

Los Angeles, Calif.  
Dec. 14, 1965

Dear Rosemary and Doug:

The labors of packing and moving from the old shack and getting things in reasonable order in the new place are now completed. This makes it possible to return to political questions.

There can be no doubt whatever that the party policy in the anti-war movement is opportunistic. The statement by Ed Shaw that "We don't take positions violating existing laws" is, as you say, very much akin to the reaction of panic manifested by Dobbs in the demand for an orderly process in settling political differences in our society at the time of the Kennedy assassination. The Shaw statement had direct reference to the question of draft resistance which, however, is only one aspect of the far broader range of false party attitude and policy in the anti-war movement. On this broader range of problems I want to make some comments.

In the anti-war movement -- or more precisely, within its more dynamic sector, made up primarily of the young radicals -- two questions have been the subject of intense debate.

These are:

1. A national membership organization versus a loosely structured federation of anti-war groups headed by the National Coordinating Committee. (The latter form has been the expression of organization up to now.)
2. A single issue movement or a multiple issue movement.

The party and the YSA promoted at the Washington conference the launching of a national membership organization. Whether or not this proposal has special merits is now quite immaterial. It was not accepted. But surely, the action taken by the party and YSA, anticipating defeat of their proposal, to set up a permanent "Caucus to Constitute a National Organization of Local Independent Anti-War Committees" with its own national steering committee and national publication, independent of the general movement, was a grave mistake. This action was taken in defiance of the great majority opinion at the Washington conference. Such criminal recklessness can only have the most seriously damaging consequences to the party, to the YSA and to the movement as a whole. It may lead to separating ourselves completely from the movement. In Washington this was denounced as a splitting action and, unfortunately, with good grounds for the charge.

On the second hotly debated question the party and the YSA insisted on a single issue movement, i.e., confined to the single issue: "Withdraw the U.S. troops from Vietnam."

Most other tendencies among the dynamic sector of the movement favor to one extent or another a multi-issue movement. For example, in addition to withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, taking up such problems as fight against other aspects of American foreign policy; resisting the draft and organizing against it; make common cause with the Negro Freedom Now movement; active struggle against other evils of the capitalist system.

Articles in the Militant, by Halstead, have argued persuasively the merits of the single issue movement; this permits far broader participation it is contended. This may be so, but debating the point would be rather futile. Far more important is the question: what is the party objective in this movement? what is the reason for participating in it? should not the party first of all provide a leverage for revolutionary thought and action?

But the exclusive emphasis on the single issue in order to attain the broadest possible movement including Republicans and Democrats, as it is said, can only contribute to illusions that the Vietnam war can be stopped by protests and demonstrations, important though as these are. When Farrell visited Los Angeles he disclaimed any intention to create such illusions, but this is precisely what the party policy does. Moreover, it puts us in opposition to most of the young radicals in this movement and too uncomfortably close to the more conservative elements, as you have remarked.

The insistence upon a single issue movement imposes self-limitations on party functions; it does, in fact, restrict its function as a revolutionary party. The issues we proscribe we cannot raise for consideration or make a part of our propaganda in the movement. This can be easily demonstrated by a few concrete examples.

Consider the question of draft resistance. Shaw's disavowal in terms of not violating existing laws is not only condemnable but it prevents the party from assuming a revolutionary position. The Washington conference showed better understanding of this question as set forth in its opposition to "Americans serving in the armed forces in Vietnam." But since at this juncture the various forms of draft resistance are primarily a matter of individual action, the conference decided that "any program relating to the draft had to be subordinated to the anti-war effort as a whole, and had to play a subordinate role."

The Washington conference also rejected the concept of government sponsored alternative services declaring that these hold dangers of becoming part of the machinery that carries on the Vietnam war. The conference favored the idea of anti-draft unions in schools but urged that they be broadened to make contact with young men off campuses.

Considering interimperialist wars of the past, we have held the position of not resisting service in the armed forces but rather to prove ourselves good soldiers alongside of our buddies as a means to prepare the basis for a more favorable reception to our ideas. Vietnam, however, presents an entirely different situation. There American imperialism is engaged in a counter-revolutionary action; it is attempting to crush the Vietnam revolution and establish a military basis from which to move against the Chinese revolution. Under no conditions can the party hold to the view that members should be good soldiers of the counter-revolutionary forces; nor could it advocate military training under trade union control. Quite the contrary, it must support the draft resistance. That is what a revolutionary policy demands.

Bearing in mind the counter-revolutionary character of the American imperialist Vietnam intervention there can be no question that the party policy must be based on revolutionary defeatism. The party should favor the victory of the National Liberation Front recognizing that its struggle is just. It aims to complete in South Vietnam the revolution that began some time ago in the North.

