

Jimstown as we knew it

Reflections on Spartacist history

BOLSHEVIK TENDENCY

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by Tom Riley

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Box 332, Adelaide St. Stn., Toronto,
Canada M5C 2J4

BOLSHEVIK

Website: www.bolsheviktendency.org

Email: contact@bolsheviktendency.org

X: @BolshevikTend

Facebook: BolshevikTendency

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Last August [2021] a debate over the history of the moribund Spartacist tendency took place on the website of former Bolshevik Tendency (BT) member Fischerzed. The exchange, which included a post by our comrade Alan Gibson, sparked interest among a layer of former members of the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B), several of whom contacted us.

There was also curiosity about the identity of “Carl Steele,” a former member of the SL/B, whose debate with James Creegan (a one-time New York Spartacist who spent a decade in the BT) comprised the bulk of the thread. No one who associated with the SL/B in the early 1980s could remember an individual named Carl, yet his commentary was clearly informed by personal experience. It came as a bit of a surprise when I eventually realized who Carl was as he and I had several lengthy discussions and corresponded for a few months in 1983-84.

In March 1976 Cathy Nason and I, who had been among the initial Spartacist recruits in Canada, were sent to Britain to join the original nucleus of the London Spartacist Group (LSG). We returned to Toronto two years later and were subsequently purged from the international Spartacist tendency (iSt) in 1980. The techniques described in “The Road to Jimstown” were drawn largely from that experience as well as similar events described by others. Nason and I attended the December 1978 meeting in New York where James Robertson, Spartacist founder/leader, celebrated the gutting of the leading strata of the vibrant Spartacus Youth League (SYL) in what became known as the “clone purge.” We immediately recognized this as a destructive and irrational act; Robertson cynically described it as a “sub-political,” pre-emptive strike intended to prevent a layer of talented youth from one day potentially developing into some sort of oppositional formation.

We had been alarmed by Liz Gordon’s treatment earlier that year when Robertson threatened to split the organization (i.e., get rid of Gordon) because she dared to criticize a formulation of his in an article on Roman Polanski. When charges were levelled against Bill Logan in January 1979, Nason and I were well aware that it was a bureaucratic frame-up. We shared a common political history that pre-dated our time in the SL by a couple of years and this created a level of trust that proved very valuable. The ability to compare notes and discuss developments freely with someone at least partially offset the mounting pressure within the group to normalize things that were not right. Many comrades, including Carl apparently, were alone and isolated and therefore more susceptible to the notion that any doubts or reservations about the behavior of the leadership reflected subjective weakness and/or a petty-bourgeois, anti-revolutionary mentality. This resulted in an inclination to suppress or ignore problems and embrace anything and everything proposed by the New York “center.”

As the Spartacist tendency degenerated, any expression of dissent or even lack of enthusiasm for proposals emanating from the leading cadres could lead to becoming the focus of a round of Maoist-style “criticism/self-criticism.” One former Spartacist insightfully observed: “Perhaps the most crucial element in perpetuating the internal regime in the SL is the unwritten law that a member must report to the organization any remarks or behavior of another member which is suspect in any way....” The author continued: “The effect of this policy within the organization is quite pronounced: everyone is afraid to talk honestly to anyone else for fear that their remarks will be reported (behind their back, of course) to the local hierarchy or (perhaps

worse) kept in reserve as ammunition by the other party to the conversation to be fired with deadly effect at some inevitable future criticism session of the errant member.... “As a consequence of the ‘fink’ rule, it is extremely rare for anyone in the organization to have any real friends because communication and trust are severely limited by the prevailing mutual paranoia.

“An interesting variety of the betrayal/counter-betrayal behavior encouraged by the rule is that any member who hears or sees anything that should be reported, but does not do so, may later find himself or herself denounced by the ‘guilty’ party for not reporting the latter to the Party! “The by-products of the situation are many and dangerous. People who may harbor doubts, questions or disagreements are forced to repress them or, at a minimum, keep quiet about them for fear of being branded in the organization as a deviationist or anti-party element who would then be subject to further bureaucratic victimization.”

—*Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt No. 4*

In the summer of 1974 Nason and I were among the handful of members in the SL’s fledgling Toronto branch. Despite our junior status, when Adaire Hannah (then Bill Logan’s partner) visited Toronto, we were told all about life in the Australian section, where members lived in “the Barracks” and turned over their paychecks to the leadership, who in turn gave them an allowance. I recall thinking that despite my agreement with their politics, I would probably not be able to live under such a grossly intrusive regime. Adaire also told us about John Ebel and his Menshevik belly-aching concerning various things, among them how a young woman in Australia, Vicky, had been pressured to not become a mother. There was a commission set up by the SL leadership in New York in 1974 that investigated Ebel’s complaints and essentially dismissed them.

Five years later when Vicky’s case became the centerpiece of the Bill Logan show trial, James Robertson feigned ignorance of what had happened to her as well as other goings-on in Australia. We knew he was not being truthful and it was obvious to us that Logan was being stitched up. Knowing that, however, did not alter our conviction that the Spartacist tendency was the sole representative of authentic Trotskyism in the world, something for which James Robertson deserved most of the credit. When the Logan purge was announced at a Toronto local meeting, Nason and I, who had worked under Logan in England the previous year, obliquely dissented, commenting that this was an unfortunate development as Bill had made valuable contributions to building the SL/B and was instrumental in winning over an important layer of talented comrades from the Workers Socialist League (WSL).

In his exchange with Carl, James Creegan explained that although he saw many things that he did not care for during his time in the SL, he soon realized—as Nason and I had some years earlier—that in Robertson’s group you only got one fight, and so it should be over something important. Nason and I joined the Spartacists roughly seven years before Carl and Creegan did, when the group was in its prime, sinking roots in the trade unions, and engaging in serious polemics with various ostensibly Trotskyist formations internationally while simultaneously growing in influence within the North American left. There were problems—as the 1974 exoneration of the Australian regime by the Ebel commission demonstrated—but they did not appear to be endemic; the mood was upbeat, the political positions advanced by the leadership were consistently revolutionary and the internal life of the group was generally pretty healthy. When political disputes did arise, or the leadership criticized individual members, the intent was to

correct and educate. Although sometimes carried out in an insensitive and heavy-handed manner, these interventions were not designed to crush or drive out supposed miscreants.

The internal character of the group Creegan and Carl joined in 1981 was very different from that of the SL circa 1974. In the mid-70s, Robertson lived modestly in a railroad apartment on the west side of Upper Manhattan much as he had in the 1960s and drank cheap California red wine directly out of screw-top gallon jugs. By the early 1980s he was living in a biggish loft with a jacuzzi in fashionable lower Manhattan, drinking good Scotch and running a tab at his favorite local restaurant (which of course the party treasury covered).

Nason and I were aware that there were some things wrong with the SL by the time of the Logan trial in 1979, but we remained deeply loyal to the organization and had enormous confidence in the wisdom and political acumen of its leadership. We knew that Logan's actions in Australia had enjoyed the approbation of Robertson and his cronies, and that his trial was therefore essentially a frame-up. All the same, we viewed it as a falling out between bureaucrats without significant programmatic content. We also appreciated that many members who lacked our knowledge believed that Robertson's intervention was motivated by genuine outrage at Logan's abuses.

In 1980, a year after Logan was expelled, Nason and I essentially acquiesced to our own purge because, as with Logan, we saw no "political" grounds for going into opposition to the leadership. We felt that it was all a big mistake and hoped that, in the event it did not blow over, we would somehow eventually find a path to being reintegrated. When the Toronto purge was just getting underway, a comrade approached Nason and suggested that if we fought back, we could probably win a majority of the membership of the Canadian group and end up as a new group with an office, bank account and newspaper already in place. We rejected this suggestion because we simply did not want to fight: we had no programmatic differences and therefore no reason to break with what we remained firmly convinced was the only revolutionary Marxist organization in the world.

Our confidence in Robertson and the rest of the SL's top leadership was due to the historic record of unflinching adherence to revolutionary principle and the incisive analysis of many complicated international issues throughout the 1970s, including Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular in Chile, the near-revolutionary situation in Portugal in 1974-75, Jimmy Carter's fraudulent "Human Rights" offensive against the USSR and Ayatollah Khomeini's reactionary "Islamic Revolution" in 1979. The SL rigorously defended the principle of keeping the capitalist state out of the workers' movement while its leftist competitors endorsed "reformers" like Ed Sadowski in the Steelworkers and Arnold Miller in the Mine Workers who pursued a strategy of reliance on capitalist courts to combat corrupt union bureaucrats. The SL rejected cross-class ideologies like feminism and black nationalism, while also fighting hard to advance the interests of the specially oppressed. On all these questions, and many more, the Spartacists defended an authentically Trotskyist position against virtually every other international tendency. In our view, that was the decisive consideration.

During the two years following our purge we spent a lot of time with other ex-members in Toronto going over what happened and trying to make sense of it. In the course of these discussions, we eventually arrived at the fairly obvious proposition that in the early 1980s, as in 1903 (when the original Bolshevik/Menshevik division occurred), "the

organizational question is a political question." Our task, we realized, was to distinguish the arbitrary and abusive behavior of the increasingly cynical Robertson leadership clique from the pristine political analysis which still regularly appeared in the pages of *WV*.

In July 1982 we made contact with four former SL comrades in the Bay Area (Ursula Jensen, Howard Keylor, Bob Mandel and Lisa Sommers) and within a few months hammered out the text of the *Declaration of an External Tendency of the iSt* which we distributed exclusively to members and supporters of the Spartacist tendency. One of the issues that required considerable discussion was the Logan case, as some ET founders who attended the trial in 1979 had been taken in by the whole charade.

Carl Steele & the External Tendency of the iSt

After Nason and I returned to Canada following the March 1978 founding of the SL/B, we remained in touch with a few comrades in Britain and followed developments as closely as we could from afar. By the time we launched the External Tendency (ET) we were aware that a lot of recruits had been ground up and thrown out of the SL/B. In April 1983 we returned to London to address a small gathering of former SL/B members who were curious enough to come out to hear our views. We basically told them that in its prime the SL represented many of the best traditions of James P. Cannon's party in the period when it was guided by Leon Trotsky, and that we considered the Spartacist political legacy to be critically important in the future reconstruction of a viable revolutionary organization.

None of those in attendance were particularly interested in what we had to say. The more experienced cadres all concluded that the Trotskyist project was hopeless, and most of the others did not seem to have ever grasped the basics. In a 7 May 1983 internal report to the ET, I described our surprise at discovering how little Trotskyism many of these ex-SL/B members had ever absorbed:

"it is not so much cynicism as the fact that they were never really fully recruited to the program. This is so general that it suggests that the members are not really being trained as we were. Consequently once the organizational constraint is slipped it is easy to dump the politics because they haven't been deeply assimilated. This is no surprise, politics isn't what goes on inside the iSt/SLB much anymore. It does have implications for us however, i.e., on the whole the iSt isn't reproducing cadres anymore."

The attendees at our meeting all welcomed the opportunity to vent and to swap stories so we found out a lot about goings on in the British Spartacist operation. We were surprised to learn how far, and how fast, the SL/B had fallen since its founding—it had obviously become a very different organization than the one we left in 1978.

The discussions with the former SL/Bers provided the basis for "Whither Britain?", an article on the SL/B that appeared in the first issue of the *ET Bulletin* in August 1983:

"Much of the time and energy of the British section since its formation has been spent in seemingly endless rounds of 'housecleaning.' Of the comrades who joined the TF [23 members of the left-wing Trotskyist Faction of Alan Thorne's Workers Socialist League] in 1978 only three remain. Only one of those comrades had any substantial experience in the British left prior to joining the SL/B. Most of the comrades from a subsequent regroupment from the WSL (the Leninist Faction) are also out of the tendency. The same is true of those cadres regrouped from the IMG [International Marxist Group] in 1981."

We also noted that:

"The atmosphere of insecurity, hysteria and fear which

pervades the internal life of the SL/B makes it a pretty unpleasant place to live. Most of the people who end up outside the group are bitter about the whole experience. Many of them have explicitly renounced Trotskyism as they spin off to the Labour Party or in a variety of other unappetizing directions."

Observing that, "After five years of existence a large majority of the section's core leadership is made up of in-transfers from other sections," we did not project a bright future for the British section:

"Many of the members' entire political experience has been gained during the purges and witch-hunts which have made up so much of the history of the SL/B. Those who have so far managed to survive have acquired a certain facility in the practices in which they have been schooled."

In the internal report cited above I described an encounter with former SL/B National Chairman David Strachan, a talented cadre who once worked closely with Robertson in developing the tendency's position on the inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland (see: *Spartacist* No. 24, Autumn 1977). David approached me as I was chatting with a new SL/B recruit at a Labour Party Mayday carnival:

"He seemed to have been recently whipped. He kept leading with his chin, hardly seemed to be trying and I had the definite impression that I'd won on points quite handily. (Joel [the new SL/Ber] had been doing better). David's remarks of interest:

"1) What about all the people that Cathy [Nason] and I had brutalized in Canada before we were blown up? There were none I told him and asked if he could indicate who he was referring to—he couldn't.

"2) On Uli [Sandler—a former German Spartacist the iSt was slandering as a 'proto-fascist'. See 'Uli Sandler Case: iSt's "Big Lie," in *ETB* No. 1] both Joel earlier and then David made much of reports of Uli telling 'racist' jokes while still in the TLD [iSt's German section] about Turks. I remarked how curious it was that no one had [thought] to challenge him on these at the time but waited until he was out to 'remember' them. Doubtless another slander but they were both quite definite about it. I said that I hoped Uli had not sunk to the depths of alleging that all Turks are goatfuckers or anything repulsive like that. [An allusion to Robertson's infamous remark during a January 1977 forum in New York that 'we believe that Marx referred to Albanians as "goat-fuckers."'] (I asked if they thought there was much of a difference between Turks and Albanians in this regard—that riled them)...."

