

INFORMATION BULLETIN

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April 1945

At the present time there exists in the United States, nothing that can really be called a Socialist Youth Movement. The Youth Movement in this country died with the coming of the war. Before the war each political party had its youth section, and there was at least some Socialist activity among the country's youth. But since the war the movement has degenerated into almost complete nothingness.

Since the YPSL's were dissolved (or rather absorbed into the party - proper) in 1941 in order to strengthen the party's trade union orientation, the Party has had no youth groups of any kind, except perhaps, a few study classes here and there of a sporadic type. Nationally, the party has done no real youth work of a coordinated or directed nature - and has in fact, in many places actually discouraged party work in this field.

It is understood that in the past four years party activity has been out of necessity almost completely focused on the trade union work - but it should be realized that the party now has opportunities also for working in the very fertile youth field which if taken would not hamper trade union work in any way. There are in the party today comrades who are not suitable for work in the trade union field, but who are in contact with progressive youth in the country; and there are also progressive youth in the country who would not be willing to enter the party on the harsh grounds of sacrificing their school opportunities for immediate work in a shop - but who would be willing to enter a YPSL-like organization and contribute valuable service there.

The party has, doubtless, many young contacts all over the country but there is really no place for these young people. They must either be taken directly into the party, for which they are often not really ready, or left to "stay around" for a few years as "sympathizers" or contacts - with the possibility of drifting away for good. Older people have a basis for party membership in connection with trade union work - but the activities of younger people are far different. Such people usually have real influence only with other persons of their own age. Moreover, the problems of single, young people - as yet not settled or held to home responsibilities often fit them for youth organizations rather than for the party organization.

There is a real need for and real importance in establishing a youth organization for the party - and of doing it now:

First, for the possible training of future party leaders in a groundwork of theory, history, and practical experience. Today's party leaders have almost all come from the late YPSL group, and have been trained for their present positions through a series of progressively more important posts first in the YPSL and then in the party.

Second, for the training of general membership in the party. A youth group can maintain contact with progressive youth in industry and in schools, and can serve to sift out those persons suitable for party membership and train them toward that end.

Third, for the influencing of youth in general regardless of whether they will ever become actual party members. A truly revolutionary youth group can serve (1) to attract the country's youth away from fascist youth groups, the pseudo-socialist groups, the AYD, liberal organizations, etc. (2) to make

youth labor conscious (and it is of the utmost importance that we try to influence young people before they are taken into the Army, now or in the possible future peace-time conscription, where they are indoctrinated with anti-labor and anti-socialist ideas) and (3) to combat the indoctrination of the schools, the radio, press, etc.

Therefore, we feel that the party must again seriously take up the question of youth work - decide exactly what its policy is to be - and how it will handle that policy once decided.

There are many difficulties inherent in forming a youth organization right now. The war has taken away most of the young men over eighteen. Moreover, since there is no general progressive youth movement in existence in which to work and from which to attract young people to us, we must start from scratch.

This means building up small groups - amorphous and weak at first into stable units - throughout the country. We have the start of one such a group - but we already recognize the strength that only a "rational" character would give us. We feel that other cities must have at least equal if not far better material for the building of similar youth groups. And it is because we feel in our most optimistic moments that we may have the nucleus for building a "second YPSL" should other cities follow our example and lay the groundwork for the future affiliation of several of these youth groups throughout the country, that we want to make known our experiences and mistakes to other branches, to give some slight direction and to provide a basis for their questions.

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HISTORY OF YOUTH GROUP

We have been able to see our group develop through a series of more or less definite stages, and we have watched it like a growing baby. Ours was a trial and error method of procedure in some degree, few of us knowing just how much or how little to expect from the attempt. The whole thing was regarded as an experiment.

Some of our problems were, of course, local problems - but the majority are likely to be met anywhere right now.

A skeleton account of the early formation of the group will furnish the setting and background, and will probably be the most clarifying:

During last fall and winter the local party organizer gave a class on the history of the Trotskyist movement to a group of young party members and five contacts; which class for several reasons started to dwindle off just before Christmas, and soon stopped. At this time two party comrades, both boys (who were not in trade union work but who did have several college contacts) were attempting to start an informal Marxist discussion group with a handful of young people of college age. They had started on the Communist Manifesto, had a loose sort of "organization" with a chairman and educational director; but they were beginning to fall apart. They solicited the aid of the disbanded class contacts, which was rather hesitantly given, and a "reorganization meeting" of the discussion group was arranged.

