

# Challenger's 'Major Malfunction' No Disaster for the Working Class

The spontaneous abortion of space shuttle Challenger on January 28 was followed by an outpouring of government-prompted, electronically-orchestrated grief. From Pope to Queen, a variety of "world leaders" were quick to convey their speechwriters' expressions of sorrow. Even Kremlin chief Mikhail Gorbachev telegraphed Reagan, "We share your grief at the tragic death of the crew." None of these notables was so impolite as to point to Reagan's fingerprints on the wreckage. Yet White House pressure to get the 25th shuttle mission into orbit—regardless of hazardous weather conditions—in time for Reagan's State of the Union address that evening was plainly the cause of the "disaster." But instead of an upbeat message from on high, the January 28 evening news featured endless replays of Challenger's fiery demise.

The media made much of the "personal tragedies" of the astronauts' families. Meanwhile the good news about the failed mission has been largely ignored, even by the left press. And the good news is that, along with the \$1.5 billion flagship of the Defense Department/NASA shuttle fleet, the explosion destroyed the second unit in a projected four-part Tracking and Data Relay Satellite System (TDRSS).

The Air Force had initially attempted to give the TDRSS project a civilian cover but, as the 8 November 1982 issue of *Aviation Week & Space Technology* (AW&ST) reported, NASA soon decided "to shift the \$2.2-billion program to a total government system with no commercial communications services." It added that the "Defense Dept. could benefit by the switch. It has plans to use TDRSS spacecraft-to-spacecraft relay capability for military programs....The relay capability of the TDRSS spacecraft eliminates the need for satellite ground stations, allowing near 100% continuous communications contact with orbiting vehicles." The first component of this system (TDRSS-A) was sent aloft aboard Challenger in April 1983. The second TDRSS unit, scheduled for launch in August of that year, has been delayed repeatedly since then.

In 1952 Eisenhower cabinet appointee Charles Wilson summed up the world view of that administration with his immortal observation, "what's good for G.M. is good for the country." The Reaganites have amended that to read: what's good for the war machine is good for the country. *Aviation Week* (3 March) reported that Air Force Under Secretary Edward Aldrich "said Challenger's destruction was tantamount to a national emergency." The February 10 issue reported, "Launch of a second tracking and data relay satellite to replace the one destroyed on Challenger and bring the TDRS system operational is a high priority in all of the manifest options." Indeed, according to the 17 March issue, the TDRSS is the *top* priority and is to be included on the next shuttle launch (currently set for February 1987).

Aldrich testified before a House Science and Technology subcommittee "that the military effect of the Jan. 28 explosion...would be 'relatively minor' if the three remaining shuttles could resume flights within six months" (*New York Times*, 27 February). But no one expects them to be ready to go in anything like that time frame. According to AW&ST (17 March) "Resumption of space shuttle launches prior to mid-1987 is unlikely, NASA managers and engineers believe....no managers believed the program will be operational as early as February, 1987."

There is plenty we don't know about imperialist Big Brother TDRSS (and the rest of the military's communications/intelligence satellite network), but it is reasonable to assume that the 28 January "disaster" represented a big setback for the U.S. military and its high-tech plans for war against the USSR. And that is a very good thing.

## Spartacist League: Another Crisis, Another Flinch

For the formerly-Trotskyist Spartacist League (SL), flinching at moments of great "national crisis" (i.e., when it really counts) has virtually become a reflex, as their execrable press coverage of the 28 January explosion demonstrates. *Workers Vanguard's* first article ("Challenger Blows Up in Reagan's Face," 14 February) pays scant attention to the destruction of the TDRSS satellite aboard Challenger and ventures timidly, "there may be some small benefit from the death of these seven people in that it makes a mockery out of Star Wars, where an enormously sophisticated system must work perfectly without testing." This ignores the fact that TDRSS can function independent of the completion of the rest of the Star Wars apparatus. TDRSS-A is working *now*. The long-awaited TDRSS-B would be working in tandem with it to "form a system capable of relaying communications from the shuttle or other spacecraft through 85% of each Earth orbit" (AW&ST, 20 January) had shuttle mission 51-L been successful. Surely the fact that it had to be salvaged from the bottom of the Atlantic, instead of circling the globe high over the central Pacific, must also qualify as a "small benefit" for the working class and its allies.

Taking its cue from the bourgeois media's "human interest" smokescreen, *Workers Vanguard* (WV) volunteers: "What we feel toward the astronauts is no more and no less than for any people who die in tragic circumstances, such as the nine poor Salvadorans who were killed by a fire in a Washington, D.C. basement apartment two days before." Yet from the press coverage we saw, there can be little doubt that those "nine poor Salvadorans" were refugees from the desperate poverty (and quite possibly the rightist death squads) of their homeland. WV's assertion that it feels no more sympathy

thy for such people than for the handful of Reaganauts who perished in an attempt to forge one more link in U.S. imperialism's bid to achieve first-strike capability against the Soviet Union, demonstrates that the ex-Trotskyist Spartacist League is no longer capable of distinguishing the class line.

