

DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS

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CCC LETTER OF WITHDRAWAL
L SANDERSON AND
SOLENBERGER 1974

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24 May 1974

Motor City Labor League
Central Committee
c/o Glotta, Adelman & Dinges
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Dear Comrades of the Central Committee of the Motor City Labor League:

On Tuesday night, 7 May 1974, we were forced to withdraw from further participation in or attendance at Control, Conflict, and Change meetings. We made the decision to withdraw with great reluctance and very real regret, but had no other choice in the face of CCC's unprincipled exclusion of members of two communist organizations, the Spartacist League and the Revolutionary Socialist League.

Because of our warm friendships with and deep respect for many MCLL and Alliance members, and our involvement in various forms of practical activity with cadre from both organizations, we feel an obligation to explain this withdrawal in a comradely fashion. We also feel obliged to make clear the critical nature of the issue involved--a fundamental violation of workers' democracy--and to communicate, with regard to this issue, our firm solidarity with the two groups excluded.

The statement of position that follows is neither an exhaustive explanation of our action nor a complete defense of the fundamental principle involved. It is merely an indication of some of the compelling reasons for our withdrawal and some of the criticisms which we hope will eventually lead the Motor City Labor League--and CCC--to reverse its present anti-Leninist course on this question. We will be happy to clarify our views in future conversations with MCLL and Alliance members and sympathizers.

First, what is not involved is the principled right of any socialist organization to hold private, closed, or "invitation-only" educationals, meetings, or gatherings of any kind. Nor is there any

question that it may be principled and appropriate at such meetings that only members and sympathizers of a given organization be permitted to speak extensively and that attendance and participation generally or questions and criticisms in particular be restricted in any fashion consistent with the stated objectives of the meetings. Quite obviously, no socialist organization can conduct business, accomplish internal education, and maintain security without a wide variety of such closed, private, or "invitation-only" meetings.

Second, what is involved is not, therefore, any question of the exclusion from closed meetings of any uninvited organizations or persons. It is quite obviously indefensible for uninvited persons or organizations to attend or attempt to intervene in such meetings, as long as it is unambiguously clear that such meetings are closed and non-public in nature.

Third, what is involved is not any question concerning meetings widely and publically advertised but unambiguously declared open only to persons subscribing to a particular tendency or a particular set of views.

Fourth, what is involved is not the principled right of any socialist organization sponsoring a public and open forum of any kind to guarantee that its politics will be put forward without intimidation or disruption from any group or person. It is, quite obviously, entirely proper that a socialist organization sponsoring a forum arrange that forum to focus on its politics. It is also obvious that any socialist organization with politics to put forward will do exactly this. It is equally obvious that any socialist organization has the principled right and duty to protect itself against gangsterism or simple disruption.

Finally, what is involved is obviously not the principled right of a socialist organization to exclude even from an open and public forum fascist or other reactionary elements, known agents of the police or employers, or any other threat to the security of socialists and militants in attendance. This is purely a matter of feasibility, expediency, and tactics.

What is involved is the exclusion by CCC, a long-standing, public and open forum of the left, of elements of the left which have in no way violated the established procedures of CCC meetings, in no way sought to disrupt these meetings, and in no way prevented the full communication of the politics of MCLL, the Alliance, or any other group invited to speak by MCLL or the Alliance. This exclusion is clearly unwarranted and unprincipled.

The principle violated is a fundamental principle of workers' democracy.

Unlike bourgeois educational institutions, bourgeois media of information, and bourgeois political organizations, socialist organizations seek to take the truth--the truths of Marxist science--to the

working class. It is understood by all scientific socialists that social truths can be discovered, understood, grasped, and communicated in all their essential relations only through the employment of materialist, scientific procedures of investigation and dialectical procedures of perception, interpretation, and debate. Fully to understand a thing dialectically is to understand it in all its relations. Fully to understand a question dialectically is to understand it from all its sides.

While the bourgeoisie "teach" workers by putting forward a set of mystifying dogmas, dressed up as the common sense of the age, and attempt to discourage or suppress, subtly or blatantly, critical and questioning tendencies; Marxists understand that workers can only gain an understanding of the fundamental social truths of our age by developing and expanding those tendencies to examine, question, and criticize. Only through such a process can workers themselves move through and beyond the spontaneous class struggle to the sort of scientific analysis of class society that conscious, revolutionary intellectuals can bring to the class struggle.