"3) He [David] raised the Logan question. I gave him our line again, at his insistence, and pointed out that no one was in a better position to know the inside story than him: 'Vicky] was your wife'. He countered lamely that even he hadn't known some of the details until the trial. I said that even I had known the general outline of the atrocity and so had everyone else and so the trial was a fraud, [although] Logan had also run a grossly abusive regime. He seemed to know that what I was saying was true at some level and couldn't get very excited about rebutting my heresy.... He asked if I thought that BL [Bill Logan] should be expelled—I replied that they were expellable offences in a d-c [democratic-centralist] org but in the iSt it would be like endorsing Healy's expulsion of Wohlforth for bureaucratism.

"In general D. seemed to be pretty tired and demoralized. I was surprised how easy he was to handle in a semi-public debate (unfortunately only Joel heard most of it). D. has also aged a lot physically since 1980. We heard about his 'nervous breakdown' (pulverization) from many of the ex-members."

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Shortly before intervening in the Fischerzed chat last summer, Carl posted the following comment on the SL to a website run by the recently deceased Louis Proyect:

"Robertson created a highly abusive sect.... Many others suffered long term emotional and mental problems after physically leaving the sect. I was a member of the British franchise for a number of years in the early 1980s. A contemporary of mine suffered a severe nervous breakdown, became incapable of looking after himself, lost his job, as a direct result of abuse at the hands of Robertson's demented followers. Most of us 'quitters' were wracked by guilt and remorse for years at having failed humanity's last best hope. And all the time Robertson had his hand in [the] till. He milked the membership for every last cent. One recruit in the UK was forced to sell his house and hand over the profits. Most of us subsisted below the poverty line, paying an extortionate amount from our low incomes, while Robertson lived rent free with all the booze he could drink.

"Robertson was a pathological cynic and a crook. His politics were incidental, a means to his personal ends. Perhaps this wasn't always so, but by the time I met him he was a profoundly corrupt creature."

—Comment by Carl Steele—June 30, 2021
@ 12:26pm—louisproyect.org

The Creegan-Steele debate on the Fischerzed website commenced a month later. In an early response to Creegan, Carl identified the SL/B comrade referred to above who suffered "a severe nervous breakdown":

"Ian Donovan, once of the BT, was a member around the same time. He got involved in a 'fight' between the female leader of the comp crew who wanted to step down from her position due to illness and the SLB leadership. [Eibhlin] McDonald and Len Meyers accused the woman of using illness as an excuse to abandon her revolutionary duties. To his credit Donovan tried to protect her. Consequently he was subjected to an intense and sustained barrage of abuse and ridicule which resulted in him suffering a severe nervous breakdown. Donovan lost his job and his home, and became incapable of looking after himself. Only his parents saved him from a life on the streets."

In a 16 October 2021 online public comment on our Facebook page Ian wrote:

"I know who Carl Steele is and he was quite complementary about me, but he is misremembering why he joined the SL. He was a highly political founding member of another left Trotskyist tendency who came over and as far as I can see chooses not to remember this perhaps because of some sort of political or personal embarrassment....I am somewhat grateful for his support when I was in a bad situation in London in the late 1980s. He was a victim of the sociopathic sadism of some of the particular hacks (Len and Eibhlin) who led the organisation at the time—as was the female circulation manager who was targeted, but the organisation at our level was not as apolitical as he now says."

Donovan remains politically active today, and despite profound disagreements with him on a broad range of issues, we find his account of life in the SL/B entirely credible.

Carl insists that for Robertson, commitment to the "preservation of a non-existent revolutionary program" was only ever a way to exert control over his acolytes and discounts the SL's adherence to "the writings of Lenin and Trotsky" as entirely superficial:

"For Robertson politics was [a] psychological cudgel, it was his way of controlling his followers, not a guide to action. He created a mission which could not be measured against success or failure in the real world—the

preservation of a non-existent revolutionary program in literary form. A pristine newspaper article which could be reconciled with the writings of Lenin and Trotsky was of infinitely greater value than a necessarily flawed and messy attempt to affect a real event."

Creegan, who witnessed plenty of abusive behavior during his time in the SL, nonetheless recognizes that it was originally created to pursue certain definite political objectives:

"Nor is it accurate to state, as Steele does, that the Spartacist League was founded on personal and sexual abuse. Robertson had a long career in the Marxist movement and was steeped in (especially Russian) revolutionary history. For all his glaring, and ultimately vitiating, faults he initially led the Spartacist League in order to carry out a serious political agenda. He succeeded in assembling around him a core of highly educated and dedicated cadres. That he could never distinguish between his political objectives and his personal authority, that he felt compelled to reduce all around him to complete subservience, undermined his own purposes. Whatever cultish features the SL possessed at birth became more exaggerated and grotesque as the organization failed to grow amid the overwhelming tides of neoliberal reaction."

When Creegan suggested that Carl must have originally joined the SL/B because he agreed with its political line, he replied:

"I can say, hand on heart, that I did not join the Spartacist League because of their political writings. My reasons for becoming a Spartacist were entirely psychological/emotional."

Donovan, who generously suggests that Carl "is misremembering why he joined the SL...perhaps because of some sort of political or personal embarrassment," doubtless recalls that Carl joined the SL/B **not once, but twice**. In 1981, when he initially signed up, he explicitly stated that his reason for joining was because he found the Spartacist positions on Soviet defensism, Afghanistan, Solidarnosc, Iran and Northern Ireland to be qualitatively superior to those of any other ostensibly Trotskyist organization.

Prior to joining the SL/B, Carl was a leading member of a rival organization, as Donovan mentioned, but he soon learned that life in Jimstown was a lot nastier than anything he had ever seen or could have imagined. He resigned from the SL/B in November 1982, only a year and a half after joining. In a 13 August 2021 comment on the Steele-Creegan exchange, the BT's Alan Davis quoted an eyewitness account of one disturbing episode that occurred during Carl's membership—when David Strachan was "reduced to an emotional wreck":

"the SL/B, according to the international leadership, 'was in pretty good shape.' This characterisation held good right up to the August 1982 national educational. Then a few weeks later all hell let loose. The SL/B leadership it turned out was guilty of racism. From a healthy section to racism in a few weeks—this should make even the most dull-witted observer a little suspicious!

"An enormous international delegation was flown in to 'find out' what was going on in Britain....The power structure is to be broken, a new and very different CC [Central Committee] is to be elected. Except that the old leadership is left intact with the addition of a few of the more abusive elements from the lower ranks. And David [the former leader] is reduced to an emotional wreck. I don't think I will ever forget the IEC [International Executive Committee] meeting that preceded the plenum. David got up to speak on the round. He stood at the front a pathetic figure, his movements strangely mechanical as he desperately tried to get a few words out of his mouth.

The eerie silence was only broken by the sound of several leading IEC members swapping jokes and guffawing. When the laughter had subsided and all attention was focused on David, unable to speak he burst into tears and ran back towards his seat. As he passed down the aisle someone shouted out 'write us a letter.' 'David...is in very poor emotional shape' pronounced Jim Robertson. No doubt indifference to such events is the hallmark of a real SL/B 'Bolshevik'....Preservation of cadre, don't make me laugh."

—Quoted in "The Robertson School of Party Building," 1917 No. 1

Alan speculated that "Perhaps Carl was in the audience at the time." In fact, Carl not only witnessed this event, **he was the eyewitness who wrote the passage Alan quoted**. Carl chose to ignore Alan's probe: perhaps he wanted to avoid the "psychological/emotional" trauma of revisiting the event, or maybe he just preferred to avoid answering the inevitably awkward follow-up questions.

Carl's description of Strachan's trashing makes clear that he fully understood, and was rightly horrified by, how things worked in the SL/B. Why then would he have re-enlisted less than two years later? By that point it seems plausible that his motivations may well have been primarily "psychological/emotional" rather than political.

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Carl did not attend our 17 April 1983 meeting with the former SL/Bers, but we did catch up with him four days later. It was immediately obvious that he was in a different category than any of the others we had talked to, and he indicated both fundamental agreement with the Spartacist tendency's program and a recognition that its internal regime was seriously diseased. In my 7 May 1983 memo to the ET, I reported that Carl:

"was in [the SL/B] for about a year and a half and left last November with no differences or criticisms of the regime. He said he left as a result of a biological urge for survival. The [leadership] tried to talk him out of it. After he was out for a while and started to talk to some of the other ex-members he realized that it had not been his contradiction so much as the SL/B's which he now characterises as something close to a 'lunatic asylum.'

"So he's a pretty experienced guy. He is approximately on our level and [although] tired and bewildered he is still alive politically and is open to us and in general favorably impressed with us in the flesh as far as we could tell.... He appeared open to our explanation of the development of bureaucracy/insanity in the SL and our assessment of the value of the remaining SL/US cadres. He said he still reads every issue of *WV* avidly but that every other iST section's press is shitty. He tended to the view that our regroupment perspective probably makes sense vis a vis the SL/US but that there just wasn't enough in the SL/B to make it worthwhile."

During our conversation Carl proposed that it would have made sense to have offered critical support to Arthur Scargill during his 1982 campaign for the presidency of the National Union of Miners. We told him we did not know the situation well enough to have a position on that. He also raised another issue:

"He has doubts about the advisability of the 'Hail Red Army' call in Afghanistan. He'd prefer 'Military Victory.' His objection is that 'Hail' represents political support to the Stalinists and they have been trying to reach an accommodation with a section of Islamic reaction."

We did not agree at the time, but a few years later, after a substantial internal discussion, we came over to Carl's position. After I returned to Canada we continued to cor-

respond. In the last letter I received from him, sent from Bristol on 21 January 1984, he promised:

"I'll reply to you much more fully in a couple of weeks. The reason for the delay is that, having run into SL/B cadres on two occasions recently, I have agreed to discuss with them in more detail in the near future. Evidently that discussion will form an important part of my reply to you—both from the standpoint of your information and my own clarification.

"I agree with your documents on the 'Marines Alive' slogan. *WV's* reply to 'critics' ('Marxism and Bloodthirstiness') was entirely disingenuous. Whilst many of the points on the Marxist attitude to violence were correct they were almost entirely beside the point. Through a dishonest sleight-of-hand *WV* polemicises against a non-existent position....The SL/Bers I've talked to (including the national chairman) do exactly the same thing....

"I'll just add that they look pretty rocky on the regime question. I attacked their characterisations of [former SL/B members] John Z + Jim W as racists and was met with silence. I attacked Bob Mandel's confession [which SL honcho Al Nelson wrote and then bullied him into signing]. Again silence. I found that sticking to concretes is the easiest way to deal with them."

At the time we were seeking to talk to SL members wherever we could find them, so we were pleased that Carl was engaging them in Britain. When he failed to respond to several subsequent letters, we assumed that he just drifted away as others had, perhaps daunted by the prospect of operating as the lone ET supporter in Britain. This was disappointing, but not entirely surprising. We were, however, shocked to learn that he rejoined the SL/B in August 1984 after repudiating all his previous criticisms of the group and its leadership. We suspect that Carl's "psychological/emotional" desire to interpret the SL/B's "hardness" as a sign of Bolshevik virtue may have played a role in the suspension of disbelief that obviously accompanied his 1984 reapplication.

Six months before Carl was accepted back, we ourselves applied to rejoin the iSt. But we did so without hiding or renouncing our political views. The ET's 15 February 1984 application, signed by Nason, stated:

"Recently various leading members of your organization have suggested that we should seek membership in the international Spartacist tendency. Please consider this our formal application. We apply for membership as a group and not as individuals.

"....We have always considered ourselves a part of the Spartacist tendency politically inasmuch as we have shared a common program. For this reason we have sought to function as a tendency of the iSt in an attempt to act as a catalyst for its regeneration, rather than attempting to build a competing public group.

"We believe that our programmatic agreement with the iSt provides a principled basis of unity. At the same time we emphasize the real differences we have with the leadership, centrally on the regime question....

"We agree to vigorously uphold the discipline of the iSt and to fulfill all the duties of membership, understanding that to fight to win a majority to one's positions is a duty of members of a democratic-centralist organization."

Carl was permitted to crawl back, but our application was, not surprisingly, rejected (the whole episode is discussed in "Warren Street: Home of the Whoppers" (*ET Bulletin* No. 3).

Ian is doubtless right that "personal embarrassment" is largely responsible for Carl "misremembering" his motivation for (re)joining the SL/B—no one could be proud of

voluntarily re-enlisting in an outfit they already knew to be so grossly abusive. While Carl omitted this rather significant fact in his exchange with James Creegan, it does help explain his claim that in (re)joining the SL/B, he was not motivated by politics, but rather by factors that "were entirely psychological/emotional."

Yet it seems likely that there was also a political dimension, as Carl rejoined at the height of the heroic British miners' strike. Perhaps he hoped that involvement in that magnificent class battle might help detoxify the internal atmosphere in the SL/B. Whatever "psychological/emotional" motivations may have been at play, it seems likely that he chose the SL/B, rather than one of its larger ostensibly Trotskyist competitors, because he considered it to be politically superior. Perhaps one day Carl will attempt to work out this puzzle to his own satisfaction. After the miners' defeat, with the SL/B as noxious as ever, Carl left for a second time and as far as we know was never again tempted to re-enlist.

