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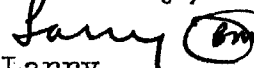
March 23, 1977

TO THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE AND NATIONAL FIELD ORGANIZERS

Dear Comrades,

Attached are two items giving a picture of the Spartacist League. The "Roots" article is from Workers Vanguard. "The Spartacist League's Scandalous Chauvinism" is from Socialist Voice, published by the League for the Revolutionary Party (Sy Landy's outfit.) It reports on a speech given by Robertson in N.Y. recently.

Comradely,

Larry 
Larry

The American Left Views "Roots"

The *Roots* craze (see *WV* No. 147, 4 March) has generated some controversy among (and evidently within) a number of fake-left groups. Typically their "reviews" of Alex Haley's book and its TV dramatization shed far more light on these opportunists' own political proclivities than on the social viewpoint of *Roots* or the reasons for its phenomenal popularity.

The most slavish in pursuing the *Roots* bandwagon have been the International Socialists (I.S.) and the Communist Party (CP). In the 31 January *Workers' Power*, the I.S.'s Kate Stacy offers no less than 27 paragraphs of plot summary and concludes with the comment: "It is a fine book, worth all 580 pages of reading. Haley's writing is flowery, but the content is fascinating. And he is an excellent story-teller." The CP's *Daily World* (5 February) lauded *Roots* and raised what must surely be one of the most minimal "demands" ever: the major networks should "draw the lessons" of *Roots* and "schedule quality, informative programs at prime viewing time." (The I.S., which speaks out of the left side of the mouth of reformism as the CP does out of the right, can certainly congratulate itself on being "in the vanguard" this time: some months ago *Workers' Power*

solidarized with *Roots* first in the name of vicarious race war and then, more guardedly, on behalf of liberal "Ellis Island to the suburbs"-style ethnic pluralism. First came Omari Musa's review of the TV show, which saw the leading black characters as some kind of freedom fighters and predicted *Roots* would foment an upsurge of what evidently constitutes militancy for Musa; describing the show as "one big consciousness raiser" that "will increase black pride," he gave two examples:

"A young brother stopping in a coffee shop before work said, 'I tell you one thing, those white folks better not mess with me today. I just might have to stomp one.'... four Black students at Harrisburg Middle School were suspended after a shoving match with some white students. The Black students had been chanting 'Roots, Roots' before the scuffle began."

—*Militant*, 11 February

Perhaps Musa thought the SWP was still courting militant-talking nationalist hucksters instead of ultra-respectable black ministers and liberal politicians. Musa's more calculating comrades must have realized that stomping white folks would not set well at NAACP headquarters, for the *Militant* (4 March) abruptly switched to a new interpretation of *Roots* in Malik Miah's book review.

Although hedging his bets by criticizing Haley for not paying enough attention to "the big political and social developments in the period he writes about," Miah locates the source of "black pride" in *Roots* in... genealogy! Miah actually calls genealogy "a subject of immediate concern to all Black Americans" which "shows where we are from and why we are in the situation we find ourselves in." That this petty-bourgeois hobby can be offered as an antidote to racial oppression speaks volumes about the tame reformism of the SWP.

But in neither incarnation can the SWP show the feeblest grasp of what *Roots* is all about: the "African heritage"—pushed in the 1960's as the alternative to bankrupt civil-rights reformism—now so smoothly reconciled with accommodation to the racist status quo. *Roots* is the pop-culture reflection of daishiki-clad black administrators doling out capitalism's crumbs



On slave ship—scene from television show 'Roots.'

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On slave ship—scene from television show 'Roots.'

called for prime time for another media hit, "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman!")

