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To All YSAers

Dear Comrades,

One of the most important tasks of the YSA National Convention is the election of the National Committee. The National Committee is the national leadership of the YSA charged with carrying out the decisions of the National Convention and is the highest decision-making body between YSA conventions.

Locals should organize discussions of the function of the National Committee and how it is elected as an important part of the pre-convention discussion. These discussions should explain how our National Committee is elected on the basis of a slate proposed by a nominating commission composed of representatives of the local convention delegations. Convention delegates from each local should meet before the convention to select nominations from their local to the National Committee and to choose which delegate should serve on the nominating commission.

The YSA's method of choosing the NC is taken from the Socialist Workers Party's experiences in democratically selecting a revolutionary leadership. We are reprinting these sections from Letters From Prison to help explain our conception of the National Committee and our method of selecting it. This material should be made available to all comrades and should serve as the basis for discussions in the locals.

Comradely,

Tony Thomas
Tony Thomas
YSA National Office

Excerpts from Letters From Prison

In our opinion the most important reason for stretching the convention out for another day is to give adequate time for a free and well-deliberated selection by the delegates of the new National Committee. This is one of the strongest guarantees of the democracy of the party. Our party has always been more democratic, ten times more democratic, in this respect than any other party. But there is room for improvement, and we should consciously seek out the necessary methods.

We never went in for any of the rigging, wangling, vote-trading and leadership-pressure devices by which, in practically all other parties (strike out the word "practically") the convention delegates are usually defrauded of a large part of their democratic freedom of choice. If one has a self-sufficient revolutionary party in mind, all such methods are self-defeating. A revolutionary party needs a leadership that really represents the party, that is really one with the party.

Without this democratic corrective, freely brought into play at every convention, centralization and discipline inevitably become caricatures and forms of abuse which injure the organization every time they are exercised. A revolutionary leadership must feel free at all times to act boldly and confidently in the name of the party. For that, it needs to be sure that there is no flaw in its mandate.

No rules exist to guide us in the technical execution of this difficult and delicate task to the best advantage of the party. The democratic selection of the primary and secondary leaders is a sufficiently important question--nobody knows how much damage can be done by bungling it--but, as far as I know, nobody has ever written anything about it. Nobody has taught us anything. We are obliged to think and experiment for ourselves.

The democratic impulses of the rank and file incline them to react unfavorably to "slates," as they feel, not without reason, that they narrow down for all practical purposes the freedom of choice. The Social-Democratic politicians, who are as undemocratic a collection of rascals as one can ever expect to meet, have always exploited this sentiment by announcing their firm, democratic opposition to slates. Of course, there was a little catch to their virtuous slogan of "no slates." They meant no openly avowed slates which would possibly be open to discussion and amendment. Instead of that, the noble Social-Democrats rig up secret slates by means of horse trades and petty bribes to ensure their control. A good 50 percent of Social-Democratic convention "politics" is always devoted to this kind of business.

From the first days of American communism, which also coincided with the first appearance on the scene of a new type of leaders with a new conception of "politics," we tried to break through the "no-slate" fraud and devise a more honest system by which the leaders would take open responsibility for their proposals and give reasons for their preferences in the makeup of the leading committee. It became rather common practice for the leading committees, in national as well as local conventions in the communist movement, to propose a slate of candidates for the new committee to be elected. We carried the practice with us in the

independent movement of Trotskyism. (During factional struggles the slate-making arrangements were carried on in the separate caucuses of the factions.) This method was, without doubt, far superior to the "no-slate" tricks of our socialist predecessors, being more honest, and in the essence of the matter, even more democratic.

But this system also was not free from negative aspects, and even dangers. I perceived some of them long ago, have thought much about the matter, and from time to time have tried to devise corrective experiments. What impressed me most of all was the quite obvious fact that while the presentation of a slate of candidates by the leadership is the most "efficient" way to get through the business of the election of the NC-- usually the last point on the agenda, carried through in a great hurry-- it concentrates too much power in the leadership just at that very point-- the convention--where the democratic corrective of rank-and-file control should be asserted most strongly.

