

873 Broadway
2nd floor south
New York, N.Y. 10003

September 30, 1969

TO ALL ORGANIZERS

Dear Comrades,

The comrades are generally aware that a number of possibilities have opened up in the recent period for national distribution of Merit literature. Because this presents a significant political opportunity, we recommend that the comrades in each area designate a Merit representative -- that is, in effect, a salesman whose assignment will be to place Merit's publications with wholesalers, retailers, libraries, universities, black bookstores, large book chains, etc.

Evidence of improved sales prospects and suggested sales methods will be found in the enclosed activity reports from Merit's two current sales representatives, Bob Gahtan in Boston and Priscilla Ring in New York. Prospective Merit sales representatives are asked to read the reports in order to better understand the nature of the assignment, its responsibilities and importance. To facilitate this an extra copy is enclosed for the prospective Merit representatives.

Comradely,

Farrell Dobbs

Farrell Dobbs
SWP

Larry Seigle

Larry Seigle
YSA

September 1969

Notes of a Merit Rep. (Priscilla Ring, N.Y.)

As a Merit representative in New York, over the past 8 months, I've covered the following types of book dealers: wholesalers; black bookstores; large chains, such as Brentano's, Doubleday, Bookmasters; department stores, such as Macy's and Gimbels; campus, off-campus and radical bookstores. I've also tried recently, with some success, to place our publications with bus and train depot bookstores and newsstands, and I'll be visiting airport bookstores soon.

The black publications are our big sellers, of course, and I've been able to place at least Malcolm X on Afro-American History in practically every store visited. (Macy's has been displaying Afro-American History next to Soul on Ice, near the cash register, and has been reordering periodically.) If a store carries books by or about Malcolm X, by Eldridge Cleaver, or even some of the works of Richard Wright or James Baldwin, they're particularly good bets for our black publications. Here I've found an excellent selling point to be the total sales figures, which Merit supplies, on the best movers among the black titles. In the convention report it was mentioned that Afro-American History was selling at the rate of over 2,000 monthly. This information convinced the buyer at Macy's that this pamphlet was a "book" -- an important distinction, since they never buy "pamphlets."

One of the more rewarding sides of my visit to such stores as Brentano's, Doubleday, the campus and off-campus stores, as well as the more specifically "radical" bookstores, has been their receptiveness to our basic Marxist books. Among these, the best sellers (on a more modest scale than our black literature, naturally) have been Trotsky's Revolution Betrayed, Permanent Revolution, and, now, Military Writings. It was quite a thrill when the national buyer for Brentano's ordered The Revolution Betrayed and The Permanent Revolution for its branches in such provincial locations as Seven Corners, Va., Wheaton, Md., Hyattsville, Md., as well as for stores in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Washington D.C., Cambridge, and of course New York. Also, Mandel's Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory and Novack's Empiricism and Origins of Materialism have been placed with Brentano's. Doubleday -- another national book chain -- has bought Permanent Revolution and Origins of Materialism not only for their several New York stores, but also for San Francisco, Boston, Washington D.C., and even politically isolated New Orleans. In New York we've been able to follow up on these original orders and get reorders. Presumably the same thing could be done out of town. It's our experience that the best way to get reorders is through follow-up visits -- one of the most important duties of a Merit rep!

It's important to note that commercial bookstores without any sympathy for -- even hostility toward -- our ideas will, because

they are astute enough to realize that there's a commercial market in our books, order our most popular classics. A dramatic example is Scribner's -- considered the Tiffany of bookstores -- the buyer for which is "Prince" Propotkin, a Russian exile, who nevertheless has placed The Revolution Betrayed, Permanent Revolution, and Origins of Materialism in his bookstore. This example has inspired us in New York to approach any bookstore with our radical literature (even if it's frighteningly radical). We simply start with Malcolm X on Afro-American History and see where we can go from there. Sometimes we go all the way. (But I've found that it's best not to encourage orders for titles, or quantities of any title, which aren't likely to move, because this will only result in eventual returns to Merit. If this happens too often, the buyer's confidence in the Merit representative, and Merit publications, will be eroded.)

Exciting possibilities are opening up throughout the country for the distribution of Merit's literature through large wholesale and retail stores, and national chains. This past vacation I visited Harvard Square and one of the main off-campus bookstores around there. While I was literally gaping at the large section of their window display that was given over entirely to Merit titles, an employee started to remove our books from the window. Somewhat alarmed, I went inside and saw that he was putting them on a table right next to the check-out counter -- the sales of our titles had been so good that he'd been asked to set that table up with a Merit display! (If Merit reps. do their jobs well, maybe such a situation will be commonplace next year.)

Of course, apart from occasional exhilarations, being a Merit rep. basically means grinding out the work on a persistent and methodical basis: making appointments with book buyers; taking inventory of Merit titles in the stores to guide the buyers in their reorders; going back to see them regularly; lugging a sample case with publications and display materials, catalogs, order forms, discount cards, etc.; bringing new titles to the buyers' attention, keeping them informed as to which the rapid movers are around the country; and, in general, doing the work any aggressive and knowledgeable salesman does to sell his product. The difference here is that Merit reps. will be pushing a product they really believe in.

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Boston, Mass.
September 22, 1969

Dear Comrades,

As of June 6, 1969, I tried to get MERIT books into various bookstores in the Greater Boston Area. This letter covers the results of a 3 month period extending from June 6 to September 9.

In evaluating what has been accomplished in Boston, I hope you will keep in mind that the work was done:

- 1) on a part time basis.
- 2) by one who had no previous training in selling books.
- 3) during June, July and August which are traditionally poor book months.
- 4) I was unable to do MERIT work for 3 weeks of that period.

RESULTS:

1. I visited 27 bookstores and got orders from 13.
2. The number of MERIT books and pamphlets placed on the shelves of various stores was 6,697 (4,000 of which went to the largest distributor of paperback books in the United States).
3. Having gotten the books into the store is one thing, but the acid test, of course, is: Will people buy them? The answer is YES!!! Specifically, in one store:
1st order 67 items
2nd order 61 items
3rd order 201 items

In addition to getting books into commercial bookstores, we plan to get into public, college and YES high school libraries. We also intend to visit, left-liberal and radical faculty and have them assign MERIT books for their classes.

I'm sure that you will want to duplicate the success we've had in Boston. This is indeed a "leverage" situation where a small input of comrade hours yields large results in effectively spreading our ideas. The objective conditions for this type of activity are more than ripe.... while writing this report, I was interrupted by a phone call from someone who placed an order for 115 pamphlets.

Fraternally,

Bob Gahtan