When I was back in London in the summer of 1988, Carl and I met once more. In a 9 July 1988 memo on that conversation I described him as:

"a two-time member of the SL/B with a brief period of ET symp in between. He is still political although not personally strong enough to do anything on his own and without the political stability to prevent him wobbling under pressure—evidenced by his decision to rejoin [the SL/B] which he now regrets somewhat and is vaguely embarrassed by. He says that the British group was for years split between two rival cliques: David [Strachan and his wife]-Faye-Ed and Len [Meyers]-Eibhlin [McDonald] with [John] Masters leaning to the latter but floating between. NY would alternately promote one or the other—it sounded a bit like the early CPUSA."

While Carl refused to elaborate on the "psychological/emotional" factors that impelled him to join the SL/B in his exchange with Creegan, he did indicate the role they played in his eventual decision to leave:

"After a few years in the SLB a dark depression descended on me. My ability to keep to the punishing schedule dropped off, I couldn't think clearly, felt exhausted most of the time, and was prone to sloppy formulations. The great leader, Eibhlin McDonald, decided I was feigning illness to mask political problems. Meeting after meeting I was screamed at and denounced, my every utterance was dissected for heresy. Eventually the situation became intolerable and I walked away."

At one point Carl cited a passage from the 1968 resignation statement of Geoff White, Robertson's last real peer in the SL, explaining what he had come to see as the futility of the entire Trotskyist project:

"Over the years, certain rules have developed. Originally, most of these were for purposes of survival and quite rational. However, these rules now survive and develop autonomously, regardless of their relevance to the objective world. It is as if we were involved in a great game, the object of which is to make points according to an elaborate and very sophisticated set of evolved rules and stylistic considerations. The analogy to bull-fighting comes inevitably to mind. In short, I question whether our basic orientation is not toward making a good record in some cosmic history book, rather than making history itself."

Carl suggested that:

"White is describing an organisation with only a tentative link to reality, an organisation at the mercy of the whims and wishes of the strongest personality."

In fact, White was clearly not referring to anyone's personal "whims and wishes," but rather to the SL's rigid adherence to basic Trotskyist principles—principles he

viewed as pointless and irrelevant. The immediate trigger for this was a dispute in the SL over an approach to the amorphous petty-bourgeois Peace & Freedom Party milieu, which the SL correctly viewed as being essentially outside the workers' movement. White objected to the "rule" that proscribed entry into non-proletarian formations. Perhaps Carl agrees with White on this—we do not.

Political movements, like individuals, evolve over time. When Carl and James Creegan joined the Spartacist tendency in 1981 it was just completing a transformation from a group with "orthodox" Trotskyist political positions (and a slightly Healyite internal undertone) into a full-fledged obedience cult that, in fairly short order, spewed out a series of overt deviations from the political heritage it had previously embraced. Over time it eventually renounced many of the "sophisticated set of evolved rules" about which White complained.

As Creegan reminded Steele, by 1981 the SL had already undergone the "sub-political" clone purge and the purge of Logan, which began with the 1978 demolition of the SL/B regime he headed. The early 1980s saw a series of destructive and essentially apolitical "fights" directed from above in virtually every locality where the Spartacist tendency operated. What most of the targets had in common was their apparent capacity to potentially stand up and fight over a political difference at some point in the future. In the course of many nightmarish internal meetings, some valuable and dedicated cadres were broken down to the point where they were willing to confess to practically anything. Many others who witnessed these events simply walked away. The character of the whole tendency changed fundamentally as a result.

Perhaps Carl recalls the purge of the *Trotzkistische Liga Deutschlands* (TLD—the SL's German affiliate) in September 1981, a few months after he initially joined the SL/B. A leading member of the British group participated in the international delegation flown in for that occasion, the politics of which are outlined in "Poland: No Responsibility for Stalinist Crimes," in the first issue of the *ET Bulletin*. In a cynical provocation taken right out of Gerry Healy's play-book, the iSt leadership put forward a motion pledging to "take responsibility in advance for whatever idiocies and atrocities they [Stalinist forces sent to repress counterrevolutionary Solidarnosc in Poland] may commit." Cde. Henning Weber, the target of the purge, who later led *Gruppe IV. Internationale* (GIVI – which subsequently fused with the BT in 1991), counterposed the following:

"1. Every taking of responsibility for the action of the Soviet troops against reactionary rabble;

"2. To take no responsibility for acts of anti-proletarian character."

The leadership's motion to take responsibility for Stalinist "atrocities," a cynical loyalty test, was passed while Henning's motion to uphold Trotskyist principle was overwhelmingly defeated. This would not have happened in the TLD a few years earlier.

On Cannonism, Robertsonism & 'Fights' in the SL/B

Serious Marxists must carefully study the best models from the past—in the 1960s and 70s this was the Spartacist tendency. In its prime Robertson's SL upheld the revolutionary legacy of James P. Cannon's Socialist Workers Party (SWP) while being much sharper programmatically on a wide variety of questions. The stages through which the SL degenerated were very different than those that marked the SWP's decline. Cannon's party in the 1940s and 50s was generally both less concerned about, and far less successful in, analyzing macro global and national political develop-

ments than the SL was in the 1960s and 70s. But the SWP's internal regime had remained essentially healthy, right up to the introduction of the new norms to justify the 1963 expulsion of the Revolutionary Tendency (RT—the SL's forerunner).

By the late 1970s there was no space for an RT to develop in the SL—for reasons that Cannon outlined decades earlier in a speech to the SWP's New York local in December 1942:

"It is perfectly possible for slick leaders to write ten constitutions guaranteeing freedom of criticism in a party and then create an atmosphere of moral terrorization whereby a young or inexperienced comrade doesn't want to open his mouth for fear he will be made a fool of, or sat on, or accused of some political deviation he doesn't have in his mind at all."

—*The SWP in World War II*

Our 1985 document "The Road to Jimstown" discussed the essential differences between Cannon's regime and Robertson's:

"Robertson has always made much of his claim to represent the continuity of Cannonism in the contemporary American left. To the extent that the SL adhered to the Trotskyist program, there was a substantial basis for such a claim. But Robertson always meant more particularly that he represented Cannon's organizational techniques, and in that he does Cannon a real injustice. Cannon was a serious factionalist. He fought hard and, on occasion, was doubtless guilty of bending a few sticks a little too far. But his organizational techniques were not those of Robertson and life in the SWP was a far different experience than in the SL. This is evident by even a casual reading of the SWP internal documents and can be confirmed by talking to SWP old-timers or reading their correspondence. From the formation of the Communist League of America in 1928 through the 1940 split with the Shachtmanites to the purge of the RT in 1963, Cannon's organization had a vibrant internal life. There were many tendencies, several factions as well as a great number of political disputes within the organization which never assumed organized form. Oehler, Goldman-Morrow, Johnson-Forest, Cochran-Clarke, Vern-Ryan, Marcy and others all felt free to make harsh and blunt criticisms of the leadership. In many cases, they did so for years. In Cannon's party, differences were not suppressed as in the SL, but fought out politically. In some cases this led to splits, in others not. Cannon ran a firm but democratic regime which recognized that internal political struggle was inevitable and even necessary and which treated its minorities loyally. Jim Cannon could live with a little dissent. In his party, up to the expulsion of the RT, you had to do something to get driven out.

"Robertson adopted the conception which Cannon advanced in *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* that organizational differences frequently mask latent political differences, but with a convenient corollary from Healy—that organizational grievances in the absence of formal 'political' differences are only raised by anti-party wreckers looking to form rotten blocs. This handy formula boils down to the proposition that the organizational question is not a political question—particularly when it involves criticism of the leadership. Consequently it is an unprincipled question to fight over and those who make such criticisms deserve to be smashed. Within the SL, the argument that the organizational question is not a political question has functioned as the leadership's license to abuse the membership."

During the 1960s the Robertson regime operated very differently from Healy's in the Socialist Labour League (SLL—which changed its name to the Workers Revolutionary

Party [WRP] in 1973). It seems that the SL's internal norms began evolving in the direction of those of the SLL/WRP after Robertson made the surprising discovery in 1972 that a few top cadres (including David Cunningham and Bill Moore) were discussing how his political control of the group might be loosened. From that point on, Robertson was increasingly inclined to a policy of pre-emptively identifying and neutralizing potential oppositionists. While in the short term this may have reduced factional frictions, it created other problems:

"Such techniques have a price. They not only affect the quality of political life in the group, but also tend to develop a momentum of their own. Tomorrow's dissident learns from the experience of today's, and thus any expression of political difference tends to become increasingly covert. Ultimately in the SL the 'shortcut' became its opposite as the very techniques which were designed to prevent costly splits, minimize cadre loss and safeguard the organization's programmatic integrity ended up in a massive hemorrhaging of the membership.

"The increasingly bureaucratic and eventually anti-political internal life of the SL (it is now seventeen years since the last faction fight) was both the first form of its departure from Leninism and the framework within which all of the subsequent revisionist departures have taken place."

—*Ibid.*

If there were problems with the SL regime even in its prime, as time passed tolerance for political differences shrank to near zero; whereas previously efforts would often be made to politically win over and reintegrate dissidents, increasingly the goal became simply to get rid of them. This shift did not occur all at once—it was an incremental process that took place alongside the SL's development of important and sometimes unique, revolutionary positions on critical political issues of the day. Tracing the stages of the SL's decline is important because, for almost two decades, it represented the authentic political continuity of Trotskyism—something that is immediately evident to anyone comparing *Workers Vanguard* to the publications of any of the SL's competitors in the 1970s.

Carl, like many other embittered former members, is not interested in such comparisons; instead, he projects the severely degenerated SL/B he belonged to in the 1980s backwards, erasing all distinctions between the far healthier Spartacist organization of the 1960s and 70s and its diseased successor, in order to arrive at the position that the entire political history of the RT and SL is worthless. In his initial response to Creegan, Carl provided a clue to his subjective motivation for reaching this conclusion:

"While a member of the Sparts I did and said things, or went along with things, that I am ashamed of. And that's the problem. The internal culture was such that everyone got to participate in dishing out the abuse, and so nobody is willing to talk about it, least of all groups who base themselves on the entirely lamentable Spartacist 'tradition'."

It is to Carl's credit that he does not seek to exempt himself from participating in the abuse of his comrades during his time in the SL/B. Yet, as Ian pointed out, Carl was hardly a naïf when he originally signed on; like others who joined in tormenting the designated targets during each "fight," he was doubtless at least partially motivated by a desire to avoid ending up in the hot seat himself. In our May 1985 analysis, published while Carl was still resident in Jimstown, we described the process through which the once revolutionary SL was transformed into an obedience cult:

"Round after round, meeting after meeting, the 'fight' continues until the object of the exercise gives up and

hands in his resignation or confesses in what is deemed a suitably abject and contrite manner. Breaking down and crying is usually taken as evidence of sincerity, especially in men. The 'fight' is then concluded with the unanimous passage of some harshly condemnatory motion. Anyone fortunate enough to be deemed worthy of one last chance can expect to spend at least the next few months as a pariah. Eventually there is a new victim and, with luck, the previous target can gradually recoup his status as a regular member. But the 'lesson' is not quickly forgotten.

"The leadership's shock therapy techniques are deliberately intended to break the personal and political self-confidence of those subjected to them. Usually the 'fights' are aimed at potential 'troublemakers'—the idiots and yes-men can usually be integrated without difficulty. The choice posed: to crawl or to leave the group (known as opting for a 'biological existence') is only a difficult one for those who take the politics seriously.

"These practices create enormous pressures within the organization. They have proved remarkably effective in shaping and molding (i.e., atomizing and intimidating) the SL membership. This in turn promotes among many a desire to ingratiate themselves with the leadership, a constant need to be assured that they are 'doing well' and an acute sensitivity to subtle hints on how to do so."

In Carl's time in the SL/B, the leadership routinely abused the membership. This behavior was not characteristic of most Spartacist League locals through most of the 1970s—although it began to develop as the decade wore on. Carl is ashamed and remorseful, as he should be. People make mistakes, and it is important to own up to them. However, in doing so Carl is still attempting to alibi his actions by claiming that everyone else behaved in the same fashion. If indeed that was the case in the SL/B during his tenure, it was certainly not universal and does not reduce his responsibility for doing things he knew to be wrong.

Carl is not interested in any serious accounting of the once-Trotskyist SL's decline into political oblivion and instead clings to an ahistorical narrative in which, from the very beginning, the Spartacist tendency was never any good, practically everyone who belonged to it behaved shamefully and its leader, James Robertson, was a cynic whose professed fidelity to the Trotskyist program was never anything more than a convenient "psychological cudgel" with which to batter his followers. Things may have seemed that way to Carl in the early 1980s, but by that time the Spartacist tendency had already essentially completed its qualitative transformation from the rigidly principled "orthodox Trotskyist" organization it began as in the 1960s and 70s into a pseudo-Trotskyist obedience cult.

On Taking Political Responsibility

In his exchange with Creegan, Carl charges that, like many other former Spartacists who are critical of the way things operated in the SL, I claim to be an "innocent victim" and "expunge from the record" anything that might undercut that: "Riley was a leader of the Canadian section in Robertson's organisation. Did he really do no wrong?"