It is not the election of the central, most prominent and influential leaders themselves. That problem solves itself almost automatically in the interplay of party work and internal strife. The problem arises over the selection of the secondary leaders, the new committee members, the potential leaders of the future. As a rule this part of the slate if presented by the most authoritative central leaders, is accepted, whether enthusiastically or not, by the convention; many delegates are reluctant to oppose them.

It is senseless, of course, to speak of a revolutionary combat party without recognizing the necessity of a centralized, fully empowered leadership. But this states only one half of the problem. Leninist centralism is democratic centralism, a profoundly dialectical concept. The other half of the Leninist formula recognizes no less the necessity of subordinating the leadership, really as well as formally, to the party; keeping it under the control of the party. The party constitution does everything that can be done in a formal sense to provide for the interaction of centralism and democracy.

The structure of the party is strictly hierarchical. Higher committees command the lower. Full authority over all is vested in the National Committee. But the NC, like all other committees, is required to render accounts and surrender its mandate at stated intervals to the party convention to which it is subordinated. This is the formal, constitutional guarantee both for centralization and the ultimate control of the leadership.

But it is also necessary to think about the spirit as well as the letter of the party constitution. A farsighted leadership should concern itself with the elusive, intangible factors which can play such a great role in determining the actual relationship between the NC and the ranks.

Some of these factors arise from the composition of the NC and the division of functions within it. Nominally, this body consists of twenty-five members, and they all have equal rights. In addition there are fifteen alternates. But the majority come to the center only for meetings of the plenum which are not held very often. Between plenums the power is delegated to the Political Committee. From this it is quite clear that one section of the National Committee is in a position

to exert far more influence on the day-to-day work and interpretation of party policy than the other.

Again, some are older, more experienced and more prominent than others, and consequently wield greater authority in the committee as well as in the party as a whole. On the other side, the committee members from the districts and the younger members of the committee generally, who are active in local work, are closer to the rank and file than the central leaders of the party are, and represent them more directly and intimately. This gives them a special function in the NC of extraordinary importance.

Their presence represents a form of continuing rank-and-file control and supervision over the central leaders. They can fulfill this function, however, only insofar as they are people of independent influence and popularity in their own localities; only insofar as they are freely elected on their own merits, not handpicked.

To be sure, the central leaders cannot be indifferent to the selection of the secondary leadership. In this, as in everything else, leaders must lead. In a certain sense, the central party leaders "select" their collaborators and eventual successors. The question is, how to go about it? It is often easy for politically experienced leaders to convince themselves that they are better judges of the qualifications and potentialities of certain candidates than the rank-and-file delegates. And, as a rule, it is not too difficult to force their selections through by means of the "slate." This may appear to be the most "efficient" way. But in my opinion, there is a better way.

Wisdom lies in "selecting" people who have popularity and influence in their own right, and whose promotion coincides with the wishes of the party members who know them best. That means to select people who are advancing under their own power.

I came to this conclusion a long time ago, and as far as I have been able to influence the course of things it has been the party method of selecting the NC. Extensive and varied experience, with every imaginable kind of experiment, has convinced me that this method, even at the cost of incidental mistakes, works out best in the long run.

The central leaders of the party, who work from day to day without close contact with the internal life of the branches, need such a constitution of the NC if they are to lead the party confidently; lead it with the assurance that they know the moods and sentiments of the ranks and are in step with them. When doubt arises, or when some new important step is under consideration, it is only necessary to consult the out-of-town members of the NC by mail, or to call a plenum, in order to get a reliable sounding of the party. Approval of a given course by the plenum is a pretty certain forecast of similar action by the party.

Conversely, when the plenum finds it necessary to overrule the Political Committee--and this has happened more than once, notably in 1938-39--it is a sign that the Political Committee is out of line with the party and requires a change in its composition. The 1938-39 National Committee rebuked the PC several times and finally reorganized it, and later tests showed that the full plenum most accurately reflected the sentiment of the party.