Meanwhile, Progressive Labor (PL), attempting to stem organizational disintegration with another round of ritual "self-criticism," is openly airing its confusion in the pages of *Challenge*. An article in the 10 February issue noted that Haley appeals to racial solidarity rather than class unity; *Roots*, "a nest of distortions" filled with "racist and sexist stereotypes," "appeals to crude nationalism." But in the 24 February issue one "H.H."—perhaps a grizzled veteran of PL's numerous campaigns against racist textbooks—rebuked the earlier writer for a "non-dialectical and sectarian approach to culture." H.H., apparently a true believer in PL's anti-Marxist notion that the root of racial oppression is racist ideas, evidently noticed that *Roots* effectively tapped the wellsprings of liberal white guilt to which PL's "anti-racism" campaigns are geared: by "making racism a mass issue," *Roots* enables "communists to put forward revolutionary conclusions within that discussion." Elevating idealism to new heights of absurdity, H.H. contends that *Roots* "represents a reform of bourgeois ideology vis a vis racism" which "is analogous to a wage increase on the economic front!"

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has the dubious distinction of having

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But in neither incarnation can the SWP show the feeblest grasp of what *Roots* is all about: the "African heritage"—pushed in the 1960's as the alternative to bankrupt civil-rights reformism—now so smoothly reconciled with accommodation to the racist status quo. *Roots* is the pop-culture reflection of daishiki-clad black administrators doling out capitalism's crumbs to the impoverished black masses. The past and present enthusiasts of black nationalism are incapable of understanding that nationalism and liberal integrationism share the same class standpoint; thus, either can serve as the ideology of black petty-bourgeois advancement, depending on the prevalent social-political climate, and elements of each can be easily grafted onto the other.

Apparently working on the assumption that "130 million Americans can't be wrong," the "Third Worldist" *Guardian* editors were loath to sharply criticize *Roots*. Instead, they sagely advised "Marxist-Leninists" to unite with the good aspects (whatever they may be) and struggle against the bad (ditto).

But while the *Guardian* cautions that *Roots* may evoke "narrow Black nationalism," the Maoist October League (OL) attacks it for being insufficiently nationalist! Articles in the OL's *Call* (14, 21 and 28 February) take Haley to task for failing to depict "the development of the Afro-American nation out of the many African peoples," citing for example the "process" which led to the "forging of one common language out of many" African tongues as "one of the features of slave life" that generated a distinct black nationality in the South.

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Where We Stand:

The Spartacist League's Scandalous Chauvinism

The Spartacist League (SL) is one of several centrist groups that claim to represent the continuity of the Fourth International. The SL boasts that it (unlike the other Pabloite movements) is building a genuinely principled international tendency. James Robertson, the Spartacists' founder and a member of its Central Committee, recently returned from an international tour and reported on his findings at a public meeting held in New York City on January 29th of this year. It is this forum to which we draw the reader's attention. It exploded the Spartacist League's phoney claim to internationalism. Unfortunately, the performance was of such a character that it added a new, ugly, and damaging stain on the reputation of Trotskyism which Robertson falsely identifies himself with.

Robertson spoke for ninety minutes, giving what was heralded as an analysis of the world conjunctural situation. It was somewhat incredible that the leader of a group which characterizes Russia, China and similar societies as "workers' states" had nothing at all to say about most of them — with one exception. But that political oversight quickly paled into insignificance. In the course of his meandering travelogue, Robertson delivered a series of chauvinist epithets that insulted the revolutionary capacities of the working classes everywhere and denigrated almost every non-white, non-American and non-English speaking people that got in his way. His theme was to blame the working masses for the weak state of the revolutionary movement.

Robertson warmed up with the sneering comment that the Vietnamese victory over imperialism was a "big deal" and was "not really as important as the defeat of the workers in Indonesia" because "not many people live in Indochina." After this cavalier dismissal of 56 million Indochinese people and a struggle which has had enormous consequences for imperialism, he really got going.

"The Greek population exists by selling its children or selling Swiss watches to one another."

Albania, the only "workers state" Robertson saw fit to mention, was a nation of "goat-fuckers."

"Northern Europe is dripping with fat," so the workers of this region can be "bought off with slight adjustments." Similarly, the foreign workers in these countries can also be bought off and when deported would "only end up supporting popular fronts."