I would not claim to have done "no wrong," but it is simply a fact that the first purge I witnessed up close was my own in Toronto, which is discussed below. Carl presumes that every branch of the Spartacist tendency throughout its entire history operated along similar lines to the degenerate group he joined in London in 1981. His suspicion that everyone's hands must be as dirty as his own perhaps lessens his guilt about participating in flaying the various "hapless comrades" targeted by the leadership during his time in the SL/B:

"At one of my first internal meetings a hapless com-

rade was set upon by the local branch and a few visiting CC members. I can't recall what his crime was but I do remember getting to my feet in the febrile atmosphere and yelling something about the comrade's real program. I think I said he wanted to kill black people. No doubt my accusation was completely deranged, but nobody contradicted me, quite the opposite, I was going with the flow, swept along by a malodorous stream of invective.

"And so it went on. Barely a meeting went by without someone being denounced. Dissent was a sign of impurity, votes were unanimous. In Robertson's words the SLB was a place 'where the men cried and the women screamed.'"

Carl takes responsibility for his participation in these destructive and irrational goings-on and deserves credit for being candid enough to admit to having slandered a comrade as a racist. But he is wrong that everyone chose to "go with the [malodorous] flow." One who did not was James Creegan, whose account of his behavior as a member of the SL's New York branch tallies with what others have told us over the years. Those who tried to avoid participating in the psychological gang-bangs that wracked the iSt in those years risked appearing "disloyal," and ending up as a future target, as we described in "The Road to Jimstown":

"A meeting is called where the designated comrade is called to account for mistakes which he allegedly committed. Each item on the bill of particulars is grossly exaggerated and extrapolated; perfidious motivations (political and/or personal) are attributed. Incidental personal criticisms of the individual's mannerisms, lifestyle or demeanor are thrown in for good measure. Those leading the attack typically do a good deal of histrionic screaming and posturing in order to create the proper emotionally-charged atmosphere. The assembled membership is expected to provide the chorus: repeating and embellishing on the accusations. (A reluctance to participate is punishable by being made the next point on the agenda.)"

Like Creegan, Nason and I generally avoided participation in the gratuitous persecution of comrades as much as we could. Our lack of enthusiasm for Robertson's campaign against Judith S., which was a regular feature of meetings of the London Spartacist Group throughout the summer of 1976, was duly noted by the lider maximo, although there were no immediate consequences. There were only seven or eight people present at most of these meetings (including Judith and her husband, Doug Hainline, who also tended to avoid joining in) so our squeamishness did not go unnoticed. But we did not like what we saw as bullying and were not prepared to say things we did not believe to be true. A few years later we would probably have been promptly called to account, but the SL circa 1976 was a different group than it became in the 1980s.

I recall the chill of horror I felt in London one day in 1976, when Robertson flippantly remarked that deep down, Charlie Burroughs, a writer for *Workers Vanguard* (WV) who I admired, viewed the SL as equivalent to a deformed workers' state. At that point, having spent a few months in close proximity to the peerless leader, I recognized that Charlie's assessment of the organization was uncomfortably close to my own—something that had never occurred to me before.

When Robertson returned to New York in autumn 1976 (with his new wife Barbara who we originally recruited in Toronto) Bill Logan and his partner Adaire Hannah arrived to head up the London Spartacist operation. Adaire immediately had it in for Nason, perhaps because she felt threatened by the presence of a competent female organizer. In any case, Nason soon replaced Judith as the designated target at the weekly local meetings. Frequently the accu-

sations were extremely petty—things like failing to put a cover over the office typewriter. But on one occasion, when Nason mildly dissented from the majority consensus on the seriousness of a potential contact, she was gratuitously accused of racism. Once again Doug, Judith and I generally avoided endorsing the accusations against Nason. Once again there were no repercussions—but of course, Adaire swung a lot less weight than Jim Robertson. When Nason complained privately to Susan Adrian, the American cadre overseeing the SL's European operations at the time, she was told that nothing could be done for the moment, but that New York was following developments closely and Logan/Hannah were headed for trouble.

In London, working in close proximity to the SL top leadership occasionally provided glimpses of the semi-subterranean shifts, hints and maneuvering that preceded major internal developments. After an initial rough patch, Bill Logan and I found a modus vivendi and eventually got on pretty well. My chief task was writing and editing the leaflets and articles produced by the LSG which we tailored to the political problems we confronted and the opportunities we thought needed to be pursued. The New York leadership regularly complained about the materials we produced and proposed a series of broader and more abstract topics instead. The London executive, which was pretty cohesive at that point, all agreed that we were on the right track and that following New York's advice would squander our limited literary resources. It fell to Bill Logan to finesse this, and he generally seemed able to steer around the center's advice without needlessly escalating tensions nor diverting energy from the pursuit of the actual opportunities we had. A few years later, as things tightened up, it is unlikely that it would have been possible to either resist the center's pressure, or pursue real openings, so successfully.

The reason that New York backed off was that it soon became apparent that we were getting results—particularly with the left-wing of the Workers Socialist League—a 1974 split from Gerry Healy's WRP. Our critique of the WSL's still-born Campaign for Democracy in the Labour Movement, which New York strenuously objected to, proved instrumental in winning over a section of the WSL cadre (see: *Workers Vanguard*, 7 April 1978).

As things began to develop favorably with the WSL, both Adaire's baseless attacks on Nason and New York's complaints about our literary activity wound down. In March 1978, the LSG fused with the WSL's "Trotskyist Faction" and the SL/B was launched. At that point Nason and I were sent back to Canada—apparently because we were not thought reliable enough by Robertson, who was already preparing to blow the lid off the Logan regime in London. We were replaced by John Masters (editor of *Spartacist Canada*) and his then-partner Simmie M. Unbeknownst to John, Robertson recruited Simmie as a secret "agent" who was tasked with gathering "evidence" to be used against Logan, who was indeed deposed several months later.

Spartacist degeneration up close & personal: the 1980 Toronto purge

After returning to Canada, Nason became Toronto organizer and I took over *Spartacist Canada*. In the autumn of 1979, the late Joe Vetter, a long-time SL cadre previously stationed in London for a few years was sent in to assume the role of New York's Canadian plenipotentiary. Unlike Reuben Samuels, the American cadre he replaced, Joe had little political authority with the members of the Trotskyist League of Canada (TL), most of whom came to regard him as lazy and self-indulgent. Joe's stock did not rise when Audrey M., the local treasurer, caught him cheating on

his pledge. On advice from New York, this was hushed up and Joe was permitted to repay what he owed without any further repercussions. This was an example of what was known as “special protection” in the degenerating Spartacist tendency at the time—something only available to those favored by Robertson and his clique.

In early 1980, Nason and I were reluctant to support Joe’s proposal to have Stephanie P., a comrade with a rather abrasive manner, transfer to Toronto to train Alice S. to do production for *Spartacist Canada*. Alice, a working-class woman with two young children who already had plenty of stress, was extremely anxious about having to work under Stephanie. Nason and I assumed that Joe’s proposal was pre-approved by New York, if it had not originated there, but nonetheless proposed that given Alice’s (entirely reasonable) concerns perhaps it would be good to see if someone else might be sent instead. Joe refused to budge and put the question to a vote—something that rarely happened in our exec meetings. We did not vote for Joe’s motion, which failed as a result. In theory members of any body had the duty, as well as the right, to vote their conscience on any motion; but we knew we were violating the unwritten rule against opposing proposals from the center. We did not have to wait long for the blowback.

In March 1980, at a Midwest educational gathering in Chicago, Joe launched an unexpected, and unprepared, campaign to depose Nason as Toronto organizer. The Chicago local had recently been the scene of a “fight” that featured the organizer, Paul Collins, a former Coast Guard officer, being denounced for overworking the members and acting in a dictatorial and undemocratic fashion. This was how things generally worked in the SL at the time, but the Chicago local was reputed to be among the worst. As a rule, the central leadership found it pretty easy to gain the support of the members whenever it seemed convenient to launch an “anti-bureaucratic” fight against a particular local leadership.

Joe doubtless expected things to follow the usual pattern when he stood up in the midst of the Chicago meeting and, apropos of nothing, began denouncing Nason as an abusive bureaucrat in the Collins mold. Nason immediately approached the (now-deceased) George Crawford, an SL Central Committee member who previously served on the Political Bureau, to ask him to intervene. Crawford, who had considerable familiarity with the Toronto branch, responded simply that there was nothing he could do. This meant that Joe’s attack had been greenlighted by New York, or at least that Crawford thought it was.

But the Spartacist tendency, or at least its Toronto branch, had not at this stage been as thoroughly pulverised as the group that Carl and James were to join a year or so later, and Joe’s assault was met with serious opposition. The SL leaders present must have been taken aback as one TLer after another went up to the podium to defend Nason; many said they considered her to be the best organizer the Toronto branch ever had. Not a single comrade endorsed Joe’s allegation, while most said they had no idea what he was talking about. I was surprised, and of course pleased, by this response but I knew enough not to participate in Joe’s humiliation. This was the only time during my years in the Spartacist tendency that I witnessed anything similar—it may well have been a unique event. There were no (immediate) repercussions beyond a “proposal” (i.e., edict) from New York that the whole episode be shoved into the memory hole, and that there be no follow-up discussion when we returned to Toronto.

One factor in the surprising response of the Toronto members was that unlike in the SL/U.S., where the members were regularly rotated from one branch to another in

a fairly deliberate policy of homogenization, the border complicated transfers. Many members of the TL knew each other from the days when they were leftist dissidents in and around the Pabloist Revolutionary Marxist Group, and had spent the previous four or five years working together in the Toronto branch. They were accustomed to the periodic rotation of different American cadres in the role of TL national chairman, but had no experience as yet with the egregious, and pointless, trashing of cadres that Carl witnessed as soon as he joined the SL/B.

The TL membership revolt in Chicago did not resolve things—indeed it likely heightened the apprehensions in New York about the potential for factional opposition north of the border. Within a few months the attack was renewed, but this time instead of leaving Joe to his own (inadequate) devices, New York took a more active role in the preparations. Several SL cadres who visited Toronto in the late spring and early summer of 1980 were (privately) asked for their assessment of the situation. Robin and Corky from the New York local, as well as Darlene Kamiura, then WV production manager, claimed to be alarmed by what they had witnessed. They were asked to submit written reports which provided “evidence” for the forthcoming purge. The third visitor, the late Ed Cliffel, an SL Central Committee member who served as the group’s resident psychologist and had also run the Chicago local for many years, was contacted by Joe and asked for his impression. When Cliffel said he could not see that there was anything seriously amiss he was advised that there would be no need for him to submit anything in writing.

The execrable Oliver Stephens, who briefly edited *Young Spartacus* after the clones were decimated, was transferred to Toronto a few months before the purge was launched. While he was ostensibly supposed to be writing for *Spartacist Canada* I could not help noticing that he managed to dodge assignments on one pretext or another and produced little or no copy. His real assignment, it turned out, was to gather “evidence” and provide a point of support within the Toronto local for the New York leadership’s attack. He as much as admitted this during one of the purge meetings when he briefly went off script and mentioned having been previously instructed, when given his Canadian assignment, not to start “the fight” prematurely.

The Toronto purge stretched over the entire month of August 1980 and concluded at the TL’s Fourth National Conference in early September. The list of charges against me (because this time I was the focus, not Nason) had to be revised several times, as various incongruities and factual discrepancies were pointed out. But the intensity and direction never changed. At the time, as previously mentioned, I regarded the whole exercise as a huge mistake; I was completely committed to Spartacist politics and regarded as one of the more energetic and effective members of the Toronto branch.

Initially I hoped to weather the storm by adopting a compliant posture—accepting whatever shreds of validity were contained in the generally outlandish criticisms, not punching back and willingly acknowledging that I could and should do better. I drew the line at confessing to anything I considered to be clearly false. Nason was both more prescient and far less optimistic about the ultimate outcome, as were several other comrades who sensibly observed that, since the whole exercise was being openly described as a “purge” by the initiators, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. They were of course proved right.

Once the “fight” began we batted down a few of the charges, but never offered any serious resistance, nor did we venture any analysis of what might be motivating the whole destructive and irrational campaign. While privately

critical of various things we witnessed, Nason and I were both profoundly loyal to the organization and inclined to attribute its problems to the low ebb of the class struggle, which had led to a dramatic contraction of the entire left in North America at the time.

After a while those directing the purge shifted gears and suggested that I was being egotistical in refusing to bow to the clearly stated wishes of the tendency's leadership that I simply resign. I was told that although the entire work of the organization in Toronto was being paralyzed by my stubbornness, the struggle to get rid of me would remain the top priority until I eventually relented. In the meantime, it was suggested, many members would become demoralized and drop out. If indeed I was as loyal as I professed to be, I was told, I could prove it by putting the interests of the group first and resigning. Doing so would signal my willingness to override my own short-term personal preferences in the interests of the common movement and thereby potentially open the door for my eventual reintegration. It slowly became clear to me that this time there would be no beating the rap and that I was not doing anyone any good by delaying the inevitable. Hoping that this would indeed prove the shortest route back to rejoining, I submitted my resignation, which was printed in *Spartacist Canada* No. 44, September-October 1980. My statement began:

"I never thought I'd be writing out a resignation from the iSt, the only revolutionary organization in the world, but here it is. At the request of the organization I am resigning from the TLC."

Nason resigned the next day. Even after being effectively driven out, we clung to the hope that a major upsurge in workers' struggles might create an opportunity to once again take our place in what we considered to be the sole truly revolutionary tendency on the globe. I was surprised, but should not have been, at the account of our purge that subsequently appeared in *Spartacist Canada*. The main allegation was that we walked out after being "unable to make the leap from an ingrown existence." We were casually described as part of a layer of former New Leftists who were "heavily petty-bourgeois, historically counterposed to the working class and, in this period, [reflect] all of the apolitical cynicism associated with the 'me' generation." We left the TL, it was claimed, after "degenerating into pursuers of various personal goals."