A serious and conscientious party leadership should deliberately aim at a National Committee so composed as to be, in effect, a microcosm of the party. When the full plenum of such a National Committee meets between conventions, to all intents and purposes the party is there in the room. That is far more useful to responsible political leaders than a roomful of handpicked supporters without independent influence and authority. Bureaucrats who have special interests of their own to defend against the rank and file need to surround themselves with dependent henchmen; but revolutionary political leaders need support of an entirely different kind, the support of people who really represent the rank and file of the party.

There is another, and even more important, reason why the rank-and-file convention delegates should take over the election of the National Committee and be free from undue pressure and influence on the part of the national political leadership in exercising this function. The free selection of the full membership of the National Committee is perhaps the most decisive way to strengthen and reinforce genuine party democracy. It puts the political leaders under the direct supervision and control of a second line of leaders who are in intimate daily contact with the local and district organizations and, in fact, represent them in the plenum.

This control doesn't have to be exercised every day to be effective. The fact that it is there, and can be demonstrated when necessary, is what counts. Strange to relate, the professional democrats have never once in the history of our party bothered their heads about the method of selecting the National Committee from the standpoint of reinforcing party democracy. This, in my opinion, is because they tend to think of democracy almost exclusively in terms of unlimited and unrestricted self-expression and forget that control of the central leadership, which in day-to-day practices is limited to a very small group, by a larger group standing closer to the rank and file, is the most important mechanism to assure the democratic half of the Leninist formula: democratic centralism.

Throwing the floor open for nominations on the last day of the convention is not the only alternative to a slate presented by the outgoing NC. That only throws the delegate body into disorganized confusion and facilitates the manipulation of the election by means of secret slates and horse trades, the favorite method of Social-Democratic pseudo-democrats.

There is no infallible formula, but the results of our experiments over a period of many years argue most convincingly in favor of a slate prepared by a nominating commission. Of course, there are nominating commissions and nominating commissions. But the best, that is, the most democratic, is not the nominating commission appointed by the outgoing NC, nor the one elected at random from the floor of the convention. The most efficient, for the purposes set forth above, is the nominating commission selected by the branch or district delegations on a roughly proportional basis--each delegation selecting its own representatives--and then ratified by the convention. The nominating commission, thus

conceived, is a body actually representing the rank-and-file delegations from the districts.

It would be grossly improper for individual central leaders to intrude themselves upon the commission and seek to dominate its proceedings. That would amount to a circumvention of the democratic process aimed at in the proposal. It is the part of wisdom for the central leaders to leave the nominating commission to its own devices, respecting the essence of party democracy as well as the form.

The nominating commission should be selected on the first day of the convention; it should begin its sessions at once and meet at least once a day thereafter to consider the various nominations until a slate is decided upon for presentation to the convention when the election of the NC comes up on the agenda.

In my opinion, the first step of the commission at the 1944 convention should be to discard formally the ruling which paralyzed the work of the nominating commission at the 1942 convention--the utterly stupid and reactionary principle that every member of the outgoing NC was, as a matter of course, to be reelected unless good cause was shown to remove him. That turns things upside down. Nobody can be "frozen" in any position in a revolutionary party. He must stand for election at each convention, and the election must be free and open.

Room must be left for competition and rivalry and differences of opinion to operate without artificial restraints. Members of the outgoing NC should be placed in exactly the same status as new aspirants--as candidates for election. The nominating commission should adopt a rule to this effect at its first session.

The most practical next step is to take a preliminary poll to ascertain how many candidates are generally favored for election as national leaders who are not counted as representatives of any special district of the party. This will clear the road for the apportionment of the remaining places on the slate for local and district representatives. Here, again, there should be no "freezing" of old representation and no automatic closing of the door to new candidates from districts previously not represented.

The object should be to provide the fairest possible representation of the districts in the new NC; but the principle of proportional representation should be modified by other considerations: the relative importance of the district; the quality of the candidates; the special role played by certain candidates, etc.

The commission should announce the time and place of its daily sessions, and invite any delegate who wishes to argue for or against any candidate to appear and take the floor. The slate finally decided upon, either by agreement or majority vote, should be presented to the convention as the nominations of the nominating commission. That leaves the floor open for other nominations and free discussion before the ballot is taken.

