

VANGUARD NEWSLETTER

Published monthly by independent revolutionary socialists

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P. O. Box 67, Peck Slip Station, New York, N. Y. 10038

Vol. 2, No. 2 Price 10¢ (\$1.00 per year) Labor donated February 1970

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PRINCIPLED POLITICS VERSUS PETTY ORGANIZATIONAL SPITE

✓We print below our call for "unity in action" in the building of a rank and file caucus in Local 1199, the union of hospital workers, the leaflet distributed to the members and supporters of the Workers League, the response of the Spartacist League, and our rejoinder.

✓The exchanges illuminate the chasm between the theory and practice of our opponents, between our principled approach to politics and

their partisan organizational maneuvering of the narrow and self-defeating variety.

✓The efficacy of a principled application of the united front tactic, in fighting to unite workers under revolutionary leadership, while, at the same time, exposing sectarian and opportunist phrasemongers and misleaders, is also concretely demonstrated.✓

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Dear Comrades,

As you will have noted, the article, "Local 1199--Negotiations and Economics" in our December 1969 issue of VANGUARD NEWSLETTER, calls for a non-exclusionary united front to build "a broad-based caucus of the rank and file, organized around a program which poses the immediate and fundamental needs of the workers" in that union.

The program which we have elaborated incorporates the thinking of hospital workers. It is, however, subject to modification, within the limits which principle imposes.

If you feel that the perspective and program which we have projected

present a sufficient basis for discussion, we would propose a meeting at a mutually convenient time, date and place, to further explore the matter.

Fraternally, Harry Turner

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To: Members and Supporters of the Workers League

As the attached copy of the letter to Tim Wohlforth makes clear, we have proposed a united front to build a "broad-based caucus" in Local 1199, on the basis of the perspectives and program elaborated in the December issue of VANGUARD NEWSLETTER.

The WL leadership has not deigned to send a written response to a proposal which we believe can be of first-rate importance, not only to the hospital workers but, in demonstrating how black and white workers can be united in struggle, for the entire labor movement.

We were informed, in a phone call to Fred Mueller which we initiated, that the WL had not considered our proposal and would refuse to meet with us to discuss it. The favorite abstentionist slogan of the WL, "We will have nothing to do with", used previously to bar involvement in any and all Black and student struggles, is now, evidently, being applied to united front activities with other socialist organizations, regardless of program. Instead, so we were informed, hospital workers in contact with us could attend meetings of the "Rank and File Committee", the hospital caucus endorsed by the WL!

The WL purports to be the lineal descendant and continuator of the Fourth International, but its leadership has, evidently, not absorbed the fundamental principle which guides revolutionary Marxists, that program is decisive.

The united front was devised by

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Dear Harry Turner,

With regard to your letter of 5 January raising the question of united front trade union work between yourself and ourselves in hospital workers' Local 1199, we would like to observe that as revolutionary Marxists we are always ready to undertake united activities with other sections of the working-class movement where such actions will further the class struggle.

You have, publicly and privately, in writing and orally, and through collaborators, on numerous occasions over the past eighteen months described the Spartacist League and its leading members as anti-working class and as anti-Negro racists, e.g., your recent "In the process of struggle, the basically elitist and chauvinist attitudes of Robertson, in particular but not alone,

Lenin and Trotsky to win the workers away from the misleaders of the social-democratic organizations to the Communist Parties, by posing concrete demands which furthered the workers' immediate and fundamental class needs. If the united front proposal was accepted, a unified struggle would advance the interests of the working class, drawing the workers, and, perhaps, some of their leaders toward the politics of the communists. If, however, the united front was rejected, the communists would still have gained, in that the misleaders would be exposed to their members, who could then be expected to shift their support to the revolutionary Marxists.

We have posed a united front in the same manner and for the same ends, albeit on a much smaller scale. The WL leadership, motivated by the narrowest organizational considerations, and, evidently, fearful of our impact on its members and supporters, has rejected it.

We call upon the members of the WL to examine our proposal on its merits, and to determine for themselves where revolutionary integrity and principled politics are to be found.

were exposed." You have made comparable and even more prominent accusations that we are police agents and informers. Thus you associated yourself with Wohlforth's "We state unequivocally that the Spartacist League acts as the finger-man for the world capitalists" and later you repeated in public print the same over the wretched Sherwood. Were we in your shoes

and did we believe these accusations which you have made, we would not then address such an allegedly counter-revolutionary organization for united action "within the limits which principle imposes". This is your contradiction.

