

CWG: Little League Mensheviks

In the spring of 1993, another set of initials was added to the alphabet soup of ostensibly Trotskyist organizations in North America when the Communist Workers Group (CWG) announced its debut. The CWG traces its origins to a dispute within the Bay Area Bolshevik Tendency (BABT). In the premier issue of *Revolutionary Theory* (which features a view of earth from outer space on its cover), the CWG announces that, “the IBT [International Bolshevik Tendency] now suffers from an organizational malaise qualitatively similar to that of the Spartacist League [SL].” It would be unavailing, and certainly unnecessary, to respond to the advent of the CWG as the SL responded to us, i.e., hysterically. Needless to say, we reject the CWG’s allegations, and note that they are long on accusations but short on substantiation.

One of the strands of the BABT dispute was the dissatisfaction of two leading Bay Area comrades—Fred Riker and Gerald Smith—with the perspective of a polemical press. This difference, which they unsuccessfully argued for at two conferences, was itself a reflection of their disappointment with the difficulties of making progress in the current reactionary period. Riker, who initially joined the Trotskyist movement in 1963, had announced internally his intention to retire from organized politics on the thirtieth anniversary of that event. Smith remains active, but over time his desire to break out of isolation led him to opportunist experiments with trimming bits and pieces of the Trotskyist program.

These comrades also evinced a growing unease over the BT’s fusions with the Gruppe IV. Internationale (Germany) and the Permanent Revolution Group (New Zealand). They apparently feared that the recent international fusions would diminish their influence. Although Smith was a member of our International Executive Committee (IEC), he and Riker became increasingly distant from our leadership collective, and participated less and less in the internal political life of the IBT. Instead they turned their attention to production of a local publication—*1917 West*—in the Bay Area.

The IBT leadership agreed to let the branch publish an experimental issue of their projected paper, subject to the political and financial control of our International Secretariat (IS). Our two dissidents found this normal democratic-centralist procedure intolerable. Smith deliberately eliminated substantive political changes made by the IS in an article. Riker, with Smith’s support, defied a directive from the IS to submit a proposal on the financing and production methods of the magazine, and made unauthorized expenditures of organizational funds to print it.

When called to account for these actions, Smith and Riker defended their breaches of organizational discipline by stating, in effect, that they were prepared to follow only those directives that they found agreeable. Their declaration of local autonomy was diametrically opposed to democratic centralism—the guiding principle of Leninist organization. The main tenet of demo-

cratic centralism is the subordination in action of the minority to the majority. Individuals or groups may advocate whatever views and positions they wish, and seek to win a majority for them. But once the membership has considered all sides of an issue, and decided upon a course of collective action, minorities must act in accordance with that decision regardless of their views. Between national and international conferences, the majority is represented by a democratically elected leadership, with full authority to make decisions for the group. It was this fundamental principle that Smith and Riker rejected.

After several failed attempts to persuade Riker and Smith to consider the liquidationist implications of their position, the IBT executive decided that the BABT, under their “leadership,” was no longer a viable branch. The BABT was therefore reduced to the status of an Organizing Committee (OC), reporting directly and regularly to the leadership. This decision caused Riker to resign. Smith remained a nominal member for another several months, but became more and more estranged from our politics and given to explosions of temper.

Opportunist tendencies were evident in Smith’s activities throughout the period of the dispute over *1917 West*. The BABT had been active in Copwatch, a loosely organized Berkeley group aimed at combatting police brutality. Copwatch was composed mainly of anarchists and liberals. Although we do not share their worldview, we are also opposed to police brutality, and can participate in such single-issue groups in good faith, provided we are permitted full freedom to advocate our revolutionary program. Smith, however, showed a clear tendency to capitulate politically to liberal attitudes in Copwatch. Thus he submitted an article to the *Copwatch Report* containing a rewrite of our statement on the 1992 Los Angeles upheavals, in which he “edited” out every mention of socialism, Marxism and the need for a vanguard party. We were hardly surprised therefore to read Smith quoted by the Communist Party’s West Coast paper, *People’s Weekly World*, as saying, on behalf of Copwatch, that “We are not anti-police.”

While Riker’s and Smith’s antics won them not a single supporter within the IBT, they found support among elements of our periphery. These were individuals who professed to support the IBT politically, but, for one reason or another, chose not to include themselves among its members. These sympathizers concluded that Smith and Riker had been the first victims of bureaucratic and hyper-centralist tendencies within the IBT. They then formed themselves into a grouplet called the Working Committee (WC), and, assuring us of their full programmatic agreement with the IBT, collectively applied for membership.

We conducted a brief correspondence with the WC in which their attitude toward the BABT fight figured prominently. The WC seemed to think our demand that they give a political accounting of themselves was in

itself proof of our degeneration, and denied that democratic centralism was the main issue in the BABT dispute. This indicated to us that the WC's assurances of programmatic agreement could not be taken seriously. We therefore rejected their application, noting that "there is little to be gained—and much to be lost in terms of time and energy—by pursuing these differences inside a common organization." Shortly thereafter, the WC surfaced, calling itself the Communist Workers Group. Smith immediately joined the newly founded CWG, while Riker drifted into political retirement.

The CWG immediately published a selection of materials from our struggle against Smith and Riker's low-level Menshevism under the title, *Bureaucratic Centralism in the International Bolshevik Tendency*. Their voluminous compilation allows a reader to grasp the general outline of the dispute, although, in an attempt to put Riker and Smith in a better light, it omits several key items (e.g., the IS directive they chose to ignore). Our principal opponents indicated a certain disappointment that there were not more "juicy" bits. The New Zealand Workers Power group asserted that the whole business was somehow the result of our "sectarian and pro-stalinist politics" (*Workers Power* [NZ], August 1993). They complained (with considerable justification) that the CWG's publication was "extremely tedious" and provided the following summary:

"Basically they [BABT dissidents] wanted to publish their own publication, '1917 West', without the IBT/International Secretariat controlling it. A minor organisational difference became the pretext for the split."

