

June 20, 1973

Dear Comrades,

This is the first of what we hope will be a regularly published newsletter of our tendency, now named the Labor Action Tendency. The purpose of the newsletter is to maintain communications among our members and supporters around the country, and also to circulate discussion documents and keep people informed of the debates going on in the organization. The newsletter will be published in New York because our members in Detroit are so busy, but we don't want it to become simply a report on New York and its phone conversations with Detroit, so please write, send reports, etc.

It's becoming obvious all over the country that the factional situation is escalating rapidly. As you probably have all heard by now, the RT conference last weekend in Chicago was apparently attended by non-ISers, though closed to all of us, and the RT is functioning more and more like a shadow organization within the IS. By the time you receive this, things will probably have gotten a lot worse. If, as it now appears, a split is unavoidable, our job is to make sure that as few people as possible are lost, and that IS comes out of it as an organization that knows where it is going and is much more serious about developing itself as a cadre organization with a real understanding of its politics. We hope the convention will begin to grapple with these problems.

We are in the process of writing several convention documents: Tasks and Perspectives including labor (Brian M. and others in New York), Black Liberation (Dave F.), Thid Camp (Dave with Joel G. as a joint tendency documents). It won't be possible for the documents to be circulated throughout the tendency before they are published because they have to be submitted to the NAC by June 30, but we will organize a discussion of them after that and if necessary amend them at the convention. We and the TC agreed to drop women's liberation(theoretical discussion) from this convention since it was discussed at the last two NCs, so this will be taken up at the first NC after the convention.

We have also, as you all should know, sent out a draft tendency statement and would appreciate hearing opinions on it. One criticism that we have heard is that it does not spell out the basis of the tendency clearly enough. When we reissue it we plan to spell out in a few sentences what we consider the basic themes of last year's convention documents to be, rather than simply listing them and saying we stand on them. One charge RTers have made against the document that is a factional distortion is that we are not planning to run for national leadership ourselves; comrades who have seen the document will remember that we stated that we plan to do so but if (as we expect) we do not win, then we will support the TC, i.e., give them a majority on the NC and NAC. If this sibject comes up with RTers, you might ask them what they plan to do if the TC does get a majority or large plurality--their answers are very evasive.

We have also elected a tendency steering committee, consisting of Dave F and Bill H in Detroit and Brian, Rose, Ilene, Sandy B and Steve B in New York (NY's NC and exec members). Ilere is the conve-nor and in charge of putting out the newsletter, so questions and reports should be addressed to her.

This issue will deal mainly with national (NAC) questions and New York developments; next issue will include a summary or excerpts from a debate Sy held with Judith S of the Leninist Tendency (we have a tape sent to us from the West Coast but haven't had time to go over it yet). Also included this issue is a discussion document by Brian M. on transitional program. This document will be publicly distributed, but is being sent to tendency members and friends now so you can get it quickly.

There have been two debates on the NAC recently in which documents by Bill H. and the RT have been sharply counterposed, and we are beginning to see the confusions and contradictions in the RT line on labor even more clearly than in Ron's auto document.

First, in the debate on wildcat strikes, the RT took the extremely conservative line of saying that we should tell militants in industry to cool it--thus ignoring the fact that wildcats in a precontract period are an important test of union-company strength, and the importance of protecting militants and leaders who are fired or harrassed. Bill H's document goes into this in more detail, and a document by Brian M. should be out soon on this question. (Individual RTers, however, haven't all internalized this line. One exec member in NY feels that we could have prevented the defeat of a wildcat in a New Jersey auto plant this week by ourselves manning the lines when the workers were unwilling to. Twenty students and one worker, he said, could have shut down the plant...)