Canada was not worth considering (although the Spartacist tendency has a group in that country) because it is only the "fringe on the sully extending fifty miles north of the U.S. border." Non-English speaking North America (Mexico and Quebec, with the most advanced class struggles on the continent) was specifically ignored in this talk, which was supposed to deal with the world revolutionary setting.

As for the U.S., the one country where Robertson believes that Trotskyism has an "unbroken tradition," it too "is a jaded

country" which, like Northern Europe, "drips with fat if you exclude the Negro (sic) from the statistics." But Robertson saved his vilest spleen for the American blacks: "The black population burned down the ghettos and it's now waiting for the Jews to come back and open up the drug stores." High prices charged by storekeepers in the ghetto were attributed to the fact that "black kids rip them off." And that was his entire analysis on this subject, from beginning to end.

Robertson's remarks would have been disgusting from anyone, but coming in a public presentation from the leader of a "revolutionary" organization based in the world's foremost imperialist country, they were nothing short of a scandal. Even more scandalous was the Spartacists' justification of Robertson's vicious cynicism — in the name of Marx and Lenin! Lenin was absolutely unequivocal on the question:

"That is why internationalism on the part of oppressors or 'great' nations, as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies), must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation, the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice. Anybody who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question, he is still essentially petty bourgeois in his point of view and is, therefore, sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view."

Robertson's comments were put forward seriously. They were not even meant as remarkably bad jokes, and the SL in its cynical defense never claimed them to be. Even had that been the case, such insensitivity would have been impossible for a revolutionary leader, for as Lenin went on to say:

"... Nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice; 'offended' nationals are not sensitive to anything so much as to the feeling of equality and the violence of this equality, if only through negligence or jest — to the violation of that equality by their proletarian comrades." ("On the Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation'," December 31, 1922; in *National Liberation, Socialism and Imperialism*, International Publishers, pp. 168-9.)

There is, as Lenin's warning suggests, a political explanation for Robertson's behavior. The Spartacist League is Pabloite: that is, it holds that the dozen countries where state power was conquered by Communist Parties since World War II are ("detorted") workers' states — which means that the socialist revolution was made under the leadership of petty-bourgeois Stalinists or nationalists. Such a notion abandons the Marxist understanding that the proletariat is the only revolutionary class in this epoch.

Pabloism by its nature is a capitulation to the petty bourgeoisie in theory and practice. It leads its followers to a petty-bourgeois outlook rather than to champion the historical interests of the working class. Given the variety of layers of the

petty bourgeoisie, pulverized by capitalism into an asteroid belt between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the different branches of Pabloism (and of centrism generally) make their capitulations in different ways. Some, like the United Secretariat majority led by Ernest Mandel and Pierre Frank, defer primarily to the petty-bourgeois leaderships of nationalist "third world" struggles. Others, like the American SWP, make their foremost obeisance to the labor bureaucracy, the petty-bourgeois leadership of the working class in the imperialist countries. (The SWP has become the cheerleaders and torch bearers for the mild-left bureaucrats, the most recent of which is Ed Sadlowski of the United Steelworkers.) Most centrists manage to submit to both of these petty-bourgeois tendencies at once.

The uniqueness of the Spartacist League, what many leftists mistakenly regard as its "sectarianism," is that it does not capitulate to the nationalism of the oppressed nations — because it directly reflects the attitudes of the privileged sections of the American working class. The SL provides a left cover for the labor aristocracy's contempt for and fear of the oppressed workers.

The Spartacists appear very left only because there does not exist a real left current in the union bureaucracy of the United States. A rising class struggle in the future will undoubtedly cast up, as in the past, such a left bureaucratic centrism presenting itself as a battling revolutionary force. (The articles in this issue on the Communist Parties and the Southern class struggle illustrate two possible variants.) This is what the Spartacists are a foretaste of, what they are laying the propaganda basis for now: a real militant reformism with, as they say, at least one demand from the Transitional Program. Therefore they don't buy the milquetoast Sadlowskis. One look at the British left Labourites of today on racism, or the left bureaucracy in the American past, will show that national chauvinism is just as virulent a disease on the "left" as among the right reformists. And Robertson presents it to us now.