I. This was the beginning of the youth group. In this EMBRYONIC stage, the group stood as follows:

Composition: Eight members, two of whom were party people. Some of these were "advanced", others quite "raw". Some knew of the party connections, others were totally unaware of them.

Organization: None to speak of. The educational director was a party member, the chairman one of the party contacts, a prospective party member, and pretty much on the "in."

Program: There was no real course of action, little perspective, other than that of educating people with no previous socialist background in the fundamentals of socialism and stimulating them to take an interest in political questions. The varying levels in the group presented a real problem. The educational director arranged meetings, invited speakers (all party people although they did not speak as party representatives) who spoke on general topics such as Fascism, the Youth movement etc. At first meeting in private homes, the group later began to hire a room each week at one of the Labor Centers in the city. The group really consisted of no more than a speaker and an audience at almost every meeting. Either the educational director or his invited speaker would give a lecture, the rest would listen respectfully and perhaps ask a few questions in the discussion period that followed. Although the group as a whole was unaware of the fact that the party was encouraging the formation of the club, the "representative" of the party was quite obvious - members of the group would receive the latest copy of LA and pamphlets from him after each meeting and then disband until the following week. All in all, the group was very loose and unorganized and clumsy.

The Fraction: The group up until this time had been regarded by the party as only an experiment - and the two comrades concerned with the group had by themselves discussed any important details that came up. But at just about this point in the group's development, the party began to take a greater interest, and a more conscious fraction was set up. The fraction itself began to realize the importance of singing, some sort of social activity for the group, and above all, more group participation.

It must be remembered that the term "fraction" is used with great reservation here. In no way, and at no time, have the party members in the group constituted themselves a real fraction - in the usual sense of that word.

We have been working in a group friendly to us, and rather sympathetic toward the party; and therefore, the tight, organized type of fraction which is necessary in trade unions or groups either neutral, unsympathetic or openly hostile to the party - would be entirely out of place. And, we might add, most unwise.

It will be seen later that what we have called "fractional work" is actually only a loose sort of ironing out of the wrinkles of the organizational problems.

II. At this point the question of how to vote in new people to the club launched a TRANSITIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL stage.

Composition: Five new people, two of whom were young party people, sent in by the party to strengthen the club. The other three were friends of the other club members, who had attended a few meetings and desired to join the group.

The members were still amazingly heterogeneous. Some had read only "Looking Backward" - others had delved into advanced socialist literature. Some were confirmed atheists, others extremely religious. One member revealed a prejudice against Negroes. Another showed irradicable traces of a bourgeois background, was extremely fearful lest his name become connected in any way with Labor Action. Still another was thoroughly familiar with the party program but disagreed with parts of the party platform - and was cautious lest he be strengthening a party about which he had not yet made up his mind. He was strictly theoretical, and resented any attempts at including social activity for the group, on the grounds that fascist groups appeal to the emotions and not the intellect, and that we would be copying the tactics of a group we were trying to combat.

Organization: The group elected committees to draw up a set of rules and regulations, and a statement of purpose. (See copies of each at end of article.) The executive committee was enlarged to four; a chairman, an educational director, a secretary treasurer, and a social director - in an attempt to involve more people in the work of the club and began to function as a committee, holding regular meetings, discussing plans, bringing in proposals, etc. We soon felt the need for choosing a name for ourselves, (an unconscious first start toward shifting from a mere discussion group to a real youth group.)

The organizational discussions gave everyone a chance to participate, and created for the first time in some of the members a feeling of really belonging.

Program: A system of alternating membership (closed) and forum (open) meetings was suggested. This allowed for both organizational and educational work; and gave an opportunity to build internally as well as to expand by recruiting. Recruiting, itself, was discussed at meetings as a duty of members - and constituted the first spirit of club responsibility.

All during this organizational stage, there were signs, however small, of becoming more of a socialist youth group instead of a group of youth discussing socialism.

Fraction work: It must be kept in mind that the fraction, convinced of the need for organization, nevertheless let the club members do it themselves after they had been convinced of the need. They did not bring a ready made organization to the group - but instead worked to convince the group that some sort of organization was needed and to direct them in building it.