Since both the fundamental character of the Marxist science of history and the objective requirements of the development of revolutionary consciousness require a process of many-sided examination, questioning, and criticism--and, in a word, of disciplined conflict--it is natural for Marxists to regard any serious process of learning and teaching as itself inevitably a process of disciplined conflict.

Given the existence of vital disagreements among Marxist groups themselves, it is also natural that Marxists handle such disagreements by insisting on the same sort of dialectical process of disciplined conflict and debate. And it is natural that Marxists insist that no process of Marxist education is complete that does not have at its core a process of disciplined conflict and debate, involving not only the current disputes of the left, but the great debates of the entire history of the revolutionary movement against capitalism.

It is customary, therefore,--and absolutely correct--for Marxist groups to assert that the most advantageous circumstances for putting their views before the public are precisely circumstances involving disciplined conflict with other groups and tendencies. In recent months especially, MCLL has repeatedly asserted this principle, albeit in somewhat different language. At a recent CCC session, a leading member of the CC of MCLL was quite correctly praised for using the formal presentations of members of different tendencies as a means for making important political points from MCLL's perspective and accomplishing the general goals of socialist education.

Clearly the idea is not that debate and disagreement go on forever, but rather that whatever unity and certainty are objectively possible can only be achieved through a process which takes into account the necessity of initial disunity and uncertainty on many fundamental

political questions, on the part of revolutionaries seeking scientific, Marxist answers to those questions. And it is recognized that any valid learning process to some degree must recapitulate conflicts and uncertainties already worked through by those who have to some degree completed such a process concerning a given question.

All this requires that the public forums of Marxist groups directed at least to some extent at persons still in a process of learning Marxism--and, above all, public forums directed to some extent toward workers going through such a learning process--must provide opportunities for wide-ranging, disciplined conflict and debate. Genuine Marxist science can be learned in no other way.

Further, and of tremendous importance, it must be recognized as the absolute principled right of the working class to see the various tendencies on the left involved in such a process of disciplined conflict and debate. It is clear that the various tendencies struggling for leadership of the working class can, under "normal" circumstances, demonstrate their revolutionary worthiness only in daily practical work, on the one hand, and open debate with other tendencies, on the other hand. Under "normal" circumstances, only the latter can provide workers with a clear-cut impression of the real, long-term, fundamental differences among groups, which often behave rather similarly in day-to-day practical work.

In particular, at a time of considerable fragmentation and rampant sectarianism on the left, this fundamental right of workers is all the more critical--and all the more difficult to realize. Indeed, there are very real limits on the extent to which it can be realized--but that fact can never justify any positive attempt by any left group to undermine or sabotage that right.

Any group worthy of the support and trust of the working class must eventually seek to further that principled right by seeking opportunities to defend its views against other groups, not only in its own press but in assemblies open to all members of the working-class movement. Of course, groups still involved in a process of learning and studying vital questions are justified in temporarily avoiding polemics on these questions, as long as they are unfailingly honest about what they are doing.

The arbitrary exclusion of any socialist groups or tendencies from a public and open socialist forum is, therefore, not merely a violation of an abstract socialist democracy, of the rights of socialist groups to speak and publish their views and address themselves to one another. It is an elementary violation of concrete workers' democracy, of the principled right and necessity for all perspectives on the left to be heard within the workers' movement and the principled right and necessity for workers to hear and judge the worth of those various tendencies as they struggle openly and critically with one another.

Any such policy of exclusion inevitably tends to reduce Marxist science to vulgar empiricism, Marxist education to a process of dogmatics, and workers' democracy to a parliamentary sham. It truncates and eviscerates living Marxism and forces it into a close resemblance to the bourgeois ideology against which we claim workers must rebel. It must be opposed and exposed.*

Consistent with these general principles and partially to compensate for the incompleteness of the above exposition, we conclude with the following specific points:

1) Control, Conflict, and Change has performed a very valuable function for the left in Detroit for several years precisely because it has allowed open discussion. Particularly at this point in the development of the American left, the existence of forums at which all socialist views can be freely expressed is of tremendous importance. It is essential both for the healthy development of the American left and for the American working class, that such forums continue wherever they already exist.

2) In the past, CCC's commitment to open discussion has been, undeniably, partially a "commitment of omission rather than position," that is, partially a consequence of a certain lack of clarity and forcefulness in the putting forward of a political position of its own. Yet that commitment has been real--as is made particularly clear by contrast with the practice of From the Ground Up. At FTGU sessions, questions and comments from the floor are carefully controlled by being accepted only in writing (although even this is preferable to the wholesale exclusion of particular socialist groups).