The singlemindedness of the SL points to a specific political conception within the general line of Pabloism. Pablo's abandonment of Trotskyism in favor of petty-bourgeois capitulation was predated by the Shachtmanites' break from the Fourth International in 1940. In giving up on the revolutionary gains made by the workers through the Bolshevik Revolution, Shachtman was originally a *left* centrist reflection of the cynical retreat of the left reformist labor bureaucracy and intelligentsia. Shachtman's "Third Camp" was not equivalent to the later "third world" politics. While it subsequently stood for the support of pro-Western ex-colonial leaderships, it placed its original and long-term faith in the left sections of the trade union leaderships of the democratic (imperialist) countries; these were the "advanced" sectors to be won to the "socialist" cause.

Shachtmanism differed from the broader development of Pabloism only in the direction of its capitulation. The Pabloites of various lands used their pro-Stalinism to reflect adaptations made to other petty-bourgeois currents. The historic links between Pabloite and Shachtmanite groupings were not accidental; the method was the same.

The Spartacist League is a Pabloite-Shachtmanite hybrid. It cloaks its quite direct acceptance of the outlook of the labor aristocracy in the so-called advanced cultures with the veneer of Trotskyist orthodoxy on the "workers' states." In fact, as we showed in the article "Permanent Revolution in Southern Africa" (*Socialist Voice* No. 1), it was only the Spartacists' support of Russian imperialism that permitted them to come

to the delayed support of the anti-U.S. imperialism struggle in Angola.

The uniqueness of the SL also lies in its clarity. Other Pabloites waver over exactly what class forces created the "deformed workers' states." Not so the Spartacists, who boldly state that the petty-bourgeoisie (in "exceptional circumstances," but the exception has been the inevitable rule) can make the socialist revolution. Similarly, very few if any other Pabloites (or Shachtmanites) would express their chauvinism so baldly as does Robertson. In fact, they would recoil in anger — to their credit.

Robertson is certainly not a racist in the Hitlerian sense; it is not at all a question of genetic inheritance. Nor do the Stalinists in the USSR wish to physically exterminate the Jews; they merely want to eliminate them as an identifiable cultural entity different from the Great Russians. Such is the SL's view: Let the Albanians and the Greeks learn civilized behavior. Let the blacks give up their unproductive rage ("nothing much happened after the ghetto riots," said Robertson). Let them all act like his image of good socialistic white American trade unionists who are the offspring of advanced technological culture and Robertson will welcome them all into the fold.

If the SL's preference for the labor aristocracy had not been made sufficiently clear by Robertson's presentation, his (and other Spartacists') defense of his performance and of the SL's long-standing positions during the discussion period proved the point. The Spartacists' first defense against attacks from the League for the Revolutionary Party (and also from the Communist Cadre organization) was that we were "moralists" for objecting to Robertson's invective.

SL speakers, Robertson in the lead, denounced the "lumpen rage" of the black ghettos — as if anger against oppression is reprehensible and confined only to the lumpenproletariat. We are far from moralists, however, in identifying with the rage of black workers. The SL's effort to lump outraged masses with the lumpen, and to separate them from more solidly employed blacks, is precisely the present political strategy of the left liberals. The unemployed and marginally employed workers for whom capitalism can no longer provide jobs are tossed on the scrap-heap, and their fury is equated with that of the criminal elements.

Similarly, the SL continued to defend its opposition to free immigration from the oppressed countries into the imperialist heartlands on the grounds that it would threaten the "national identity of the recipient countries" (*Workers Vanguard*, January 18, 1974). This position is a sophisticated left cover for the favorite remedy of the labor bureaucracy for unemployment, crime and the other ills of capitalism: blame them on foreign workers. The SL does not support the bureaucracy's present course, but again it serves notice of its future course in a more left setting.

