

Healyites of the Second Mobilization

Workers Vanguard De-Collectivized

Reprinted below is the 1 July statement of the International Bolshevik Tendency on recent developments in the Spartacist League/U.S.:

The Spartacist League is currently retailing an “internal” bulletin on the recent purge of several members of their top leadership. SL founder/leader James Robertson opines that had they:

“gone on just a little bit more, I think we’d have found a roaring fire gutting our version of the theoretical edifice that Marx and Lenin and Trotsky built.”

The hero of the piece is Al Nelson, who, Robertson “jocularly” suggests, deserves to be honored by a “motion that all party comrades shall hang in their homes a picture of Al, not less than one foot square.” Al is credited with discovering that Jan Norden, editor of *Workers Vanguard* (WV) for the past 23 years, was a “revisionist,” a “cliquist,” an “impressionist” and an assortment of other bad things. Possessed of phenomenal energy, Norden was the SL’s best linguist, their most prolific writer, and quite possibly their best administrator. We predict that this purge will soon be apparent in the journalistic quality, and perhaps also the frequency, of the SL’s press.

The political issues ostensibly posed in Norden’s removal chiefly concern events in the International Communist League’s (ICL) German section, the Spartakist-Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (SpAD). The dispute involves various documents not included in the SL’s recent bulletin. One of the key issues appears to be differences on the evaluation of the ICL’s failed intervention in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) in 1989-90 (for our assessment see “Robertsonites in Wonderland,” 1917 No. 10). For much of this period Norden was one of the senior ICL cadres on the spot, and was responsible for the production of the group’s daily German newssheet. Nelson’s attack on Norden hinges on the claim that in his January 1995 public speech on the collapse of the DDR at Humboldt University in Berlin, Norden capitulated politically to the Communist Platform (the left wing of the social-democratic Party of Democratic Socialism—successor to the former ruling party in the DDR).

Apart from the laudatory treatment of the ICL’s activities, Norden’s remarks at Humboldt seem unobjectionable enough. Nelson focuses on Norden’s observation that given the tiny size of the ICL’s German group, and its lack of connections to the working class, it could not have posed itself as an immediate contender for power. Nelson quotes Norden as saying:

“Look at the reality: we came in from the outside to the DDR, and at times at the height of our intervention at the end of 1989 and beginning of 1990 we only had eight comrades in Berlin who spoke German.”

The fact is that the SpAD was never able to mobilize

even 100 people in its own name. Nelson displayed his political acumen during his sojourn in Berlin with the prediction that the SpAD would get hundreds of thousands of votes in the 1990 election. In fact it only got a couple of thousand. His insistence that only a “revisionist” would deny that the SpAD stood ready “to take the power, just as Lenin said in 1917,” demonstrates that even hindsight is not 20/20 for everyone.

Once he knew where to look, Len Meyers, the facile cynic who has succeeded Norden as WV editor, soon came up with more shocking evidence of revisionism. Toward the end of his speech Norden attempted to explain how the policy of seeking to make deals with imperialism at the expense of workers’ revolution (i.e., “peaceful coexistence”) did not originate with Khrushchev, as some hard Stalinists in the Communist Platform imagine, but can rather be traced directly to Stalin himself. To illustrate this, Norden used an example that his audience would be familiar with:

“Stalin’s policy of ‘peaceful coexistence’ also led to enormous concessions to imperialism. That was why the Soviet Union sent only limited amounts of munitions during the Spanish Civil War, because it didn’t want to directly go against the blockade decreed by the imperialist ‘democracies.’”

Meyers deliberately wrests Norden’s example out of its context and treats it as if it had been put forward as an alternative analysis of the Kremlin’s betrayal of the Spanish Revolution. He claims to have been “struck” by the “left-Stalinist or left-democratic critique of the Soviet bureaucracy on the Spanish Revolution” contained in the above passage and claims that:

“this statement, which it is hard to imagine coming from anyone even remotely sympathetic to the Trotskyist analysis of the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution, well politically epitomizes the conciliationism which permeates the Humboldt presentation.”

It seems to us that Meyers’ critique “well politically epitomizes” the logic-chopping that passes for political criticism among the Robertsonians these days.

Norden’s Group

What the SL bulletin refers to as “Norden’s ‘Group’” includes his companion, Marjorie Salzburg, a highly experienced and capable alternate member of the SL Central Committee. As well as being a prominent public spokesperson for the SL, Salzburg also functioned as WV’s “*de facto* managing editor.” She had also been the initiator of the ICL’s South African work. The “Norden Group” also includes Negrete who, until he was recently purged, had been the leading figure in the Grupo Esparquista de México (GEM), the ICL’s Mexican branch. As such he had worked closely with Norden, who ran the ICL’s Latin American work. The fourth member of the

“group” is Socorro, an 18-year ICL cadre, who had also been a leader in the GEM.