By and large CCC has consistently encouraged members of the audience to rise and raise their own questions and comments for the response of the designated speaker(s), and facilitated this policy with an "open" microphone. The genuineness of CCC's commitment to open discussion has also been evidenced by the generally courteous treatment of occasional, if infrequent, critical questions or comments.

Our point is that there is no reason why the policy of permitting open discussion cannot be combined with the most forceful and clear-cut presentation of CCC's, MCLL's, or the Alliance's own politics.

* It should be clear that there is not a drop of "ultra-democratism" in any of this. Within a combat party open debate and criticism are fully disciplined by democratic centralism and the process of principled splits and fusions; the same applies to pre-party organizations operating under democratic centralism. And, of course, circumstances "beyond the control" of revolutionaries can alter drama-

On the contrary, there is every reason to do exactly that--and even act to strengthen the role of open discussion rather than diminish it.

3) In actual practice, at CCC sessions MCLL and the Alliance have the overwhelming advantage of having a very large majority--often nearly all--of the audience on their side of any question. In terms of the cadre of MCLL alone, they outnumber the intervening cadre of any oppositionist group that has ever appeared at a CCC meeting by at least four to one.

4) The two sponsoring organizations also set the agenda and rules for all meetings and can easily control both the chair and all microphones. There is not even a formal right to appeal any decision of the chair to the "audience-membership" of CCC--which would, in any event, almost invariably uphold any appealed decision. We are not arguing that such a degree of control is inappropriate, but merely pointing to its obvious existence.

5) It is perfectly simple to prevent any open question-and-answer period from getting out of hand by adopting and rigidly enforcing clearly enunciated rules and regulations. Five- or three-minute time limits on each question or comment; the prohibition of the repetition of any question or comment; limiting to two or three the number of speakers from any single organization; etc.--any of these or any number of other easily imaginable rules of procedure, rigidly enforced, can prevent any intervention from becoming disruptive and protect both CCC's ability to put forward its politics and the principle of open discussion on the left. Any such procedures are infinitely preferable to the outright exclusion of selected groups from attendance and participation in supposedly open meetings.

6) With all these advantages and alternatives available, it is difficult to understand how any organization worthy of respect would be incapable of dealing with a handful of hostile questions from members of an intervening group, however "un-nice" and however well organized. It is even more difficult to imagine how an organization so incapable will ever survive the free-swinging polemics of union meetings and other workers' assemblies.

7) The American left as a whole is notoriously underdeveloped theoretically. In this period, when so much theoretical work has to be done, especially in order to understand and defeat all forms of revisionism, centrism, and reformism, it is a particularly serious mistake for MCLL to cut itself off from all contact with and criticism from any other left group, however much MCLL may dislike them. As we have already indicated, the full theoretical

tically the extent to which open debate and workers' democracy are possible. None of this affects the obligation of revolutionaries to do what they can do when they can do it.

growth of the American left can only occur in an atmosphere of open, disciplined conflict among all current Marxist revolutionary tendencies and through a fully dialectical study of the weaknesses and strengths of all past trends in the revolutionary movement.

8) The unprincipled and completely unnecessary exclusion of these two groups inevitably produces the impression that the only real problem is the inability of MCLL and Alliance leaders and rank and file to deal with the political criticisms raised by both groups.

9) Although members of MCLL and the Alliance may be reluctant to admit it, cadre from both of the excluded groups have performed genuine services to the membership of CCC in the past.

A year ago, at the CCC meeting held 1 May 1973, Staughton Lynd delivered a lecture on "workers' struggles" in the course of which both Marx and Leninist organizational principles were, in effect, slandered. Only a comrade from the Spartacist League rose to attempt any fundamental defense of Leninism at all, defying what can only be described as an atmosphere so subjectively friendly towards Lynd as to intimidate any serious would-be critic.

Similarly, at the April 1974 CCC session, a comrade from the Revolutionary Socialist League at our discussion table insisted on criticizing both the "economic" presentations for confining themselves to precisely the sort of "business-cycle" analysis that Keynesian economics long ago absorbed, with appropriate bourgeoisification, from Marxism. He insisted on presenting the fundamental Marxist argument for the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. In the course of discussion it became clear that both presentations had failed to communicate the whole basis of Marxist economics: the labor theory of value, as criticized and developed scientifically by Marx in the four volumes of Capital.