In the second debate, on the NMU, the RT took the position of critical support to the Spartacist-supported candidate on two grounds: (1) his program was "formally correct" even though the caucus was too sectarian to fight for it and (2) in order to expose the Spartacists for being centrist! Bill's position was that we should urge the SI-backed caucus (MSC) to abandon their campaign and support Morrissey, a longtime oppositionist with a rather inadequate reform program. Morrissey's victory, Bill argued, would open up the union for struggle by the ranks, while the victory of Curran's candidate would perpetuate the decline and destruction of the NMU. In such a contest, he said, a socialist educational campaign was a mistake, and he called for extremely critical support of Morrissey. Bill also pointed out that the MSC's program in fact has little connection to the struggle now being waged by the ranks and is in many cases wrong.

These documents have just been sent out to NC members; comrades should look at them as soon as possible to see the RT methodology at work. The question is similar to the MFD debate: we are saying that a decision to give critical support in a union election is based on our assessment that the person's victory will open up possibilities for struggle by the ranks, even if the candidate himself is likely not to lead such struggles once in office, and that the opposition candidate/group is raising certain important issues that can move the ranks forward if they wage a struggle for them. In the NMU, CWA and MFD, the issue was also that the survival of the union as a vehicle for struggle may depend on defeating the candidate of the entrenched bureaucracy. The RT, on the other hand, sees critical support simply as a maneuver by which we expose someone to their base.

This dispute in turn reflects a larger disagreement--whether our task in the unions, as we say, is to organize the militants and raise the level of struggle by trying to build a rank and file opposition movement that will be broader than ourselves, or whether it is the RT's sectarian approach of counterposing an abstract "revolutionary" leadership to existing struggles.

In Detroit, the RT has written a branch perspective that again misses the mark. Their perspective may well be an indication of what we will see in their convention documents" its basic approach is that since the IS is a propaganda group, our task is to propagandize around a list of demands. They have nothing to say on any of the specific work of comrades in auto or on the strategy we should put forward in our industrial work this year, or on any of the other specific work of the branch.

The five comrades who are actual members of our tendency in Detroit, plus a larger group who sympathize with us but either have not made up their minds or have varying levels of disagreement with us, have been meeting with the TC to see where we agree and disagree with them on branch perspectives. We have, as people probably know, been very critical of the way the TC has organized the Detroit branch into circles around specific factories, of the branch's failure to develop ongoing fractions in auto and other areas, and of the lack of preparation and leadership at the recent UNC conference. It is likely that the branch perspectives discussion will be postponed for a while until the factional questions are settled.

Now for New York: There are about 20 members of our tendency here. We have been meeting together regularly since the NC, and met once before that as a temporary grouping around a recent exec election here. We are now meeting weekly to hold classes, discuss upcoming branch discussions, or documents, etc. There have been classes so far on Bureaucratic Collectivism (what Shachtman really said) and Party and Class. Unfortunately, the will of the people is in this case much greater than our grasp of the man's technology, so we didn't succeed in getting them taped very well, but we will try harder next time. A third class is planned on Transitional Program.

The rest of the branch lines up as follows: about 12 RTers, plus a small number of sympathizers; 8 orthodox trotskyists who spend most of their time squabbling among themselves--they were in one caucus but have already had a split; and a group around Steve Z and Carl F who are very critical of the RT, fairly close to us politically but very unhappy about the bloc with TC because of their disagreements with TC. They have put out a document that calls for suspending discipline in order to prevent a split; our response to it informally has been that while we do not want a split, we don't feel anything will be solved by having two organizations coexisting under the same name, and that our task at this point is to resolve the factional disagreements, not perpetuate them. We feel that the convention must settle these questions, and that comrades must be willing to carry out the line of the organization; any other course will destroy the IS. There are no TCers in New York, so our debates are thus very different from elsewhere.

We feel we've been most successful debating the RT on labor questions, least able to deal with the discussions that never get

off the totally abstract. This is true elsewhere, too, as far as we can tell: the RT has little to say beyond abstract generalities about leadership and program, but they cannot be combatted successfully by refuting their abstractions with others.