In view of your manifestly insincere and politically terribly slanderous accusations, it would seem that you should publicly withdraw your accusations if you at all seriously desire to have any possible collaboration at any time with us.

We would like to draw your attention to your own letter of 10 January 1969 to G. Healy pointing out the enormous virtues of the Workers League and Healy as compared to ourselves. Noting in particular "As to the Negro Question, the WL's program, flowing from the basic per-

spective of the world capitalist crisis, for a struggle in the trade-unions to unite workers on a transitional program... is one which we can support." Further, one of the WL leaders, Mueller, is an 1199 activist. Contrastingly, you have expressed great differences with our views and aims in Black and trade-union work, specifically as related to the 1199 union (e.g. SL leader Joseph Seymour's 4 February 1969 document "On the Black Question: Round Two"). Moreover we have only marginal contacts in 1199 since as you know the bulk of our NYC blue collar union work is elsewhere. Perhaps you would be better advised to seek common activities with the Workers League.

Fraternally, James Robertson

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Dear Comrade Robertson,

Your response, in behalf of the Spartacist League, to our proffer of unity in action to build a rank and file caucus in Local 1199, on the basis of the program set forth in the December issue of VANGUARD NEWSLETTER, did not surprise us.

We have enclosed a leaflet we distributed to Workers League members and supporters which will inform you that that organization reacted to the same offer in predictably similar fashion. The leaflet spells out our reasons for persisting in posing joint activities to groups such as the WL and SL, despite all indications that our initiative will be rejected.

We were not aware that the SL's contacts in Local 1199 were only "marginal". No matter. We would have placed our proposal before the SL as a matter of principled tactics, in any case.

While you do not, as directly and as bluntly as the WL, refuse to deal with us, you have set forth preconditions which, you fully realize, effectively closes the door to such united activities.

You demand that we publicly withdraw our accusations that the SL "and its leading members" are

"anti-working class", "anti-Negro racists", "police agents and informers". Had we leveled these precise accusations at you--and we did not--would that fact have been sufficient for you to have refused, in principle, to consider united front activities with us? We think not.

As you, after many years in "Trotskyist" politics are, no doubt, aware, the Bolsheviks projected the united front tactic at the Third World Congress of the Communist International, in order to reorient the newly-fledged Communist parties to a situation in which the post World War I revolutionary wave had been succeeded by a temporary stabilization of capitalism, made possible and manifested in part by the retention of a majority of working class support by the parties of the Second International.

The united front was to be offered to the Social-Democratic parties, to the social-chauvinist traitors

who had saved capitalism in Europe, and who had, in Germany, been directly implicated in the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, on the basis posed in our leaflet.

Trotsky, in spite of the heinous crimes and betrayals of the Stalinists, including the physical liquidation of the whole generation of Bolsheviks, continued to insist that, wherever possible, united front activities be posed to them.

This tactic was projected by the Bolshevik leaders to resolve the contradiction between the form of an organization, ostensibly socialist, and its real, counter-revolutionary content; between an organization which had been qualitatively transformed from the former to the latter in 1914; the contradiction of a lag in the consciousness of workers behind the pace of developments, which the ultra-left tactics of the immature Communist parties were not only failing to overcome, but reinforcing. In other words, the united front tactic was designed to overcome an inherent dialectical contradiction.

While designed for large working class organizations, this tactic does not exclude, as the WL has erroneously claimed, episodic agreements between much smaller radical formations. Everything is relative in this world where only change is absolute.

At no time, did any revolutionary Marxist, least of all Lenin and Trotsky, dream of retracting or even modifying a single accusation. To have distorted the historical record in order to win unstable, vacillating and temporary allies for "united activities", would have itself constituted a betrayal, encouraging new illusions in reformists and centrists. It was the epigones of Lenin who debased the united front tactic in this manner.

In contradistinction to the completely subjective attitudes taken by both the SL and WL leaderships, revolutionary socialists would have asked whether a broad-based rank and file caucus, operating on a prin-

cipled program, would not objectively advance the interests of the hospital workers at this time. They would have welcomed the opportunity to be involved with workers in struggle, and to win them and, perhaps, some of their socialist opponents, to their views and to their organization. They would have seized upon an opening to unite workers under revolutionary leadership--the entire purpose of the united front.