Outraged by these grotesque falsehoods, I immediately began drafting a response—but eventually abandoned it after Nason sensibly pointed out that, having passed up the opportunity to fight when we could have, there was no real choice but to await the future developments that we anticipated might one day create a path to rejoining—a prospect that a candid response to the dishonest fabrications of *Spartacist Canada* could only complicate.

The 1980 SL Conference—Liquidating the Trade Union Cadre

In August 1980, midway between the initiation of our purge and its inevitable conclusion, the SL/U.S. held its Sixth National Conference in Chicago. The "fight" underway in Toronto was well known to many American comrades, but right at the beginning of the conference Robertson requested that there be no discussion of the situation in Toronto as a Canadian gathering was scheduled for Labour Day weekend and he did not want to spoil the fun. No one mentioned Canada during the proceedings, but when we returned for a second session in the packed hotel ballroom where seats were at a premium and many comrades listened to the proceedings while standing along the walls, the chairs on either side of Nason and I were empty. No one wanted to be seen in proximity to those "not doing well."

Robertson, upon entering the room and seeing this, came up and, rubbing his hands together in glee, loudly cackled "What's this—the pariah's corner?" Which is exactly what it was. Doug Hainline, our old friend from London who originally joined the SL in 1964, was the only person who came over to speak with us. Everyone else steered clear, and we understood why.

During a subsequent session I was assigned door duty outside the main room—sitting by myself in the vestibule to ensure that no unauthorized person came up to the door to listen in on the proceedings. I was very gratified when several SL cadres, knowing I would soon be an ex-comrade, came up to shake hands and say they were sorry I would no longer be around in future. Some of them I believe are still in the SL, or whatever remnant exists today. Their action would have been seen as "disloyal," but of course I was not going to report them. When one comrade, Peter Atkins, who severed all relations with the SL a couple of decades ago, asked how I was doing, I replied, as jauntily as I could, "Into each life, some rain must fall." He immediately quipped: "Said Noah."

WV's account of the 1980 conference emphasized "The need for a hard cadre in this period...." The SL leadership was executing a conscious turn, one which, all proportions duly considered, paralleled the "Bolshevization" of the Comintern after Lenin's death in 1924. Robertson set the tone:

"The main reporter, comrade Robertson, addressed the question of our 'communist cutting edge':

"It tends to dull and sharpen and dull, depending on what we do....Here we are, a small organization moving into increasingly conservative times. I'd say that the pressures put us at risk of losing a communist cutting edge. And you don't go without a communist cutting edge for very long before you get somebody else's cutting edge cutting at you."

—WV, 17 October 1980

A sure sign of an insufficiently sharp "cutting edge" was being squeamish about using gross exaggerations or outlandish falsifications against designated enemies of the leadership. Anyone too pusillanimous to embrace (and repeat) the accusations, and/or who wanted to see actual evidence before taking sides, obviously lacked the requisite "cutting edge."

The WV report omitted what was probably the conference's most electric moment, when everyone (except of course the designated pariahs) loudly joined the top table in chanting: "Our Party—Love it or Leave It!" This was a dramatic manifestation of the pervasive political rot eating away at the iSt: the clear and unambiguous message was to avoid getting out of step with anything emanating from the leadership. The Stalinist bureaucracy employed a similar approach in consolidating control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during the mid-1920s—those reluctant to issue a blank check to the leading clique were simply forced out. As James P. Cannon observed in a 28 October 1928 letter to the CPUSA:

"Such methods which substitute bureaucratic control for ideological and political leadership have permeated our Party to an alarming degree, adversely affecting its policies, choking its internal life, weakening its influence, blocking its growth...."

—cited in *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, Bryan Palmer

The SL's 1980 conference marked a more or less explicit "hardening" of the organization. Members who bought into this, essentially agreed in advance to allow Robertson and his coterie to get away with almost anything. For those who were not completely cynical, the willingness to

blindly trust the leadership, suspend critical thought and deny, even to themselves, things they knew not to be right, required a leap of faith—a conviction that whatever the leadership did, however irrational or unprincipled it might appear, presumably served some larger revolutionary purpose.

The top item on the agenda of the 1980 “Love it or Leave it” conference was the political disposal of two of the SL’s leading worker-activists. The prime focus was on Bob Mandel, a talented cadre with a long history in the Bay Area left who for some years had been the SL’s highest profile trade-union supporter in the pages of *WV*. Mandel was slated for trashing after having the temerity to complain about Al Nelson (one of Robertson’s chief cronies) pointing an unloaded revolver at his head while dressing him down for his role in a stupid, sectarian provocation at an SWP forum. By reporting Nelson’s behavior to other SL supporters, Mandel was seen to be acting in a hostile fashion to the regime. A pro-forma motion was passed criticizing Nelson’s outrageous act, but this infraction was judged vastly less serious than discussing it with other members, as this was likely to undermine the prestige of Robertson’s longest-serving henchman. Therefore, Mandel had to go.

The secondary target of the purge was Jane Margolis, a close friend of Mandel’s who, after learning what happened, communicated her disgust at Nelson’s thuggish behavior to several other SLers. For some years Margolis had been the leading figure in the Militant Action Caucus (MAC), a class-struggle formation in the Communications Workers of America (CWA), with a history that went back to 1969 (see: “Class Struggle in the Phone Company”). By 1980 the MAC was generally recognized as the leading leftist opposition to the CWA’s overtly pro-imperialist leadership. In 1979, only a year earlier, Margolis was dragged off the floor of the CWA’s national convention by Secret Service agents to prevent her from speaking out against U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who the CWA bureaucrats invited to address the delegates. In a front-page story headlined “Outrage!”, *WV* reported:

“Jane Margolis is a spokesman for the Militant Action Caucus, an opposition group in the union which has repeatedly protested government interference in the labor movement, particularly by the CIA in Latin America. Earlier in the day she was prevented by the chair from presenting a motion that the union convention not allow itself to be used as a platform for the anti-labor strikebreaking policies of the Democrats. Clearly, a key purpose of the hamfisted, blatantly illegal action by the Secret Service was to keep union delegates from registering any dissent against Carter and his energy speech.

“In New York, James Robertson, National Chairman of the Spartacist League/U.S. immediately issued a vehement protest upon learning of the seizure of Margolis, an SL supporter and long-time personal friend. ‘What the Secret Service did to Jane is an outrage against organized labor,’ he said. ‘We don’t have kings here. According to the law, every citizen is supposed to have equal rights. But Jimmy Carter’s personal goons simply march into a union convention and mug a woman who is an elected union official!’”

— *WV*, 20 July 1979

Margolis, with a national profile as the leading leftist militant in the CWA, subsequently sued the Secret Service and won. But for daring to privately criticize Nelson to SL members, her trade-union activity was terminated. Both she and Mandel walked away from their unions out of political loyalty to the Trotskyist program which they continued to believe the SL leadership embodied. Their removal proved to be just the first step in the wholesale abandonment of the

SL’s once promising trade-union activity.

In the 1982 founding declaration of the ET, we identified the capricious liquidation of important footholds in the trade unions as a vitally important element of the SL’s disintegration as a revolutionary organization. We pointed to the:

“repeatedly expressed fears [by the SL central leadership] that the independent sense of social reality gained by cadre with a modest but real base in the workforce [of a particular sector] could someday provide a focus for opposition within the organization. Under the banner of ‘trade union consciousness is bourgeois consciousness’... [the Robertson leadership] proceeded to attempt to demoralize, politically destroy and eventually drive out most of the SL’s leading working class spokesmen (particularly on the West Coast) and many of the trade union cadre.”

— “Declaration of an external tendency of the iSt”

The next year, in June 1983, we published a critique, drafted by Bob Mandel, of the on-going destruction of the SL’s once-promising activity in the organized working class:

“The critical task at hand, of putting the SL back on the correct political track and saving the trade unionists from extinction, cannot be done by passively acquiescing to the leadership—it must start with a conscious decision to fight. Comrades who may have wondered what it was like to have been in the SWP in the 1950s and early sixties as it incrementally slid away from Trotskyism are living through the beginning of the same process today in the SL.”

— “Stop the Liquidation of the Trade Union Work!”

Class-Struggle Unionism & the Transitional Program

One of the SL’s most important and original political insights was the idea that the Transitional Program, written by Leon Trotsky as the founding document of the Fourth International, should provide the basic program for revolutionary activity in the trade unions. The idea was that a version of that program, beginning with immediate demands as adapted to a particular industry and going all the way to the need for a workers’ government, could provide the political basis for oppositional formations competing with pro-capitalist trade-union bureaucrats for the allegiance of the rank and file. In the preface to our 1998 edition of the Transitional Program we observed that:

“Among [the SL’s] most important political contributions was its exemplary work in building class-struggle caucuses in various unions on the basis of a full transitional program. Trotsky had written the 1938 program as a tool for intervention in the unions, but to the best of our knowledge the SL was the only ostensibly Trotskyist organization to have ever fully grounded its trade-union work on the Transitional Program.”

Our book includes the text of Trotsky’s 1938 document with an explanatory introduction and several essays providing historical context. It contains articles from *Workers Vanguard* with highlights from the activity of SL-supported trade-union caucuses among dockers, sailors, auto and phone workers in the 1970s. It also includes an important 1987 interview with our supporter Howard Keylor, drawing the lessons from his decades as a class-struggle militant on the San Francisco waterfront.

The conception of building an alternative leadership formation (or caucus) based on a program for workers’ power developed by the SL closely parallels the model for revolutionary trade-union activity developed in the early years

of the Communist International, as Chris Knox described in his 1973 article, "Early Communist Work in the Trade Unions" which is also reprinted in the book. The struggle to promote revolutionary consciousness in the working class is a central strategic task for revolutionaries—not merely an activity to be pursued episodically when and if opportunities arise. By 2014 the SL leadership, which had long since abandoned even the pretense of doing serious trade-union work, explicitly repudiated the strategy of building programmatically-defined caucuses within the unions ("Spartacists Repudiate Class-Struggle Caucuses", 1917 No. 37).

Bob Mandel and Howard Keylor, two of the SL's most important trade-union supporters, were among the founders of the ET. Keylor, who spent two decades as an active Communist Party supporter in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) before recruiting himself to Trotskyism in his mid-40s, bitterly regretted his willingness to go along with Mandel's removal in 1980. He described the genesis of the destruction of the SL's trade-union work in the Bay Area, which began with the removal of Mandel and Margolis, in a 2 August 1998 interview (the relevant portion begins at roughly 2:00:00).

In August 1981, Keylor fell out with the SL leadership over its policy toward the PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization) strike:

"*Workers Vanguard* characterized the PATCO strike as the most important labor struggle in the U.S. since the 1978 miners' strike. [U.S. president Ronald] Reagan's attempt to bust PATCO by firing its entire membership was the opening round of his war against labor and thus of his anti-Soviet war drive.

"Unfortunately the government was able to scrape up enough scab air traffic controllers to keep the airports open without PATCO. As an elementary act of solidarity with the embattled strikers all labor militants should have refused to fly from the day the strike was launched. Instead the SL chose to use the struck services and fly with the strikebreaking pilots.

"George Foster, deputy national chairman of the SL, even attempted to rationalize the position at a San Francisco local meeting in early August, 1981 as a form of support for the strike! He argued that the scab air traffic controllers did not have the experience to handle a full schedule of flights and thus if enough people flew and overloaded the airports, Reagan could be beaten.

"When PATCO and its supporters organized mass pickets around the passenger terminals on August 21, the strike entered a new stage. The SL joined the picket lines, called for their continuation and expansion and marched under the banner 'Picket Lines Mean Don't Cross.' Clearly the pickets had a dual purpose: to keep out both the consumers and the pilots, flight attendants, ticket sellers, etc. who entered through the terminal doors. Yet in spite of publicly acknowledging the legitimacy of the PATCO lines, the SL leadership announced internally that the pickets around the passenger terminals were merely 'consumer boycott' picket lines and that it was still o.k. to fly for vacations or any other purpose."

—"Declaration of an external tendency of the iSt"

Howard's objections to this cynical (secret) position were harshly denounced by the SL leadership. Other SLers who were uncomfortable with the leadership's posture kept quiet, so Howard got little overt support. In his 5 September 1981 statement breaking with the degenerate Robertson/Foster regime, he pulled no punches:

"If I were to attempt to remain in the SL the tensions deriving from my distrust of and contempt for the central leadership and the expected ongoing campaign to destroy

and discredit me politically will inevitably result in a confused, unclear confrontation over secondary questions.

"I would have preferred to remain in the organization and attempt to open a fight over the real question of the defensive regime, the increasingly cult-like internal life of the organization, and the consequences of these trends in the work of the SL.

"For about a year I have been moving toward the conclusion that distortions in the leadership of sections, locals and fractions have developed and matured—at least in part from an internal life characterized by a defensive, hierarchical regime combined with a personalistic, Jesuitical method of internal argument and discussion. This process is advanced to the point where the SL/SYL membership is increasingly composed of 'true believers' or cynics.... There is an implied arithmetical equation: disagreement with the leadership equals hostility to the leadership equals disloyalty equals betrayal. Carried further, these trends will see the SL come to resemble less a principled, proletarian combat organization than a theatrical, hierarchical political cult.

"I remain in political agreement with the SL and will continue to politically support the program as expressed in the public life of the SL and the public work of its supporters and members."

