

REPORT ON MEMBERSHIP POLICY GIVEN TO THE POLITICAL  
COMMITTEE OF THE SWP BY JACK BARNES, FRIDAY,  
NOVEMBER 13, 1970

Since the early 1960s the party and YSA have been moving toward a policy which proscribes homosexuals from membership. This was mentioned in the organizational report to the February 1970 SWP plenum. The evolution of this policy was summarized as part of the organizational report which was adopted by the August 1970 YSA plenum. This report was printed in the September 2, 1970, Young Socialist Organizer.

The main purpose of this policy was the protection of the party now and in the future from the effects of legal or extra-legal victimization and blackmail of homosexual members.

The Administrative Committee believes that this policy is wrong. It doesn't accomplish its purpose and it breeds problems and misinterpretations both internally and publicly. In so doing it shifts attention from the central question in all membership policies and decisions -- the security of the party, its growth by recruitment from the mass movement, its capacity for disciplined activity in all periods, and its political homogeneity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Most homosexual organizations have described the problems and oppression that homosexuals face in capitalist society. These problems range from the threat of physical attacks to the invocation of archaic and reactionary legal codes concerning sexual behavior, to occupational exclusion, the threat of blackmail, housing problems, and various forms of psychological oppression and social pressure. All of these are very real problems that homosexuals face to one degree or another, and which can lead to conflicts with the cops, blackmail, and susceptibility to pressures of all kinds.

Another thing which the homosexual organizations point out is that because of the depth and intensity of social pressure and prejudice, the psychological pressure on homosexuals is such that a homosexual usually goes through personal, sexual crises in which she or he becomes obsessed -- to the detriment of other aspects of her or his life -- with the problem of finding any fulfilling sex life under these conditions and in this society.

In the past experience of the party, this aspect of the life of a homosexual has led to membership problems. That is, some homosexual comrades reached the stage in a personal crisis, in which being a member of our kind of political organization and being able to throw herself or himself into the work of the party became difficult or impossible. Under these conditions they often tried one way or another, directly or indirectly, to change the

character of the party into some form of therapeutic organization which would help solve the personal problems of the individual homosexual. We've had several experiences like this. What happened under these circumstances in the past was that a leading comrade in the area had discussions with the homosexual comrade facing such difficulties. No one can remember a single instance where there was ultimately any problem in such a person understanding through discussion that the best course would be to become a sympathizer or move away from the party. Quite often instances of this sort involved people moving away from organized revolutionary political life. Such a person can't handle his or her personal development to the degree that she or he can be enough of a stable, disciplined party member whose basic fulfillment comes from political activity as a disciplined member of a combat party. Needless to say, this type of problem is not limited to homosexual comrades. We also have homosexual comrades for whom this question has never come up. Their personal lives, regardless of the problems and pressures that were entailed, did not conflict with party membership.

\* \* \* \* \*

As we have discussed this question informally, everyone agreed that we must put the discussion of our policy in the context of the changing objective situation. First, there's the change in attitudes that's gradually evolving in this country. There's no question that the general acceptance of different norms of personal behavior has increased. This has reflections in the legal sphere. One state, Illinois, has abolished all penalties for homosexual acts between consenting adults. Other state legislatures are discussing it.

In the last election the two main New York state candidates of the Democratic Party and one of the candidates for the Republican Party -- Goldberg, Ottinger and Goodell -- all came out with public statements endorsing what was in essence a Bill of Rights for homosexuals, demanding that they be treated like other citizens, that their private lives be their own and not be subject to legal or police restraint as long as they don't damage the rights of other people. Quite a few other candidates made statements -- Walinsky, and several of the congressional candidates. This is the first time comrades can remember that major bourgeois candidates did this. The fact that they did take such a stand in the midst of an election campaign says a lot about the changing attitudes in society as a whole.

There are a number of cases now at various levels of the federal courts system demanding rights for homosexuals. Legal fights against entrapment laws and entrapment practices have been successful in several states and municipalities. A homosexual in Connecticut is fighting to get a driver's license which has been denied him because of his conviction for sodomy. This case is being handled not by a small group of radical lawyers, but by the

Connecticut ACLU. And this legal test, like others, is being reported objectively and favorably in papers like The New York Times.