The absolute, metaphysical, contradiction which you see, and with which you charge us, for calling for "united action" with "an allegedly counter-revolutionary organization", not only demonstrates a failure on your part to appreciate a basis tactic of revolutionary Marxism but, beyond that, the dialectical method on which Marxism itself is based and creatively developed. This failure is manifested by you in small ways as well. For example, you omit a curtesy title from the salutation of your letter. You seem unable to use the word "comrade" in its formal sense, as I do in addressing you, and as is the common practice among socialists from divergent and antagonistic organizations. For you, evidently, the relationship between form and content is one of rigid immobility.

We believe that it is necessary to be precise in making "accusations" against others, particularly other socialist groups. It is a matter of revolutionary principle with us to say what is, to state exactly what we believe when addressing workers and the radical milieu. We believe that the deliberate distortion of the positions of an opponent in order to set up a straw-man which can then readily be vanquished, to be, not only a violation of revolutionary morality but also, a confession of political bankruptcy, of inability to deal with the ideas of such an opponent.

It would seem that you have "improved" our positions in just this fashion. Can the quotation from my letter to Dave Cunningham, to wit,

"In the process of struggle, the basically elitist and chauvinist attitudes of Robertson, in particular but not alone, were exposed", be construed as characterizing "the Spartacist League and its leading members as anti-working class and anti-Negro racists? Evidently, you could not find a single statement to this effect in either VANGUARD NEWSLETTER or in our voluminous correspondence with the members and periphery of the SL, and were, therefore, forced to enlarge upon and twist our words to suit your purposes.

We have charged you, in particular, with being a political dilettante, whose erratic functioning as National Chairman of the SL and as editor of the "Spartacist" paralyzed the organization. We have charged that the present leadership of the SL, and, therefore, the organization, has no perspective for building a Leninist party, that it is "...unable and unwilling to reach the height of revolutionary practice, and to develop beyond the politics of the small circle built around a personality..." with being a petty-bourgeois formation which abandoned an orientation toward the working class and toward the Black workers in particular, in the process of driving the minority out of the SL, and that the "elitist and chauvinist attitudes" of yourself and your chief spokesman, Joseph Seymour, were demonstrated in that struggle (Spartacist League Split). But where have we ever characterized the SL and its leadership as anti-working class and anti-Negro racists?

We have also stated that the WL has made a passive adaptation to white chauvinism, but there is also a considerable distance from this designation to that of "anti-Negro racists". The qualitative difference between the two characterizations, in both cases, should be clear even to someone impervious to dialectics.

Our "prominent accusations" that you are "police agents and informers", and that we "repeated in

public print" the WL's accusation that the SL "acts as the fingerman for the world capitalists" boil down to the following in the September 1969 issue of VANGUARD NEWSLETTER:

"The WL's 'Bulletin' published several of Bob's articles, using his middle name, Hartley, as a nom de plume. When the Canadian government, evidently instigated by the US, instituted legal proceedings against Bob, the formation of a broad defense committee prevented his deportation to the US. It should be noted in this connection that an article in the March-April 1968 'Spartacist', and an often-circulated SL leaflet entitled 'What is the Workers League?', attacked Bob Sherwood by name for a Canadian 'cop-out', even identifying him as Robert Hartley Sherwood!"

We were content to let the SL's behavior speak for itself, and to have our readers draw their own conclusions as to its meaning. We should add here, that Bob Sherwood, to our knowledge, is one of the few charged with flight to avoid arrest, which carries, along with the usual 5 years for draft evasion, an additional 10 year penalty.

Should one judge the SL's actions in regard to Sherwood as isolated incidents of regrettable thoughtlessness or as willful disregard for his security, as an unconcern with the future well-being of ex-members, now opponents, in striving for political and organizational advantage, or even as a vindictive, perhaps only semi-conscious wish for the harassment of such opponents by the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state? We have ruled out the first alternative because of other such incidents. We can be more explicit, should you desire it.

We have informed others, both verbally and by personal correspondence, but not in public print * of our belief that the latter possibilities are most probable. We have

*until now

not, however, concluded, nor do we believe, that the SL "acts as the fingerman for the world capitalists".