But it seems that this may not exhaust the list of supporters of the “Norden Group.” The final pretext for kicking out Norden and Salzburg was their refusal to turn over their personal phone bills so the leadership could go after anyone unwise enough to have accepted a call from them recently. Norden/Salzburg characterized this as a “fishing expedition,” and while insisting they had not engaged in any “public political activity” behind the back of the SL, refused to implicate comrades whose only crime was having spoken to them on the phone. In his 7 June postscript, Robertson comments: “We are indeed left wondering *who* in fact he [Norden] has been in phone/fax contact with since the first of the year.” Robertson may one day be able to make a pretty good guess.

Liz Gordon, apparently still a nominal member of the SL leadership, was a collateral target of the assault on Norden. Gordon and Norden, with Joseph Seymour, were the key Political Bureau members involved in the production of *Workers Vanguard* over the years. They were central to the “WV collective,” which was denounced in the Autumn 1994 issue of *Spartacist* as “furiously defensive, turf-conscious, hypersensitive, arrogant, cliquist [and] anti-Leninist.” In the recently released ICL document, Gordon, the former Secretary of the ICL’s International Secretariat, is denounced for running “the would-be splitters as a cliquist operation out of New York behind the back of the party.” Nelson quotes Robertson to the effect that, “Norden, Marjorie and Gordon stand revealed as the architects of an impressionistic opportunism, as shameful as it is dimwitted.” Gordon, a highly political but introverted and emotionally fragile woman who has been periodically trashed by Robertson over the years, does not seem to have much of a future as a leader of the SL/ICL.

Robertson’s Midnight Ramblers

In their resignation statement, Norden and Salzburg denounce the charges against them as an “entire fantasy of groundless assumptions, wild conjectures and filthy smears,” and protest that they were “framed up” for expulsion “on the basis of speculation based on suppositions based on lies.” This seems fair enough, judging from the materials published in the SL bulletin. Salzburg and Norden have not entirely lost their sense of humor:

“In recent months, we have been called Stalinophilic, Castroite, Shachtmanite, Pabloite of the second mobilization, accused of running a Healyite regime, with a touch of Loganism, like the BT, like Hansen, and partly like Goldman-Morrow and Cochran-Clarke. Oh yes, and also believers in Saddam Hussein’s war propaganda. To be all that at once is quite a feat.”

This kind of overkill will be familiar to anyone who has had the pleasure of witnessing one of the ICL’s purge campaigns up close. The Norden/Salzburg claim that the leadership’s charges “abound in utterly false statements” sounds about par for the course, as does their

account of how they were notified of their suspension: a “hefty repo squad” arrived at their apartment around midnight, notified them that they had been removed from the leadership and demanded that they turn over their keys, computer and fax machine. The following example of double-think has also featured in other purges:

“all opposition to the line of the I.S. [ICL International Secretariat] was labelled ‘anti-internationalist’ and fundamentally deviant on the party question. We replied that the Germany dispute was a false fight to find a Stalinophilic deviation, that the alleged facts, analysis and conclusions bore no resemblance to reality. *Defenders of the I.S. and IEC line declared that if we thought that, then we must believe that they are bureaucratic witchhunters.*”

—emphasis added

In the ICL a “hostile” attitude to the leadership is incompatible with membership. Those who dispute accusations by the leadership must believe that the leadership levels false charges. But such a belief constitutes “hostility.” And so the circle is closed.

Mexican Leadership Purged

The SL has not been able to assimilate many of the handful of cadres they have regrouped internationally over the past 15 years. This is attributable to the disparity between the ICL’s orthodox Trotskyist facade and the unpleasant reality of life on the inside. One of the main charges made in the purge of Negrete and Socorro was “anti-internationalism.” Roughly translated, this means daring to disagree with instructions from the U.S. leadership. After the purge of Negrete, who, perhaps for cosmetic reasons, was apparently not suspended but rather placed on (involuntary) leave, Socorro was brought back to New York to stand trial on a variety of charges, including “breaking discipline” by getting separated from other GEM members in the midst of the several hundred thousand participants in Mexico City’s May Day demonstration. This is the kind of infraction that only a perceived factional opponent would ever have to stand trial for in the first place. The result of the trial was of course a forgone conclusion: she was found guilty.