The gentle souls who run the Spartacist League have taken great interest in our recent contretemps, and have reprinted the CWG pamphlet as the eighth in their *Hate Trotskyism, Hate the Spartacist League* series (half of which feature the IBT). The SL's introduction is a typical specimen of their polemics against us: a composite of bile, bombast and prevarication. They characterize the materials they reprint as "apolitical, personalist and grotesque," which "we nonetheless thought...could be instructive to others." We would not suggest that our internal dispute with two demoralized individuals was a high point in the history of the Marxist movement, but even if the issues were posed at a low level, they were no less clear. This is evident in the SL's own sketch of the major issue in the fight:

"Riker was a lead element of the BT opposition in the Bay Area which went into revolt over the question of producing their own local journal *1917 West*. Met with resistance from the BT's 'International Secretariat,' Riker simply took the money, ran to the printers and had his newspaper run off."

The only charge worth answering in the SL's screed is that we put up with Smith and Riker for too long:

"Even Smith and Riker's supporters recognize them as pigs. The 'defense' is that the leadership never minded...until the *1917 West* power struggle erupted."

In fact the behavior of these ex-comrades (both of whom made valuable contributions to building the BT) had been a subject of considerable attention over the years. For the SL, which had its last factional struggle in 1968, the idea of attempting to struggle with comrades

to try to change their behavior may seem peculiar. Certainly our organizational methods stand in marked contrast to those of James Robertson, the SL's top banana, who has little difficulty purging anyone who rubs him the wrong way from the ranks of his servile personalist cult.

The Regime Question Revisited

We do not wish to exaggerate the importance of this fight. It originated out of frustration and demoralization which found expression in a great deal of pettiness and personalism. But it was not entirely without political significance. When all incidentals are left aside, the Riker/Smith opposition, and the new organization it has spawned, have serious differences with the IBT. First, Riker and Smith were highly uncomfortable with democratic centralism. As we noted in our letter of 17 April 1993 breaking off discussions with the WC:

"In the BABT fight...we were compelled to defend democratic centralism against an internal opposition that attacked its centralist component, i.e., the obligation of a minority to abide by the decisions of the majority and its elected representatives."

Second, there was a pattern of programmatic departures (most of which are deliberately omitted from the CWG's compilation) in a rightist, opportunist direction. These were products of a desire to find a shortcut to recruitment through rounding off the hard edges of the Trotskyist program.

In social-democratic organizations, the politics of the rank-and-file is a matter of indifference to the leadership. Individual members can be "loony leftists" if they like, so long as the party's press and parliamentary wing (if it exists) continue to pursue a slavishly reformist course, dictated by a small group of bureaucrats at the top. In a democratic-centralist organization, on the other hand, the political line of the organization is determined by majority rule. Individual members are greatly concerned that the correct political line be adopted because they must defend it in public. Democratic centralism, in short, forces members to argue their positions internally.

On the external side, polemics against other currents in the left are necessary for the development of a serious cadre organization. If an organization finds that it is in substantial agreement with another grouping, it is necessary to unite. On the other hand, if the politics of a "Marxist" formation are seriously flawed, it is necessary to point this out in order to correct it, or win over a section of the supporters of the organization in question, or at least to make clear to everyone exactly where one stands.

Those who wish to avoid polemical struggle tend to de-emphasize what is programmatically sound in the long run, in favor of what is personally and politically convenient in the short run. This is called opportunism. What is most convenient, especially in a reactionary period like the present, typically involves accommodation to the existing social and political order. The road of least resistance inevitably leads to the right.

We have strong reason to believe that this is the path the comrades of the Communist Workers Group have

embarked upon. The initial issue of their *Revolutionary Theory* is critical of our comment that:

“the road to human liberation lies only through consciousness....The role of the Leninist vanguard is to develop and struggle for the revolutionary program against the myriad forms of pseudo-socialist false consciousness....”

The elipse in the middle of the quotation marks the omission of the following sentence: “This is what Marx meant when he said that the working class must emancipate itself—it cannot be freed by some group of leaders, however well-intentioned and sincere.” In a particularly comical touch, the CWG equates the Leninist emphasis on the necessity of political struggle to transform the “class in itself” into the “class for itself,” (i.e., the struggle for socialist consciousness) with the idealism of the Young Hegelians which Marx and Engels ridicule in *The German Ideology*. This sophmoric confusion of Leninism and idealism provides a hint as to the CWG’s political direction.

It seems, from the first issue of its “popular” journal, *The Worker*, that the CWG does not intend to devote a lot

of time to arguing with opponents on the left. By avoiding the arcane “sectarian” squabbles that divide small leftist groups from one another (over the Russian, black and party questions, for instance); by emphasizing issues of greater momentary popular interest over those of greater intrinsic political importance, the CWG may hope to reap quick membership dividends. But many leftist organizations have gone this route before. The results are rarely what they expect. Such organizations either fall apart due to disappointment when the anticipated pay-off fails to materialize, or, if they meet with some initial success, wind up adapting to the politics of the milieus from which they recruit. Organizations constructed in this fashion are built on sand.

The CWG is a new group. Many of the tendencies that we discern from our close familiarity with its members are still only tendencies. At this relatively early stage they have not yet clearly manifested themselves in the group’s public work. But the early signs are there. We can only advise anyone skeptical of our ability to predict the CWG’s trajectory to stay tuned. ■