

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CONVENTION

FROM DAVID MILLER

The decision of the EC to drop SF, BH and DM from its NC slate and the political grounds given for that decision impose upon me the obligation to set the record straight on my political role in the NC. Unfortunately it must take the form of this letter since illness prevents my attending the convention.

For some time it has been evident to a good many members of the NC that the EC is very uncomfortable when a proposal of substance comes from the ranks of the NC instead of from the EC itself, i.e. from above. On occasion the NC has initiated a policy or reversed an EC policy. Such incidents are considered by the EC as a 'defeat' (for the entire NC and for the I.S. -- i.e., the EC seems at times to identify itself as the I.S.). The EC minutes are replete with statements about the poor, immature NC meetings. A "good NC meeting" is one in which the EC has "carried" the NC on everything. This EC attitude had crystallized, even before the turn, into an increasing reluctance to tolerate "dissidents" or questioning on the NC. (The three individuals involved are not of course the only "dissidents", only the most vulnerable ones at this moment. The disgraceful treatment of MP by the EC in announcing its slate is just another variation on this theme). The three have been eliminated from the slate -- even though they have demonstrated through the years their acceptance of discipline in action once a line has been voted on.

BUT TO BE MORE SPECIFIC.....

Precisely what issues have precipitated the EC feeling that the presence of these three comrades on the NC is detrimental to the NC and to the organization as a whole? SF and BH will have an opportunity to speak for themselves at the convention.

For my part, I have differed sharply and persistently in five areas with the EC (and the majority of the NC for that matter). All of these differences, sharp as they may be, are perfectly consistent with the fundamental program of the I.S. and with disciplined participation in its leadership in action. These areas are: (1) the black question, (2) our work in the UAW, (3) the role of agitation/propaganda, (4) the meaning of Democratic Centralism, and (5) the theory of the PAE. Some of these differences are well known and need little more than mention. Some will require at least minimal explication.

BLACK QUESTION

(A) The most recent document by JT represents a radical reversal by the I.S. of one part of our policy on the black movement. This partial shift is most welcome. It more or less adopts three views which I have fought for, unsuccessfully, in the organization for over two years, mainly at NC meetings.

(1) I have long maintained, alone on the NC, that increasingly blacks would find black nationalism a dead end, and that AS THE ECONOMIC CRISIS INCREASED blacks would recognize this dead end and move more toward united union caucuses and away from nationalism and separatism. In an extended debate at the NC meeting of the Spring of 1974, JG and JT insisted on the opposite consequence of a crisis -- they claimed it would increase the tendency to nationalism and to black caucuses. I am glad to see through the new document that, implicitly, JT, and I hope JG, have now changed their positions on this central question.

(2) Until this new document, the I.S. position, officially, has been to advocate black caucuses. The JT document reverses this in practice. Good. This reversal is one I have urged on the I.S. for some time. I have argued that the main thrust of our attitude to black ~~unions~~ should normally be to defend among white workers the right of blacks to have their own caucuses, if they wish it, and the need for joint efforts with them. Instead of advocating black caucuses, I have proposed that we prefer and urge common caucuses, while not breaking with those blacks who do not agree with us. The I.S. majority, in my view, has consistently forgotten that Leninists normally do not advocate self-determination, separatism, etc. (for nations, and other minorities), but merely defend the right to self-determination, etc., if the masses wish it.

(3) The NC record will show that all through 1973-74 I fought, unsuccessfully, within the NC for the turn to black work. In these efforts, I am happy to say, I was joined by JG. (Obviously, this was in the pre-voluntary self-discipline days). He and I were repeatedly turned down. A similar situation existed with regard to our Maoist campaign. Again, despite the concurrence of JG, it took a year to convince the EC and NC. Today, against my vote, the Maoist campaign is dead, while JT, who voted for ending it, has now belatedly discovered that Maoism is a key to reaching revolutionary blacks in this country.