LRP speakers charged that the SL had reneged on the revolutionary obligation to give military tactical support in the anti-imperialist struggle in Angola and in the Palestinian fight in Lebanon when they were under attack by the U.S.-backed right wing and the Syrian army. The SL replied that Lebanon was a "tribal puzzle" whose pieces, apparently, have no relation to world imperialism. Warming to the subject of the Middle East, the SL repeated the familiar Zionist slogan that the Arabs really wanted to "drive the Jews into the sea."

As for Africa, the Spartacists again stressed the importance of the South African whites for the anti-apartheid struggle because of their "privileged access to culture and technology" (*Workers Vanguard*, January 14, 1977); the blacks would be

"wiped out" without whites on their side. In perhaps the most outrageous remark of the evening, Robertson affirmed the SL's support for the "right of the Boers to self-determination" — against a black republic, not the British Empire of 1900! This was a direct appeal to the bourgeoisie's most corrupted allies in the working class.

Responding to angry criticism from the audience, the Spartacists alleged that they, like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, supported the right of self-determination for "all" nations. What a travesty! It would never have occurred to Lenin, nor to any other leftist until the Spartacists, that the "great," imperialist oppressor nations were in need of self-determination. The right of self-determination means the right to secede from an oppressor. The South African whites already have their independence, and use it to enslave the

groups who had come to personify capitalism and its oppression, as well as at the petty nationalisms of his epoch which were stalking horses for Czarist Russian reaction, the main threat against the oppressed and the progressive forces of his day. Robertson, in contrast, aimed his barbs against the nationalism of the oppressed and thereby proved that, in Lenin's words, he "has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question, he is still essentially petty bourgeois in his point of view." To be a Leninist is to be an anti-nationalist, but one cannot be a Leninist without distinguishing between the nationalisms of the oppressed and the oppressors.

The SL tried to turn the tables on the LRP by accusing us of acquiescing to racism through our "refusal to defend busing." The SL has indeed mastered the art of substituting slander for

Documents of Struggle

The League for the Revolutionary Party is publishing the major documents that the Revolutionary Party Tendency (now the LRP) issued during its fight inside the Revolutionary Socialist League. Two documents of the series are now available in pamphlet form.

No. 1, *The RSL in Crisis; Behind the Labor Party Slogan.* The first major re-evaluation of the labor party concept by Trotskyists in decades. The persistent use of this slogan regardless of time and place represents a denial of the need for the revolutionary party.

Price: \$.25 each. Order from: *Socialist Voice*, 170 Broadway, Room 201, New York, NY 10038, USA.

No. 2, *Statement of the Revolutionary Party Tendency.* This document examines the specific features of the decay of the RSL. It resurrects the Bolshevik position on the united front as a front for action, as opposed to a programmatic or propaganda bloc.

blacks. To guarantee such rights to an oppressor can only mean equating the rights of oppressor and oppressed — and that always comes down to denying the rights of the oppressed. If the South African whites demand "self-determination" on the verge of a black victory in that country, whose side will the South African Spartacists be on?

The equation of the rights to national self-determination of the oppressor and the oppressed is a constant theme of the Spartacists, not only in South Africa but in Palestine and Northern Ireland as well. The equal right of the rich and poor to sleep in the cold is a notorious watchword of the bourgeois democrats, not of proletarian revolutionists who recognize such "equal rights" as a cynical defense of capitalist inequality.

The Spartacists' other repeated defenses against our attacks were 1) that we were wrong to criticize Robertson's words rather than the SL program, and 2) that Karl Marx was also famous for using strong language in describing various nationalities. The LRP, in fact, said a good deal about the SL's program in our intervention. Not surprisingly, however, Robertson and the SLers who followed his lead chose not to answer our politics but instead tried to cover up the impact of Robertson's "great nation" bullying. The Spartacists overlook the fact that program is not just a list of positions — it is everything a party stands for. In this case Robertson's words spoke louder than his purported political message. One who claims to be an internationalist yet breathes contempt for every people but his own, is no internationalist.

