

# Life in Cannon's SWP

## A Conversation with Myra

*The following is a transcript of a February 1987 verbal report by Tom Riley based on notes taken during a discussion with Myra Tanner Weiss in her New York apartment. Myra had agreed to discuss her personal political history, but refused to be tape recorded.*

I talked to Myra Tanner Weiss on the 9th of February 1987 with Paul Abbot and Uschi. One of the first things she told me was that she had been a friend of Greta Garbo's. In her late teens she was living in LA, and she was going out with the son of Greta Garbo's screenwriter. And Greta Garbo used to make a point of taking her to all the various Hollywood parties where she would rub shoulders with the "progressive" left-wing film community, many of whom were German émigrés.... They were almost all Stalinists, and at this point she was already a Trotskyist, and Greta Garbo, who had no particular sympathies one way or the other, found it very amusing to have her little Trotskyist friend around persecuting these Stalinists.

Myra knew Ernst Toller. He was a collaborator of Bertolt Brecht, and she had been feeding him [Toller] Trotskyist literature, giving him one piece after another, and he had been devouring it. Now, Brecht was a very important émigré, and Toller was potentially a very important contact, and she had given him all Trotsky's writings on Germany, had discussed it, and had discussed various other aspects of the Trotskyist program. He seemed to be in agreement with it—he showed interest and he'd done the reading.

He [Toller] then spoke at a large meeting of "progressives" and he followed the party line exactly, including denouncing Trotsky. So Myra was extremely angry at that, and right around that time, when Brecht approached her and said he'd like to go out and talk to her, she said no, she wasn't interested, on account of the fact that she was mad at this guy Toller. Something that she said she'd always sort of regretted. She said that a year or so after this happened, Toller had committed suicide, but she never knew why.

She also knew Marlene Dietrich.

There was one famous party, apparently, when Joseph Freeman came out to raise money for the [Communist Party's] *New Masses*. They arranged a party of these wealthy Hollywood types, and she went around and talked to all these people. Garbo made sure that she was invited, and she managed to pretty much screw up the guy's fundraising tour, by asking all these difficult questions....

At another party, or perhaps the same one, she met André Malraux, and she asked him, "why do you have one line in *Man's Fate* and another line in *Man's Hope*?" This represented a shift in Malraux's thinking from something approximating Trotskyism to Stalinism. She said he was really on the spot and was very uncomfortable, and couldn't answer it effectively.

She started out in politics as a pre-med student at the University of Utah where she met Joe Hansen. She was recruited by a guy named Hal Ryan who was her chemistry instructor. What's amusing about that, is that Earl Birney, the Canadian poet, was the guy who started the branch at the University of Utah, and [after] she had waged some long campaign and finally got her file from the FBI...it specified that Earl Birney had recruited her to Trotskyism, which she

said is a complete lie, and that she had never met Earl Birney, but that she would like to.

She said that she liked the piece we did on "Jimstown" and found particularly useful the section on the organizational question as a political question. She commented that generally she thought it was quite well written. She said that she guessed that the SWP and the SL were approximately the same size now, after Barnes had cleaned out so many people. She said that by the late 1960s and early 70s the SWP had become a pretty strange bunch.

She remembered in the 1950s Cannon telling her that the youth were going to save them. They had managed to survive this long, and now there was this new influx of people on the horizon, and this would turn things around for the party because they were getting pretty old and pretty tired—they'd been at it since the 30s (Cannon of course had been at it since the 'teens) without much to show for it. The problem the party had at this point was that it was pretty much split into two groups. And this was true from '54 on, or perhaps before '54—there was the Weiss group and the anti-Weiss group.

They felt that with these new youth coming in they'd be healthy, they'd be vigorous and they'd solve the problems of the party. But there was a problem, she said, and that was with the kind of youth they were getting. They were ambitious, and they were overly eager to carve out little slots for themselves—little "machine men" they were. She said that this did not apply to people who were in the RT—Wohlforth, Robertson, Mage. The Weissites, who played some role in recruiting them, looked to them as the best elements. But they didn't stay in the party very long, they quickly split among themselves, and they "didn't amount to much," was her characterization.

She said that whatever the problems with Wohlforth, Mage and Robertson, they were a thousand times better than Barnes. She defended them when they were getting kicked out of the SWP [and] felt that if she could engage them politically, give them some time to learn, that they could be won over. She didn't agree with them on Cuba, but she thought that they were serious people, and that they were getting kicked out of the party prematurely and unnecessarily.