\* \* \* \* \*

One characteristic of the radicalization itself, especially in the youth movement, has been discussion about sex. Adolescents have all kinds of social restrictions put upon them concerning their private lives, and especially their sex lives. The way they're treated in the schools, under the law, etc. has become an issue among radicalizing youth. So there's a widespread and growing opposition in very broad layers of young people in this country against sexual repression and the enforced mutilation of sexuality.

This has been reinforced by the rise of the women's liberation movement, which has been even more intimately concerned with repression of homosexuals. This is true because one of the central questions faced by the women's movement is the question of sexual oppression. In addition to their class, race or national oppression, women are especially oppressed as a sex. Comrades are familiar with the many things which the women's liberation movement has done to draw attention to this -- the publicity campaigns, the propaganda and educational materials that have been written by various activists in the women's liberation movement against the objectification of sex, against the exploitation of sexual relations, against the reactionary and debilitating sexual norms and pressures of society, against the possessive and compulsive sexual relations bred by this system. They see that the social attitudes toward homosexuals are simply another facet of a sick sexist, racist class society. From the beginning a certain number of women's liberation activists and leaders have publicly identified themselves as homosexuals or bisexuals. And more and more the women's liberation movement has recognized the reactionary character of lesbian-baiting and the threat it poses to the movement if capitulated to.

Finally we have growing numbers of public political and social organizations of homosexuals, something that is unique in American history. Beginning in 1968 and early 1969 and undoubtedly sparked by the general radicalization and reinforced by the rise of the women's liberation movements, we saw across the country the proliferation of homosexual and homosexual rights organizations. It's probably not an exaggeration to say that almost every major campus in this country has either a homosexual rights organization or an organization of militant homosexuals demanding their rights, demanding an end to all discrimination, demanding a scientific and objective view of homosexuals as human beings. It's become the norm, as opposed to being unusual, for contingents of the more militant and more open homosexual groups to march in various protest demonstrations in addition to organizing some of their own.

This all takes place in the post-Kinsey period. For the first time, scientific knowledge of the extent of homosexuality,

and the characteristics of homosexuality has become widespread. This has helped in breaking down the stereotype of society divided into exclusively homosexual and exclusively heterosexual people. The fact that individual human beings go through different periods in their lives, with different characteristics to their sexuality, has become more widely known. The fact that homosexuality of one kind or another is widespread in the population, that it cuts through all geographical and class layers, has been established.

There has also been the experience, the growing body of literature available and the evolution in the understanding of the younger generation. The younger generation has begun to differentiate between sexuality and reproduction, sexuality and religious norms, sexuality and the sex-roles imposed by the nuclear family system, and has begun to understand the relation between sexuality and class society. For this generation, opposition to restrictive norms and repressive attitudes that feed reactionary ideologies has become the norm.

\* \* \* \* \*

We had been evolving toward a policy of blanket proscription of homosexuals from membership in the party. The faults of this policy are several. One is general enforceability.

The more we thought about it the more we realized we were not enforcing this policy and we could not enforce this policy. Maybe one of the ways to look at this is to compare it to our policy on narcotics and marijuana, use of which is incompatible with party membership. We have this blanket policy for a variety of reasons the comrades know, including the chance of victimization and frame-ups, of which there's been a whole record of experience in the radical movement, and the hatred of many of the oppressed of this country for the narcotics trade. We've had a firm and clear policy on this question, which we've enforced. When we know of, have evidence of, or even hear rumors of the use of marijuana in the organization, we look into it. If it's true we tell the comrades they have to knock it off, we explain why and say they must comply with this rule or leave the organization. We've done this consistently and even-handedly. It's not been arbitrary, it has not been tongue-in cheek, and it has not basically been handled one way in one locality and a different way in another. If our policy was to be the blanket proscription of homosexuals from membership in the SWP, we would have to enforce such a policy in the way we enforce the narcotics policy.

