

SOME LESSONS FROM OCT.3 (KY VISIT) PREPARATIONS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

September 30, 1970

by Fred Halstead

In the course of preparations in Washington for an antiwar demonstration on the occasion of the then scheduled appearance of South Vietnamese dictator Ky, our forces lost the vote to a CP-ultra-left bloc at a major mass meeting which we had initiated and built as a necessary step toward a successful demonstration.

This tactical defeat did not have serious bad effects as things turned out, especially since Ky cancelled his visit anyway. But there are some lessons we can learn from it, since we may face similar situations in this period. In my opinion, the defeat was due to mistakes we made in preparing for the meeting, rather than in secondary tactical errors made during the meeting itself.

The mass meeting, held at George Washington University, was packed with about 800 persons, the overwhelming majority level-headed students interested in antiwar activity. The meeting was also attended by some broad community forces, labor officials, etc. In addition, there were about 100 ultra-lefts, including Yippies, members of the radical student union and some people around Rennie Davis. Spokesmen for the National Coalition Against War, Racism and Repression (formerly the Strategy Action Conference which grew out of the CP-ultra-left bloc in New Mobe) also attended along with Rennie Davis.

Four proposals were put on the floor: a proposal for a broad, mass, nonconfrontational action, a proposal by Davis backed by the NCWRR, a Yippie proposal and another ultra-left proposal from a group at Maryland University. The Davis proposal called for an assembly and rally at the Health, Education and Welfare building, which is across the street from where the McIntire march was to assemble, a march from there to "arrest Ky" at the McIntire rally, and civil disobedience at the point where the marchers were stopped in approaching the McIntire rally. Obviously, the Davis proposal was loaded with possibilities for physical confrontation. The other two ultra-left proposals were even wilder, and were motivated with the most undefensive rhetoric.

As the meeting began, the response of the audience, especially the sparse applause accorded Davis when he made his proposal, made us feel the meeting was in the bag for the proposal we backed. But as the meeting proceeded and the serious disruption by the ultra-lefts occurred -- including rushes at the speaker's podium and long, irrational harangues by persons under the influence of assorted chemicals -- the majority of the audience left the hall.

Before the vote, the makers of the Yippie and Maryland proposals withdrew in favor of the Davis proposal. The vote was taken with about 300 left in the hall. The vote was 180 for Davis, and 108 for the proposal we backed.

What happened was that the CP-ultra-left bloc succeeded in disrupting the meeting sufficiently to chase away most of the audience. Underestimating this possibility was our major tactical error. Our fraction was less than 30 on this occasion, and while the independents were not for an ultra-left proposal, they weren't committed or experienced enough in general to stay thru two hours of confusion in order to vote the ultra-lefts down. The point is that if we couldn't bring massive

forces which were committed to do that, we should have built the meeting as a mass meeting of those wanting a mass, nonconfrontational demonstration, rather than as a meeting open to all. The meeting would have been almost as large, and we could have dealt with the ultra-left disruption as what it was -- an attempt to bust up somebody else's meeting.

There was another error involved. The Davis proposal also succeeded in winning the vote of at least a few of the independents who remained. This was in part due to the general confusion, but it also was due to the fact that the proposal which we backed was poorly worded for a student audience and was not crystal clear. This occurred because we left the wording of the proposal to two sincere but inexperienced moderates. The proposal was not wrong in principle, but it had a distinctly moderate, non-militant sound, and its action features were buried in this kind of verbiage. We let the wording go as it was because we didn't want to be too pushy with the moderate forces with which we were working. Actually, we could have successfully insisted on wording which would have been much clearer and more militant and much more suitable for presentation to a large student audience.