She did say though that she found it extremely amusing that Robertson considered himself to be a continuator of Cannonism, because she said that Robertson didn't know Cannon, he had nothing to do with Cannon. She also said that she didn't know what went wrong, and she thought that Cannon didn't know what went wrong, but she knew that Cannon felt at least by the mid-60s that what the SWP had become was not what he had meant to build....

She also said that she remembered the first time she saw Barnes speak to a youth organization. They were discussing some political point and Barnes said: look, let's not talk about the politics. Let's leave that up to the party leadership. That's their job. Our job as the youth is just to get out there, sell the newspaper, get the subscriptions, etc.—let's leave the political theory with the leadership.

She said that he was saying that to curry favor with the leader, Dobbs, because that's what Dobbs wanted to hear.

But she said that she knew also that this kind of spineless behavior was not characteristic of revolutionaries. In the 1930s, when she was a youth, nothing could have been further away from them—the idea of some obsequious toady offering to sell papers, and let somebody else do the thinking was not why she got involved in revolutionary politics. Barnes of course fulfilled her expectations.

She and Murry moved to New York in 1952, and they were sent by Cannon to correct the situation in New York at that time. Murry was supposed to become the National Secretary in place of Dobbs, but Murry became very ill—he had a bad heart even at this time. She says that she knows that Robertson has called her and Murry “Pabloites,” and she thinks that is funny because they, in fact, were the people who were fighting Pablo most. Murry was supposed to be an editor of the journal, and Myra’s job was to be one of the principal public speakers of the party.

One story which she recounted from the early 50s was that Cannon, in alliance with [Vince] Dunne, proposed to the National Committee that Myra be their candidate for vice president in the election of 1952. But he was unable to persuade Dobbs of this, and Dobbs had a majority, so Cannon and Dunne were defeated. But the problem went to the convention, where it was brought up again, and Myra won a majority.

She said that Cannon was very good on “feminism” and that he always tended to back her when she was involved in some fight for women’s rights within the party. She [recalled] one fight in ’47 that went to the Political Committee. There was a seamen’s branch, and it was made up of either seamen or their wives. The wives pretty much took over the routine functioning of the branch, because the seamen tended to be gone for long periods of time.... Well, one of the seamen at one of the branch meetings apparently put forward a motion that only seamen could be delegates to the upcoming national convention. Myra got involved in this, and there was a fight over it with the branch. Myra was apparently involved in giving advice to some of the wives and saying this was scandalous and ridiculous and absurd and sexist, and whatever.

And Tom Kerry said (I believe at a Political Committee meeting— at a leadership meeting anyway) that he was going to charge Myra for disrupting and meddling in a branch that she didn’t belong to, and various formal violations of protocol. When Cannon took the floor, he said this is ridiculous, it is illegal, you are not allowed to do this in the party—pass motions that certain people can’t run for certain posts—and he wouldn’t hear of any action being taken against her. That was in 1947.

She said that Murry had a stroke in 1960 that pretty much took him out of politics, and that Jim Cannon insisted that Murry be given permanent membership in the party, that he not have to pay any dues and that he be a member in good standing. This was Cannon’s way of indicating his regard for Murry.

Dobbs was always jealous of Cannon, and was hostile to Cannon, and for that reason ended up being pro-Cochran at the beginning of the fight. So Dobbs was blocking at this time with Kerry and with Morris Stein. And at first, they ended up in a bloc with Clarke and Cochran. So it looked, for a period, like the opposition to the Pabloites in the United States would be Cannon and the Weisses. In the end, Dobbs came over, although perhaps not very firmly.

One of the things she described was Murry’s role in the leadership where she said that he played a role as sort of a

conciliator and tried to balance people off. When Kerry would get mad at Dobbs, Murry would intervene to try to protect Dobbs somewhat or defend him. And he’d do the same for almost anyone in the leadership. His job, as he saw it, was to try to make it into a collective that could work together. And everyone in the party liked Murry more or less. He was not a macho male. He believed that if you defeated somebody you didn’t try to smash them into the ground and destroy them. You tried to win them over on the point, and to be comradely toward them after the fight, even if [you] had been on opposite sides over some political question.

She said that one of the origins of the youth group in the SWP was that she went and gave a speech on dialectical materialism at Harvard, and that the turnout was so good, and there was so much interest in her talk, that she suggested to the Political Committee that they consider organizing a youth group again. The Political Committee went along with it. Many of the people who were originally involved in it were young comrades from Los Angeles, which is the Weisses’ old branch, and they set up the apparatus.