As for Marx's language, an LRP speaker pointed out that Marx lived before the epoch of imperialism, before the holocaust of Nazism had painted in bloody colors the depths to which decaying capitalism can descend. Marx raged at those

politics. Our tendency has always made clear that the first obligation of revolutionaries in the busing controversy is to defend blacks from racist attacks. And we have also stressed that "busing is a vicious ruling class attack on blacks and cannot be supported." (For a full discussion, see *Socialist Action*, September 1976.)

Busing for racial integration of the schools is a liberal bourgeois strategy that claims to improve the education of black children by associating them with whites, a claim endorsed by the Spartacist League. In reality, busing is a cover for denying decent education in the cities' financial crisis by cutting school budgets and shifting children from one decaying school to another. Black students are being used as well as cannon fodder in an effort by the ruling class to mobilize the most backward workers against the black oppressed. We stand for the right of black children to attend schools out of the ghetto if they wish. But the SL opposes this right and grants the bourgeois judges the right to allocate schools as they see fit, for that is what the busing programs (which the SL wishes to "extend") entail.

It is noteworthy that the Spartacist League does *not* extend its busing program to the factories by advocating preferential transfers of black workers to replace white workers in better-paying jobs. That, says the SL, would be unconscionable interference by the bourgeois state into the trade unions. The state's manipulation of education, in contrast, for them is not a class question. This distinction once again demonstrates their commitment to the labor aristocracy, their consequent trade union chauvinism — and the liberal integrationist, cultural-chauvinist veneer which is the hallmark of the Spartacists. The state must be prevented from dividing the working class, not only in the unions but throughout social

and political life. Wherever the division is attempted it is the task of revolutionaries to identify with the struggle of the oppressed sectors of the class, to try to win the better-off workers away from the bourgeois strategy and to prevent the mobilization of the labor aristocracy against the interests of the oppressed and the working class as a whole.

We note the fact that the Spartacists' own account of the forum in the February 4 *Workers Vanguard* did not quote any of the reprehensible comments which we had attacked, although it summarized the speech at great length. Nor did it deal honestly with the SL's opponents; the article referred to our criticisms only as a "glorification of lumpen rage." The citations from Robertson's speech, however, are proof that our outrage was based on quite different considerations.

The remarks that we cite here were taken down by *Socialist Voice* reporters at the forum. After the forum, a Spartacist official agreed that we could listen to their tape recording of the talk in order to verify our notes. Several days later, however, we were told that "the tapes will not be made available externally." As we replied to the Spartacist League in a letter challenging their refusal:

"Comrade Robertson's talk was public, and it would seem that you would, under normal circumstances, want to have the contents of such a talk widely disseminated. However, we can well understand why you have now decided to suppress such a frank admission of your chauvinist politics. Your cowardly account in *Workers Vanguard* No. 143 testifies to your intent to disguise the content of Robertson's remarks and the real nature of the attack made upon it by the LRP."

We again repeated our challenge to the SL to make the tapes of this public talk available to the left public and the workers' movement.

Since our quotations come from notes taken by several comrades and were checked with those of non-members of our organization who were present, we believe them to be reasonably accurate. If the Spartacists wish to challenge the accuracy of the quoted material, if they wish to argue that Robertson did not make such chauvinist and racist remarks, there is a simple recourse. Make the tapes available. If access to the tapes is given to us (and to others like the Communist Cadre who have requested it) we will publish any necessary corrections. We frankly doubt that the SL will yield the tapes, if only because they contain even more insults and outrages than those listed here.

The Spartacists' international tendency will die aborning. Its implicit orientation to the labor aristocracy spells its doom. For the most oppressed sectors of the workers are where the revolutionary parties must sink their roots. These layers have no stake in maintaining the capitalist system and will inevitably make up disproportionate numbers of the leading cadres of the reconstructed Fourth International. The struggle to forge the International will have to sweep aside the chauvinist conceptions of the Spartacist League, for internationalism abhors the slightest concession to the ideology of imperialism. It will reject capitulation to capitalism in any form — statified, monopolized, or petty — and thereby learn the necessary lessons from the tragic degeneration of the Fourth International. ■

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