(It should also be noted that I have repeatedly, perhaps to the point of nuisance, challenged the gap between our practice and our theory on this subject in our UAW work where (good instinct prevailed) our comrades and WP retained near total silence on the subject of black caucuses. Indeed, too much silence, for we never even criticised or analyzed the errors of DRUM in our literature or press for "good reason". Our theory advocating black caucuses made such criticism awkward.

(B) But not all changes in the JT document have been for the better.

(1) There is not the slightest attempt to relate the changes in policy to I.S. basic theory on Black Nationalism and its relation to the black masses. The old I.S. theory of Black Nationalism organically leads to the expectation of increased black caucuses, parties, etc. One can not scrap the consequence of a theory without re-examining the theory itself. Otherwise we shall have gained nothing but an empirical, easily reversible or easily forgotten change in line.

(2) Our position on superseniority, which I consider erroneous, remains in the diluted form of the percentage layoffs clause (though how much of a role it played in our UAW election campaigns I do not know).

(3) Never having written on the subject (since the NC has, to my recollection, never discussed this matter at any meeting which I have attended), NC members may not be familiar with my views on this. Briefly, I believe that we must defend the right to bus, and give critical support to busing movements in situations such as Boston, but we should not advocate busing as in any sense a solution. Furthermore, I believe that the busing issue will not be a growing one, will not be the focus around which the black movement will be organizing in the period ahead. Consequently, I believe it is an error to place the emphasis which the JT document places upon getting caucuses to endorse the busing principle (except in specific cases, as, say, any rank & file caucuses we might have been involved in in Boston, or within the AFT nationally).

Having confidence in the revolutionary will of the comrades in I.S., I believe that, with more experience in the mass movement, our line on blacks will continue to evolve in the healthier direction it is now belatedly beginning to move. That I should be in part a casualty of this move, so far, is a minor irony of I.S. history.

UAW

(A) Despite repeated requests on my part, the overall policy of the I.S. in the UAW, and our attitude to the UNC in particular, have not been discussed by the NC in two years. This would not be improper were it not for the fact that it was well known that I had written document(s) critical of that work, which I was anxious to raise.

We have done much good work in this arena. Naturally, it has not been without errors. But our policy re: the UNC, and the nature of the industry has been characterized by slippery, ambiguous assessments which have led us to vacillate between ultra-left attitudes toward the UNC and over-exaggerations of its strength and short run potential. I have tried to contribute to improving this situation in writing (on two occasions). But I have never even been given the courtesy of a response or of a hearing by the EC, NC or auto fraction to my written material.

(1) Over the past two years a number of documents on the UNC have been committed to writing. I invite the comrades to read them retrospectively and not rely on verbal reports. I believe they will find it evident that in fact the policy and evaluation of the UNC which we are following at present, in practice, is the one I proposed and advocated 18 months ago, and not the ones proposed by the other documents. Elementary political hygiene would require that we re-assess our written policy in recognition of this fact. Instead, total silence on all my attempts to open the question.

I should add that I have also warned against recent over-exaggeration about the immediate and short-run prospects for the UNC (which the small attendance at the last UNC meeting only corroborates). This over-reaction to the UNC, away from our earlier equally erroneous excessive down-grading (check the documents, not today's verbal assurances) is a classic response to the disease of "revolutionary impatience".

(2) The refusal of the EC to give consideration or discuss the UAW with "outsiders" is reflected in a second situation. Over six months ago, I submitted an article on the future prospects of the auto industry, and the response of the capitalists to that crisis. I requested its publication in WP (denied, but more on this below). I also asked the EC and the auto fraction to discuss the article. Again, neither body ever bothered to respond to the article (have they read it?)

despite the fact that, to the extent that it has any merit, the article could have serious implications for our work in auto.

The EC's treatment, its ignoring the above documents from an NC member, gives one the right to wonder about the EC's real willingness to develop a functioning NC and a collaborative leadership, and provides us with just another example of the EC's discomfort with any policy except one initiated from above.