You refer to our letter to Gerry Healy as "pointing out the enormous virtues of the Workers League and Healy" in comparison with the SL. You also quote out of context in an attempt at identifying the WL's views on the Negro question as our own. You ignore the rest of the paragraph which clearly and succinctly raises our differences with the WL in this area, as follows:

"However we feel that the program does not sufficiently orientate toward the increasingly militant Black workers; that the WL does not sufficiently recognize their revolutionary potential in the struggle, and for the building of a Leninist party; that the same Black workers, who are today being increasingly mis-directed by Black nationalists toward reactionary and sterile positions, can be won to a united working class struggle, provided that it prominently poses the question of their special oppression; that the conscious factor, the Leninist party, has a vital role to play in this respect."

At the time our letter to Gerry Healy was written, we were engaged in a dialogue with the WL, in an exchange of views in which we explored areas of agreement and disagreement in furtherance of our perspective of "discussion, debate and unity in action" with other radical formations. While couched diplomatically, the letter also restated our ongoing organizational and political differences.

Thus, while expressing agreement with the IC's international economic and political perspectives, we also assert our continuing disagreement with its positions on Cuba, China and the Arab-Israeli question, as well as on the Negro question.

While praising "the performance of the French adherents to the IC ... in initiating the first strike

and factory occupation..." in May-June 1968, and of the WL in publishing "a bi-weekly now weekly paper without interruption", and in developing cadre, we make clear our serious disagreements on the American question, as we have shown.

While expressing our belief that the major portion of the responsibility for the split in the "Revolutionary Tendency" in the Socialist Workers Party in 1962, and for your exclusion from the London Conference of the International Committee in 1966, was your own, we also "took exception to certain of the tactics used by the Wohlforth group against the Robertson group", and to the "forms chosen" by Gerry Healy and Wohlforth "to disclose Robertson's essence".

As to trade union activity, we feel that a welter of minuscule competing "rank and file" caucuses, all with immediate demands in common, can only confuse and immobilize workers. In view of the urgent need and greatly improved possibilities today for building an alternative revolutionary leadership in the trade unions, and in view of the petty organizational practices by ostensibly revolutionary socialists, which act as a barrier to the formation of real rank and file caucuses with meaningful working class support, we will recommend at this time that our members and supporters join those "rank and file" groups already in existence, and carry on a struggle within them for the type of principled program, which we have advocated.

Fraternally, Harry Turner

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NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

The Arab-Israeli Question --Marxism and Jewish Nationalism

[Lenin, the most determined advocate of the right of nations to self-determination, was equally opposed to all varieties of Jewish nationalism, whether of the Zionist or Bundist varieties.]

The Jewish General Labor League, better known as the Bund, affiliated to the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party at its first congress in 1898. It broke from the RSDLP at the second congress--which also saw the historic division between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks take place--when its demands for a federative relationship, as the sole and official representative of the Jewish working class was rejected.

The Bund's central programmatic demand was for "cultural national autonomy" for the Jewish masses, disregarding the Austrian Social-Democratic originators of the concept, Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, who had specifically and clearly stated that it was not applicable to the Jewish people.

Trotsky, known in the early stages of the second congress as "Lenin's cudgel", took a leading role in opposing the petty-bourgeois nationalism of the Bund, on the basis that it acted to split the Jewish workers away from the Russian working class.

Lenin led a consistent struggle for a dialectical understanding of the national question, in achieving the unity of the working class for the socialist revolution. But, this unity between workers from oppressor and oppressed nations could only be won through support by workers from the oppressor nation for the right of the oppressed nation to separate. "Cultural national autonomy", however, meant strengthening clericalism and chauvinism, meant drawing the workers to their "own" bourgeoisie, meant the self-segregation of Jewish workers in the cities and towns in which Russian workers and other national minorities dwelt.