Mandel and Keylor, like many others designated persona non grata by Robertson and his cronies, had no programmatic differences when they were driven out.

WV's report on the SL's 1980 conference celebrated "the accumulated political capital of the Spartacist tendency in presenting over the past years an authentic Marxist analysis of the major events shaping the world situation and the unique program for working-class power." By the Seventh National Conference, in 1983, the trade-union liquidation had been largely carried out and the transformation of the group into an obedience cult was far advanced. During the previous five years the "fights" launched in almost every SL local significantly shrank the cadre, while hardening and depoliticizing those who remained. What was difficult for most of the victims to get their heads around at the time—including those of us who eventually founded the External Tendency—was that the iSt remained essentially on track programmatically.

Butting the Spartacus Youth League

The first real purge in the Spartacist tendency—the 1978 campaign against the "clones"—was aimed at the layer of talented youth whose analytical articles raised the political level of the monthly *Young Spartacus* (YSp) to a point where it began to rival *Workers Vanguard*. Robertson said that the genesis of the purge was when he observed YSp editor Sam Lewis going out to dinner with Joseph Seymour and Charles Wesley Ervin (O'Brien) who previously edited the youth press. Robertson said he wondered what they would be talking about—no doubt imagining that they might get around to discussing his increasingly autocratic and self-indulgent behavior (cf. his January 1977 "goatfuckers" speech, which we discussed under the subhead "Robertson's Dubious Record on Great Nation Chauvinism" ("From Trotskyism to Neo-Pabloism"). Seymour, the SL's leading theorist, is an outstanding Marxist intellectual who sadly remained in the group throughout its descent and was eventually rewarded by being attacked as a national chauvinist for his contributions to the SL's distinctive position on the application of Leninism to situations of interpenetrated peoples and the "national question" more broadly ("In Defense of (Seymour's) Marxism"). Ervin, a formidable intellectual in his own right, is one of many valuable cadres who quietly departed Jimstown in the early 1980s

as the descent into cultism and political banditry gained momentum.

Robertson resented the fact that the “clones” on the YSp editorial board modelled themselves on Seymour (whose role in the SL could be compared to Cliff Slaughter’s in Healy’s SLL circa 1966). The SL founder/leader feared the potential of a future opposition based on the SL’s thin layer of intellectuals and was determined to avoid what he considered to be Cannon’s error of permitting potential oppositionists to coalesce. The post-purge analysis made this all more or less explicit, while also seeking to provide a suitable “programmatically” cover:

“Left unchecked, the dangerous situation which was developing in the SYL could have led to the destruction of a whole layer of youth cadres, primarily centered in the apparatus, and an estrangement of the youth organization from the party....it is not unlikely that there would have been a Shachtmanite development in the youth at some future conjuncture when bourgeois pressure was brought to bear.”

—“Forging a Youth Cadre,” *Young Spartacus*, May 1979

The article drew an explicit parallel between the clones and Bill Moore and David Cunningham, Robertson’s 1972 critics; they were accused of having “posited a two-class stratification of the party, the ‘thinkers’ and the ‘hack functionaries.’” The YSp article also included the peculiar assertion that:

“...there have been difficulties throughout the existence of our youth group in forging an effective leadership cadre. It remains true today that comrade Robertson is our best youth leader.”

After successfully smashing up the youth leadership and driving many talented young comrades out of politics, Robertson’s next move was to promote several relatively inexperienced and politically insecure young women (who the “clones” had supposedly been taking advantage of while also holding back) into the new SYL leadership. They were barely settled in before Robertson, the superannuated “best youth leader,” wearing sunglasses and appearing to be at least slightly hung over, took the stage at the SYL’s Sixth National Conference in April 1979 to make the surprise announcement that the SYL should immediately go out and recruit 200 new members. This completely unrealistic projection appeared to take members of his inner circle by surprise, as well as those who were supposed to execute it. No one wanted to openly contradict the genius-leader, but the cadre all seemed to know there was no likelihood of success, and apart from a few hacks, few expressed any enthusiasm for the proposal.

A year later, after the 200 new recruits failed to materialize and the quality of the youth press withered, Robertson and his office-bound coterie complained about those out in the field doing the actual work. According to *Workers Vanguard* the membership’s failure to implement the founder/leader’s projection emerged as a theme of the 1980 conference:

“The [SL Sixth National] conference document noted that ‘the next “transformation” must be one, crudely put, of numbers.’ The need to fully implement the recruitment drive projected over a year ago by the previous national youth conference was a recurring theme of the discussion.”

But repeated exhortations to expand the dues base could not change the fact that the SYL was badly damaged—instead of growing it continued to shrink. Shortly before it was finally mothballed in 1986, Ed Cliffel observed that “what we tend to get in struggles in the youth are confessionals and denunciations, as opposed to clarifying fights.” He advised the demoralized remnants of the SYL:

“If you’re to develop in the way Lenin proposes, it requires on the level of the individual some capacity for self-assertion, which used to be the hallmark of youth, but which seems to have strangely disappeared in the past decade or so.”

—“Leninist Tactics and the Road to Workers Power,”
Young Spartacus, No. 131, November 1985

Cliffel was not stupid; like every other SL cadre he knew very well that the “capacity for self-assertion” in the SYL disappeared as a result of the clone purge and all the ensuing leadership-initiated carnage that followed in which the targets tended to be anyone seen to possess “some capacity for self-assertion.”

The gutting of the SYL was the first clear example of how the capricious destruction of cadres impeded the growth of the Spartacist tendency and lowered its capacity to resist the series of egregious departures from the Trotskyist program that soon followed. Confused and disoriented by the continual irrational leadership-generated crises and depressed by the general downturn in class struggle in North America, many valuable comrades simply gave up. In many cases they did so without renouncing the Trotskyist politics they were once recruited to, as the *WV* report on the SL’s 1980 conference noted:

“In the preconference discussion it was necessary to sharply point out that the ex-comrades whose resignations read like membership applications in professing ‘no political differences’ actually have a difference on the ‘party question’: they no longer believe that bolshevism requires concrete expression in a vanguard party.”

The policy of initiating “sub-political” fights to reduce the risk of future potentially damaging political struggles produced a toxic environment that was far worse than anything previously experienced in the internal life of the Spartacist tendency. Pressure by the leadership on everyone present to get their hands dirty, inexorably accelerated the political corrosion. During the 1960s and 70s instances of such abusive behavior by leading comrades was less frequent and far more limited in scope.

ET/BT vs IG on Spartacist History

In a 6 August message on the historiography of the decline of the Spartacist tendency, Carl Steele wrote:

“James [Creegan] continues: ‘Norden [Jan Norden is the leader of the Internationalist Group (IG) which departed the SL in 1996], on the other hand, to this day refuses to acknowledge that there was any abuse committed under the Robertson regime, except that to which he and his three faction partners were subjected when they finally fell foul of the Peerless Leader. Until then Norden sat with his mouth tight shut throughout all the National Chairman’s horrendous misdeeds.’

“I agree with what you say about the IG. But the BT were exactly the same 15 years earlier. Tom Riley claimed the Spartacists were a well-mannered revolutionary organization guided by fealty to the revolutionary program until they turned on him. The abuse prior to Riley coming under attack was expunged from the record.”

Creegan responded the next day:

“Steele reiterates his refusal to distinguish between the BT and the IG, except to say that the leaders of the two groups were ejected by Robertson at different times, and date the party’s degeneration from their respective exits. This is certainly true of Norden, who claims that everything was peachy-keen in Spartsville until his departure. But if Steele would re-read the BT’s major document, *The Road to Jimstown*, [*Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt* No. 4] he would discover a critique that traces the pro-

cess of degeneration back to the early 70s. It gives a lot of weight to the clone purge, and refers to Robertson's trashing of Liz Gordon when she dared to criticize an article of his on the Polansky affair as unbalanced. Both events that transpired when Tom Riley, Jimstown's principal author, still belonged to the SL. He did not claim it only went downhill when he left."

We sought to engage the IG in a discussion of our common history as soon as we learned of their expulsion (see our December 1996 letter reprinted in TB #6: Polemics with the Internationalist Group, pp 7-23). In reaching out to them we characterized the Logan trial as "a milestone in the degeneration of the iSt/ICL," and observed that "However uncomfortable it may be for the IG, the fact is that the proceedings against Logan set a precedent for many of the improprieties in Socorro's [one of the four founding members of the IG] trial." We also speculated that, like us, Jan Norden must have known that the core of the case against Logan was bogus because all the essential information surfaced during the Ebel Commission, five years before Robertson claimed to have first learned of any problems:

"Comrade Norden, who was a leading member of the SL/US at the time, may recall the commission that met in the SL's New York headquarters in August-September 1974 to consider the complaints of John Ebel, a disaffected member of the SL/ANZ. Ebel's complaints touched on all the allegations (including the celebrated one of a female comrade supposedly pressured to give up her child) that five years later the SL leadership was pretending it had just learned of. Yet the 1974 Ebel commission, after considering the evidence, did not find that there were any serious improprieties in the SL/ANZ. How do the IG comrades account for that?"

Unfortunately, the IG comrades have chosen not to comment on this or any other episodes in the long chain of events that marked the departure of the once-revolutionary SL from its Trotskyist past—a process we consider to have been qualitatively completed by 1984. In Jim Creegan's last contribution before leaving us ("Willful Blindness - IG: Ex-Robertsonites in Denial," 1917 No 20) he pointed to the uncanny similarity between the IG's descriptions of the cynical and abusive techniques used against them during their 1996 purge and those described eleven years earlier in "The Road to Jimstown."

Carl claims that the IG's approach to SL history parallels our own, but in fact it is much closer to his—with the conclusions inverted. Whereas Carl asserts that the SL was never any good, the IG, at least in its public pronouncements, acts as if things only started going wrong in the lead-up to their purge in 1996. The IG thereby embraces at least implicitly all the expulsions and frame-ups, moral corruption, multiple political deviations and unconscionable abuse of so many dedicated and self-sacrificing comrades right up until it was their turn for a trip to the chopping block.

In October 1982, in launching the External Tendency, we declared that:

"while the SL's program remains revolutionary, its leadership collective increasingly exhibits hyper-centralist, paranoid and personalist characteristics. These tendencies on the part of the leadership have reached a point where they call into question both the possibility of significantly enlarging the organization and of reproducing Trotskyist cadres within it."

We have documented the SL's departure from its Trotskyist past on a wide range of key programmatic issues—see, for example, "Compare and Contrast" for our respective records on the Russian question. Norden et al prefer not to comment on the cynical Stalinophilic motion used to purge the

TLD in 1981, or the 1982 identification with Soviet supremo Yuri Andropov who played a key role in the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian workers' political revolution (TB #1: Only Trotskyism Can Defend the Gains of October). The IG has also yet to address the SL's many other serious deviations from Trotskyism that took place prior to 1996, including the call to save the survivors of the 1983 destruction of the U.S. Marines barracks in Beirut (TB #2: Marxism vs. Social Patriotism) and the social-patriotic flinch over the destruction of the anti-Soviet Challenger mission in 1986 ("No Disaster for the Working - Class Challenger's 'Major Malfunction'," 1917 No 2).

This reticence to engage in a serious evaluation of SL history, or even mention Robertson's passing, clearly derives from the fact that Norden et al are not proud of having acquiesced to both the multiple overt programmatic deviations from Trotskyism and the brazen abuse of many comrades that marked the decade and a half prior to their expulsion. The founders of the IG, when they eventually found themselves on the receiving end, did not simply give up as Carl and so many others did. They at least deserve credit for that. As we pointed out in 1996, the story they told followed:

"a familiar pattern: a cynical purge of cadre whose main infraction appears to have been a reluctance to swallow everything laid down by those in positions of authority. Many comrades have been purged from the International Communist League/international Spartacist tendency [ICL/iSt] for similar reasons in the past."

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"We have always said that the absence of a democratic internal life within the iSt/ICL could only produce a bureaucratized and largely depoliticized organization. Your recent experience would appear to confirm this estimate. Over the years the SL leadership has also propped a range of formal programmatic deviations from the Trotskyist heritage it once championed."

—TB #6: Polemics with the Internationalist Group, pp 7-23

We noted that:

"The IG comrades, despite their decades of experience in the ICL, were apparently also surprised by what happened to them. They so far seem unable to provide a satisfactory explanation of their own experience. The issues posed are considerably more complicated, and personally more difficult, for the IG comrades because coming to grips with what happened requires that they first establish some critical distance from their own political histories, and begin to rethink many of the assumptions that they have operated on for years."

We also reviewed some key political moments in the SL's political degeneration and discussed, in forensic detail, the grotesquely cynical purge of the Australian SL in 1981, which the IG, in its initial declaration ("From a Drift Toward Abstentionism to Desertion from the Class Struggle") gormlessly characterized as a struggle against "social-democratic deviations." We observed:

"Any politically experienced person should recognize that something must be wrong in an organization where a motion unanimously adopted in Melbourne on 27 July, is then unanimously voted down in Sydney the next day (including by its mover!), only to be unanimously endorsed again by the same people four days later."

The IG never responded on this or any other issue we raised. A serious historical accounting would be awkward because Norden et al would have to acknowledge the abusive character of the internal regime of which they were a part. They would also need to defend, or repudiate, the SL's myriad programmatic political deviations prior to their

departure. The IG's reluctance to do so is understandable. They don't want to damage their own credibility. But any-one serious about building a viable revolutionary movement must reject "prestige politics." In our 1996 letter we noted:

"A rigorous and critical accounting of the history of the Trotskyist movement is an essential element in forging the cadres of the future. We recognize that in his 1993 document tracing the genesis of Pabloism to the disorientation of the post-war Fourth International over Yugoslavia comrade Norden made an important contribution to the historiography of our movement. The same seriousness and detachment must guide our approach to the history of our own time."