The first big opportunity for what was to be the SWP youth group came with the dissident Shachtmanites. And the first dissident Shachtmanites that they located (this would become the RT group) were Judy and Shane Mage who were at Antioch College [in Ohio]. Murry was busy contacting them. He was also busy writing another group of people in Chicago that he was in touch with.... These people ended up coming to New York—most of the important people in the Shachtmanites ended up coming to New York. And, in New York, the Weisses organized classes for them to teach them about Trotskyism and re-discuss Trotskyism. The big question they had to win them over on, and it took some time, was the Soviet Union.

At that point, I asked her if she noticed which of these three— Robertson, Mage or Wohlforth—showed the most interest or aptitude, or if there was any difference in terms of winning them over on the Russian question. She thought there wasn’t, and explained to me that none of these characters was very important or particularly worth paying attention to, so we got off that subject.

She said that she was in the party and continued to be active until there was one meeting where she made a criticism of Castro in the Political Committee and people were furious. Morris Stein, she said, almost threw a typewriter at her. The idea that anyone would make a criticism of Castro was unthinkable, and that sort of represented the beginning of the end for her apparently. She said that Dobbs was no party organizer, that he couldn’t organize his way out of a paper bag. When he was in Chicago they had to send people up from LA to help him out.

She said she remembered a PC meeting at the time of the Cuban missile crisis where Dobbs put forward a proposal to condemn Khrushchev for backing down to Kennedy. And she’d said, “What would you have us do, risk World War III for a couple of lousy missiles in Cuba? We shouldn’t criticize him for that.” What if the bourgeoisie was so stupid and crazy that they would actually drop the bomb? It would be a crime to use Cuba as a pawn. With her intervention, they managed to hold up action on this question until they heard from Cannon. She said that was generally the way that things went in the SWP PC: they would consult him first before doing anything.

Cannon wrote them and said they were way off base, and that he basically endorsed Myra’s position. So that was

another example where Cannon backed her up, and they didn't publish anything in the paper along the lines that they had been thinking of.

She said that in the mid-1960s, as she was getting less active, she, and Murry I believe, did have correspondence with [European Pabloite leaders Ernest] Mandel and Pierre Frank, just as one friend to another. Although she mentioned that she had never been to Europe, which I thought was curious for someone of her stature in the Trotskyist movement.

Nonetheless, she corresponded with Mandel and Frank and discovered that they had the same basic differences with the SWP leadership. She said that she left the organization for purely personal reasons. Murry had suffered considerable brain damage in the 1960 stroke. He had to relearn almost everything, and the Dobbs machine took this opportunity to move against him. So he did the only thing possible, and went to a school to re-learn English. She meanwhile got a job in a printshop and financed him.

She said that as time went on she ran into the SL here and there. She always regarded their politics as a little weird, but she was always very impressed with individual Spartacists. They seemed very intelligent and very good people. She belonged to the ITU [International Typographical Union] and she was involved in trying to organize cold type shops around New York where she ran into several SLers. And said that as "crazy as the SL was, they were never as bad as that Barnes bunch." They were sort of "wild and impossible," but Barnes' problem was not wildness—"Barnes buried Trotskyism." At least the SL, even if they were "irresponsible," were Trotskyists by her standards.

She said she went to an ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] march in Washington sometime in the 1970s, and she watched as an SWP contingent went by. She was there with a friend of hers, who she was pushing in a wheelchair, and as the contingent went by she raised her fist and screamed out to them, "Long Live Trotsky!" She said they all looked back and forth at each other and looked fairly embarrassed. And she thought, this is an ailing group.

I asked her a little bit about the Weiss faction—she said, "We didn't have a faction." After World War II, LA was the largest branch in the country. They sent people to all sorts of cities to start up new branches. They sent people to Chicago, to Seattle, to New York and to San Diego. And they would always have these people over to their house before they went out, and they said look, we want you to go out and build a branch. But work through the national office, don't work through us. We're interested and we hope you do well, but remember, you're building a branch not for the LA branch, but you're building a branch for the national. She said we were very strict about that....

I asked her about Grace Carlson [an NC member who stood as the SWP's 1948 vice-presidential candidate] and if she knew her, and what her attitude was when she defected to the Catholic Church [in 1952], and whether people had anticipated it or not. She said no, she was really shocked, she was devastated. She had no idea at all that this was going to happen, and she thought that was a pretty general attitude. But she was hit particularly hard because Grace was the other best known woman leader. She said that the only other female member of the NC at that point was a woman named Eloise Booth....

She said that....Grace and she felt, by and large, the women got stuck with all the "administrative shit" in the

party. That if there was a speech for the fund drive to be given, a speech to give money, it would always go to one of the women. They would never get a political assignment to write up the major document on this or that, or to give a direction here or there....She said that she made several national tours as a speaker.