Lenin, as though anticipating the reactionary role of Black national-

ism and of social-opportunists such as the Socialist Workers Party who cater to them, had the following to say about the Bund:

"The only thing left for the Bundists is to develop a theory of a separate Russian-Jewish nation, whose language is Yiddish, and their territory the 'Pale of Settlement'...The idea of a Jewish 'nationality' is definitely reactionary not only when expounded by its consistent advocates (the Zionists), but likewise on the lips of those who try to combine it with the ideas of Social-Democracy (the Bundists). The idea of a Jewish nationality is counter to the interests of the Jewish proletariat, for it fosters among them, directly or indirectly, a spirit hostile to assimilation, the spirit of the 'ghetto'. (Coll. Works, Vol. 7, pps. 100-1)

Unlike some metaphysically inclined "Leninists" and "Trotskyists", such as the WL, who ignore or directly oppose all ethnically-oriented demands of the Black and other minorities, Lenin supported autonomy, "as a general universal principle of a democratic state with a mixed national composition, and a great variety of geographic and other conditions". He considered it possible, therefore, "to meet, on the basis of equality, all reasonable and just wishes of the national minorities", such as the provision of premises for the teaching of "Hebrew, Jewish history, and the like", and the "hiring at state expense" of teachers for these subjects. (Coll. Works, Vol. 20, pps. 441, 44)

Lenin, alert to national sensi-

tivities, and true to dialectics, understood that the unity of the revolutionary party could only be achieved by recognizing the heterogeneity of its component parts. Within the RSDLP, said Lenin:

"Autonomy...provides the Jewish working class movement with all its needs: propoganda and agitation in Yiddish, its own literature and congresses, the right to advance separate demands to supplement a single general Social-Democratic programme and to satisfy local needs and requirements arising out of the specific features of Jewish life."
/However/...in the struggles against the autocracy...against the bourgeoisie as a whole, we must act as a single and centralized militant organization, have behind us the whole of the proletariat without distinction of language or nationality...we must not set up organizations that would march separately."
(Coll. Works, Vol. 6, pps. 334-5)

Not only did Lenin oppose Jewish bourgeois nationalism of all varieties on general Marxist grounds, but also because the isolation of Jews from the general working class movement would negate the "great world historic progressive features of Jewish culture...its internationalism, its identification with the advanced movements of the epoch (the percentage of Jews in the democratic and proletarian movements is everywhere higher than the percentage of Jews among the population)". (Coll. Works, Vol. 20, p. 26)

Trotsky explained the outstanding role of Jews and other "non-Russian" revolutionists, their "prominent place in the praesidium, in the various committees, among the orators, etc.", as follows:

"Since the intelligensia of the oppressed nationalities--concentrated as they were for the

most part in cities--had flowed copiously into the revolutionary ranks, it is not surprising that among the old generation of revolutionists the number of non-Russians was especially large... As a matter of fact at a moment of deep historic change, the bulk of a nation always presses into service those elements which were yesterday most oppressed, and, therefore, are most ready to give expression to the new tasks."
(History of the Russian Revolution, Vol. 1, p. 233)

The national state, a once, progressive factor, which spurred the development of the social forces of production, has long since turned into its opposite. World War I and II gave explosive expression to this fact. The slaughter of 5 million Jews--following upon the catastrophic defeats of the European working class prepared by Social Democracy and Stalinism--directly expressed the contradiction of productive forces fettered by the capitalist mode of production within national states, and capitalism's inability to absorb them, or other oppressed national minorities, into the national economy.

National movements, which expressed the needs of the rising bourgeoisie for an internal market freed from feudal particularism, and which could win mass support in the struggle against national oppression at the dawn of capitalism, are again emerging in the epoch of the general crisis of capitalism. Under present conditions, any "solution" which proposes a capitalist state of its "own" for oppressed nations and national minorities--which will then be free to oppress its "own" minorities--can only be a hopeless and hopelessly reactionary utopia.

In the case of Israel, the Zionist "solution" can become, in Trotsky's words, a "bloody trap" for its 2½ million Jews.

(to be continued)

To: The Northeast Regional Conference of the
Socialist Committees of Correspondence

Vanguard Newsletter extends warm fraternal revolutionary greetings to the followers of Daniel De Leon, who are attempting to construct a Marxist leadership for the American revolution.

De Leon's "Socialist Industrial Union" brilliantly anticipated the Soviets, the form of working class rule, which emerged from the three Russian revolutions, which, under the leadership of the Bolshevik party, enabled them to overthrow Tsarist autocracy and capitalism, and to establish the first workers' state. However, this conception, in the hands of the Socialist Labor Party, became an arid and ultimatic doctrine. Its narrow sectarian and parochial outlook, its isolation from the lessons taught in the school of struggle for socialism on a world scale, guaranteed its existence only as an ineffectual sect.