At just about this time, the party was setting up a new headquarters. There was some antagonism on the part of two club members to becoming too much affiliated with the party by using the Labor Action headquarters. A fraction meeting was held, and there was a question of whether or not we were attempting to rush matters. No real group spirit had as yet developed, but it was felt that time was needed for more orientation. Inasmuch as the fraction at this time constituted such a large percentage of the club, (five out of eleven) they could by unified vote, sway almost any vote or any question. It was felt that ironing out all questions in too minute detail at fraction meetings moreover would stifle to some degree the clubs own development. Therefore, it was agreed that the fraction would meet only to discuss those questions of real organizational and programmatic importance - as such questions arose.

III. The group became gradually more and more STABILIZED.

The composition of the group, the organization, and the program became so much integrated into one question that it is impossible to discuss them as separate points.

A. By a fortunate turn of events, the group was unable to use the room it had been using, was too large to meet in a private home, and could afford no other place than the party headquarters which was rented to it one night a week. The use of this room was an invaluable aid in building a group feeling. The group soon, almost automatically adopted it as its own headquarters, helped to fix it up and make it attractive as a club room, rather than just a meeting room.

The forums proved rather successful, and were well attended. The league gained many contacts (who multiplied geometrically) and several new members, most of them of high-school age.

The members really began to like each other, so that the idea of social get-togethers such as picnics, hikes, swimming parties, trips to museums, etc., seemed natural and not a duty.

The group was able to use the headquarters mimeograph machine to mimeograph song sheets, copies of the statement of purpose, and the rules and regulations.

B. With the coming of the summer, concentration was put on internal education. It was during the summer that a real solidarity was built up among the members. Lectures were replaced by assigned reports from the members themselves, on various phases of the American Labor Movement. It was felt that this was the only way to get a real interest aroused in the members. The group also began to sponsor a Marxist study class on another night. The contact list grew long enough to make it worthwhile to publish a Newsletter and draw up a mailing list. Moreover, a summer slump that everyone was waiting for never came. However, the summer was regarded as a "biding time."

The fraction felt that the group showed a need for activity other than pure educational programs and socials, and began to look forward to the fall as a time for the league to start developing a real youth program for itself.

It was also felt that it might be time to lead the group into a closer relationship with the party.

At the very end of the summer, therefore, the party organizer with whom most of the youth group were already familiar inasmuch as he had given a series of two lectures in the beginning of the summer on the character of youth groups and how they are built, spoke to the group, again on the character of youth groups - but with a more advanced approach, pointing out that youth must eventually ally itself with some other, older group. He spoke as a representative of the party and ended by voicing the hope that the youth group would investigate the question and choose his party.

C. Since our rules and regulations called for a re-election of officers at the beginning of September - most of our attention focused on the event as the opportunity for pulling together all loosed strings and setting ourselves to work with a vengeance, on making the league a real youth group.

The old Executive Committee prepared an analysis of the group's first six months existence - and indicated the general tasks for the future. A new system of organization was suggested and accepted. Instead of selecting four officers who would constitute an executive committee, an executive committee as such was elected - composed of one person elected to the post of chairman and of three others to act in whatever capacity the committee as a whole felt was best. In addition a set of four other functioning committees was set up (an educational committee, a newspaper committee, a publicity committee, and a house committee)*. The whole idea was geared to suit the group's plan for real activity... namely, an extension of the idea of group participation - and a preparation of the group for activity designed to influencing youth outside of the club - thereby bringing the club closer to a knowledge of the meaning of real socialist activity.

We started by writing to the Winifred Lynn Committee to ask if we could help in their campaign. As it turned out, we couldn't - but the incident served to break the ice for the group's "activity" program. Also, there was at this time an attempt by a number of youth organizations in the city to organize a "Youth for Interracial Unity" Council in the City.

*All these ideas had been rather generally discussed by the fraction, and were brought to the club through the club executive committee of which two of the party people were members. The fraction also agreed on which two party people to support in the elections, since it was felt that at least two, but no more, party people should have positions in the club.

Some of our members (they happened to be party people) attended the organizational meetings and reported back to the youth group to get further instructions from them. As yet, not too much has developed with the new group - but the group's action represents an attempt to become involved in the general youth movement.