Two days later she criticized the ICL’s trial procedure at an internal SL meeting:

“I was, a number of years ago, abducted and raped and the fucking bourgeois court gave the rapist more justice than I got. And that is the truth. That is the truth. And it is a travesty and it’s a shame on this party.”

The next day the SL Political Bureau, citing this remark, responded:

“Membership must be based on something other than open hatred, contempt and derision, fundamentally counterposed to our basic principles. To therefore hereby expel Socorro for her comment...”

In other words, criticism of the SL’s juridical procedures is now an expellable offense. One of the more puzzling features of the Salzburg/Norden resignation statement is their characterization of Socorro’s remark as “unconscionable and false.” We were not present at

either trial, but judging from the SL's own account of the procedure, as well as Salzburg/Norden's observations, it is not apparent why her comment was either "unconscionable" or "false."

Democratic-Centralism in the SL

Perhaps Norden/Salzburg have good reason for their criticism of Socorro, but it seems more probable that their comment somehow reflects the influence of a quarter of a century spent in the Spartacist League. This is also evident in their claim that:

"Over the recent period, and particularly in the past several weeks, the I.S. has taken a series of measures breaking sharply with our Spartacist traditions and norms of internal debate governed by Leninist democratic centralism and instead imposing increasing restrictions and reprisals."

—emphasis added

While it was necessary to have some room for political debate at the top of the SL (particularly within the editorial board), the fact is that the internal political life of the SL and its satellites has been pretty arid for the last couple of *decades*. As we noted in our initial declaration in October 1982, the SL/iSt had not had an internal tendency or faction since 1968. We commented that this distinguished the internal regime of the SL from that of Lenin's Bolshevik Party, Trotsky's Fourth International and James P. Cannon's Socialist Workers Party:

"Trotsky's method of dealing with intra-party political struggle was quite different than that of the present leadership of the iSt. Political differences were fought out politically and where possible attempts were made to re-integrate oppositionists. Seymour [the SL's preeminent intellectual and author of *Lenin and the Vanguard Party*] makes the same observation as regards the Bolsheviks.

"The fact is there is something pretty unhealthy about a Trotskyist organization in which there have been virtually no political tendency or faction fights for a decade and a half."

The ICL leadership has naturally always been a bit shy about addressing this question, but such a record strongly suggests that the SL's departure from Leninist democracy occurred years ago, not weeks ago. ICL cadres (like Healyites or Stalinists) who suddenly find themselves outside the organization to which they devoted their lives are forced to spend some time thinking back and trying to make sense of their experience. It is not uncommon for them to begin with the assumption that things were basically okay—that there was at least rough justice—in most, if not all, cases that preceded their own. But often after further reflection and/or investigation, they realize that their experience was not really unique or unprecedented after all.

'WV Collective' Terminated

The impact of these events for the ICL can hardly be over-estimated. Robertson is well aware of this, which is why he has rushed to circulate this latest "internal" bulletin. As usual, his main concern is preserving his dues base. He evidently figures that it is best to undergo

a short, sharp shock—particularly since it is clearly all going to come out anyway. Everyone familiar with the SL knows that this represents a deep split in the core cadre of the group. The apolitical authority fights, which have reduced every section of the ICL to shells directed by people deficient in either brain or backbone (or both), have now taken their toll on the *Workers Vanguard* editorial board. This can only further erode any expectation on the part of the aging layer of those who joined in the early 1970s and still remain in "Jimstown" that somehow, someday, things might start to turn around.

In the leaflet we distributed at the SL's debate with Ernest Mandel in November 1994 we commented that the internal difficulties of the SL leadership foreshadowed a "succession struggle" that "will erupt when Number One is no longer around to settle all disputes by personal fiat." We also noted that, "The current targets [of Robertson's inner circle] seem to be the leading members of the editorial board of *Workers Vanguard*" and commented that:

"The members of the WV collective, who have slavishly endured such abuse for years, may be missing a few vertebrae, but they constitute the brightest and most political elements in the group, and are therefore the most logical candidates for future leadership."

Norden is no longer short-listed for the job of taking over the post-Robertson SL, but he and Salzburg did demonstrate that there were at least a few vertebrae intact among the "WV collective."

Joseph Seymour is now the only one left at the top of the SL from the "cliquist" literati denounced in *Spartacist* several years ago. He only appears in the bulletin as the author of an opaque farewell to Norden, with whom he toiled for so many years in *WV*. Long pained by Robertson's insistence on driving out most of the more political and talented SL recruits, while promoting "reliable" low-caliber apparatchiks, Seymour might be feeling a bit lonely right now. His letter to Norden ignores the specifics of the various charges and instead chides him for thinking that it is possible to make a breakthrough in this period. This, says Seymour, marks Norden as a "man of the pre-1976 era," i.e., someone who is out of sync with the shrunken historic possibilities of the moment.