(3) The Unemployment Campaign: from the start, I cautioned and warned the NC and the Trade Union commission that the level of consciousness of the working class today made attempts to build meaningful unemployment committees questionable at this time. The only possible exception lay within the UAW because of special circumstances -- the UNC role and the 25% unemployment (and even then, only when the SUB ran out). A campaign outside auto was not at all promising, and it was my understanding (apparently in error) that we were only going to try it seriously in auto.

In retrospect, even my limited cautious, exploratory perspective of a real campaign (not just propaganda and resolutions) proved excessive.

Today, we have, in effect, dropped the campaign (properly, in my view). To protest that we have not done so, officially, is self-deception. A policy of putting our unemployment ideas into caucus programs is hardly the same thing as a campaign (especially when unemployment is today 50% higher than it was when we initiated the campaign).

No, we have dropped the campaign, in practice, but are apparently too embarrassed to admit it, so we keep the name of "campaign" in the EC minutes, while transferring the director of the campaign to other work. In this way we prevent ourselves from analyzing and learning from our failures and experiences.

AGITATION & PROPAGANDA

I have been a dissident too, though by no means the initiator, on the matter of our press. I voted with 7 other NC members for the establishment of an I.S. Journal. I share the heresy, with others, that with respect to WP (immensely improved as it is), (1) we lack the resources today to effectively distribute a weekly paper, without gravely distorting the main thrust of the organization, (2) that the paper is lacking adequate political and analytic material (and in economics often borders on populism). I would have voted for the MP document on Agitation and Propaganda presented to the Winter NC, had it been submitted for a vote.

PAE

My difference with the majority on the PAE is well known, and I mention it here only to note one point: Since the defeat at the last convention, I have at no time tried to re-raise the issue in any form, tho god knows, the recent economic perspective document of the EC gives adequate grounds for doing so. I refer to the fact that the basic theory used (and misused) by the current EC document is not the PAE (to which one ritual sentence is devoted, and erroneously, too). Instead the EC document focuses quite properly upon the role of the state in bringing on the crisis, and in "resolving" it, in terms of deficit finance, welfare

expenditures, and aid to capital accumulation (that is what the oil price policy of both the Democrat and Republican parties is all about). In short, the theoretical apparatus the EC is finding useful is precisely the one I tried to develop and which they scoffed at as "Keynesian". How supporters of the theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism can ignore the key role of bourgeois state capitalism (Keynesianism) is another question.

ON DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM (D.C.)

Today, for the first time, there is not a single known opponent of D.C. in the I.S. But the content of that D.C. is in question. I am one of several NC members who have resisted the EC's tendency to distort the historic meaning of D.C.

Viewing the pattern of practice ^{of the EC} which began long before "the turn", tells us far more about what the EC really means by D.C. than a dozen documents.

(1) Some of the examples of this pattern are being widely and rightly challenged among us:

(a) Equal Time for Minority Resolutions: The NATsec and EC advocacy of denial of equal time to the defenders of a minority resolution (not an amendment) in N.Y. is unparalleled in the history of the movement to my knowledge -- it is a violation of the norms of D.C. which even the SWP in its worst days avoided.

(b) Voluntary self-discipline: The articles by JB/BB and Bob P. opposing this are accurate, reasoned critiques of that view.

(c) Expulsion for ideas has been proposed for the first time -- instead of for actions and declaration of intention to act (RSL). Denial of access to the Internal Bulletin on political grounds has been proposed.

(d) Making Local Organizers Agents of the EC is clearly interpretable in only one way -- as a vote of no confidence by the EC in the local execs' and memberships' willingness to carry out the organization's policies. It implies that the only solution to our problem is to provide a watchdog. If the EC believes this is the way to relate to the vanguard, our enemies will certainly have the right to question our belief in socialism-from-below.