We are now trying to arrange a jointly sponsored forum on "How Can American Youth Fight Racial Discrimination?" with several other youth organizations in the city - and have sent out thirteen letters requesting participation in the project.

Our plans for a newspaper have already brought up a discussion of editorial policy - making it possible for us to at last formally agree on our position on the war, a question which was quite touchy six months ago, and which makes much more concrete our statement of purpose which was so general a thing. The newspaper is regarded as a means for eventually building up ideas on more immediate and specific youth problems - and thus developing what will amount to a real program for ourselves.

To start the season off with a bang - the group gave a party which attracted over fifty new and old contacts, and which ended up as a really smash hit.

In addition, we have bought a bookcase for the headquarters and are starting to build a library. And the room is now comfortable enough to keep open as a reading room one or more nights a week.

In short, the group is beginning to take shape as a real youth group - and may even be beginning to make a slight name for itself in the city.

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[1945]

TO THE DELEGATES TO THE NATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE
YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIALIST LEAGUE IN DETROIT

A Letter of Greetings from the Workers Party

Dear Comrades:

The Workers Party sends you and your convention warm fraternal greetings. Like ourselves, you have great responsibilities and weighty problems to resolve. For you, as for us, what is involved is the building up of a strong, effective revolutionary socialist movement in this country. Each of us has approached this task from different directions and in different ways. You have exercised your right in the past to make a critical evaluation of our party. We wish in this letter to take the liberty of expressing our views about the Y.P.S.L. No better occasion could offer itself than your Detroit convention, at which the future of the Y.P.S.L. will be decided at least for the next period.

A socialist youth movement as a purely independent organization is of course an absurdity. The organization of the socialist youth has always been - and properly so - linked intimately with a party, whatever the terms of the relationship may have been. From its inception, the Y.P.S.L. has been affiliated with the Socialist Party. In the history of this affiliation, the youth movement has almost invariably stood at the left wing of the party or worked together with the left wing of the party and for the victory of its ideas.

The question of the future relationships between the Y.P.S.L. and Socialist Party is now uppermost in the minds of the young socialists in this country. In one way or another, the discussions and decisions of your convention will deal with this question. It is a decisive one.

Socialist Party and the War

The Socialist Party in the past few years, and particularly in the crucial period of the second world war, has steadily deteriorated, both from the standpoint of its influence in the working class and the standpoint of its socialist character. In general, the members, and especially the militant left-wingers, in the Y.P.S.L. have sought to resist this deterioration to the maximum of their ability. It is a fact that they have not been very successful.

During the war, and in all the vital problems raised by the war, the clear-cut, consistent socialist and internationalist position that a party like the S.P. had the elementary duty to espouse, was not in evidence. The consolidation of the party that was mandatory upon it in the crucial period we have been living through, did not take place. The firm discipline - not bureaucratic sterility, but democratically-organized and democratically-maintained discipline without which no socialist party can hope to be effective, disappeared entirely. More accurately, it was

relaxed completely against the right wing and directed exclusively against the left wing.

A socialist party is tested decisively in war-time. The S.P. has failed to pass the test. The party, as an organized, clear-voiced political force, has virtually ceased to exist. In effect, the S.P. is known today only through the words and actions of its most prominent leader, Norman Thomas. "Official" Socialist Party policy has no meaning for him. He makes policy for himself and by virtue of the submissiveness of the rest of the party leadership, who dare not speak up against him when he flouts or contravenes "official" policy, it is his individual politics which come to be known in public as the politics of the Socialist Party. This fact is only too well known to you. The result is that the S.P. has come to be the party of Norman Thomas. As such, it has practically nothing in common with the revolutionary socialist principles and aspirations of the militants of the Y.P.S.L.

What Is Your Task?

If Norman Thomas is a law unto himself in the party, with his constant veiled threats to resign if any attempts are made to enforce party discipline, he is not an exception. Other party leaders and spokesmen go their own way and do as they please with impunity. As you know, in Michigan and Illinois, in particular, many of them are constantly at work to find some way or other of dissolving the party entirely into some opportunistic combination.

Up to now, the Y.P.S.L. militants have resisted and combatted this disintegration. They have collaborated with some of the left-wing elements inside the S.P. itself. They have set themselves the goal of winning the party to a left-wing program, a left-wing leadership, and to their conception of what a truly revolutionary socialist party should be.