We also responded to the IG's contention that only "crude anti-communists" could allege there was any "corruption" within the SL leadership:

"To our knowledge, only Robertson and a few close associates enjoy any significant material privileges. Indeed, the rest of the functionaries live very modestly. But there is also corruption of a political/moral sort, where comrades are forced into situations where they must either compromise their integrity or break from the movement to which they have dedicated a good part of their lives. The demand that the [Brazilian] LQB comrades support the expulsion of Norden/Stamberg, without either reading the documents or hearing the arguments, is an example of this sort of 'corruption.'"

We concluded with the following proposal:

"We are interested in initiating serious discussions between ourselves and your organizations, with the object of either narrowing the gap between us, or at least clarifying where we stand in relation to each other."

The IG leadership nonetheless adamantly refuses to seriously discuss our common history. Fearful of acknowledging some measure of responsibility for the many organizational crimes, misdemeanours, and programmatic deviations of the SL prior to 1996, Norden et al hide behind Bill Clinton's policy of: "don't ask; don't tell."

Healyism Implodes—Spartacists Miss the Boat

As in the iSt's American flagship, Robertson prioritized the elimination of potential rivals within his mini-international over the construction of politically authoritative leadership configurations—an obvious precondition for viable sections. By the time Carl joined the SL/B, many of the more talented and effective cadres from the WSL regroupment and elsewhere had already been broken or discarded.

While Carl was shocked by the gratuitous harshness with which the members were treated, at the time such behavior was celebrated in the iSt. *Spartacist Britain's* account of the SL/B's Seventh National Conference in September 1981 was brazenly headlined "Bolshevik Parties are Mean." This is simply false. Bolshevik organizations are distinguished both by their adherence to Marxist principle and insistence that members carry out their assignments in disciplined fashion—but under Lenin, Trotsky and Cannon the leadership prided itself on being fair, not "mean." That attribute was always rightly associated with Stalinist and Healyite organizations.

There was plenty of "meanness" but little clarity in the chaotic SL/B "fights" that characterized its formative years. So many leadership configurations were smashed up that by 1981, only three years after its founding, the SL/B was already on its seventh (emergency) national conference. I suspect that may be a record of some sort. The celebration of "meanness" and "torture" was captured in the follow-

ing pithy utterance from an unidentified participant (likely Robertson) at the 1981 confab:

"Bolshevik parties that are capable of taking and exercising state power aren't built gently...they're built through their own torture not so much that the party is broken and obliterated but enough so that it's pretty mean."

—*Spartacist Britain*, October 1981

The techniques employed to make the members of an ostensibly Trotskyist group "mean" are roughly like those used to get the same result in a dog. Creating revolutionary cadres requires very different methods.

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In 1966, after the Spartacist delegation was brutally ejected from the International Committee's London Conference, Harry Turner aptly observed that Gerry Healy's intent was to create "an international after the manner of Stalin's Comintern, permeated with servility at one pole and authoritarianism at the other." Two decades later, when Healy was ousted from the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), it was a sizeable organization with a daily newspaper and the capacity to mobilize thousands of members and supporters on short notice.

The WRP's unexpected implosion presented a major potential opportunity for the SL—and was the occasion for Robertson to consider that perhaps the years spent "torturing" the SL/B, which destroyed both the political self-confidence and internal cohesion of its cadre, had perhaps not been such a good idea after all. The "mean" capos who ran the SL/B were adept at interpreting hints and nuances emanating from the New York headquarters, but manifestly unequipped to pursue the potentially huge, but fleeting, opportunity presented by the sudden meltdown of the Healyites. To do so would require a capacity to innovate and a willingness to take some chances—qualities which had long since been beaten out of the remaining members of the iSt's British franchise.

Robertson and his cronies, well aware of the limitations of their barely operational British "section," attempted to intersect this important development as best they could from afar with a hastily produced special double issue of *Spartacist* (Nos. 36-37, Winter 1985-86) featuring "Documents and Interviews on the WRP's Buried History." In the early 1960s, Robertson and his comrades in the Revolutionary Tendency were allied with Healy in resisting the rightward-moving SWP's reunification with the European forces of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. In the process they learned that Healy's operation was not what it appeared to be. In his *Spartacist* interview Robertson observed:

"There are two kinds of ostensibly socialist organizations in this world. There are those where, if you read the group's paper and find yourself in agreement, and go and join the organization, it turns out to be pretty much what you expected. As examples: the Communist Party, the American SWP (until fairly recently, at least), the Democratic Socialists of America, the Spartacist League. The Healyite organization is of a different kind. It is a political cult."

Five months prior to the WRP's implosion we published "The Road to Jimstown," tracing the steps through which the SL itself descended from a revolutionary organization into a political cult. In his 1985 interview Robertson recalled how, in 1966, he refused to bow to Healy's demand that he debase himself by confessing to being an American chauvinist; he clearly hoped that this episode might provide some access to the WRP's better elements:

"The Healy/Banda organization has blown apart, and a lot of dazed people are asking 'where did we go wrong?' And the 1966 IC Conference and our expulsion keeps coming up over and over again."

Speculating that “we may have helped to crystallize a split in the WRP,” Robertson concluded: “So we have some stuff to say now, because we were the principled people the whole way.” Untrue, of course. Had Robertson indeed been “principled...the whole way,” had the Spartacist tendency been the sort of organization it was in 1966, then the SL/B might have been positioned to absorb a significant influx of experienced and valuable cadres. But by 1985 the SL was a group that routinely employed the same techniques to break potential dissidents that Healy once tried on Robertson. What’s more, there were a lot of former Spartacists telling tales about life in “Jimstown” that closely paralleled Robertson’s description of “the Healy operation”:

“Over the course of years the Healy operation has sought to create a totally controlled environment devoid of any risk of internal political struggle.... There was the systematic destruction of cadres: abusing them and then holding them up to scorn as weaklings, breaking down their self-respect by extorting false confessions, using their loyalty to the professed ideals of socialism to make them complicit in crimes against their comrades and the comrades of other groups. The use of these techniques was calculating, as was also the two-pronged effort to deprive the members of the ability to think....”

Robertson’s description of the tension between the WRP’s “orthodox Trotskyist” façade and the reality of how it actually functioned, was just as applicable to the SL itself circa 1985:

“When you have a regime that is nominally of a revolutionary Marxist character, and is multi-facetedly corrupt, that creates a tension. Because the corruption has to reflect an appetite alien to the program. That’s always the basis of bureaucratism—when you proclaim one thing and practice another.”

Had the SL/B been less thoroughly ground down, it might have been able to present itself as an attractive alternative for dissident WRPs, but the traumatized submissives who composed most of the group’s members were obviously not up to the task. Yet Robertson was determined to do what he could in the circumstances. So, in addition to rushing out the special “Healyism Implodes” issue of Spartacist, he flew to London in December 1985 to personally attempt to reanimate his flailing British franchise. He hoped to perform this miracle by organizing a special, recovered memory internal educational to acquaint SL/B with a new, upbeat, sanitized rewrite of their own recent traumas. It seems possible that Robertson found inspiration in a Tony Robbins infomercial (Robbins is America’s foremost self-help huckster and a practitioner of “neurolinguistic programming,” a 1970s pseudoscientific technique developed in California that is supposed to accelerate personal growth).

A previously unpublished transcript of Robertson’s remarks at this ill-omened event has recently surfaced. It was posted on 31 October 2021 at the “splitsandfusions.wordpress” web page. Robertson began by admitting that “I was the architect of London Station,” before going on to explain how in 1976 he deposed Judith S., who had originally been running the SL’s London Station. Judith, a qualified economist who, while in the SL, gained a well-deserved reputation as a brilliant polemicist, was not a particularly gifted administrator—so her removal as London organizer was generally well received. Continuing his narrative, Robertson took credit for his role in orchestrating the October 1978 overthrow of Bill Logan’s regime, which was elected at the founding conference earlier that year. The group never really recovered from that; the Logan regime, during its brief tenure, was far more effective than any that replaced it.

Robertson, anxious to disclaim any responsibility for the wretched condition of the SL/B, claimed that after Logan’s removal he had little involvement in Britain:

“I’m very familiar with that. And nothing since really; I sort of have a sense that I’m poured onto an airplane every two years and there’s a national conference and the men are crying and the women are raging and people are purged and everybody swears to do better and then I go away again.”

Carl’s paraphrase of Robertson’s description of the non-traditional behavior of both men and women in the SL/B presumably derives from this event. The Spartacist supremo’s opaque reference to the chronic churning of the SL/B more or less corresponds to other descriptions we have heard: international delegations periodically flew in and whacked one or another group of leadership unfortunates (usually on some pseudo-political pretext) before flying out again.

One of the chief objectives of the December 1985 “educational” appears to have been to reanimate David Strachan, whose earlier humiliation Carl described so vividly in the passage cited above. Robertson praised David (who succeeded Judith S. in 1976), for doing “a good job of organizer” in London:

“We picked carefully where to go and sell, where to go to contact left groups. We did a lot of internal education. It was in that period that we did the necessary work that laid down our basic document on the Irish Question, which was finely synthesized by David....”

Robertson returned to David a bit later, this time making light of his earlier treatment:

“I just read a letter by David...in which he says, you know, the leadership in Britain is cliquist and over-activist and drives people into the ground. But I laugh at him and say: David, you ought to know—you did it all twice (?) as bad yourself. (laughter).

“I read this document from August 1984. This is a very fine document which he [David] just claims he didn’t write—National Conference document—and it pointed out the fine work we were doing—that we had nearly 60 members and we had a perspective of doubling our size. About 18 months later we cut our size in half....”

Robertson’s claim that he only “sort of had a sense” of the endless, pointlessly apolitical carnage that wracked the SL/B for years was clearly disingenuous, although he no doubt would have preferred to have seen the SL/B double in size the previous year rather than shrinking by half. He obviously hoped that somehow what he described as the “awfully tortured” ranks of the badly battered SL/B might still perhaps lure in at least a few dozen refugees from the WRP’s left wing. But deep down he must have known that was never going to happen.

After explaining to his audience that having an international affiliate in place can sometimes provide a “chance for a payoff” when unexpected developments like the WRP’s meltdown occur, he concluded by lamenting all the abuse the SL/B membership endured over the years (as if he had no hand in any of it), “Because you’ve never done anything wrong here”:

“One of the most powerful arguments for an International—so that you can struggle on many different terrains and you have a better chance for a payoff in any one of them.

“I don’t have anything else to say about this—history of the British section—except that it’s been awfully tortured. Comrades have been hard on each other. Now a bit more typically the Central Committee is hard on the ranks, but it’s not right to be hard (?)...And it’s too goddamn bad. Because you’ve never done anything wrong here and you’ve done a lot of good things here.”

Had the SL/B possessed the same élan and self-confidence as it did when it was launched in 1978 it could probably have collected a substantial “payoff” from the WRP’s troubles. But by 1985 there were a lot of former Spartacists walking around Britain who were acutely aware of the similarities between Robertson’s operation and Healy’s and quite willing to talk about it. Their tales concerning life in Jimstown could only have complicated attempts to market the SL/B as a suitable destination for WRP refugees.

We had almost completed the initial issue of 1917 when we learned of the WRP’s travails. On reading the special “Healyism Implodes” issue of *Spartacist* we were struck by how closely Robertson’s description of the practices of the SLL/WRP fitted his own operation. By transposing “Robertson” for Healy, “SL” for WRP, and scaling down the numbers, the *Spartacist* article provided a pretty accurate picture of the organization that Carl Steele and James Creegan belonged to at the time:

“[Robertson] is a political bandit, and the organization he built is an outfit of cynical charlatans at the top.... But there is a tragic side to all this: the damage that has been done over the years to [hundreds] of sincere young people who joined the [SL] because they hated capitalism and wanted to take part in the fight for socialist revolution. The [SL’s] posture of ‘Trotskyism,’ utterly fraudulent though it is, is not without meaning for many members. And [Robertson’s] organization has frequently done a competent job in exposing the reformist scum and centrist confusionists who people the British left; hence, the [SL] is widely seen as the ‘hard Trotskyists’ the alternative to class-collaborationist betrayal.”

—*Spartacist*, Nos. 36-37, Winter 1985-86

We decided to delay publication so we could include an article spelling out the striking similarities between the SL and WRP (“The Robertson School of Party Building”, 1917 No. 1). We considered Carl’s vivid description of how David Strachan was bullied until he broke down to be powerful first-hand testimony about life in Jimstown, so we included it. We knew that while he had composed it as a letter to the SL/B, he had never actually sent it and we also knew that he had, for whatever reason, decided to crawl back. We did not want to “out” him as the author—life in the SL/B would be punishment enough for “ghosting” us. When we met in 1988, Carl told me that there was a lot of curiosity in the SL/B about the identity of the author of the account of David’s humiliation. He said he immediately confessed to Jon Brule, who was then in London, and nothing more was said about it. By that point the SL/B needed all hands on deck.

We wrote “The Robertson School of Party Building” in an attempt to intersect subjectively revolutionary WRP members interested in exploring where and when the Healy group had gone off the rails. The Spartacist tendency was obviously part of this story, as its predecessor, the Revolutionary Tendency, which was aligned with the SLL in the early 1960s, disagreed with Healy’s absurd contention that despite Fidel Castro’s expropriation of the bourgeoisie Cuba was not a deformed workers’ state. Healy was sufficiently threatened by the much smaller Robertson group’s unwillingness to completely politically subordinate themselves that in 1962 he split the RT, thereby severely compromising any possibility of winning a chunk of the SWP’s historic cadre to oppose reunification with Pablo/Mandel.