But the Militant insists (Halstead article) that the anti-war movement does not have to adopt a position on the NLF. With this the party serves notice it will not raise the question and it will oppose such a proposal coming from other tendencies in the movement. What is this but a negation of a revolutionary policy? Maintaining this attitude can only vitiate and pervert the role the party should play in this movement; the consequences to the party will be serious disorientation. Conversely, only by pursuing a revolutionary policy can the party attract revolutionary minded recruits.

The insistence on a single issue movement with the single demand: "Withdraw the U.S. Forces from Vietnam," prevents any real party differentiation from the miscellaneous conservative, liberal elements in this movement who in one way or another advocate the same issue. For the majority party leaders the single issue strategy serves as rationalization for an opportunist policy. It appears to be inspired by a desire for respectability; but this also has its own objective logic. The result will be party attraction to recruits in search of a radical political home that is respectable.

Nevertheless, one cardinal principle the party must observe, if it is to remain a revolutionary force, is to gear its policy and its propaganda efforts in situations like the anti-war movement to the revolutionary objectives on which the party was founded. Of necessity this means to utilize every opportunity available to promote the struggle against the whole capitalist system as the only really effective way to oppose the Vietnam war. The more revolutionary ideas become expressed within the anti-war movement, the greater the impact of its opposition to the American imperialist counter-revolutionary designs.

Bearing this in mind, we should be aware of the fact I have mentioned elsewhere, namely that the external and internal contradictions of American imperialism are coming to a head simultaneously. This is epitomized in the dialectical interconnections between the effects of the colonial revolution, Washington's counter-revolutionary role, the civil rights struggle on home grounds and the anti-war movement. The civil rights struggle, while drawing inspiration from the colonial revolution, has ignited sparks in the anti-war movement and infused the latter with some of its militantly fighting methods. The system of counter-revolution that created the war in Vietnam, the invasions of Santa Domingo, etc., is the same that commits murder and oppression of the Negro people. Whether we focus attention on Vietnam, Santa Domingo, Watts, Harlem or Selma, Alabama, these various areas form but different phases of one single struggle extending throughout the world.

"You can't divide the peace movement and the freedom movement." So said the Mississippi delegation at the Washington conference. And surely, joining both issues in one united struggle would lend vastly greater impact to the anti-war movement. At any rate, this basic idea, which is contained in a proposal made by Comrade Fraser, should be adopted as a policy objective by the party.

The issues arising out of the Vietnam war are cutting deeply into the political fabric, not only of this country but elsewhere. They will cut still deeper as the war continues. In fact, what happens further in Vietnam may very well prove a historical turning point. There we have a people's war which American imperialism cannot win. The more this becomes clear to the world, the more definitely the present ebb-tide of the colonial revolution which has now recorded set-backs in the Congo, in Brazil, Algeria, the Dominican Republic and Indonesia, will again experience an upward curve. More clearly also the world will recognize the chief protagonists in all major international class conflicts -- American imperialism supporting reaction and revolutionary China supporting socialist progress.

For the party, a fundamental change of policy becomes so much more imperative; not only a change of policy in the anti-war movement but more particularly a change of attitude to the leadership of Vietnam and China. If the party fails to learn by persuasion it may face corrections the hard way: it will suffer the blows produced by the experience of applying its false policy in the living movement.

The condemnation expressed by the great majority at Washington, coupled with its characterizing the caucus set-up by the party and YSA as a splitting action, is regarded here in Los Angeles as a serious blow. Most leading members in the local organization view the action as a grave mistake. At the branch meeting hearing the report from Washington, Jim Cannon came to listen; this is something that has not happened in a good many years. He said he wanted to hear the report, which he, no doubt, had already heard in private. Had Jim felt confident of the party policy standing up on its own merits he would not bother coming to the meeting. The reality is, he wanted to hear what we had to say, and he got our views. I had the chance to speak at some length and analyse the whole question along the lines of this letter. Arguments supporting the action were feeble indeed. Discussion is to continue at the next meeting and maybe Jim will return to have his say.

There will be more such blows coming from the living movement which may shake the party more deeply. The false policy now pursued makes this inevitable. What the result will be still remains to be seen, but there will be opportunities for us to explain. Above all, this raises again the question of the party position on the leaderships in Vietnam and China -- its attempts to present these as sell-out artists. This, in reality, lays at the foundation of the wrong course now pursued in the anti-war movement.

Comradely yours,

P.S. The article in Monthly Review, by Luis de la Puente, on the revolutionary movement in Peru, is not the last word, nor does it give a complete picture of Trotskyist views and actions in Latin America. A more complete picture will have contradictory aspects. It will contain examples of correct Trotskyist orientation toward the problems imposed by conditions of guerrilla warfare and correct orientation toward the process of revolutionary regroupment arising out of the Sino-Soviet ideological dispute. There are examples also of the opposite. These contradictory aspects, due mainly to the failure of assimilating the important lessons of our epoch, are to be found most everywhere in the Trotskyist movement. But this we can discuss more fully at some other occasion.

Copy to members of the tendency