It is a policy that can easily be misused. If it's really going to be a policy, it would be the obligation of branch organizers and executive committees to check into the sexual predilection of prospective members, if one is supposed to proscribe a certain sexual category from membership. It doesn't take much imagination to think of the negative results of this practice.

If we do not carry out and enforce the policy uniformly, an additional problem comes up. That is, it becomes known that

there is a policy of the party that is not enforced uniformly. If the policy is not enforced at all, then it appears that the leadership supports the policy only tongue-in-cheek. That would be a default of leadership. If it is enforced, but not uniformly and consistently, there would be the suspicion that the leadership was being arbitrary. Why pick this one and not that one? Over a time, this would raise the question of the leadership's fairness in carrying out other general policies.

Our tradition, the tradition of the revolutionary movement has been that the private lives, the psychological and cultural views, and the sexual behavior of individual comrades is basically their own business. There's been a general tolerance within the movement, as opposed to a society which in general is very intolerant of anything that's different or threatens its morals and norms. At the same time, the party is not responsible for what members do as private individuals and does not take responsibility for their private conduct. While minimizing interference in or responsibility for the private lives of members, their private conduct and their personal demeanor must be subordinated to the needs of the party as a whole. If a person's private life became damaging to the party the individual is asked to leave the party. As I outlined earlier the party's security, its capacity to recruit militants from the mass movement, political homogeneity, and its capacity for disciplined action always comes first.

Leaving the homosexual question per se aside, we occasionally have comrades who go through periods where they simply are not in control of themselves personally or psychologically. We sometimes have to ask them to leave, or find a way out of the party for them at a certain stage. The same is true with comrades who get on some kick and decide they are proselytes whose mission is to put the party on trial or to turn the party into something other than a revolutionary socialist combat party.

All individual revolutionaries are very interested in culture, art, sex and the evolution of social norms. But we must always remember that the party's role is political. It is defined by its purpose and the strength of its enemy. First and foremost is the organization and recruitment from the mass movement of a combat party that has a political program for the defeat of the capitalist state. A large number of questions of art, cultural norms, mores, etc., are not really within the field of party policy or "line." As long as we in fact apply the materialist method in our analysis there is plenty of room for divergences of opinion. It is a very good idea to have a little tolerance for each others' views on these matters.

The party is a political, not a therapeutic, organization. While revolutionaries get their personal satisfaction from understanding and working to change this society, we neither accept members nor do we keep members ultimately because it is good for them. We recruit members and we keep members because it is good for the party.

Any sort of blanket membership proscription of homosexuals cannot remain and has not remained an internal question in the SWP. In several cities, we've been publicly attacked or asked to clarify our position on homosexual membership. The comrades have responded to such attacks or questions with leaflets and public statements which show the difficulty of trying to explain to non-members the reasons for a blanket proscription of homosexuals. Secondly, such statements have shown discomfort our members feel in trying to carry out this policy. It raises a whole series of concrete problems within the women's liberation movement; problems of recruitment, of hidden red-baiting in the form of slander, of misinterpretation. There's no question that the membership of our movement is in its overwhelming majority uncomfortable with such a policy. We see all the evidence of that. Of course we also know that with some newer members this is for the wrong reasons. It takes a little while for members, especially new members, to actually come to an understanding of what a revolutionary party is and what it cannot be.

But more is involved than misunderstanding by new members. What is really involved is an uncomfortableness with a policy which is really not viable in that it creates more real problems for the party than it solves.

So the conclusion of the Administrative Committee has come to is that we should reject this evolution toward a policy of proscription of homosexual members per se and continue the actual practice which has basically been the party's policy on this type of question for some time. That is, we will continue to deal on an individual basis with any homosexual comrade or any other comrade who because of a personal crisis or personal demeanor, more and more finds her or his personal life in conflict with disciplined functioning in the party or in conflict with the kind of a party that can recruit out of the mass movement, that is going to become a mass party. And secondly, of course, we will continue to take into account the character and personal demeanor of anyone who applied for membership. We always have. But a general policy of proscription of homosexuals is incorrect.