If you are to cast up a sober balance sheet, these efforts have ended in failure. The left wing is weaker today in the S.P. than it has been in a long, long time. Its prospects for victory in the S.P. are more remote than ever. If anything, it is the right-wingers and the "tired radicals" in the party who have recently taken the offensive against the left wingers, above all against the Y.P.S.L. militants, notably in Chicago.

The question arises: What to do now?

Shall the Y.P.S.L. militants devote themselves indefinitely to the work of winning what remains of the Socialist Party?

The most obvious danger in such a view is this: The left-wingers can exhaust themselves, to no practical end, "by substituting a purely internal struggle against the hardened right-wingers and deadweight duce-payers for effective independent participation in the class struggle. This means: no realistic perspective, disorientation, a waste of valuable energies. It can only end in the gradual breaking-up of the Y.P.S.L. itself.

We in the United States are, in a sense, more fortunate than our

comrades in other countries. We have more time at our disposal for the building up of an effective revolutionary socialist movement. But this time is not unlimited. It must be utilized to the maximum, because every day is precious and the task is deadly serious.

To continue any longer with the work of "reforming" the Socialist Party, and therefore affiliation with it, is a waste of precious time.

Join the Workers Party

We therefore place before you an alternative. We ask that you give it the most earnest consideration.

Our Workers Party is a revolutionary socialist organization. It has come into being along a different road from yours. In many ways, its traditions and its methods differ from yours. These facts need not be ignored.

But between the Workers Party and the militants of the Y.P.S.L. there is a fundamental bond which, in our view, is decisive. We do not have important differences on basic program and aim. And it is program and aim that should unite revolutionary socialists into one movement.

There is an additional bond between us, and it is of great importance. Like ourselves, every thinking member of the Y.P.S.L. has noted with abhorrence the ravages wrought in the labor and socialist movements by bureaucratism. Every one of us lays greater store by workers democracy than ever before. Our party is proud of the fact that bureaucratism is not tolerated within its ranks in any form for a single instant. Our party is proud of the fact that it looks upon the free discussion of party problems, party principles and policies, not as an "occasional" affair, or as a "luxury", but as an integral part of its daily life, as an indispensable element in its development. The unity in action which we have achieved is based in large part upon the most jealous maintenance of party democracy.

We propose to you:

Join ranks with the Workers Party!

Let us be more concrete. We propose to you:

That the Y.P.S.L. shall fuse with the Workers Party and operate as its youth organization. The terms of this relationship are of course fully subject to discussion between us. We ourselves hold to the principles of complete organizational autonomy for the youth organization which is linked with the party politically.

In a Common Struggle

We know that many of you have significant differences with the Workers Party, particularly on questions relating to historical estimations, more particularly on the question of historic Bolshevism or Trotskyism and of aspects of the Russian Revolution. To us, this is the least disturbing aspect of the problem of our relations. In our party, it is possible to discuss these historical questions, and even their topical political implications, in a free, comradely and scientific manner, free

of bigotry, heresy-hunting and threats of excommunication. For our part, we welcome such discussions, not only between organizations but inside our own movement. We ask only that those with whom we discuss likewise refrain from intolerance and bigotry, and confine themselves to the methods which are in the best traditions of revolutionary Marxism.

Both of us have the same problem to solve, the same task to perform, there must be built up in this country, - and, with our aid, also internationally - a strong, effective, serious revolutionary socialist movement, its roots deep in the working class; its activity constant, disciplined, consistent; its inner life a model of the democratic social order to which we socialists aspire.

We propose to you that we solve this problem by performing the task jointly, in one movement. We are not concerned with petty "maneuvers," with "clever tricks" in regard to the militants of the Y.P.S.L. Our proposals is made to you openly, with candid recognition not only of what unites us but what still divides us, with the sincerest wish for the closest union of the best revolutionary socialist forces in the country.

The fusion of the Y.P.S.L. and the Workers Party would not mean that our job is accomplished - far from it. But it would mark a real leap forward in the building of the movement to which we are both devoted, with the most fruitful results in the immediate future. The decision is in your hands.

With Revolutionary Socialist Greetings,

The Workers Party,

Max Shachtman, National Secretary.

Published also in
Labor Action, April 2, 1945