In both instances, one could raise quibbles about manner of presentation, exact precision of language, etc. But what is important is that both interventions advanced the cause of Marxist theory at CCC sessions in a way Alliance and MCLL members were not yet themselves prepared to accomplish.

10) We reject any notion that the interventions of SL and RSL in the April 1974 CCC session constituted even so much as a disruption. Their interventions may have been somewhat well organized and "un-nice," but such qualities are hardly crimes for revolutionaries. Anyone casually familiar with the debating style of the Bolsheviks can only be appalled by the Christian objections voiced by some presumed Marxist-Leninists to the appearance of harsh polemics at a CCC church picnic. MCLL may have been ill-prepared for their intervention, but that is hardly the fault of the two groups.

11) The unwarranted physical exclusion of members of other socialist groups unavoidably raises the spectre of gangsterism

masquerading as politics. We support unequivocally the principled right of the members of any socialist tendency to defend themselves against unprovoked physical attack from other left groups, using whatever means are necessary, excluding resort to assistance from agents of the class enemy.

12) The unwarranted exclusion of left tendencies by a body such as CCC has an obvious intimidating effect on all those who remain. This will tend to be true not only for critical and neutral persons and groups but for MCLL and Alliance members also. This will tend to be true regardless of any formal procedures observed in the meetings. The theoretical struggle that MCLL and the Alliance claim they want cannot take place in such an atmosphere.

13) If MCLL and/or the Alliance are determined to transform CCC into a closed vehicle for the communication of its own politics in semi-isolation, permitting only their own members, close sympathizers, novices to the movement, occasional "neutrals," and a few "nice" critics to speak--if CCC is to become this sort of organization, then MCLL and the Alliance should be honest about what they are doing. They should, both in all literature regarding CCC, in all future announcements opening CCC meetings, and in private conversations inviting workers to attend, make clear the closed or semi-closed nature of these meetings. We doubt that many workers will be impressed by this kind of practice, as we doubt many workers are likely to be impressed by supposedly open meetings that are in reality closed.

14) Finally, the "charge" that the members of SL and RSL are "agents of the bourgeoisie" (or, even more scientifically, "cops") deserves no response. This "charge" is, of course, made without a shred of evidence or a scrap of rational argument and is easily overwhelmed by even a superficial knowledge of the history of both organizations. If what is meant is that all "Trotskyists" are "agents of the bourgeoisie," one wonders why the avowedly Trotskyist organizations from which these two groups emerged, the SWP and IS, are not also excluded. Or did SL magically turn into "agents of the bourgeoisie" the day they were expelled from the SWP more than a decade ago--while presumably RSL magically turned into "agents of the bourgeoisie" the day they left IS, less than a year ago? Of course, we reject the nonsense that all "Trotskyists" are agents of the bourgeoisie--but the inconsistencies in MCLL's own stated position are too glaring to ignore. Of course, any left tendency can become infiltrated by provocateurs--but one has to have some evidence of this stronger than one's own inability to handle a tendency's polemics.

All this sort of argument is a sorry stooping to the level of the revisionist CP-USA's long-standing method for handling anything that smacks of left criticism--not to mention the crackpot NCLC's current practice of labeling everything in sight a CIA conspiracy. It is the substitution of the demagogic inculcation of paranoia for the serious handling of serious opposition.

15) Needless to say, we have no organizational ties with either group and have serious differences with both of them. Nevertheless, we feel it is of fundamental importance to defend both groups with regard to the issue of exclusion.

For all these reasons--and more--we hope MCLL and the Alliance will sharply rethink this easily reversible policy decision. We would like nothing better than to rejoin our friends and comrades in future CCC meetings.

This letter is intended to be a comradely explanation of the political errors MCLL and the Alliance are making in excluding any socialist group from CCC meetings. In keeping with this intention, we will ourselves restrict circulation of copies of this letter to a relatively small number of persons, including friends and comrades who have attended CCC meetings in the past. We have no objection to internal circulation of this letter within MCLL or among members of the Alliance. However, since we regard this statement as an initial stage of criticism and not a public denunciation, it is only appropriate that it not be published and that it be circulated by MCLL only among its own membership and members of the Alliance. We are, of course, interested in any response from MCLL or the Alliance and are entirely prepared to defend our positions and actions in any arena.

Finally, we will, of course, continue to work in a completely comradely and non-sectarian fashion with any and all members and sympathizers of MCLL and the Alliance with whom we are involved in practical work.

In comradely struggle,

Peter Solenberger

Peter Solenberger

Leland Sanderson

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