The subsequent expulsion of the SL from the 1966 London Conference for the “crime” of lese majeste was roughly equivalent to the various non-programmatic purges carried out by Robertson for similar reasons, beginning with the clones. Following the break with the Spartacists, the SLL soon began to veer away from its formally Trotskyist

stance which led to a deepening programmatic divergence over a broad range of issues—including Soviet defensism, the “Arab Revolution,” Mao Zedong’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular and many other questions. Of particular significance was the indifference of Healy/Wohlforth to questions of special oppression (e.g., women, racial minorities, oppressed nations, etc.). In every case, the Spartacists’ authentically Trotskyist positions contrasted sharply with the opportunist and/or backward adaptations of the Healyites, thereby demonstrating their qualitative political superiority.

The 1985 WRP split resulted in two groups: a minority continued to support Healy while the majority was grouped around Cliff Slaughter and, initially, Michael Banda. Shortly after their break with Healy, Slaughter et al began maneuvering with the Argentine-based Liga Internacional de los Trabajadores (LIT), a pseudo-Trotskyist grouping led by Nahuel Moreno, a political adventurer with a well-deserved reputation for combining gross opportunism with occasionally flamboyant revolutionary posturing. Some of the more politically serious elements in Slaughter’s wing of the WRP were worried about the indecent haste with which the prospect of some sort of unification with the LIT was being pursued. They had some notion of Moreno’s checkered history and wanted to look more deeply into it while also investigating other international groupings claiming affinity to the ideas of Leon Trotsky.

In early 1987, Chris Bailey, a prominent WRP trade-union cadre based in Cambridge, travelled to the Bay Area to investigate the Internationalist Workers Party (IWP), the U.S. Morenoite franchise led by one Leon Perez, who was originally from Argentina. A few months before Bailey arrived, in November 1986, the BT fused with a leftist split from the IWP, the Left Trotskyist Tendency (LTT). While visiting the Bay Area, Bailey sought out members of the former LTT for discussion. He soon took a great interest in Howard Keylor’s exemplary trade-union work and was particularly impressed by his role in initiating the 11-day anti-apartheid cargo boycott in 1984. When Bailey returned to Britain, he and his somewhat loosely organized co-thinkers (who subsequently emerged as the Internationalist Faction [IF]) proposed that the WRP sponsor a speaking tour for Howard to address trade-union militants across Britain. The WRP leadership raised a series of objections to the idea, so Bailey and his comrades went ahead on their own, and using their trade-union connections, organized six engagements for Howard in early July 1987.

Bailey and his circle were interested in discussing the history of Trotskyism and particularly the Spartacist tendency’s experiences with Healy in the 1960s and their subsequent history. Chris told us that he knew of three copies of “The Robertson School of Party Building” that were mailed to WRPers, apparently from three separate sources. We were pleased to learn that our article had found its target audience, but we focused on the reasons we considered the SL to have been the only authentically Trotskyist tendency during the 1960s and 70s. We also of course discussed its recent political decline, which was clearly exemplified in its shameful attempts to wreck the 1984 anti-apartheid boycott, behavior which paralleled sectarian episodes from the WRP’s own history.

A month prior to Howard’s speaking tour, Dave Bruce, a former WRP full-timer who became the leading Internationalist Faction member in London, generously invited me and two BT comrades from the Bay Area (Dov Winter, leader of the former LTT and Gerald Smith) to spend a week in his flat for the purpose of holding an intensive round of programmatic discussions. One key issue we went over at length was Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism and the contemporary

implications that flowed from it—this involved addressing many questions about which the WRP had been fairly consistently wrong. At the time Dave was working on a document on this issue for submission to the WRP internal bulletin and questions arising from this project were the focus of much of our discussion.

We also exchanged views on the broader history of post-war Trotskyism and the role of the Healy tendency—what was done right and where it had gone wrong, particularly following the 1953 rupture with the Pabloists where, for almost a decade, Healy was aligned with the SWP in the International Committee (IC). Throughout these discussions we pointed to those issues on which the Spartacists correctly diverged from Healy, beginning with the class character of the Cuban state under Castro.

Among the many issues that came up, some of the most important ones involved a Marxist approach to the complicated problems posed by situations of interpenetrated peoples, which included both Ireland and Palestine/Israel. We also explained why we thought revolutionaries should take a defeatist position on both sides in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973. In general the comrades of the Internationalist Faction proved to be surprisingly open to our arguments and it seemed that there was a significant convergence on most issues. The sticking point came with Polish Solidarnosc, the mass proletarian movement whose leadership, we argued, had by September 1981, essentially embraced a program of capitalist counterrevolution. In this case the comrades listened carefully to our arguments and engaged us in several long discussions, but in the end, they were not persuaded.

In a letter dated 28 June 1987, a few weeks after our visit and just on the eve of Howard's speaking tour, Dave Bruce wrote:

"Far from the sectarian nonsense of the WRP Central Committee sabotaging the tour, I am confident that we shall be able to fill his schedule with what should be worthwhile meetings. We also feel here that bowing to the diktat of Leon Perez [the Argentine leader of the U.S. IWP who had been dispatched to London to promote the projected unification with the WRP] on an issue like this may well backfire on them in the long run. Many in the WRP, while not agreeing with our general line, are disgusted by the handling of the Keylor visit and will work for its success regardless...."

"That to one side, may I, on behalf of my 'co-thinkers' in the WRP take this opportunity of thanking your comrades Gerald, Dov and Tom for the enthusiasm and frankness they brought to their discussions with us...."

We replied on 14 July 1987:

"The document enclosed is an SL compilation from the early days of the tendency when it tried to defend a Trotskyist position on the Cuban question in both the IC and the SWP—with similar results in both cases. We send it to you partly because it has some relevance to the theoretical issues posed in the discussion of Stalinism...and also because we think that the Cuban question is central to the crisis of world Trotskyism in the post-war period, and that the RT (the SL's progenitor) represented something politically important on that question...."

"Thanks again for your recent document [on Stalinism]... We hope to have a more substantial document available on the question of Poland 1981 in the not too distant future."

Our projected document was indeed substantial, but it did not appear until the next year. The title we chose for it, Solidarnosc: Acid Test for Trotskyists, was at least partly a reference to our discussions with the Internationalist Faction. When we met Bruce and several of his co-thinkers

for another discussion in the summer of 1988 it was clear that there was no movement on the question by either side.

We were surprised when we initially talked to these comrades to discover how extremely serious and politically impressive many of them were. No one we encountered had any positive interest in the SL/B or even took them seriously; our documentation of the unpleasant similarities between Healy's regime and Robertson's may have played some small role in that but a far larger factor (apart from the SL/B's negligible size compared to the WRP) was doubtless the many horror stories circulating on the British left from dozens of wounded and embittered former Spartacists.

The BT was (and remains) a very small group with limited resources; we were only able to spend a week in London. Had we the capacity the Spartacists possessed at that time, our intervention might have turned out very differently. If we take a step back from that we can only imagine what things might have been like had the SL, instead of undermining its position in the ILWU by forcing Howard Keylor out, supported him and the successful 1984 anti-apartheid cargo boycott he led. It is clear that this exemplary struggle, which resonated in South Africa and to which Nelson Mandela referred years later when he visited the Bay Area, could have been leveraged into a great deal more than we were able to. If, instead of being "tortured," the members of the British Spartacist group had been developed politically, as Robertson had been during his time in Max Shachtman's organization through participating in internal discussions and debates over substantive political issues, rather than "fights" to rearrange the pecking order, it is entirely possible that scores of WRP cadres could have been won over. Of course, a lot of other subsequent things would also have been very different.

In Germany we also established contact with some former Healyite youth. In an internal retrospective on our 1987 European trip, Dov Winter reported:

"After and as a result of our participation in the [Lutte Ouvrière] Fete, we encountered several groups who had just split from Healyism (similar to the experience of the WRP minority except they had been expelled or left and had some other criticisms they fought on). These groups included the German group which [Ursula] Jensen had discussions with when she was in Germany....Our intervention and discussion with these comrades led to their decision not to pursue the SL, nor fuse with them. The German group is very close to us, though they are very young comrades we have a perspective with them given that we have a projected transfer to Germany of two comrades next year."

We did eventually make a few valuable German recruits from this work. We also followed up a couple of leads from former Healyite Greek and Iranian comrades, but neither panned out.

I recall Charlie Burroughs, during one of his trips to Toronto from Buffalo, New York, where the SL had a local in 1974, observing that Trotskyist "principles are distilled tactics." Which is why, in the long run, "crime doesn't pay" in left-wing politics. If Robertson had run a less brutal regime, if he had been prepared to risk permitting dissidents to articulate differences and responded with counterarguments, instead of attempting to pre-empt damaging splits by identifying and obliterating potential factional opponents before they expressed any criticism—in other words, if he had run the type of operation that James P. Cannon did—the SL circa 1985 might well have been able to collect the anticipated "payoff" from the WRP meltdown and a great deal more.

The excessively heavy-handed treatment of the SL's overseas affiliates also proved costly in Germany. In 1985,

the year of the Healyite implosion, the already badly politically disoriented TLD was slapped around by New York for deciding not to bother travelling to Bitburg to join the protests against Ronald Reagan's visit to a military cemetery, which, among its 2,000 graves, included 49 of Waffen-SS members. In a wildly disproportionate response, the iSt leadership disbanded its German section, which resulted in a number of TLD members abandoning political life. Those who remained were dispersed abroad for a year or more. Eventually the TLD was reconstituted, but the resulting loss of public credibility and political self-confidence hobbled its ability to take advantage of the crisis that engulfed the East German deformed workers' state (DDR) in the autumn of 1989. In a desperate attempt to make up lost ground, Robertson threw everything he could into the DDR. But an influx of members from abroad, most of whom could not speak German, hardly compensated for the absence of an effective organization on the ground. The needless squandering of so many German cadres, which reduced the TLD to a shell of what it was in the late 1970s, severely limited the scope and effectiveness of the Spartacist intervention in 1989-90. (For an analysis of the profound political disorientation of the Spartacist tendency resulting from the leadership's projection that a proletarian political revolution was underway in the DDR, see: "Whatever Happened to the Spartacist League?").

No need to reinvent the wheel

The American Trotskyist movement, which Cannon led for three decades (with direct guidance from Leon Trotsky during a few critical years) had, by the early 1960s, degenerated into publicists for Fidel Castro's guerrillaist strategy and the Cuban deformed workers' state that he ultimately presided over. The SL originated in a struggle to uphold the precious Trotskyist/Bolshevik political heritage the SWP once championed against this overt revisionism (see: "In Defense of a Revolutionary Perspective"). For most of the next two decades, James Robertson and his close supporters worked to build a new revolutionary organization committed to defending and advancing the programmatic legacy of Trotsky's Fourth International that the SWP abandoned.

In its prime, during the mid-1970s, the Spartacist League stood apart from its ostensibly Trotskyist competitors by its willingness to tell the truth and its unflinching fidelity to revolutionary principle. While Joseph Hansen, Gerry Healy, Ernest Mandel et al were busy hailing the "Arab Revolution" that was supposedly being led by various sheiks and colonels, the SL championed a policy of "class against class" in the Middle East. When Ayatollah Khomeini mobilized his followers in an "Islamic Revolution" against the brutal

regime of the Iranian Shah, the SL correctly asserted that the working class had no interest in the victory of either of these qualitatively equivalent reactionaries. The Spartacists similarly rejected Lech Walesa's Solidarnosc as an agency of anti-communist counterrevolution and drew a hard line against popular-frontist class collaboration. All these positions, and many more, distinguished the Spartacist tendency from the opportunism common to virtually every other self-proclaimed "revolutionary Marxist" current.

There is a great deal to be learned from the political analysis and practical activity (particularly in the trade unions) of the revolutionary SL during the 1960s and 70s. Its subsequent decline into an irrelevant and now apparently largely comatose obedience cult is regrettable, but entirely understandable. As James P. Cannon commented:

"On the basis of a long historical experience, it can be written down as a law that revolutionary cadres, who revolt against their social environment and organize parties to lead a revolution, can—if the revolution is too long delayed—themselves degenerate under the continuing influences and pressures of this same environment...."

—*The First Ten Years of American Communism*

But as Cannon also noted:

"The basic ideas of Marxism, upon which alone a revolutionary party can be constructed, are continuous in their application and have been for a hundred years. The ideas of Marxism, which create revolutionary parties, are stronger than the parties they create and never fail to survive their downfall."

—*Ibid.*

Revolutionaries today cannot be discouraged by the disappointments of the past and the fact that many individuals thrown up by previous waves of class struggle ultimately proved too small and too weak to be worthy of the great ideals of socialism they once claimed to represent. Only by the careful study of the entire history of the revolutionary Marxist movement is it possible to fully understand both how the workers' movement has arrived at the present conjuncture and how the basis can be laid for its resurgence. The victorious workers' revolutions of the future will be presented with new problems to solve, but their success will largely depend on their ability to assimilate the lessons and legacy of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the revolutionary movements that grew out of it. As Trotsky observed, "Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones." Time spent reinventing the wheel is time wasted, because:

"Only continuity of ideas creates a revolutionary tradition, without which a revolutionary party sways like a reed in the wind."

—"Trotskyism' and the PSOP," 15 July 1939