In his letter to Norden, Seymour comments: "I sometimes find it conceptually useful to look at our organization as if I were *not* a member of it." As the group's leading intellectual, Seymour has traditionally been permitted a considerable degree of detachment from the operational side of the SL. Norden *et al.*, on the other hand, have had their detachment thrust upon them. Whatever one's vantage point, the picture must be discouraging for those who accept Robertson's dictum that only the ICL possesses the capacity to "facilitate the emancipation of the proletariat internationally."

Ascension of Prince Albert

A revolutionary organization cannot be built upon the principle of deference to the whims of a single individual. But a political obedience cult can have no other

basis. The history of the Spartacist League over the past two decades is that of an organization in transition from the one to the other. The termination of the “Norden Group” appears to be the culmination of the protracted process of pulverizing any sense of political independence in the leading cadre who remain from the revolutionary SL of the 1970s. The SL’s bulletin is entitled “Norden’s ‘Group’: Shamefaced Defectors From Trotskyism,” but there is little evidence that they have so far defected from anything but the obligation to accept that “the party leadership,” i.e., James Robertson and his surrogates, is always right. In a speech delivered in Germany in late January, Al Nelson put his finger on the real reason for getting rid of Norden:

“In the past when one of these episodes provoked a fight in the party he [Norden] would grudgingly yield to the party’s judgment and go on to something else. But not this time. For six months he has categorically defied the party’s judgment...”

Nelson concluded his January 16 document attacking Norden with the following classical statement of an apparatus man:

“It is the responsibility and duty of party leaders who steer the party off its programmatic course to *assist* the party in correcting that departure. You can’t do that by standing back and thumbing your nose at the party. You can’t be right against the whole party.”

In the SL these days “the whole party” doesn’t add up to a great deal, as Nelson’s preeminence indicates. Norden’s opposition was tolerated for as long as it was because he was so important to the whole operation. In their resignation statement, Norden and Salzburg recount how Norden was gradually stripped of one post after another, in what was evidently an attempt to isolate him internally, while gradually increasing the pressure on him to capitulate. In response to the leadership’s charge that Norden had gradually wiggled out of his political responsibilities, they write:

“This cynical question is designed to get around the fact, which the I.S. knows full well, that Norden didn’t ‘unilaterally suspend his political responsibilities,’ but rather *he was removed from them*. Following the 20 July 1995 I.S. meeting, Norden was removed step by step from operational responsibility for the work in areas which he pre-

viously oversaw. This was immediately true for everything concerning Germany except work on *Spartakist*; Brosius took over phone contact with the SpAD. On Mexico, Richard D. was assigned to maintain regular communication with the GEM. This can be verified simply by looking at the reports and fax traffic. On Brazil, Norden supervised the trip by Abrao and Adam in August 1995, but after that communication with Brazil was handled through other comrades.

“This culminated in the January 1996 IEC meeting, where Norden was removed from full IEC membership; thereafter he was no longer responsible for any particular area of work in the I.S....”

In the Spartacist League today the selection of cadres does not take place on the basis of their political capacities and commitment to the program of Trotskyism, but rather on the basis of their “loyalty” to the leadership. It is therefore somehow fitting that faithful Al Nelson (the only veteran, besides Robertson himself, of the SL’s predecessor, the Revolutionary Tendency of the Socialist Workers Party/U.S.) should emerge as the victor in the fight which defines and shapes the final, irreversible decline of the ICL. Nelson’s detractors may grumble that he’s rather dull, very insecure, has a tendency to be a bully and is sometimes a bit unstable. But they ignore his other qualities: he has a certain base cunning, and, more importantly, he is thoroughly, deeply, unremittingly loyal to Robertson. Robertson is well aware of Nelson’s limitations and has occasionally had to jerk his chain—but one needs to do that with pit bulls.

While the SL degenerated beyond recognition, its press continued to publish some first rate articles. *Workers Vanguard* was the main reason why anyone would want to join the SL. But a high-quality political newspaper requires high-quality political people to produce it. It cannot be written without discussion and argument—phenomena which the Robertson regime, in its desire for absolute control, profoundly distrusts. With the expulsion of Norden/Salzburg, and the triumph of the hacks over the “WV collective,” the SL leadership divests itself of the one thing that has unnaturally prolonged its life: a compelling literary facade. ■