Naturally, one would have to have some good arguments for another candidate to hope to amend the slate of the nominating commission. But if he thinks he has a strong case, there is no reason why he shouldn't make the attempt. Adequate time and patience must be accorded for the presentation of any such proposed amendments. The heavens will not fall if a slate is amended once in a while.

One word more. The convention should not shunt the election of the new NC off till the last hurried half-hour of the convention, when impatience of departing delegations would tend to discourage full discussion and ample consideration of the various nominations. The best procedure would be to fix a definite hour and day to take up the election of the NC whether the rest of the agenda is finished or not at that time. This decision should be made demonstratively in order to call sharp attention to the vital importance of full and careful deliberation in selecting the party leadership. And even more important, the convention will thus give itself time to do the job right.

All of these measures will not guarantee the election of an ideal National Committee. But they should help to provide us with the best committee that a free party can select from the material at hand by the method of party democracy. If the returning delegates go home with the feeling that this has been accomplished, the new NC will be able to begin its work with a strong authority. On the other hand, the leadership, precisely because of the care and deliberation taken in the selection of the personnel of the NC, will feel itself to be more than ever under the watchful supervision and control of the party.

Report on Detroit Third World Antiwar Work by John H.

The success or failure of the Detroit local's approach to antiwar work in the third world communities is yet to be verified. After an abortive attempt to build a Third World Vietnam Solidarity Committee, we lapsed for a while into inactivity. After discussion it was decided to approach already established formations within the black community. The YSA comrades approaching Associations of Black Students through the SMC; the Detroit Coalition to End the War Now approaching the adult group within the black community.

The decision to approach these groups has the possibility of bearing fruit for the following reasons:

1) The success of the massive October 15 demonstration and rally, built almost entirely by the SMC, and witnessing the presence of at least 5,000 blacks, verifies the depth of the antiwar sentiment within the black community. Most of the youth there were drawn by the sheer momentum of the action. Preparations and legal hassles involved in getting the 15th off the ground were widely covered by the local press. The leaderships of high school and college ABSs were in many instances forced against their will to address themselves to the action. For instance, at the rally itself the organized ultraleft fringe of the high school movement realized it actually had no control over its constituency. Although they tried to initiate a mass exodus from the rally their call went unheeded and the majority of high school students remained for the duration of the rally.

2) ABSs at at least two colleges have expressed, independently of our intervention, an interest in building the November 14th strike and the November 15th March on Washington. Besides the two ABSs mentioned, we have the possibility of engaging a third in antiwar activities through the intervention of a comrade at Highland Park Junior College. Various high school ABSs have been sending representatives on an irregular basis to the regional SMC meetings here.

3) An article in the Michigan Chronicle, obviously in response to the October 15th action, appeared, written by Dan Aldridge, a leading militant in Detroit. The article calls for blacks to address themselves to the antiwar movement. There has also been a letter from Gwen Patton urging ABSs to build the November Moratorium.

How solid or enduring this new attitude on the part of ABS leadership will be is doubtful. The continued involvement on the part of ABSs and black student groupings in antiwar activities depends on the state of the movement, in particular the state of the SMC, and upon the active intervention of our comrades in these organizations.

In any case, recognizing the leftward trend with the ABS memberships and the impossibility of drawing the best militants from allegiance to their organizations into a third world committee, we have begun approaching the ABSs. The November 14th action will be proof of the failure or success of this approach.

Within the SMC itself we are attempting to organize a black caucus. This will depend on the success of drawing the independents who have expressed interest in the now defunct Third World Vietnam Solidarity Committee into the SMC and on reaching out to new layers of black students and youth to join the SMC. The need for a black caucus is readily apparent considering the uneven development within the black and third world communities. Some of the blacks who have been attending regional SMC meetings are solid nationalists; others have not yet reached that level of consciousness. In the future it is quite possible that the SMC will draw in large numbers of youth of the NAACP youth variety. A black caucus within the SMC could serve to raise their level of commitment to support the Vietnamese liberation fighters as well as to educate them on some of the basics of nationalism and on the contradictions inherent in this system.