracy. In response, the IWP added the BT and LTT to the list of banned organizations. On the night of the debate, twenty-five people (including supporters of the Freedom Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Workers League, the Workers Socialist League and various unaffiliated leftists) joined us in protesting the IWP's anti-communist exclusions.

### **For Workers Democracy!**

Political differences among leftists must be dealt with *politically*. If a particular organization resorts to slander or falsification, the appropriate response is political exposure, not suppression. Invariably in the history of the workers movement, exclusions, physical suppression of opposing points of view and slander have been the

weapons of reformists and bureaucrats against Marxists. This is not accidental, for they are the means of *destroying consciousness* and avoiding political debate.

We do not subscribe to the centrist interpretation of "non-sectarianism" as peaceful coexistence with everyone purporting to espouse Marxism. We seek to politically destroy revisionist formations in the labor movement—but our only weapon is trenchant Marxist criticism. At the same time, we have a consistent record of defending the democratic rights of *all* tendencies in the labor movement to participate in left meetings and demonstrations on an equal basis. The attempt to substitute lies and violence for reasoned argument and conviction weakens and demoralizes the workers movement and hampers unity in action against the class enemy. As revolutionists, we have confidence in our ideas and the historic capacity of working people to understand and act in their own rational self-interest. We are committed to the unconditional defense of the democratic rights of everyone in the labor movement, because we know that only through the full and free airing of all points of view in the left can the political vanguard of the proletariat come to embrace the Marxist program. ■