I asked her if there were any blacks in the SWP top leadership, and she said none after Johnson [C.L.R. James] left. I asked her about the Johnsonite cadre. We talked a little bit about "cult," and she said yeah, it was pretty much like a cult. I asked if she knew Freddie Forrest [Raya Dunayevskaya], and what was her impression. She said Freddie Forest was a Johnsonite. Freddie Forrest later split, but she said that at that point there was no distinction in their tendency that she was aware of. They pretty much came in by themselves, and went out by themselves. She said, though, that they did recruit some people in LA—they recruited some of the Johnsonite faction to the main branch of the party.

She said...she appreciated the stuff we wrote about Cannon and Robertson in "The Road to Jimstown"—that basically it was true that Cannon's group was pretty democratic, and he didn't drive people out of the group at all. He had a sense that if you had enough agreement with the basic programmatic positions of the party—he wasn't going to let them take over—but he wasn't going to try to get rid of anybody who might have any little difference. Nonetheless she said that Cannon's cadre (and this is I think a quote), "was scared to death of him," which she didn't elaborate on all that much.

She said that Cannon was not a feminist, that he was a "Victorian male." But that she often appreciated his authority, and that when Cannon spoke in favor of her everyone else would shut up—which she thought was interesting. She brought up again the seamen's union thing where Kerry had been about to press charges against her, Cannon weighed in, said something, and that was the end of it. She said it was peculiar—nobody would continue to disagree. She said, the way we did it in the LA branch that would never happen. If she or Murry spoke against somebody, the discussion would go on until they were won over, changed their mind or got outvoted or something. But Cannon just spoke on this thing, and on many other occasions, and everybody would shut up, she said. But nobody would give a little talk about how they were convinced, or why they were won over, or anything like that.

She said that perhaps some of his reputation for really hard factionalism was that he was really concerned about keeping the cadre together, and as soon as he'd see someone really starting to move away, he would come down with an axe on them.

She said that the operation of the LA branch, with her and Murry, ran along somewhat different lines. There was a case, for instance, in LA where she was the organizer....Some of the men in the branch were very anxious because they didn't particularly like having to take orders from a woman. There was some dispute over something in an aircraft union, and one of the prominent people in the faction got someone, a woman, to run against her. They weren't going to run against her directly as a woman, but there was a woman more to their liking who they were going to get to run. So they had a campaign in the branch, and Myra's people won....And she said that some of the men who were in her faction said "oh good, now we can get rid of Jack Dale" (that was the guy's name)....And Myra said, no, no, let's not get rid of them, let's make Jack Dale

the education director for LA and make his wife (who had run against her), put her in charge of corresponding for *The Militant*....In the long run, [this] was the best way to build a branch—show these people that it was okay, that they could work together, treat them well and integrate them.

She said that in LA that was generally the approach they took and they had great success in recruiting people back....They had great success recruiting people back from the Shachtmanites, recruiting back from the Johnsonites. She said we were very hard politically, we didn't give anything politically, but we remained personally friendly with these people, and tried to treat people in a decent, political fashion. And she said it worked out well, "we had a very successful branch."

She said the Shachtmanites never gave them any problems—they never lost anyone to the Shachtmanites in LA, and, indeed, the Shachtmanites lost a lot of people to them. At one point apparently, the Shachtmanites got an office in the same building— they opened next door [to the SWP], thinking they were going to cash in. But she said the traffic all went the other way.

There was a famous story which is reprinted in an SL bulletin where Gerald L.K. Smith was going to speak in LA. And this was the biggest fight they had in the branch apparently. The Shachtmanites had proposed an anti-fascist united front to deal with this guy, which basically meant a bloc with other radicals to form a picket line in front

of his meeting. The Weisses didn't go for that. They said that this thing could be very big. The war had just ended—there was a war fought "against fascism," and a lot of workers were very concerned about it, and they didn't want to see it cropping up here. So it could be much bigger than just an alliance of left groups. So they proposed that instead of a quickie picket line that they spend a month or so building something in the labor movement, try to get something really big.

She said that they got phone calls from New York, with people saying what the hell do you guys think you're doing—you must be crazy. How could you turn down the Shachtmanite proposal for a principled united front. She said they managed to convince them. They were successful, finally they built a demo of 20,000 people ...and the fascists couldn't get anywhere near the place. And that was basically the end for Gerald L.K. Smith. He turned up a few other places, but the word had got around, and the people in other cities followed the example in LA, and Smith's career as a fascist agitator pretty much came to an end.

She said that in the LA branch they had many disagreements, and that there was never unanimous agreement on anything. But they were always able to keep the minority shifting their ground, keep them off balance, and generally had pretty good success winning people over from outside the group, and also winning dissidents from inside the group. ■