### Who Was Who Aboard Challenger?

Who were the "victims" aboard Challenger? Prominent among them was Air Force lifer Lt. Col. Ellison Onizuka, who was clearly a big shooter in the Star Wars program. Onizuka was a mission specialist on a top-secret January 1985 Defense Department launch. He was identified by *AW&ST* as the man "in charge of the TDRSS deployment" on the 28 January mission. *Time* magazine (10 February) identified Challenger's commanding officer, Francis Scobee, as an aerospace engineer and Air Force pilot who "found his true potential in the skies....[where he] flew on combat missions in Viet Nam."

Another war "hero" and Challenger "victim" was Michael Smith. According to *Time*, Smith won "appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis," and "became a pilot and won a chestful of medals during the Viet Nam War" in the course of flying 225 combat missions. Payload specialist Gregory Jarvis "enlisted in the Air Force in 1969, became a specialist in tactical communications satellites...and rose to the rank of captain."

Ronald McNair, the only black on the shuttle, "helped develop specialized lasers" at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Time* quotes former college classmate and black Democratic Party hustler Jesse Jackson as saying McNair saw participation in the space program as "the highest way he could contribute to the system that gave him so much." Judith Resnick was an electrical engineer who "operated the spacecraft's remote-control arm" on a previous shuttle flight in 1984. She must have been aware that she had locked onto the Star Wars program.

Christa McAuliffe, the New Hampshire schoolteacher who won a national competition of 10,000 teachers to become the "first ordinary citizen in space," probably really thought that she was "reaching for the stars." She was indeed a victim. But the degenerate SL makes no distinction between Star Warrior Onizuka (whom the 28 February *WV* blandly describes as "a Japanese American Buddhist from Hawaii") and public relations hostage McAuliffe.

### SL's Bogus Amalgam

To further confuse matters *WV* writes, "Those who died [aboard Challenger] were the victims of the U.S. imperialist anti-Soviet war drive, like the 200-plus dead Marines in Beirut or the passengers on the KAL 007 spy

plane." What we have here is an attempt to amalgamate three very different situations by a bit of political sleight-of-hand.

The KAL-007 passengers were innocent victims. Unlike the "mission specialists" aboard the Challenger, they were sent to their deaths on a provocative and deliberate spy-flight intended to trigger the Soviet air defense network. Despite their posture as defenders of the USSR, in the crunch the Spartacist League flinched. *Workers Vanguard* (9 September 1983) declared that, had the Russians known that there were innocent passengers aboard, then "despite the potential military damage of such an apparent spying mission," shooting down KAL 007 would have been "worse than a barbaric atrocity." The SL defends the Soviet Union as long as there is no heat, but in the midst of an anti-Soviet media-blitz the position is subject to adjustment. So much for "unconditional" defensism!

The flip side of ducking on the Russian question is social patriotism. The 200-plus U.S. Marines who perished in the 1983 barracks bombing in Beirut were imperialist hitmen establishing a beachhead for a U.S. military presence in the Middle East. Revolutionists unconditionally oppose imperialist intervention anywhere in the "third world," and call for the removal of such colonial gendarmes by any means necessary. Not so the Spartacist League, which, in the aftermath of the barracks bombing called for *saving* the survivors! As we pointed out at the time:

"The demolition of the Marine headquarters was the biggest military blow to U.S. imperialism since Vietnam. And Reagan didn't like it. It might look 'unpatriotic' to be seen applauding that action. So the SL leadership, despite all its huffing and puffing about hanging tough in the crunch, flinched and adjusted the program of the organization to make it more palatable to the bourgeoisie. A 'profile in cowardice.'"

—*Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt*, January 1984

The SL sought to alibi its refusal to defend the demolition of the Marine barracks in Lebanon on the grounds that there was no force in Beirut fighting for a "just cause." But the spectacular crash of January 28 demonstrated that even an outright *accident* can bring a welcome setback for imperialism. Those "revolutionaries" who cannot bring themselves to come out and tell the truth to the masses about such "national tragedies" demonstrate their ideological subservience to their own bourgeoisie.

As for *WV*'s "millions of Americans" who saw the space shuttle's fatal malfunction as "a heart-rending human tragedy," we can only observe that the capitalist mass media is indeed a powerful ideological weapon. Perhaps exposure to the truth will one day teach some of them to greet future setbacks for the imperialist war machine with calls of "Encore"! ■