We have had two discussions here on AFT work since the NC and are now in the midst of another. We first discussed the problems our comrades are having as the leadership of a fairly small state local; here, the RT was really unable to make any serious criticisms of their work beyond what the comrades involved were already critical of in their own work.

In the second discussion, on UFT, with a presentation by Jack G., only two RTers spoke in his defense, and they all did so poorly that Jack ended up accusing the branch of setting him up to look foolish. Jack said in his presentation that he thought our orientation should be more toward the subjectively revolutionary Maoists he is working with in a caucus, and had little to say about how he thought this caucus should try to win the broader layer of Shanker supporters away from him. In an exec discussion preparing for the branch meeting, Jack presented the problem of para-professionals being in danger of losing their jobs in September but gave no concrete strategy for us to propose to fight it; he finally said there was not much we could do. (Now that may actually turn out to be the case, but that does not justify an approach that puts forward only slogans like 'a coalition to fight for national funding of the schools.')

At the branch meeting, Judy L., an RTer, said something very much like "some people here are talking as if we have one program to form union caucuses on and another to recruit people to the IS. Well that's wrong--our program is the same for both, the transitional program" No RTer disagreed with her, and Jack also said at the end of the meeting after we questioned him that the program he was for raising in the AFT was the 1938 draft as amended by Ron. The exec is now dealing with his proposal to do just that.

In general, the RT labor perspectives seem to be amounting to a combination of very revolutionary rhetoric and extremely cautious or even abstentionist functioning.

We are also at the beginning of a debate with the RT over their handling of prisoner work and the prisoner conference the NY branch held recently. Until recently, RTers were in charge of this work, although they have asked for additional people and now others have been assigned to it. The conference was poorly planned, poorly attended, and very unfocused. Most of the speakers were either liberals or otherwise anti-socialist, and while they might have been ok in a firmly defined context, the RTers didn't provide one. ISers in general were very badly prepared for speaking from the floor, since we have no real line on prisoner work. We attempted to get such discussions held before the conference but weren't successful, partly because we didn't want to appear overly factionally critical. What is interesting about this is that the RT denies that the conference problems resulted from not having a clear line; for them, socialism is enough of a line, and they attribute the conference's failure to organizational mistakes. One result of this was that they had much more difficulty than in the past in dealing with Spartacists; their response to SL criticism was generally "I said that, you weren't listening."

The only contact the branch has had with TCers was a visit by Joel and Kay and a presentation by Joel on transitional program at a branch meeting. We felt that on one level Joel had moved quite far from his previous position that the TP is only useful in an immediately (pre)revolutionary period and that the 1938 draft is the program we would have in such a period. He spoke about the method of the 1938 draft being the key--the point we have been making--but then dropped this approach when he got to actually talking about the IS and program today. Today, he said, we derive our program out of the immediate shop-floor struggle--an approach that we criticized as reactive, pragmatic and narrow. As Brian argues in the accompanying document, transitional demands are always part of our program--as is socialism itself. Our program does not depend on the period we are in, although what we emphasize, raise agitationaly, etc. does of course change according to the period. And we always retain what is basic to Trotsky's conception of transitional demands: we put forward what we believe is objectively necessary for the workers, not what capitalism can grant or what simply reflects workers' current consciousness, although we tailor our demands so they make sense in today's context. Joel says he agrees with much of this--we think he has to clarify his attitude further.

A branch discussion on our functioning in CWA is scheduled for this week, which all sides are eagerly looking forward to. We feel it will again enable us to expose the RT's absurd line for labor work, while they are anxiously anticipating the chance to accuse us of being reformists. We will report on that discussion in the next newsletter, since it will be one of the major issues between us and the RT between now and the convention, and since much of our labor perspectives are derived from the understanding we gained testing our earlier line in telephone.

Please send in reports, criticisms, discussion documents, comments on the newsletter, etc. We will try to publish regularly every two weeks, for now. Please send letters etc to Ilene Winkler, 201 Eastern Pkwy, Apt 1K, Brooklyn NY 11238.

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