You are now engaged in re-evaluating your past theory and practice. You wish to end your isolation from ongoing mass struggles, to win youth on campus, work-place and ghetto, Black and white workers to socialist consciousness, to a Marxist understanding of the revolutionary process. You have undertaken a fraternal exchange of views with other socialist currents as an integral part of your Marxist re-arming, and desire as we do, joint activities with them on a principled basis, for a unity in action which can overcome the Babel of myriad competing socialist organizations, which can enable the ideas of scientific socialism to achieve a new, broad and revolutionary organizational expression.

We in Vanguard Newsletter have understood the presently dispersed state and numerical weakness of the revolutionary socialist movement to be, in the final analysis, a reflection of the prolonged post-World War II ascendant curve of world capitalist economy, and of the enormous confusion introduced into the working class movement by Social-Democratic and Stalinist betrayals, which succeeded in artificially extending the life of capitalism. We believe that the inflationary and monetary problems which have developed in a number of advanced capitalist countries, and which, in this country have forced the ruling class to unleash a recession to try to escape a catastrophic depression, signal the onset of a world-wide economic downturn, which will impel the working classes in all countries in a revolutionary direction. We believe that, under these conditions, a new and broad revolutionary movement will emerge, that the struggle of ideas between the differing socialist organizations in the new objective circumstances, will produce the clarity and resulting program and organization to ensure the victory of the international socialist revolution.

American revolutionists in the stronghold of the world imperialist system, have a particularly heavy responsibility to the international working class, and especially now in the atomic age, to all humanity. The international revolution may achieve its break-through in Europe, in which case, our revolution will be immeasurably advanced. It is not at all precluded, however, that the law of uneven and combined development may find its expression in a leap in consciousness of the presently backward American working class, a backwardness which has its positive side, the absence of a Stalinist or Social-Democratic barrier to revolutionary socialists, and bring the American workers to power first.

Key to the American revolution is a correct understanding of the

Negro question. This revolution cannot hope to be successful without the unity of Black and white workers. This unity cannot be forged unless a struggle is conducted by Black and white workers, and in the interest of all workers, against the special oppression of the Black people including the super-exploitation of Black workers. Only on this basis, can Black and white workers reach class, i.e., socialist consciousness.

The upsurge in militant struggles of the Black people is an expression of the law of uneven and combined development by which a leap in the consciousness of the most oppressed layers can and does occur.

It was Trotsky's understanding of this law, which enabled him to foresee the road taken by the Russian proletariat, to elaborate the concept of the "Permanent Revolution", the path by which the working class in backward countries can come to power in advance of the advanced. This understanding and his outstanding mastery of the dialectic, enabled Trotsky to make his enormous contributions to the Russian revolution, and to Marxist theory. It was also this understanding which Trotsky contributed to the Negro question, and which the other "Trotskyist" organizations have abandoned, each in its own way, either actively or passively, in an opportunist or sectarian (a variety of opportunism) direction.

It is this understanding which we in Vanguard Newsletter have presented in our perspective of work in the trade unions. We have advocated the formation of bi-racial rank and file caucuses, united around a program of transitional demands, and linked in industrial regional and national bodies, which can become, at a revolutionary moment, the factory committees and workers' councils through which the workers can take and hold power. We have, in other words, posed an operational perspective for the revolutionary struggle in this country, whose end-product clearly resembles the De Leonist "Socialist Industrial Union", but which is based on the living dynamic of the class struggle in the United States, and not on the ultimatism of the SLP.

You are engaged in a process of testing programs, your own and others, and of clarifying a perspective. The revolutionary process requires a clear perspective embodied in a firm program which meets the requirements of principle concretely applied, as well as a firm leadership able to withstand the pressures of the bourgeoisie in all its guises. You must ask yourselves how word and deed, your own and others, match. You must determine if you and others have achieved a clear understanding of the revolutionary process, have been able to develop a perspective for the revolutionary struggle in this country, or if, instead, you or they are content to mouth general Marxist formulae, in the hope that some day, some way, by the grace of God, or rather, the "objective process" passively understood, the correct path to the socialist revolution will be stumbled upon.

We wish you every success in achieving a revolutionary direction.

Fraternally,

VANGUARD NEWSLETTER