(2) If some issues are being debated, other gross violations of D.C. norms are either being ignored in the convention debate, or have gone totally unreported:

(a) The Cleveland Affair is an example of the first. Even the EC dare not ask the Convention for an endorsement of its actions there. No one questions the right of the EC to intervene in branches. But hiding behind this right is a disgraceful episode in I.S. history which tells a great deal about the EC's concept of D.C. On three separate occasions, the EC has affirmed in writing that its intervention there was based on political policy considerations. On not one of these occasions has the EC offered a scintilla of evidence for its assertion. But if the grounds for intervention were not political, then what were they? Any refusal by the convention to plumb this matter, to find the truth in the name of "they'll know better next time" is illusory and a disservice to the I.S.

(b) EC Changes I.S. Constitution Unilaterally -- and without cause. D.C., in principle, even allows an EC to violate the constitution under extraordinary circumstances. barring security problems, these violations should be reported and

explained openly to the membership.

But what are we to think of a conscious, covert violation of a member's rights under the constitution, under conditions which are hardly extraordinary?

An example: 7 months ago I submitted a discussion article on the future of the auto industry to WP. Adjudged too long, I cut it by 40%. But it was also refused publication on political grounds. When publication was requested (as a discussion article of interest to the working class) on constitutional grounds, the EC refused. For the record, here is what the constitution says:

"Also, members may publish in external IS publications without limitations. Pamphlets and special supplements of the IS may be limited to the majority point of view."

The EC did not argue that it opposed the clause of the constitution. (There is no doubt in my mind that this clause is too broad and ought to be amended.) The EC simply denied that any such constitutional right existed at all.

In addition to denying what the constitution clearly says (like it or not), the EC invents a new criterion -- that the article does not represent the position of a minority within the organization. Therefore it need not be printed in WP. But the fact that the EC disapproves of a clause is hardly ground enough to revoke the constitutional clause prior to a convention (under present day conditions), and worse, to revoke the clause by both denying what it says and inventing what it does not say.

I should add that though the EC did promise to print the article in our internal bulletin, the decision was never implemented. The NATSEC has now promised the article would be available to the convention.

Small as this matter may be, the principle involved is no small matter.

The above list of EC actions is not exhaustive. But, in sum, as a pattern, it points clearly in one direction. The EC is driving the organization, unwittingly, along a road which, if continued, leads to a bureaucratized organization similar to that of the SWP. In some ways we have already surpassed the SWP.

This is not to say that the EC (any more than Cannon) wants to be or is a bureaucratic apparatus. Far from it. But our theory of history tells us that the path individuals and movements take in reality is not always the path they subjectively want to take. Cannon was a great revolutionist despite his many manipulative, elitist practices and policies vis a vis the party rank & file and cadres. But under adverse conditions, these bureaucratic practices and traditions helped destroy the SWP politically. (The EC's 100% slate -- which the SWP adopted only in 1963 -- was proposed, as in the SWP, not because 90% is insufficient for effective control, but as a means of letting everyone know -- "Agree with the EC and the majority or face punishment, isolation, or worse.")

The current EC may not be all we might wish. But it is also the best we've got. That should not blind us to the fact that its administrative, undemocratic tendencies exist, or to the fact that these tendencies stem from the EC's understandable lack of confidence, and its desperation at the vast gap between the objective needs of the class struggle and our own limited resources.

The EC's caricature of Bolshevik Democratic Centralism must be resisted. It can only be defeated, as in the mass movement, by a conscious, self-activating membership.

Democratic Centralism has one unavoidable danger. There can not be any fixed, inviolable rules, etc. Balancing the dangerous potential implicit in this seeming formlessness requires an educated membership which will come down hard and fast upon those violations of the norms which are not justified by the real needs of the movement and which open the door to bureaucracy.

Today this means that the convention and the membership must endorse the constructive acts of the EC and NC. But the convention must also reject EC proposals and reverse EC actions which violate the real spirit of Democratic Centralism. The convention must repudiate EC attempts to deny minorities equal time; it must censure the EC for its false charges in Cleveland; repudiate the EC concept of a monolithic NC slate, and the so-called "voluntary discipline" of ideas -- not actions.

I hope the convention will do its duty.

Fraternally,

David Miller

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