

X-PC

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014
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Thabo Ntweng
Cleveland

Dear Thabo,

I'm sorry this reply to your letter has taken so long. I'd hoped to be able to see you and talk to you about it at the YSA convention.

First, on the question of Political Committee minutes. There are two main roles that the minutes have to play for the National Committee, the body to which the Political Committee is responsible: First, they are the formal record of the decisions taken and items discussed; and secondly, we try to use the material attached to the minutes to inform the National Committee of the results of the discussion in the PC.

The problem you pose is real and has been raised many times before. And there is never complete agreement, even within the Political Committee, on how to proceed. Some time ago we discussed and rejected putting out, as a matter of course, transcripts or lengthy summaries of our discussions, prepared by a Political Committee member or secretary. We rejected this for two reasons: First, this would entail a lot of time, as you know. We don't think it can be justified as a routine thing. But secondly, and more importantly, Political Committee members must be totally free to engage in discussions and not feel that they're speaking for the record. PC discussions have to be a collective process through which decisions are reached.

I've often noticed that when members feel they're speaking for the record, discussion is stiff, tentative criticisms aren't advanced, some ideas won't be developed, people hesitate to speak unless they're totally sure of themselves. In short, all the things that lead to a rich discussion, and eventually the best conclusions are undercut. This is one of the reasons that after a Political Committee member who may have missed a meeting listens to the tapes, we erase and reuse the tapes.

However, other things do not have the negative sides that transcripts or lengthy summaries do. Your letter helped us to think about some of these, and we've tried to improve on them. Sometimes we do have a short summary of conclusions, as you'll notice in recent minutes. More often, we now try as a rule to make the minutes explicit as to where National Committee members can find the results of a particular discussion if they're not in the minutes. The results of most substantial Political Com-

mittee discussions are printed in articles in the Militant; in the Party Organizer; written reports to the National Committee, organizers, or work directors; or in a direct attachment summarizing a report in light of decisions made. As you've probably noticed, recent minutes have stated things like: Agreed on Militant coverage. See such and such an article. Or see Party Organizer, or see a specific mailing. This is so National Committee members will know where to find the results of a discussion and is a way of drawing leadership attention to these articles or mailings. Hopefully, if non-PC comrades have further thinking about the points of discussion, they will be encouraged to write these ideas.

This, of course, is the biggest difference between Political Committee minutes and branch and local minutes, which don't have the Militant, Party Organizer, national mailings, or attachments. These minutes have to incorporate what we do through these other vehicles. You're right, if they didn't do this, the minutes would be worthless except as a formal record.

Of course, there are some points we can't summarize or document, such as international, financial, or preliminary discussion whose purpose is to organize the Political Committee, not to direct the party or solicit something from the National Committee.

This ties in to your point on collaboration and leadership responsibilities of National Committee members. I guess it's always best to go back to the basics--the National Committee is a committee, not a collection of leading individuals. Thus its deliberations and decisions must take place at plenums--meetings of the National Committee. The key to making the National Committee a successful leading body is frequent plenums, where the NC can discuss the questions before the party and make the decisions that guide the PC and the party for several months. Here we've made some progress, and I hope we're able to continue it. As a norm, we're now having more frequent plenums than at any time in the history of the party. They are usually four-day not three-day gatherings, with a pretty full political agenda on both national and international questions. And with the change in composition and enlargement of the National Committee, plenums have become even fuller leadership gatherings. I think their character will continue to evolve in this direction in coming years.

Then, of course, there is the important side of informal leadership collaboration between the National Committee members in the field and those elected to be responsible on a day-to-day basis on the Political Committee. Here the only vehicles are informal. (I leave aside opening a formal National Committee written discussion--which we may do if there are long periods between conventions, but it would be unusual.) The normal informal channels are: one, a visit of someone from

the center to a city, when it's very important to take time for informal discussion with National Committee members and other leading comrades. Two, the same is true with the national field organizers. One purpose of having the NFOs is to provide the opportunity for give and take and thinking out loud when national field organizers are in town. We also hope the field organizers can use NC members to help out in their regions one in a while. The third vehicle is letters from National Committee members, posing problems, initiating ideas, which makes us respond and think about these things. Your current letter is a good example, and your letter about a year ago was another good example of this.

Of course, National Committee members are obligated to read the Political Committee minutes, read the results of discussions in the forms of articles, thus following very carefully the areas we're active in, thinking about these problems, and communicating their ideas and doubts and ideas where our work could be improved.

There is one danger in informal collaboration--a sort of selective communication between the center and "certain" National Committee members can begin. Nothing makes a National Committee member more angry than hearing through the grapevine some decision that some NCers were drawn into but he or she was not. We have to be careful not to drift into any selective consultation and collaboration and make clear that if it seems to have occurred, it was accidental and should be drawn to the attention of the center. While avoiding this danger, it's important to take time to talk to each other informally.

Finally, the main responsibility of a National Committee member is to think and act like a national leader at all times. That means taking political responsibility for help and advice in the area one lives; pushing forward and inspiring comrades on the party's campaigns; jogging comrades' thinking in national (or international) not just local terms; trying to set an example where needed. Also it means collaborating with the local leadership whether you are on an executive committee or not. As Jim Cannon said, the simple fact is that leaders are those who lead.

Your letter helped us think this out again a little more. Also it was a help to me personally because I have to prepare a report for the plenum that touches on the questions you raise. I would like to get any further thinking you have on these things. If you have no objection, I would appreciate your sharing our correspondence with Pat, the other National Committee member in Cleveland. I'm sure she's thought about this.

Comradely,



Jack Barnes